
Serious inquiry into postcards is a relatively new phenomenon in art history and visual studies and this publication represents “the first anthology to bring together scholars, artists, and critics from the humanities and social sciences to focus exclusively on postcards as significant objects of study worthy of sustained, critical analysis.”

Part of the Refiguring Modernism series published by Penn State University Press, the volume opens with a detailed introduction in which the editors outline the book’s purpose and present brief overviews of each of the fourteen essays. The first essay, by Naomi Schor on the subject of turn-of-the-century postcard views of Paris produced by Maison Lévy, is a reprint of an article that appeared in Critical Inquiry in 1990. This essay, the only one in the book to have been previously published, is included for its comprehensive approach to postcard-related issues.

Continuing the tone set by Schor, each of the remaining essays looks at a distinct set of postcard images and their role as cultural objects. Among these are Nancy Stieber’s study of postcard views of Amsterdam produced between 1880 and 1920, which maintained the ideal of “Old Amsterdam” at a time when the city was undergoing significant social and physical changes; Rebecca J. DeRoo’s discussion of Algerian postcards published in Paris in the early 1900s in the context of Orientalism and gender; and Cary Nelson’s examination of wartime postcards that featured printed poems mainly by unknown authors, occasionally combined with graphic illustrations or images. Two of the chapters consist of facsimile texts by two early collectors of postcards, the French Surrealist poet Paul Éluard and the American photographer Walker Evans. Both of these include a brief but thoughtful introductory text by Elizabeth B. Heuer.

Although available only in paper, the book is well-bound and should stand-up to repeated use. One minor drawback in design is the horizontal format, which makes the book awkward to read unless one is seated at a table or desk. The book is illustrated with good-quality images, 108 in black and white and 64 in color, which are attractively laid out and clearly identified in a list at the front of the book. A section with short biographies of contributors, an index, and detailed footnotes follows the fourteen essays. There is no bibliography.

Postcards: Ephemeral Histories of Modernity offers a diverse and well-written collection of scholarly articles on the postcard and is an essential resource for scholars, students in art history and visual studies, and postcard collectors (including institutional collectors). It is highly recommended for academic and museum art libraries.

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