

Victorian Calling Card Classroom Lesson

Subject: Introduce the etiquette of calling cards as a method of social communication during the Victorian Era.

Objectives for the Student

1. Place the Victorian Era in history.
2. Understand that social customs are important in culture and in developing friendships.
3. Compare how we communicate today to the Victorian Era.

Information for the Teacher

The Victoria Era

The Victorian Era commonly refers to the period of Queen Victoria's rule between 1837 and 1901. Queen Victoria had the longest reign in British history, and the cultural, political, economic, industrial and scientific changes that occurred during her reign were remarkable. When Victoria ascended to the throne, England was essentially agrarian and rural; upon her death, the country was highly industrialized and connected by a massive railway network. Discoveries by Lyell and Darwin and began to question centuries of assumptions about man and the world, about science and history, and, finally, about religion and philosophy. As the country grew increasingly connected by a massive network of railway lines, small, previously isolated communities were exposed and entire economies shifted as cities became more and more accessible. The same types of changes were occurring in American society as well. The post and then the telegraph were the most common method of long-distance communication. The telephone was not in common use until the late 1890s.

Victorian Calling Card Etiquette

In the Victorian era, calling cards were used by every lady and gentleman of means. While the custom began in Europe, it spread to England and America quickly, and the intricate courtesies of how and when to leave cards was a facet of Victorian social life and etiquette. Everything about a card carried a meaning, from its design and motifs to a turned-down corner or black border.

Cards could be colorful or plain, with lovely calligraphy or printing. Some cards had the name hidden in the design or behind a colorful decorative front card. Some cards were black and white lithographs with the color added by hand, but others were done in Chromolithography, which used a different plate for each color, resulting in a richly colored and detailed card. Most cards carried only the name of the person, as it was a token of a personal visit—not an item to be referred to later for information.

Making a Social Call

Making social calls was a ritual of Victorian life, and calling card trays graced the entry of most homes. There was even a method of leaving a message with no words by folding a corner of the card.

- If the top left corner was bent or torn, it was a social call.
- If the top right corner was bent, it was a visit of congratulations, perhaps for a recent engagement, wedding, birth or other good news.
- If the bottom left corner was bent, it was a visit to say goodbye, as if the visitor were getting ready to go on a trip.
- If the bottom right corner was bent, it was a visit of condolence, usually for a death in the family.
- An unfolded card meant a servant was sent

Social customs are essential in developing friendships and it was important in society to pay frequent calls and to return calls promptly. Ladies' cards were often elaborately decorated with a gilded, pierced, scalloped edge. Ladies' cards might be glazed, men's were not. Men's were more straight forward and of a business nature. Men often wrote their street and numbers; women did not. A black border on the card meant the person was in mourning. Children also purchased calling cards and exchanged them in imitation of grownups.

Servants would carry the caller's card (on a tray) to the master or mistress of the house, and the visitor may or may not be received. Cards were left at a person's house whether or not the person was at home. Visits were brief, thirty minutes or less and unpleasant topics were never to be discussed. It was considered courteous to leave within a few minutes if another caller arrived, unless invited for tea or luncheon.

Calling Card Symbolism

The birds, hands and flowers depicted on calling cards had a specific meaning:

Birds: Birds in flight are symbolic of the "winged soul." The **dove** signifies purity and devotion. The **eagle** suggests courage & possibly a military career. The **owl** suggests wisdom. The **swan** is symbolic of purity and grace. The **swallow** indicates a child or motherhood

Flowers: **Ivy** is the sign of immortality and everlasting life. **Forget-me-nots** are used to symbolize and affection and a wish that love never dies. The **poppy** is sacred to deities of the moon and represents obliviousness and sleep. A **white poppy** is the symbol of peace. The **violet** is the symbol of shy modesty and quiet virtue. A **wreath** is a symbol of victory, merit and of anything venerated.

Hands: Hands, especially lady's hands, were a popular motif on calling cards. Hands holding a **wreath and laurel sheaf** symbolized love victorious. Hand holding a **sheaf and wreath of roses** symbolized hope and love. **Clasped right hands** signified friendship. Hand holding a **rose** symbolized love. Hand with the **index and little finger** extended was the sign for love. A hand holding a **fan** symbolized flirtation.

Communication Today

Compare pictures of Victorian calling cards to modern samples and consider these questions:

- How are they alike?
- How are they different?
- What do they tell about the person?
- Do they indicate a person's status or wealth? How?

Topics for Discussion:

- Business cards today are used more in a professional context. Business cards are a way of exchanging information for communication later. For example, the address, phone number and email address is often on most business cards today.
- Telephone calls and emails are used instead of personal visits.
- The answering machine could be compared to a servant who announces caller and some times screens the calls.

Calling Card Activity

Supplies

- Colored paper cut into rectangles of different sizes (Use decorative edging scissors for more elaborate borders on cards)
- Marking pens or rub-on lettering
- Victorian stickers or pictures of birds, flowers, etc., cut out of magazines
- Paper lace doilies
- Glue sticks

Procedure

A lady's card may be made by gluing a paper lace edging on the back of a rectangle and decorating it with stickers and lettering. A gentleman's card was less elaborate, but was still decorated with flourishes and pen strokes.

Practice exchanging cards as they would have done in the Victorian Era and today. Don't forget to fold the corners!



Cindy Stankowski
Director

16666 San Pasqual Valley Road
Escondido, CA 92027-7001
Phone: 760.291.0370
Fax: 760.291.0371
cstankowski@sandiegoarchaeology.org



SAN DIEGO
Archaeological
Center

preserving pieces of the past
www.sandiegoarchaeology.org



kinko's

Sherrie Arden
Commercial Business Representative

3755 Murphy Canyon Road, Suite K
San Diego, California 92123
TEL (858) 573-0515 FAX (858) 573-0413
www.kinkos.com

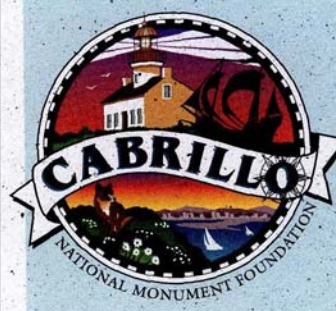
© 100% recycled fiber/50% post-consumer



ADVANCED
WEB OFFSET
INC.

Jerry Coolman

(760) 727-1700 ▪ Fax 727-4278
2260 Oak Ridge Way ▪ Vista, CA 92081-8341
e-mail ▪ jlc@awoink.com



Karen Eccles
Executive Director

1800 Cabrillo Memorial Dr.
San Diego, California 92106
Tel: 619 • 222 • 4747
Fax: 619 • 222 • 4796
Email: cnmfkaren@aol.com



California's Own
Native Landscape
Design, Inc.

Greg Rubin

760•746•6870 Fax 760•746•3420
25950 Los Arboles Ranch Rd., Escondido, CA 92026
www.calown.com E-mail calown@pacbell.net

Lic. No. 717147