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Many of us who are interested in railways have over the years also become de-facto Postcard collectors. Apparently we are 'Cartophilistes' according to Jean-Marie Michellod, a Swiss who is a member of the Philatelic Club of Martigny and who recently authored an article on the history of postcards in 'Rhône Philatélie', the journal of the Association of Philatelic Clubs of the Rhône Region. This was reproduced in the Helvetia Philatelic



Postcards – A Short History

Society of Great Britain's 'Newsletter'. I had never heard of the word but it appears to be a title that has developed in Francophile philatelic circles to describe those collectors who are as interested in the front of postcards as philatelists are in the stamps, cancellations, etc. on the back.

I was surprised to learn from Jean-Marie's article that the illustrated postcard that we know today did not arrive on the scene until 1869, when the first were published in Austria. Up until that time Postal Administrations had refused to accept single pieces of card into the mail system and it was only in that year that the Austrians took the initiative, with the British and German authorities following soon after. The early postcards were in essence simply correspondence cards with some having a lithographed image on the front, and the rear being solely for the address. The photographic postcard dates from 1891 when the first were printed in Marseille, France. The idea took off like wildfire and within a very short time cards became the 'social media' of the day, enabling people not just to send mementoes of their holidays, but also to picture significant local scenes, events and personalities. It was a medium that even a photographer with a business in a small community could become involved in, and it is through their efforts that we now have access to images of long-forgotten buildings, disappeared views, and even the long-scrapped locomotives and rolling stock of former railways. The Golden Age of the photographic postcard was from the 1890s to the 1920s, although it was only after 1904 that the Universal Postal Union allowed anything other than the address on the rear of the card, hence why we often see a message written across an image that we may have wished to see in a pristine condition.

Although we generally associate postcards with holidays and travel, after 1904 they often became the medium of choice for sending urgent messages ("Please meet

me tomorrow off the 12.00 train.") or for making business appointments, etc. Remember this was the era when many places had multiple postal deliveries per day. It was the spread of the telephone from the mid-twenties that brought an end to that business, and it was the spread of cheap mass printing processes that doomed the short print runs of local producers. Economics also meant that publishers moved towards

producing timeless, all purpose cards, that could stay on sale for as long as possible. The decline in postcard sales was slightly arrested around 1960 when cards in full colour entered the market, and in more recent years there has been an upsurge in the distribution of 'artistic' photographic images rather than simple views. Now, with the introduction of smartphones and the slow 'rationalisation' of postal services, we could see the traditional postcard go into terminal decline. With a smartphone travellers can send a personalised image to friends and family – even on the other side of the world – in an instant. On the up-side though the ease in which images can now be printed digitally, in very small numbers and at a quite low cost, could see some forms of postcard remaining in circulation for the appreciation of future collectors – the 'Cartophilistes'.

One interesting adjunct to the spread of photographic postcards was the ability for publishers to make photomontages that could manipulate views, etc. The saying that the camera cannot lie has never been true! Two examples of this technique were shown in the article on the 'Lake Thun Right-bank Railway' in the March magazine. Apart from inserting the different forms of transport on different editions of the card of Beatenbucht, the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau in the background could never be seen from the photographer's viewpoint. Another example is the Brienzer Rothorn postcard that accompanies this article. Here the mountains are actually almost behind the photographer. I have seen for sale in Basel a view of its frontage along the Rhein with the main alpine range in the background - an extreme example of the genre!

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