



Image: Artists' Christmas cards (clockwise from upper left) – Doris McCarthy, date unknown; William Ronald from 1958 (with handwritten greeting below from the inside of card); Kazuo Nakamura from c. 1960; Doris McCarthy, date unknown.

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I recently had one of those *who knew?* moments.....who knew that the Canadian Christmas Card industry was so closely linked to Grey County. The *Grey County Luminaries* section on the *Grey Roots* website has an interesting profile of one of our own from Grey County, who for many years helped Canadians wish each other Merry Christmas. "William Coutts was born near Maxwell in Osprey Township in 1882. When William was four months old, a team of runaway horses killed his father. His mother then took William and his three sisters to live with his grandmother in nearby Feversham. Four years later his mother died. He and one of his sisters were sent to live with an uncle in Wareham. At the age of 16, he married Charlotte Robinson and the young couple moved to Toronto where William began to work in the stationery business, and developed an idea for a greeting card company." The *Hallmark Canada* website picks up the story: "the *William E. Coutts Company* sold greeting cards across Canada from 1916 - 1931. In 1931, Mr. Coutts entered into a gentleman's agreement with owner of the American *Hall Brothers Inc.* company (who by this time were marketing their greeting cards under the 'Hallmark' name), to print their designs in Canada, and marketed the cards across

what was then known as the British Empire under the 'Coutts – Hallmark' name. In 1948, the Hall Brothers company became a partner in Coutts' Canadian printing company. Ten years later, the Hall Brothers company purchased the remainder of Coutts' company." William Coutts died in 1973. Although people seem to be sending less cards every year, the Hallmark Canada website says "If all the Hallmark Christmas cards sold in Canada were lined up end to end, they would stretch back and forth from Toronto to the North Pole six times."

But the history of Christmas cards goes back further, and according to the *Greeting Card Association* website "the world's first known Christmas card appeared in London in 1843, when Sir Henry Cole hired painter and illustrator John Calcott Horsley to design a holiday card to send to his friends and acquaintances." Although it took several decades, the custom of sending Christmas cards became well established in North America, at least for the wealthy. The *Greeting Card Association* goes on to say "In the late 1890s cheap imported cards from Germany swamped the North American market. These imported cards were very popular until the outbreak of World War I, which effectively closed off the market from German imports, and spurred the birth of the American greeting card industry." In Canada, from 1914 until the Great Depression of the 1930s, the market for locally produced, printed and designed Christmas cards increased steadily. William Coutts saw an opportunity, and the company he started in 1916 was leading the way.

Although imagery on Christmas cards has reflected changing social trends over the decades, one constant even going back to the "original" Christmas card, was that they were created by an artist. Most of the commercial cards produced by the printing companies have been designed by "nameless" artists, and we will never know who designed the cards. But when you do some research, you also find some notable names in Canadian Art have designed Christmas cards too. Championed by Group of Seven artist A. Y. Jackson, the graphics company Rous and Mann, Ltd. created its "Canadian Artist Series" starting in 1922 and continued for a number of years. Designs were chosen from both in-house artists, former employees (Thomson had once worked for them) and from hundreds of original designs submitted by Canadian artists looking to make a bit of money doing freelance work. These very "Canadian" cards served as another vehicle to reinforce the new nationalistic school of art conceived by the Group of Seven.

Just prior to the William Coutts's company starting to import *Hallmark* designs to be printed in Canada, his company, created the "Painters of Canada Series" of Christmas cards. With the encouragement and connections of A. Y. Jackson a series of 43 designs, featuring art work from twenty-six of Canada's leading artists (including Group of Seven members Frank Carmichael, Lawren Harris and their contemporaries like Sarah Robertson, and Anne Savage) was created. These cards were a very high quality hand silkscreened edition. But this series only had a short run; expensive to make, and money was tight during the Great Depression, this product line

was not financially successful.

In addition, some artists were submitting designs to competitions or designing cards as part of their employment, and others designed cards independently as a way of supplementing their income, including Doris McCarthy (1910 – 2010). The Gallery is fortunate to have been donated from the artist herself, 13 of her own cards. In her book *Doris McCarthy: My Life*, she reminisces about early projects she came up with to make money to supplement her art teaching career in the early 1930s “That first year.....My biggest item was Christmas cards. I made and peddled hundreds of dozens of lino block prints of Haliburton winter scenes, printing and coloring them by hand in up to eight colors and making the envelopes to match.”

There are other artists who only created their Christmas cards to send to friends and family. A few of these very personal cards form a small but very special collection within the Gallery holdings. Because of the ephemeral nature of most Christmas cards, it is unusual that any of these cards survived. Through the generosity of Dr. J. Godfrey Lister, we are very luckily to have some of these very personal “one off” Christmas cards by Painters Eleven members Kazuo Nakamura (1926 - 2002) and William Ronald (1926 – 1998). *Canadian Art Magazine* (fall 1958) featured an article on unique Christmas cards by contemporary artists. Writer Paul Arthur doesn’t specifically reference Nakamura or Ronald, but mentions others in the group, including Tom Hodgson, and Harold Town, along with other well known mid-century Canadian artists Takao Tanabe, Jack Shadbolt, York Wilson, Alex Colville, Tony Urquhart and Michael Snow. The author mentions that these artists’ designs “may provide a foretaste of a better future among the drab and witless affairs which submerge us at this season”. Arthur goes on to write about the uniqueness of these cards as they “are personal expressions of the artists’ own personalities and no pretense is made that any of them would necessarily make a good commercial card.”

These two donations in the Gallery’s Collection of artist handmade cards, give us some insight into the personal lives of three Canadian artists, getting ready for the holiday season.

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