

The tradition of the Christmas card

— By Jim Cornelius —

Most of our Christmas traditions have somewhat murky origins. No one knows who sang the first Christmas carol or decorated the very first Christmas tree.

But we know who started the tradition of sending out Christmas cards: A Victorian Londoner who couldn't keep up with his correspondence.

Middle-class and upper-middle-class Victorians were prolific letter writers. As the postal service became modern and efficient in the 19th century, the volume of letters increased — some would exchange multiple letters a day in the Victorian era equivalent of texting.

Sending out letters at Christmas and New Year's was a big thing — and it was a serious faux pas to fail to keep up with that correspondence. Not getting your letters out could be socially fatal.

In 1843 (the year that Charles Dickens published "A Christmas Carol"), Sir Henry Cole, a well-known patron of the arts, was facing a crisis of correspondence.

As John Hanq writes in *The Smithsonian Magazine*:

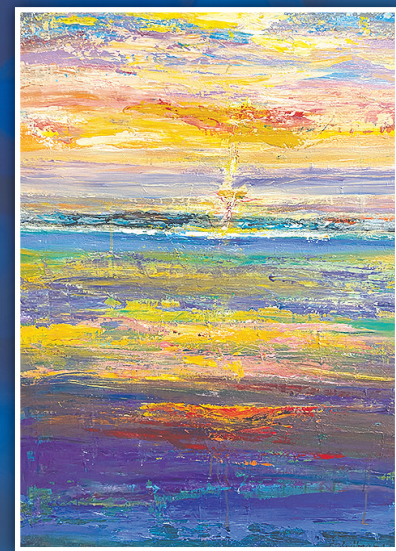
"Sir Cole—best remembered today as the founder of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London—was an enthusiastic supporter of

the new postal system, and he enjoyed being the 1840s equivalent of an A-Lister, but he was a busy man. As he watched the stacks of unanswered correspondence he fretted over what to do.

'In Victorian England, it was considered impolite not to answer mail,' says Ace Collins, author of 'Stories Behind the Great Traditions of Christmas.' "He had to figure out a way to respond to all of these people."

His solution launched a tradition that now spans centuries. He asked an artist friend named J.C. Horsely to create an image that Sir Cole conceived, and he had 1,000 of them printed on stiff cardboard cards, which he could address and send out quickly and easily. Social disaster averted; tradition created.

The image on that first Christmas card is quite festive and even a little racy for the time: The centerpiece is a family at a long table, imbibing red wine. A young man has his arm around the waist of a young woman(!) and right down front there's a little girl taking a sip (or is it a swig?) from a wine glass. The underage drinking thing triggered the temperance activists in London. This probably wasn't the first "Christmas controversy" moment, but it certainly was a good one.



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