Studio Cards: Funny Greeting Cards and People Who Created Them

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Tall, narrow cartoon cards were the new big thing in greeting cards in 1958. When Hallmark Cards was printing official Christmas cards for President Eisenhower, the Eisenhowers asked Hallmark to also create a funny studio card that they could send to a few close friends. If you have one of the 200 cards that has a personal lip print (Mamie's) and a personal thumb print (Dwight's), you have a valuable collectible piece of cartoon art. And other studio cards from the 1950s and 1960s may become collectibles.

Studio cards began in the 1940s in art studios in New York's Greenwich Village. A company called Panda Prints published the first humorous studio cards in 1947, and soon there were many small companies following that path. The major greeting card companies (Hallmark, American Greetings, Rust Craft, Norcross and Gibson) began publishing studio cards in 1956 and then the public general became aware of them. Hallmark named their cards Contemporary Cards, and American Greeting named theirs Hi Brows.

Studio cards flourished into the 1980s and then became extinct in the 1990s, or perhaps it is more accurate to say that studio cards morphed into alternative humour greeting cards. When Hallmark and American Greetings discontinued the tall cards, their cartoonists easily moved into creating the cartoon cards you see in stores today. Hallmark calls theirs "Shoebox", and American Greetings call theirs "Just My Style".

Dean Norman joined the Hallmark staff in 1956 a few months after their studio cards line was launched, and moved to American Greetings to draw Hi Brows cards from 1960 to 1990. His book, STUDIO CARDS...Funny Greeting Cards and People who Created Them is a collection of humorous stories about these writers and artists.

The major companies hired young people out of college and art schools, and rarely gave them bylines or signatures on their work. Some of them worked for a career in greeting cards, and you may have never heard of them although you may have bought and sent many of their cards. Some moved into other fields of humour, and you may have heard of them. Mort Walker, creator of Beetle Bailey. Paul Coker, a Mad Magazine cartoonist. Phil Hahn and Jack Hanrahan, writers for Rowan & Martins Laugh-In TV series. Tom Wilson, creator of Ziggy newspaper cartoon feature. Russell Myers, creator of Broom-Hilda comic strip. Robert Crumb, underground cartoonist featured in the documentary film titled Crumb. Herb Gardner, author of Broadway plays I'm Not Rappaport and A Thousand Clowns.

Over 150 writers and artists are featured in the book, with illustrations from cards published by Hallmark, American Greetings, Panda Prints, Box Cards, Nellie Card Co., Bernad Creations, Dale Enterprises, Country Cousins, Comicana, Joy&Cheer and other cartoon art by the illustrators of studio cards. Also tossed into the mix are some funny stories about the CEO's of Hallmark and American Greetings, Joyce C, Hall and Irving Stone. Studio cards were funny, and not surprisingly, so were the people who created them.

Review from the Cleveland Free Times

My Life & Card Times : Looking back at the era of funny greeting cards By Pamela Zoslov. Wednesday,

March 10, 2004

SEATED IN the living room of his cozy West Side home, Dean Norman reflects on how he became a cartoonist. "My dad was an accountant. He had to add figures all day. I thought, I could draw funny pictures ! That would be so much more fun than sitting at a desk." A teenager growing up in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Norman signed up for a mail-order cartooning course, hoping to someday become a magazine or comic-strip artist.

"I never dreamed of doing greeting cards," says Norman, now 70 and retired from a 30-year career working for the two greeting-card giants, Hallmark and American Greetings. By the time he graduated from the University of Iowa in 1956, general-interest magazines like The Saturday Evening Post, Look and Collier's were folding, and the once-lucrative market for freelance cartoons was drying up. Fortunately, executives at Hallmark spotted a cartoon series Norman drew for his college newspaper, and offered him a job. "I kept thinking someday I'd break into newspapers. I never did," he says, laughing.

Norman came into the industry at an interesting time. Greeting cards, once limited to sentiments like "Pansies always stand for thoughts/At least that's what folks say,/So this just comes to show my thoughts/Are there with you today" (one of Hallmark's all-time best-sellers) were beginning to reflect the subversive Cold War humor of the 1950s. Comedians like Mort Sahl, Bob Newhart, Ernie Kovacs and Lenny Bruce, and publications like Mad Magazine, were lampooning the uptight post-Sputnik culture with irreverent, sardonic humor. Hallmark, the very traditional Kansas City company that practically invented the greeting card, created its Studio department to tap into the emerging zeitgeist. They hired creative, offbeat artists and writers to produce funny cards with a modern twist.

The new Studio line (later called Contemporary) was an instant success. Before Studio cards, people bought greeting cards only for specific occasions; now they were buying them because they made them laugh. "They were so funny that people just wanted them," Norman says. "So that fueled a lot of growth."

Many of that generation's best and brightest launched their careers in the greeting-card business. Paul Coker, known for his kinetic illustrations for Mad, drew countless memorable cards for Hallmark. Robert Crumb, before moving on to underground-comics fame, produced finely detailed drawings (while lusting after heavyset female colleagues) as a staff artist for American Greetings' Hi Brows line. Tom Wilson headed the Hi Brows department before launching Ziggy . New Yorker cartoonist William Steig, Beetle Bailey creator Mort Walker and playwright Herb Gardner all penned cartoons for greeting cards.

Norman is now the unofficial Boswell of the crazy creatives who changed the business in the 1950s and 1960s. His new book, Studio Cards: Funny Greeting Cards and People Who Created Them (Beaver Creek Features) chronicles the rise and fall of this unique segment of the industry, with ample illustrations and amusing reminiscences by Norman's former cohorts. Those of a certain age may already have some of the most popular images burned into their memories: the bleary-eyed gent raising his top hat to reveal a birthday candle melting on his head; the morose man stretching his mouth into a wide grin, with the legend "Keep Smiling."

The new cards also allowed for a more risqué brand of humor. "People would have to explain to the clerk why they were buying the card," Norman says. "They'd say, 'I don't know anybody I could really send this to, but it's so funny'." Hallmark founder and president J.C. Hall, who had to approve all the cards, frowned on anything that could be considered in bad taste. "The only reason Contemporary Cards got some suggestive humor was that [Hall] didn't get the jokes. He didn't like the Studio cards. He thought the people buying them were a bunch of beatniks and lunatics."

After retiring from American Greetings in 1990, Norman began to think about capturing the Studio experience in a book. "It was such a crazy time, and I kept thinking that someday, somebody would write about this. We were all getting older, and about two years ago, I realized nobody's gonna do this." He wrote up his reminiscences and called on his former colleagues to send him their stories. "And more and more stuff kept pouring in, until I had a fairly good history."

Unable to find a publisher willing to even look at his manuscript, Norman decided to go the self-publishing route, investing his own money to have the book printed. "I figured even if I didn't sell any books, I can afford it; I'm retired now. I may lose [money], but no one else is going to write this book. And the people I write about are so pleased to have the stories told."

Some of the funniest tales center on the stifling working conditions at Hallmark's editorial department in the early '50s. The department was headed by a humorless ex-salesman, whose strict rules forbade the writers to do any of the following: talk; read anything except greeting cards and a rhyming dictionary; laugh or make loud noises; smoke, eat or drink at their desks; or disagree with the boss. Not surprisingly, the writers found ways of subverting the rules: one woman took to yelping like a dog to break up a boring afternoon (she was such a refined person, the boss never suspected her).

Norman started out in that buttoned-up department, writing verse for traditional cards. "They would hand you an assignment to write a sympathy card. You can only use about 12 words: 'thinking about you in your sorrow,' things like that. You'd rearrange that and turn it in." After a year in editorial purgatory, he transferred to the Contemporary department, where he worked for three years before being lured away by American Greetings.

For a time, Studio cards made greeting cards cool. Customers would flock to the card shops every week to laugh at the new releases. After a while, the companies stopped producing new jokes, opting to save money by reprinting their best sellers. Tastes changed; in the 1970s, consumers turned to Soft Touch greetings and alternative-humor cards. "They lost the novelty value," Norman says. "Now, if people want something strange, they can make their own cards on the Internet.

"It's no longer a show. It's not entertainment. And I don't know if they can ever get that back."

From reader reviews:

Donna Sedillo:

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Edward Cooley:

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