

VISUAL ARTS

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Vibrant tidings from a century and a half ago

While some of us may be sending e-cards for the holidays, the printed Christmas card is far from dead. About 1.3 billion such cards are sent each year, according to Hallmark.

Such cards were introduced in England in the 1840s, but it took three decades before they arrived in the U.S., published in Boston by a Prussian immigrant. Those early cards are still among the most visually striking and colorful ever produced.

"The Father of the American Christmas Card: Louis Prang," an exhibition comprising three tightly packed glass cases and a few framed works at the Book Club of California, is a tantalizing sampler of the range of early designs. It is on view through Jan. 9.

Many of the first American Christmas cards were generic images — country lanes, sprigs of flowers and the like — that could be imprinted with the message of any season. But if they seem incongruous to us today, we must remember that the image traditions we now so revere were only being formed then. A pictorial message of spring might be just the tonic a winter-bound recipient would have appreciated on a cold Christmas morning.

From the evidence of this show, religious themes were only a small part of the array of designs available. More common were crimson-cheeked children and anthropomorphic animals, symbols of innocence and playfulness.

Sentiment and humor were preferred to piety by our great-grandparents — though some of what they presumably found hilarious is lost on us now. What are we to make of an image of a rooster biting the tail of a turtle, which in turn is chomping on the neck of a duck? The card's legend is little help. "A Hearty Christmas to you all!" it says. "May good



Book Club of California images

Above: Some cards may have seemed funnier — or made more sense — to our great-grandparents than to us. The text reads "A Hearty Christmas to you all! 'May good digestion wait on appetite.'"

Left: Religious themes were much less popular than now. Louis Prang was the foremost publisher of chromolithography.

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Louis Prang was the century's foremost publisher and developer of chromolithography, a printing process capable of both sublime subtlety and vivid depth of color. He applied the method to framed reproductions of fine art and to popular holiday cards alike. Employing a separate lithographic stone to print each color of a single picture, up to 40 ink impressions blended together into extraordinary images.

Bring along a store-bought



The Father of the American Christmas Card: Louis Prang From the Collection of Keith S. Clark: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays-Fridays; closed Dec. 23-26 and Jan. 2. Through Jan. 9. Free. Book Club of California, 312 Sutter St., Suite 500, S.F. (415) 781-7532. www.bccbooks.org

card of today and compare: You will be stunned at the difference in richness and detail. A large card advertising "Prang's Christmas Cards" — probably a store display — is a tour de force of the technique, in perfect condition.

The Book Club of California is one of those treasured anachronisms of old cities like San Francisco that many people never see. The visitor must take an elevator to the fifth floor of a downtown building, then dare to open an opaque wooden door to enter a hushed space lined with books.

But don't hesitate: The small staff could not be more charming and will greet you as eagerly as an old friend. They act as though it is their pleasant duty to make you comfortable and to answer your questions.

Although the small show may not merit a special trip to the city center at the most trafficked time of the year, it will provide a delightful half-hour break from business or holiday shopping. And you will leave knowing much more about the visual history of our country's biggest holiday, and of a great city tradition.

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