

THE
GUIDE

ANTIQUES & COLLECTIBLES

Finding Love

Give an antique valentine and receive
a heart in return. | BY CATHERINE RIEDEL



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EACH YEAR AS VALENTINE'S DAY approaches, I say to my husband, "Please don't send me roses." Don't get me wrong—I appreciate the fact that I have a thoughtful husband. But for me, it is the *idea* of getting roses that most appeals to me. The roses themselves always leave me a little cold. They're often too big, too pristinely packaged, and a little overdone. They seem to shout the words "I love you" when a whisper in my ear would have done just fine. Dare I say it, when it comes to Valentine's Day, it's the thought that counts. It's the gesture of affection that pierces the heart.

Which brings me to the Victorians. Those folks knew how to express a thought, profess love, and send a valentine. That's why more than 100 years later, antique valentines—bits of hand-colored paper and lace penned with thoughts of love and longing—still resonate with the romantic in all of us.

"Antique valentines are the simplest tokens of affection, but they carry a heavy emotional appeal," notes Kerry Shrives, Victorian expert at Skinner, Inc., and an avid fan of early valentines. Over the past 20 years, she's seen the interest in holiday collectibles, including antique valentines, grow significantly. She adds, "Valentines are easy to collect because they don't require a lot of storage room, they're affordable, and the variety is nearly endless."

In the early 1400s, the very first written valentine was exchanged in England. Today, that example is housed in The British Museum in London. Fast-forward to the mid-19th century, when Valentine's Day became a commercial enterprise. The first American to mass-produce valentines was New England native Esther Howland of Worcester, Massachusetts,

who set up a cottage industry assembling valentines in her home. She later founded a highly successful business, and these examples are among the most desirable valentines today. Look for cards marked "N.E.V. Co." (for New England Valentine Company) or marked with a red "H."

For would-be collectors, I offer these general rules of thumb. The fancier and more elaborate the decoration, the better. Three-dimensional valentines or those with moving parts fetch the highest prices. Ditto for valentines with their original envelopes. Cards with die-cuts, gold leaf embossing, lace overlays, cobwebbing, and honeycomb tissue pop-outs tend to be more desirable than plain postcards. Valentines that are *not* signed fetch more than those with signatures and greetings. As with any paper collectible, condition is vital. Shy away from valentines with creases, discoloration or stains due to age, wear to edges and corners, adhesive residue, or musty odors. Antique valentines begin around \$30 to \$50 apiece for small postcards and simply decorated items. Highly decorated examples by Howland can fetch several hundred, even \$1,000 each. You'll find valentines at flea markets, yard sales, auctions, antiques stores, and, of course, online.

So this Valentine's Day, take my advice. Skip the roses. Send your sweetheart a lacy paper creation whose message has endured for a hundred years. The sentiments expressed are sweet. One might even think them sappy. But they'll never beg the question, "Where's the love?"

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