The History of Christmas Cards

One enjoyable aspect of the holiday season is the sending and receiving of Christmas cards. Today's Christmas cards are available in a variety of styles, from traditional cards depicting holiday scenery or decorations, to cards that play music upon opening, personalized family photo cards, greeting cards sent via the Internet and many more. Christmas cards are a wonderful way to send season's greetings to family and friends. But how did this custom originate?

Before the age of e-mail and cell phones, the printed word was the primary form of personal communication. The art of writing letters was an important social skill in Victorian England, a period from 1837 to 1901 when Queen Victoria ruled. During this era, proper Victorians composed letters of introduction, business, congratulations, love, apology and more. Well written, elegant letters were a sign of good breeding and considered an obligation by ladies and gentlemen of that period.

English schoolboys away from home composed an early form of Christmas greeting in the 19th century. The boys practiced their penmanship and displayed proof of their writing progress by composing "Christmas pieces" or "school pieces" for their teachers and families. Though holiday messages were conveyed in letters, it is England's Sir Henry Cole who is credited with the creation of the first commercial Christmas card.

A civil servant with a strong interest in art and design, Henry Cole (1808-1882) began his career in the Public Records Office in London at the age of 15. Here he played a key role in organizing Britain's national archives. While assistant to Sir Rowland Hill, Cole was instrumental in reforming the Penny Post (British postal service) and in introducing the first adhesive postage stamp known as the "Penny Black".

When Cole found he did not have time to send personal Christmas letters one year, he approached friend and artist John Callcott Horsley and commissioned Horsley to illustrate a Christmas greeting card.

In 1843, Cole's cards, featuring Horsley's illustration, were printed in lithograph form and then colored by hand. 1,000 cards were initially printed featuring the sentiment, "A Merry Christmas and A Happy New Year To You." After addressing cards to his friends and family, the remaining cards were sold for sixpence each, thus becoming the first commercial Christmas cards

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