

**CHRISTMAS CARDS &
THEIR CHIEF DESIGNERS.
EXTRA NUMBER OF THE
STVDIO XMAS, 1894**

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Christmas Cards & Their Chief Designers. Extra number of the STVDIO xmas, 1894 by Gleeson White

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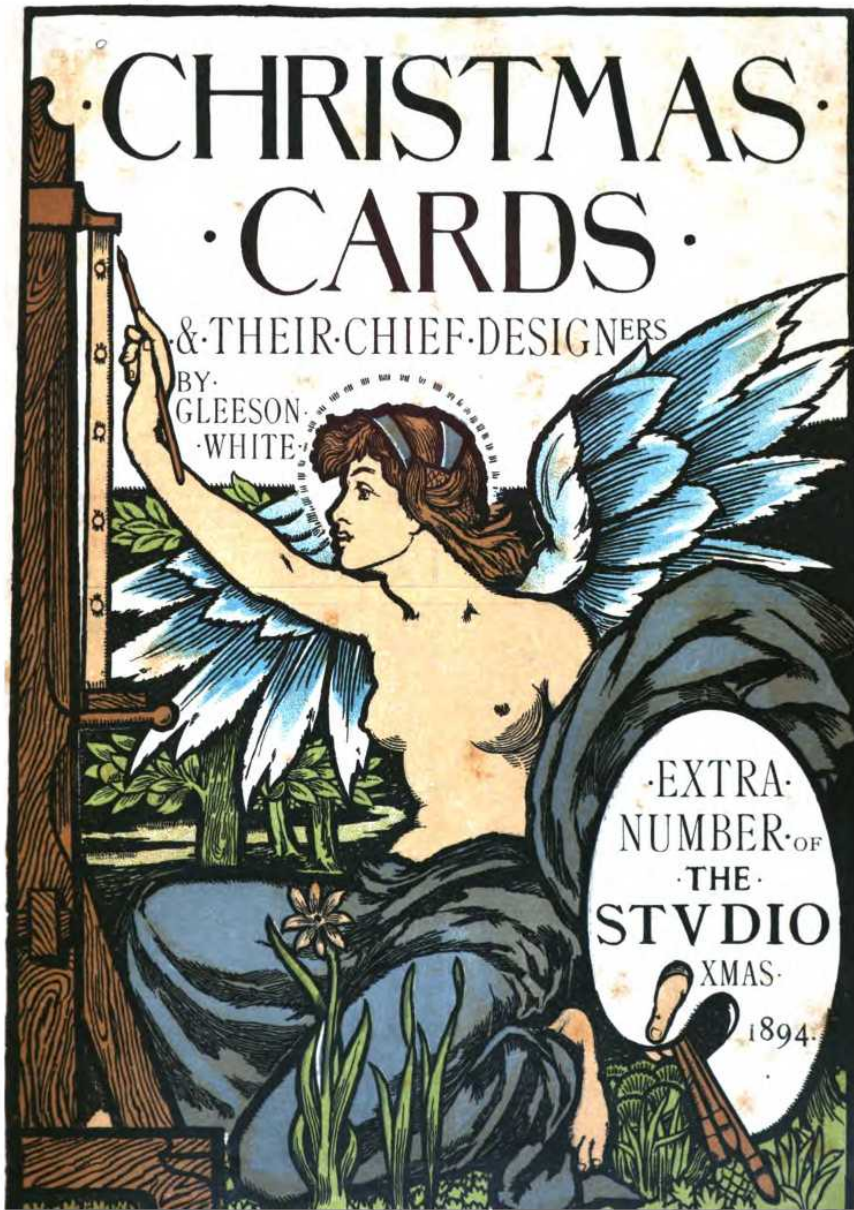
GLEESON WHITE

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BY
GLEESON
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THE
STUDIO

XMAS

1894



FROM AN ETCHING BY
EDWARD SLOCOMBE, R.P.E.

CHRISTMAS CARDS AND THEIR CHIEF DESIGNERS

THE fact that the Christmas card is rapidly becoming a recognised subject for collectors would not in itself warrant its consideration from a purely artistic standpoint. For collecting is only accidentally concerned with Art. Some most popular manufactured products, eagerly amassed by experts, could not for an instant be considered even mildly artistic. A postage stamp, for example, that is not absolutely beneath contempt so far as its design is concerned, is rare enough. Comparatively few "book-plates" are in themselves intrinsically interesting as decoration. But other branches familiar to connoisseurs—coins, gems, terra cottas, lacquer, bronzes, and the like, are almost invariably artistic, often enough genuinely serious works of art. The Christmas card must be taken as

mid-way between the extremes. Perhaps in no single instance does it rise to the level of the average of the best coins, gems, or terra cottas. But even at its worst it is seldom so distinctly unlovely as the postage stamp, or the old play-bill. Such interest as it possesses, however, is entirely confined to its designs. Its sentiment—excellent in itself—is worn thread-bare by repetition. Its "original poetry" is rarely original, still more rarely poetry; its ideals are, as a rule, peculiarly conventional.

For the preparation of this paper, it has been my lot to look through the sample books of all the chief firms who manufacture Christmas cards. How many thousand patterns have passed under my eye I dare not estimate. A complete set of all designs published in England alone would include at least 200,000 examples, possibly



THE FIRST CHRISTMAS CARD (1846), DESIGNED BY J. C. HORSLEY, R.A., FOR SIR HENRY COLE

Christmas Cards

a good many more, yet of these the number that could be grouped under the various seasonable subjects I have roughly jotted down might be reckoned in hundreds at the most. Flowers, fairies, everything and anything all over the world, in all seasons of the year, have been pressed into the service of the Christmas card. The legends, painfully monotonous in their greeting, are, as a rule,

purchaser, is more likely to be ridiculous than apt. Consequently the wisdom of the publishers has generally preserved them from ridiculous excesses of sentiment—so far as regards the message the cards are supposed to bear. "A Merry Christmas," more usually modified to "A Happy Christmas," frequently (I regret to say) abbreviated unnecessarily to "A Happy Xmas," with or without the "to you," may be taken as the representative phrase in ninety-nine out of a hundred instances.

It is obvious that for the sake of their literature no collection would be worth making. We are, therefore, compelled to own that it is in the design alone that any reasonable excuse can be found; otherwise as objects of sentiment, literature, or documents of social interest, the post-mark or the railway ticket might be collected with not less inconsequence, and with almost as much reason to be reckoned an outlying colony of the empire of art and letters.

The designs, however, have a distinct interest. During the most notable period of production, 1882, one firm alone paid in a single year seven thousand pounds to artists for original drawings. If you turn over the records of sales at the Royal Academy and note the prices, the amount of works "sold" in a season, you will realise that an art patron who spends seven thousand pounds in a year, be he a person or a company, is a very rare creature. What influence this expenditure had upon British Art, either on its own merits, or in comparison with the patronage bestowed upon Burlington House, is too large a subject to enter upon here. It is a fact, however, that for ten or twelve years the cards of many of the prominent makers attracted the work of artists of considerable repute, including not merely several members of the Royal Academy and others already popular, but of men then scarce out of their student days, who have since established themselves as painters and illustrators of the first rank. Yet this period of popularity, when the artist, not accustomed to designing for commercial purposes, was often lured to do so, has fairly well defined limits; from 1878 to 1888, is, roughly speaking, the happy hunting ground



C. H. BENNETT (1865-6)

C. G. AND S.

the only common factor it possesses. It has never descended to the fatuous vulgarity of the valentine, on the other hand, it has rarely risen far above the conventional courtesies of daily life. Its idiom hardly conveys more personal feeling than the commonest colloquial phrases—"Good Morning" or "Good-bye." On the whole, this absence of fervour is a thing to be grateful for. A passion poured out in a phrase, to be used haphazard by any chance

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of the collector. Since that time the designs are for the most part supplied by those who habitually work for colour printers, and one suspects that instead of being almost wholly of British origin, as in those years, a very large proportion of cards to-day are not merely "manufactured in Germany," but designed there also.

The orthodox card attracts you solely by its design. A chromo-lithograph upon a rectangular card, decorative in treatment as a rule, it was content to rest upon the attraction of its subject alone. Now-a-days, from frosted surfaces to fringed edges, from perforated cardboard to pieces of brown paper, old cigar ends, and rubbish of all sorts—its catholicity is unbounded. When, however, its limitations were disregarded, its art escaped rapidly.

Hard as it is to define sharply the limits within which artistic interest is to be found, it has been the purpose here to make a rough survey of the ground, to gather together a mass of facts, by no means exhaustive, and to present a cursory summary of the subject, not unlike the tentative pamphlets in favour of a century ago—modestly entitled: "Contributions towards the History of So-and-so." Starting with the brave enterprise of mastering the subject, collating all the sample books of all the publishers, digesting the facts into formal order, making a complete list of every card worthy of serious note, the result is much more modest than the attempt. For to systematise the chaos of the thousands—one had nearly written millions—of designs were enough to frighten the most expert catalogue maker. If to this you add the task of deciding where the border line is to be drawn between worthy effort and sheer inanity, it is obvious that even the rapid decision of a Royal Academy jury would be paralysed, that the most learned judge would be appalled by an attempt to summarise the evidence and present a coldly impartial statement of the facts. Indeed, to identify and collect a specimen of each might exhaust a life-time; to classify and appraise them would be like compiling a dictionary. To fail, in the limited time allowed,

is to confess one's self human, to succeed would be a task for the genii of the Arabian Nights.

It seems perfectly unnecessary to explain here the object of a Christmas card or, perhaps one might write more truthfully, the object conventionally accepted as the reason for the existence of the custom which has grown up in the last quarter of a century. To find precedents in the "everlasting great Japan" with its



C. H. BENNETT (1866-7)

C. G. AND S.

almost precise equivalent, the Suri-mono, sent to friends on New Year's Day, would be tempting; but the dignity of our native products might suffer if set side by side with the exquisitely dainty prints familiar to collectors of Japanese art. These, in their employment of metal as well as colour, their embossed surfaces, and the playful grace of their design, may bear somewhat the same relation to the sterner art of the ordinary colour print that our own

Christmas Cards

Christmas cards bear to the more ambitious products of the print-seller's window. The difference between an Arundel Society's print and the Raphael Madonna, or one of the Fra Angelico angels, issued as Christmas greetings, is mainly one of size; and the average landscape

sentimental effusions, and they are at times gloomy enough. Indeed, it is amusing to note the pictorial accompaniments considered fit to illustrate the very mundane wish for "A Happy Christmas." As we know, the hope implied is unquestionably that

the recipient may be surfeited with turkey and mince pie; have a feast of roast beef and plum pudding, and well-filled stockings if a juvenile; and good entertainment and much jollity if an adult. To accompany this prosaic and wholly carnal greeting we find, often enough, tragic sunsets, haunted churchyards, consumptive choir boys, monsters of nightmareland, pictures of accidents dear to the farce writer, and, in short, the subjects which are in vulgar parlance "weird" and alarming on the one hand, and distinctly uncomfortable on the other. Or to take the opposite extreme: the glory of the transformation scene in a



H. STACY MARKS, R.A.

M. W. AND CO.

of the card is as artistic as the average landscape of the chromo-lithograph or oleograph; but the average figure subject is not so nearly on a par with the ordinary modern picture of the galleries, too seldom reproduced in chromo-lithographs to allow the comparison.

Between the art of the Christmas card and that of the Suri-mono the difference is far more than that between "hand-painted" and printed pictures. In Japan, the Suri-mono is merely the art of the day lightened and treated a little less demurely. In England, even the best of Christmas cards cannot be placed in serious rivalry with a Whistler etching, or a wood-cut of the "Once a Week" school. To us it is rarely given to be "funny without being vulgar," that is to say, when the gaiety is intentional. The true courtesy of Japanese art may unbend and preserve its dignity unimpaired; here, we are apt to grow unduly coarse, as in Rowlandson's caricatures, or Cruickshank's etchings; distinctly bourgeois, as in Hogarth, or the cartoons—admirable in their way—of *Ally Sloper*; or to be merely "pretty," as in the average colour print.

It is not surprising that the humour of our Christmas card is often even sadder than its

pantomime, the tinselled splendour of stage fairy-land is presented as the haven of our heart's desire. Houris, most scantily attired, are sent to demure stockbrokers; fairies, revelling by moonlight, to grim county magistrates whose sympathy for midnight revels in their preserves would probably urge them to commit the whole



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tribe of pixies to the county gaol. So the game is played, or rather was played, for to-day flowers are almost the one idea of the designer. Flowers possible or impossible, mostly the latter, are his chief aim; and, poor as the ideal may be, it is, at least, less unfit than many of

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the fantastic themes which before figured as the illustration to the conventional recognition of "Goodwill towards Men."

For—and the fact must be only touched lightly here—if we look below the surface, we find these gaudy pasteboards are meant to pass

eaten that records the most striking event of the era in which we live, the formal armistice is duly prepared; no matter if we may secretly intend to renew the slight feud in the New Year, it is set aside for the moment, and, in theory, we are at one with the world, and at peace with all men.

To translate this laudable intention into dull facts, to note the ridiculously insincere feeling underlying the custom, would be easy enough: too easy, indeed, for the most cynical person to care to attempt. Everybody is able to search his own memory and discover the very remote resemblance between the idea which governs the sending of a card and the actual reason for its dismissal; but noting that it undoubtedly owes its origin to the birth of the Christ child, it is odd to find in how comparatively few instances it recognises, even remotely, that it is not a

secular but a sacred function which is being celebrated.

It would be out of place to dwell upon this tendency to secularise the greetings of the season: but it is impossible to avoid noticing it. For one feels that if the custom had arisen centuries earlier, if Giotto or Botticelli, Raphael or



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on from one human being to another the echo of the salutation which sounded in the shepherds' ears that night in far Bethlehem. All this vast industry is to afford a way of expressing one's goodwill to one's neighbours; to send out, not with too personal a meaning, as in a written letter, the assurance of renewed amity; to say as it were, "all through the rest of the year we have not met, and may not do so," or else, "although I have seen you frequently but left this fact unsaid," (it matters not which hypothesis we accept) "yet at this season, when of old a message of peace and friendliness was sent from heaven to earth, I would you should feel I bear you no ill-will, but wish you all good things in the future." This, a settling of outstanding grievances, a balancing of one's social accounts at the end of the year, is the sole defence of the custom worth considering. In such a way new acquaintances, not insufficiently familiar intercourse to exchange letters, may greet each other without presumption. Those to whom one is indebted, those who may, one suspects, feel slighted by omissions in the past, are thus for the moment brought into touch. So for Christmas Day, as the feast is



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even Overbeck for once "curbed the liberal hand subservient, proudly cramped their spirit, crowded all in little," and essayed a trifle of this sort, then if they had filled their "missal marge with flowerets," it would have been as framework to the subject of the Nativity. The