

EMBROIDERING THE GREAT WAR—

The Golden Age of Embroidered Postcards

By Sergio Lugo and Dasa Metzler

Figure 1 shows a rarity, nearly one hundred years after the times and events that it represents. For it is more than what it seems, namely, an American YMCA cover, of which many of our readers have seen thousands of surviving examples.

The significance of the cover lies in its contents! Those contents have been given space and attention in, among others, the Australian War Museum and Great Britain's Imperial War Museum in consequence of the significance the contents had to those nation's respective fighting men. For in fact, **Figure 1** is one of the few surviving covers used by AEF servicemen to forward one of the novelties of the "Great War."



Figures 1 & 2: Letter (and contents) sent in March 1919 by Howard Kosier to Dollie Kosier, most probably his sister. He was a member of an Ambulance Company in the AEF.



During the four years of that conflagration, significant numbers were purchased. **Figure 2** is that of which

we write, an example of the estimated ten million (10,000,000) so-called "WWI Silks" postcards produced, distributed, and sold throughout France and Belgium - mainly to Britons and Americans serving in their respective expeditionary forces. An estimated 10,000 patterns were produced during the war.

What quickly becomes evident with such cards, is the infinitesimally small number of postally used variants. The co-author of this article has made the collecting of "WWI Silks" one of her favorite collecting pastimes—in large measure because she was an instructor of embroidery in her younger days. She continues to collect these majestic reminders of the Great War, with a collection now approaching 1,500 cards. Not surprisingly in light of their attractiveness, many can be found in on-line auctions. Or displayed at on-line websites. One of the most extensive collections in private hands can be found via the internet at silkpostcard.co.uk.

As already suggested, the overwhelming majority of her cards are mint—with roughly 95% being a safe guesstimate of that percentage. It, therefore, became a challenge to find enough cards to justify their inclusion in a military postal history journal. But we did and this colorful "postal history" is advanced in the pages that follow as appropriate to the interests of our readers. We propose to enthrall you with aspects and illustrations of "WWI silks" that you may have been unaware of, or simply didn't know, as a feature of military postal history.

Let us begin at the beginning—namely with those cards known as "Stevengraph." These embroidered cards made their appearance in the 1880s and 1890s, as expensive, highly ornate and artistic outgrowths of the Industrial Revolution. Their beauty and scarcity still command a high price as a search of the internet will show.

But their very costliness made them of limited commercial appeal. Enter the Paris Exhibition of 1900. There, the embroidered postcard got its initial commercial birth - introduced as it was by Adolf Grieder & Cie of Zurich, Switzerland. The objectives of the company were straightforward—to expose an increasingly interested public in another variant of the postcard—with its colorful illustrations and patterns at a reasonably affordable price.

At first, most of those designs emphasized flowers, with their associated romantic captions. Unfortunately, their continued comparatively high prices still did not make them an attractive seller in the tourist or postcard collecting trades. Despite this, in the following decade, manufacturers of hand made and machine made postcards existed in France, Belgium, Germany and the United States.

Embroidered silk postcards evolved in the course of the first decade of the twentieth century. The main transformation was in the arena of presentation, not content. Initially, as illustrated by **Figure 3** such postcards consisted of silk mesh (technically known as organza) panels applied to the surface of a card by tacking glue along the borders. By the onset of the Great War, the pan-

els were affixed to the reverse of the card, in which an opening had been cut to display the embroidered card. Repetitive design panels could contain as few as 25 completed panel meshes, or as many as 400. They were initially produced as income streams by peasant women and nuns



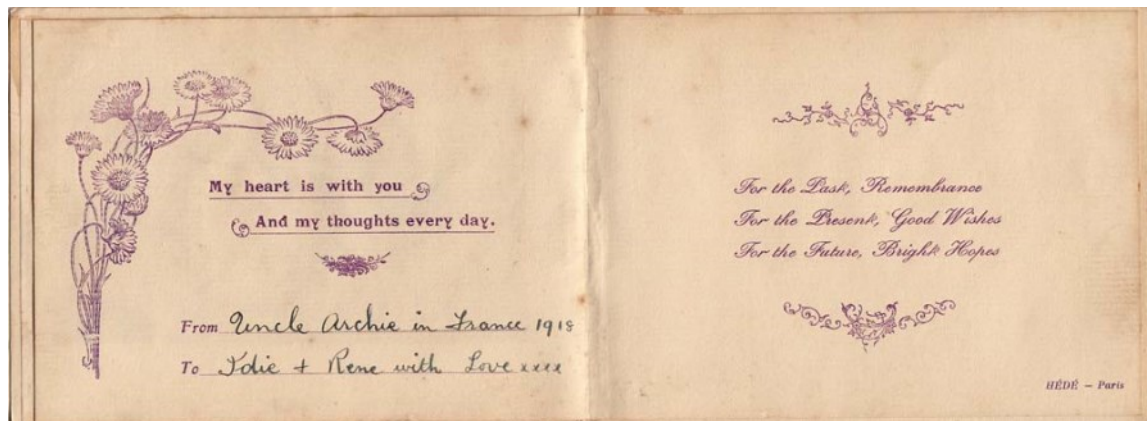
Figure 3: Embroidered silk panel before mounting. Improved post 1917 card design showing U.S. sunflower, not flag.



Figure 4: The embroidered silk panel of **Figure 3** mounted onto the reverse of card. Manufacturers varied the borders, first introduced in 1903, from plain to highly embossed, ornate frames for the design.



Figures 5 and 6: The inside panels of an exceedingly rare multi-paneled embroidered silk postcard of the Great War. In **Figure 5** above the design appears in reverse imagery. The color of the reverse imagery of the silk threads has been imprinted over time on the right panel of the postcard. The silk thread of the left panel at the right edge was merely for decoration on the front of the card.



working in convents. A hand embroidery machine came into existence as early as 1846, however, the machine was such a threat to the traditional hand embroiders that it did not reach its potential on the market until 1915, as war demand necessitated alternatives to hand manufacture. By 1915, 14 different manufacturers of hand embroidery machinery were displacing the hand embroiders.

Early designs of silk postcards produced during the war evolved from patterns with longer embroidery stitches to more sophisticated patterns with shorter stitches. Captions were usually shorter, tighter stitches. Differentiating between hand versus machine embroidery can be difficult for the non-experienced eye. Machine embroidery stood out more definitively on the mesh with its precise appearance and white sewing thread intertwined with silk embroidery threads.

Figure 7:

The Brit was upending the German “Boche” in this highly decorative card made early on in the war. (note the long embroidery stitches of the curtain).

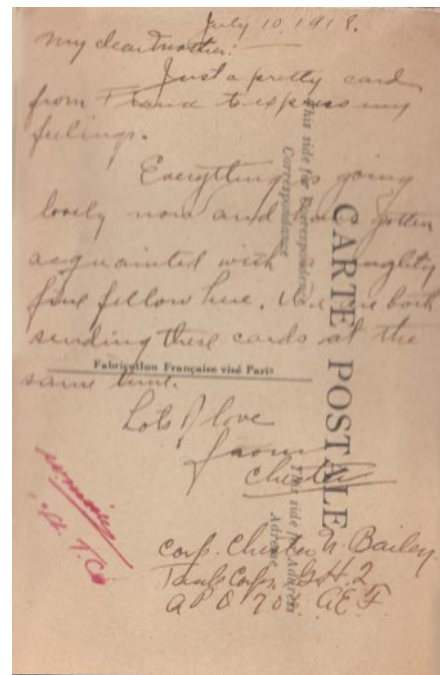


Figure 8:

Likewise in the dress of the child. The arrows point to threads left by the fabricator—uncut and untied.

Embroidered cards, however, interfered with post office processing of mail; not unlike “glitter” or leather postcards in the United States. These were banned by the 1907 Post Office Congressional legislation. At some point in time, European postal officials required that all novelty cards were to be sent in brown translucent envelopes, that were basically early versions of glassine envelopes. During the war, a regular paper envelope served just as conveniently, but the translucent envelopes still found employment - as in the case of the censored postcard illustrated by **Figures 9 and 10**.

The strips of silk mesh (organza) were stretched



Figures 9 and 10: A translucent envelope is suggested by the red censor marking of the unit officer at the lower left. Corp. Chester Bailey was writing from the AEF’s Tank Corps at AEF Headquarters, APO 702 on July 10, 1919, explaining that everything was fine.

over a simple wooden frame and embroidered. Strips were repeatedly embroidered with the same design; with as many as 400 identical patterns on the same strip. Once a panel of repetitive designs was completed, the multi image strips were sent to factories for cutting and mounting.

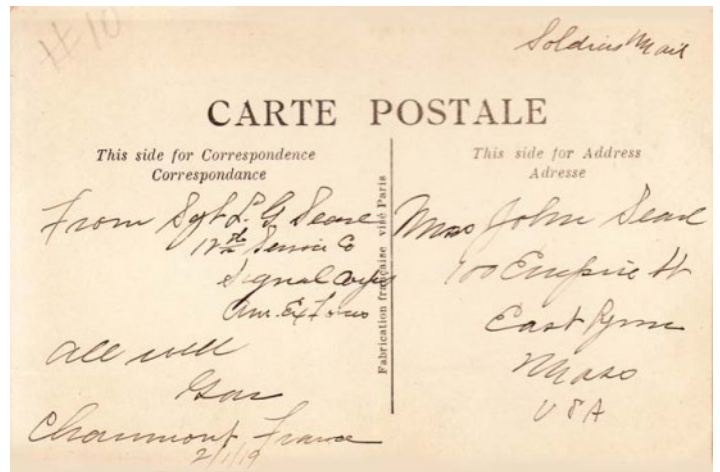
Spelling mistakes could be repeated, and are not uncommon on machine manufactured cards. By the same token, alterations could be deliberately made to preexisting patterns, which explains the absence of the Russian colors after 1917 in postcards honoring the Allies. A faithful ally until that time, wartime shortages, the revolution that overthrew the monarchy and set in motion a three year civil war, and her huge casualties (accounting for 40% of the Allied military dead), forced the country to sue for peace in that year and withdraw from the war.



Figure 11 : Produced in France, as evidenced by the French “fighting rooster” emblem, the card was meant for an English speaking audience. The Russian flag at the left, and the absence of the American flag, indicates production before 1917. The Russian colors are excluded below.



Figures 12 and 13: Written in February 1919, from Chaumont, France, by Sgt. Searl of the 12th Service Company of the Signal Corps to a family member. The absence of the censor marking suggests that the card was enclosed in either a paper or a translucent envelope.



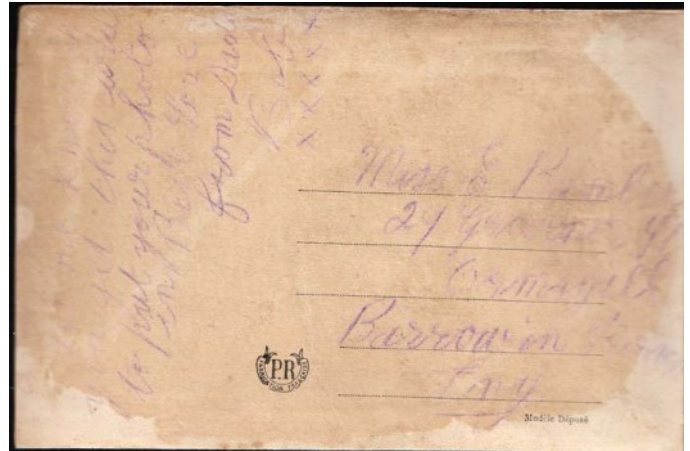
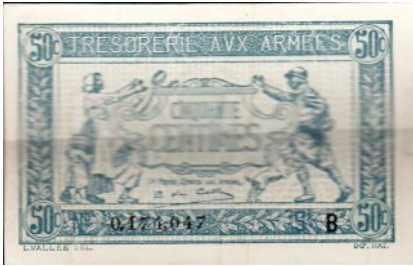
Some other attributes of embroidered postcards are worth mentioning. Threads that had become faded by sunlight or were just too old were sometimes used. In consequence, distinct differentiation of designs might prove possible. However, because the cards were intended as souvenirs many were exposed to environmental conditions—whether sunlight or smoke suffused rooms that would have affected the silk thread colors or the borders. .

A new feature introduced to such cards during the war was the creation of a two part pattern. The envelope flap design, at the top of many cards, was created to appeal to the public. An embroidered flap was attached to the mesh and glued to the panel. This resulted in creating a pocket for a small card to be inserted. Insert cards were part of the card. But, in addition, many other items found their way into the pocket as **Figures 15—17** on the next page suggest.



Figure 14: A Happy Birthday card in the two part format. Produced by an embroidery machine. The card inserted into the pocket is shown as **Figure 15** on the next page.

Inserts most typically involved greeting cards (as in **Figure 15**). On occasion the soldier felt the urge to send an example of military script (in the case of **Figure 16** issued by the French). Even more exotic, was the occasional miniature handkerchief sent home (see **Figure 17**).



Figures 15—17:

Figure 15: French military script;
 Figure 16: A typical card insert;
 Figure 17: a miniature handkerchief

Figure 20: “Tommy” Barrow of Figure 19 was writing to his daughter.—Miss E. Paul of Barrow on Trent, England. The card was likely produced before 1917.

Figure 21: German language postcard praising Germany.

A variant of the flap postcard became very popular. It took the form of postcards into which photos could be inserted, as in Figures 18 - 20.



Figure 18:
 This Belgian soldier did not record his name or the mailing address on the reverse of the card.

Figure 19 (below):
 Whereas the Tommy did so, as he was writing his daughter



Before closing, it's well to remember that among the postal history of embroidered silk postcards can be found those produced in Germany as well as those manufactured in the U.S. German production of such WW I silks ceased soon after the onset of the war, and the remaining stock was used up, as in Figure 21

Figure 22: At the left, an American produced embroidered postcard.

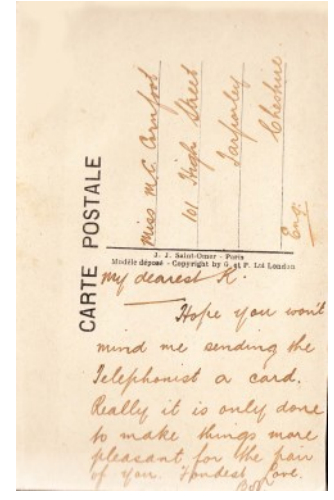
A barrage of “WWI silks,” in conclusion, are shown for the readers enjoyment. The captions explain the postcards and their postal history. We hope you’ve enjoyed this look into a somewhat aesthetic aspect of the Great War, and we thank Dasa Metzler profusely for having made a very small part of her collection available to you, as well as for her initial research into the subject.



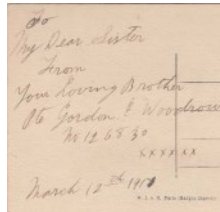
Figures 27: Scenes of the front-lines, as well as significant battles of the war (Arras, Ypres) that were fought on the Western front, are uncommon.



Figures 22—24: Pvt. Gordon Woodrow was writing his sister (Edna) in March 1916, recording for posterity his serial # of 126830



Figures 28 and 29: Cards commemorated military and naval formations as well. In this instance, the writer was sending a card to Miss Cornfoot of Cheshire, England.



Figures 25 and 26 (below): As is evident by the article, “WWI Silks” took on a highly patriotic theme; in this case emphasizing the number of years the war had been fought. Pvt. Harry Williams of Co. B, 312th Machine Gun Battalion was writing to his brother Jim, with Lt. W.W. Ball of his battalion censoring the card.



Figures 30—32: The end of the war brought an end to the large scale production of the cards. In this example of a British American airplane a brother is writing to J. Jackson (probably in 1918) at Retford, Nottinghamshire, England, having inserted a card beneath the flap Figures 31 & 32 below. By 1920, the sale of such cards petered out, never again to reach its golden years level.

My dear Bro Jim
 Just a few
 lines to let you know
 that I am in all best of
 health. Don't worry the
 war can't last very
 long. Hoping the war
 is soon over. let me know
 how the start is going.
 I have to think of the
 good things that are in the
 world. Best regards to all.
 please write me a nice
 long letter and put me all
 the news.
 Pvt Harry N. Williams
 Co B. 312 Machine Gun
 Battalion, E. F.
 312 M. G. B.

