Postcards: the "stamped picture" in the history of art

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The illustrated postcards, which can be seen in a way as moving images (since they are sent through the postal system), are a visual arts document and a popular culture icon. We aim to revise the different roles of these marginal and fragmentary media in the history of art since their emergence in the XIXth century.

As it developed at the same time as photography, the postcard became a crucial device in the building up of the photographic vision of the landscape and in the conception of portrait. Being contemporary of the work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility (Walter Benjamin), postcards are also an important support to Malraux's Imaginary Museum: owing to their small price, they provide a democratic access to art images. Often appropriated by avant-gardes, the postcard also concurred to the decentralisation of art.

The art nouveau authors, the italian futurists, the dada movement, the surrealists, the Flux members, the pop art and the New York Correspondance School are some examples of avant-gardes who have used the postcards as a material and a structure for their artistic manifestations. Nowadays, the postcards are continually renovated and used by graphic designers and visual artists. Postcards make up a democratic vehicle of expression (specially appealing for young artists), a subversion tool towards museums as well as a source of inspiration (in order to approach different contemporary subjects). On the other hand, contemporary cultural institutions choose postcards as a privileged object for their different strategies. Popular events such as Linden Postcard Show (Australia) and RCA Secret (UK) take profit of postcards qualities, concerning artists' participation and public impact. Furthermore, contemporary museums have been integrating postcards in their exhibitions: Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is the most recent example. At the same time, this petite monnaie de l- art [petty cash of art] (Paul Eluard) is controlled by advertising industries (from mass tourism to art institutions), and serves their purposes efficiently. The postcard has become a profitable consumption object because of its chic and cheap or kitsch mimicry of art.