Library Company of Philadelphia Acquires the Kathryn S. Alpert Collection of Women’s History Postcards and Ephemera

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania – June 3, 2024 – The Library Company of Philadelphia has acquired a collection of ephemera that illuminates the lives of women before the mid-20th century. With the receipt of the Kathryn S. Alpert Collection of Women’s History Postcards and Ephemera, the Library adds 3,000 new pieces of ephemera, primarily postcards, but also trade cards, fans, labels, and photographs that foster the study of women and visual culture.

Kathryn S. Alpert, founder of Postmark Press, a Boston publishing, design, and licensing business, began to collect ephemera first as a child and then later in support of her professional work. The acquisition of her collection by the Library Company began to unfold in March of 2023, when Ms. Alpert met the Library’s Curator of Graphic Arts and Director of the Visual Culture Program Erika Piola at the Ephemera Society of America’s annual conference. After reviewing her portfolio of postcards and related ephemera, Piola encouraged Alpert to assemble a collection of postcards and other ephemera reflecting women’s history during the early 20th century.

Dating from the 1870s to the 1930s, the visually poignant ephemera consists of a multitude of thought-provoking imagery on topics that range from marriage and motherhood to women’s rights, fashion fads, and reform. The collection also adds the work of such premier postcard illustrators as Hamilton King, Ellen Clapsaddle, and Pearl Fidler LaMunyan to the Library Company's graphic arts holdings. The ephemera represent the visual and popular cultures, the sociopolitics, and the gender, class, and race complexities of the late 19th- and early 20th-centuries.

The Library Company began collecting ephemera in 1785, when it acquired the Pièrre Eugène Du Simitière Collection of Revolutionary War-era pamphlets and broadsides. Today, it plays a leading role among research libraries in the collection and research of American graphic arts and ephemera, powerful primary resources for historical inquiry.

“Given the charge of the Library Company to augment the valuable holdings in our care, as well as that of the Visual Culture Program to foster creative research in historic visual materials, the Kathryn S. Alpert Collection of Women’s History Postcards and Ephemera acquisition is a wonderful addition to our holdings," said Curator Piola. "The Alpert Collection will enhance the study of the public and private roles of women before the mid-twentieth century." The Collection will be processed for online access and will be featured in Library publications and programming.
“I am thrilled to entrust Erika and her colleagues at the Library Company with preserving and studying this collection. With the Library Company's help, this Collection will soon be available to scholars, researchers, and others,” notes Ms. Alpert.

**Visual Culture Program (VCP) at the Library Company of Philadelphia**

Launched in 2008, the Visual Culture Program (VCP) promotes visual literacy and the use of historical images as primary sources for studying the past and fosters research, collection, and interpretation of historic visual material. Scholars and the general public are increasingly aware of the importance of visual images in examining the past. With the proliferation of sophisticated digitization technologies, researchers now have the opportunity to “see” images in new ways. No longer considered secondary to text and used merely to illustrate the written word, visual materials are taking their rightful place as primary evidence that documents the past and influences our understanding of the present. Through exhibitions, research fellowships, conferences, acquisitions, and public programs, VCP promotes the creative use of the Library Company’s varied collections of visual materials.

**About the Library Company of Philadelphia**

Established in 1731 by Benjamin Franklin, the Library Company of Philadelphia was founded as the first public library with the mission of putting books in the hands of “ordinary citizens.” It is the oldest cultural institution in America, the Nation’s first Library of Congress and the largest lending library through the Civil War.

Today, the Library Company is an independent research library and educational institution specializing in American and global history from the 17th through the early 20th centuries. With one of the world’s largest holdings of early Americana, the Library Company’s collection strengths include African American history, economic and women’s history, the history of medicine, and visual culture. The Library promotes access to these collections through fellowships, exhibitions, programs, and online resources. To learn more, please visit [www.librarycompany.org](http://www.librarycompany.org).

**About Kathy Alpert**

Kathy Alpert’s postcard images have appeared on everything from greeting cards to billboards. After running her PR firm, Alpert Communications, for ten years, she pivoted to publishing, creating a line of greeting cards that were sold in 500 stores across the U.S. Alpert appeared on the Martha Stewart Living television program in 2004 to share her Valentine postcards and greeting cards. Her most satisfying accomplishment to date, however, is persuading the Library Company of Philadelphia that her treasured postcard collection belongs at their esteemed institution, where the postcards will live on and be accessible to scholars and researchers for years to come.
How Do the Big Hats Strike You? (United States, ca. 1908).

Hats were all the rage in the early 20th century. A respectable woman could not leave her home without donning a hat, often wide brimmed and draped with fruit, flowers, ribbons, or feathers. At church, men complained that women blocked their view of the pulpit. On the trolley, men were crowded out of their seats, and sometimes became a casualty of a woman’s hat, as comically depicted in this postcard. An object of fodder for postcard creators, large hats and the women who wore them served as the butt of the joke for countless cards lampooning the fashion. The Alpert Collection contains numerous ones of this kind, as well as those showing elegantly rendered portraits of women in their stylish headwear.
"Lips that Touch Liquor Shall Never Touch Mine" (United States, ca. 1910).
The title of a poem authored in 1874 by Harriet A. Glazebrook, a British temperance movement advocate, "Lips that Touch Liquor Shall Never Touch Mine" became the slogan of the American temperance movement in the decades that followed. Used satirically as the title on this postcard to chastise those supportive of the movement, the card depicts a woman with an expression resembling that of the figure in Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* (1893). The Alpert Collection also contains cards advocating for temperance and organizations like the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union founded by Frances Willard in 1883.
[Real photo postcard depicting an African American couple] (Cincinnati, ca. 1910)

Portrait photographs developed on postcard stock and representing intersections of gender, race, and class constitute a powerful segment of the Alpert Collection. This postcard shows a captivating portrait of an African American couple. Posed in a poised and confident manner in a setting of their choice, they are dressed in the voguish fashions of the day. Seated on an ornate stonework prop, the woman wears a wide-brimmed hat with a plume of large feathers, furs, an overcoat, and lace-up boots. Standing behind her, the man sports a bowler hat, tie, and overcoat. Stamped with the date "Dec 17" on the back of the photograph, the couple possibly hoped to send the card as a holiday greeting.
Reg Maurice, *Expecting a Rise Shortly* (London: Regent Publishing Co., ca. 1917). During World War I, women assumed factory and other jobs left vacant by the men who enlisted in the military. Designed by British artist Reg Maurice, this card typifies one style of wartime postcard art circulating during the period of conflict. Wartime postcard art is a genre well-represented in the Alpert Collection. Containing a title with a double-entendre, the card depicts a woman factory worker, with a knowing smile, lighting a cigarette as she sits atop a barrel of gunpowder surrounded by bombshells. For the cheeky viewer, the "rise" expected likely did not only mean an increase in the amount of ammunition produced.

This postcard, the title translating to *Lucky Charm*, catches the eye immediately with its depiction of an elegantly dressed lady walking eight leashed pigs. Symbols of bounty, they are portrayed with the heads of "well-to-do" men. Attired in respectable bowties and spectacles, the "men" walk under the command of the "lucky" woman. She brandishes a four-leaf clover over their heads as though a whip. The Alpert Collection includes a number of portrayals of "devious" and mischievous women who are shown "handling" a multitude of men. Other graphics within the Collection show women fishing for men, trapping them in spiderwebs, or dangling them from their fingers.

Containing a literal portrayal of a man with "money to burn," this postcard with striking retouched details, typical of Theodor Eismann postcards, shows a couple celebrating with champagne in an elegant setting. Although a 20th-century image, it echoes the culture of overindulgence that occurred during the Gilded Age. The man lighting the cigarette of a self-assured woman whose act of smoking challenges the prejudices of the day adds a modern sensibility to the scene. The period details of wooden ceiling beams, columns, and tiled floors used in the backdrop also create a decadent aesthetic. Images of women smoking in a variety of scenarios comprise another sizeable segment of the Alpert Collection.
*Sometime the girls kiss each other in Greenville but it's only between times* (United States, ca. 1911).

Composed of a stock image and an interchangeable ornament shaped as a pennant, this postcard and its variant copies circulated widely during the 1910s. Portraying the queer visual culture of the period and its complexities, this card referencing the Greenville Women's College in South Carolina uses satire and innuendo to "normalize" the scene portrayed. A pennant for the women's college Bryn Mawr College, as well as those printed with the names of towns and cities across the country, also appeared on these postcards significant for LGBTQIA+ studies.