

## national museum COLLECTORS AND COLLECTIONS

Lebovic Collection Christmas  
postcards

*Choicest Blessings Heaven send You, Every Christmas Joy attend You. Lebovic Collection*

Joseph Lebovic began collecting Australian historical photographs in 1974 and opened a gallery specialising in the field in 1983. A couple of years later he offered the National Museum of Australia the opportunity to purchase his collection of around 8000 postcards. Consultants employed by the Museum considered it was likely the third-largest private collection in Australia. They could not identify any comparable significant collections in national collecting institutions and so it was acquired.

The postcards in the collection are primarily Australian, mainly from the so-called 'Golden Age' c.1900–1920. There is an emphasis on photographic views of New South Wales, particularly of Sydney. Many other categories are also represented: Aboriginal people, animals, art, children, comic, events, railways, shipping and sport. A variety of different printing techniques and materials, including limited use of 'appliqué' have been used in their manufacture.

'Deltiologists' (postcard collectors!) usually categorise cards bearing a Christmas message as Greeting Cards. Valentines and Christmas cards were used in England as early as 1667 – the earliest form of commercially produced cards. By the 1850s, pictorial stationery and Christmas cards had become quite common and influenced the development of picture postcards in general. Marian Klamkin claims in her book *Picture Postcards* that there was no standardised image of Santa Claus until the 19th century, and that postcards played an important role in helping to popularise and stereotype him as a figure.

Better methods of colour mechanical printing in volume and the advent of photography and its improvement spurred the use of the postcard. Several large greeting card publishing companies made the natural transition to postcards.

An important influence on the look of postcards was the need to comply with postal regulations, which stipulated the size – during the period covered by the collection, 3.5 by 5.5 inches – and the

location of the address and postage stamps. In Australia before January 1905, one side of the postcard was dedicated to the address alone; the other bore an image, with limited space for a message. After that postcards were required to have a divided back, one half for the message, the other for the address. The front was then totally given over to the image, as now, but the transition took several years.

At a time when there was more than one mail a day, and the telephones were not common, postcards were ideal for short messages, similar to email today. A postcard sent early in the morning could arrange a rendezvous for later the same day. They were cheap to buy and post, and they moved through rapidly improving transport networks. Improvements in education had led to greater levels of literacy and contributed to their uptake. Collecting postcards became popular in Australia in the early 1900s, several years after the fad in Europe, and families would display their cards in albums.

With the festive season approaching, it's interesting to see what the collection contains with regard to Christmas. There are at least 30 Christmas-themed postcards in the collection. Some have been used to create Christmas cards sold in the Museum Shop.

There are very few foreign postcards among those I looked at for this article. Old European Christmas postcards are not rare in shops that sell vintage postcards but there are none in the group I viewed. A couple make reference to turkey, suggesting they may have been published in America for Thanksgiving, without actually using the term. Despite being common motifs for Christmas, Santa Claus, snow, holly, tinsel and glitter are all absent too. This may suggest that Lebovic had certain tastes and was selective in what he acquired. Strangely, almost all are devoid of religious content.

Given the inappropriateness of European wintertime Christmas symbols to the Australian summertime experience, would the group – essentially Australian – reveal any particular

## national museum COLLECTORS AND COLLECTIONS

Australianness, or alternatively similarity to other countries, in how Christmas is represented?

Most are common production run postcards with photographic or printed scenes simply overprinted or embossed in gold with 'Merry Christmas' to suit the occasion, and quite naturally many had been posted within a week of Christmas Day.

The postcards project a festive sentimental mood and carry symbols familiar to Australians, such as in J Norton's painting (illustrated) which features a swagman dipping his billy into a river lined with gum trees. His swag is nearby, beside the fire, and a riverboat with barge proceeds leisurely in the distance. There is a comfortable, homely tranquillity in this scene. Have the orange tones and warmth of the Australian summer sun presented in Norton's painting replaced the Northern Hemisphere's roaring log fire? Perhaps the desire for comfort, tranquillity and prosperity are themes universally associated with contemplation of Christmas.

There are many striking examples of decorative Australian flora in red, a colour associated with Christmas. Postcards featuring the red flower commonly known as Christmas Bells (*Blandfordia* sp.), naturally make a topical card regardless of whether it carries a Christmas greeting. The flower is featured in the drawing on a postcard by the famous English-born illustrator of Australian children's stories May Gibbs. Waratah (*Telopea* sp.), another red flower, is also popular as an appropriate Australian Christmas postcard decoration – a substitute for holly.

The cards generally celebrate the Australian outdoors through flora, fauna and landscape. European cards may feature a picturesque snow-covered landscape, usually viewed from the warmth and comfort of indoors – unless they show children skating or riding sleds. The Australian cards place people within the landscape, also picturesque but generally being enjoyed or exploited. One card features decorative bunches of flowers above

a small photograph titled *Surfing at Manly*. What could be more Australian at Christmas time?

It is often claimed that Federation led to an increase in patriotism and recognition of Australian national identity during this period, strengthened by the nation's experience in the First World War. The nationally recognisable and distinguishable symbols in these cards appear to celebrate the rising awareness or birth of an independent nation.



*A Christmas Remembrance, c. 1918. Lebovic Collection*

Christmas is seen as a time to catch up with dear ones, and the limited messages on the backs of these cards often indicate their writers were seeking to regain contact with relatives and old friends. A wonderfully colourful and sentimentally stylish postcard, typical of high-quality examples from the period, was sent by 'Ruby and Chas' to their brother serving in France during the First World War. Apparently they had not heard from him in a while and expressed their love to him. They wished him luck and for a peaceful new year. Amen to that, and may you all have a very merry Christmas too!

**Paul Griffiths is a Documentation Officer in the Museum's Registration section**



*Damper and Tea, by J Norton, c. 1909. Lebovic Collection*