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1 Vintage postcard with a night scene from Istanbul. The David Collection

2 Vintage postcard titled 'The Whirling Dervishes'. The David Collection

3 Vintage postcard showing women with coffee and hookah seated on a kilim in Bethlehem. The David Collection

Messages from the past

An exhibition in Copenhagen is showcasing vintage postcards from the Middle East. Curator **Peter Wandel** explains how combinations of text and image—especially depictions of clothing—tell us much about historical attitudes to 'the Orient'

We live at a moment when the postcard is rapidly disappearing from everyday circulation. But the exhibition 'Sending All My Love—Vintage Postcards from the Middle East' at The David Collection in Copenhagen returns us to the height of its cultural potency. The show gathers 136 original postcards from North Africa, Egypt, Turkey and the Levant, illuminating a chapter of visual history in which image and message travelled together.

More than a display of nostalgic artefacts, the exhibition offers a layered portrait of the Middle East as it was imagined, staged and consumed in the early 20th century—a vision, neither wholly accurate nor entirely fabricated. The photographs include scenes of landscapes and cityscapes, artefacts and architecture, people and dress.

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4–5 Front and back of a postcard sent from Mecca to France showing the courtyard surrounding the Ka'aba, early 20th century. The David Collection

6 Vintage postcard from Tunis captioned 'The muezzin calling the faithful to prayer'. The David Collection

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Photo: Pernille Klemp

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7 Vintage postcard from a series of 'types' showing a veiled woman. The David Collection

8 Installation view of 'Sending all my love—Vintage Postcards from the Middle East' at The David Collection, Copenhagen

By the 1910s, the postcard had become the analogue precursor to today's image-driven social media—a compact format in which photograph and text were fused in a portable, affordable unit. First issued in 1869 in Germany and Austria-Hungary, the illustrated postcard spread with remarkable speed. For example, by 1909, Britain alone processed more than 800 million cards annually.

If postcards functioned as the social media 'posts' of their day, they also shaped perception in ways strikingly like contemporary digital imagery. A single photograph, often carefully staged, tinted, or retouched, carried with it not only a greeting but an entire visual narrative. Early cards typically featured drawn vignettes and handwritten salutations, e.g., 'Grüss aus Hamburg'. But by the turn of the century, photography had become dominant. One side bore the image, the other an address and message. Often, the message was brief, almost secondary, while the picture carried the meaning.

A postcard sent from Mecca to France in the early 20th century reads simply 'Bonjour' (4, 5). The photograph shows the courtyard surrounding the Ka'aba, Islam's most sacred sanctuary. The sender's laconic greeting points to what can be seen: I am here. I have arrived.

Such imagery from the Middle East often circulated far beyond the place of origin. Most postcards of the period were printed in Germany, England or France, shipped south, then dispatched again, back to Europe or onward to America, by tourists or business travellers.

They reveal how textiles could be used as a visual shorthand for otherness

Local populations undoubtedly participated in postcard culture, yet surviving examples written in Arabic script or signed with Arabic or Turkish names remain comparatively few.

Postcards from the Middle East often catered to fantasies of an 'Orient' steeped in romance and spectacle. Minarets against rose-tinted skies, palm-fringed oases, Bedouins posed in deserts, coffee sellers, dancers, snake charmers—these motifs drew deeply on a visual vocabulary already familiar from Orientalist painting and illustrated editions of *One Thousand and One Nights*.

Many postcards were manually coloured, enhancing, for example, the theatrical quality of textiles and costumes. The fabric was central. Striped *aba* cloaks, embroidered waistcoats, translucent veils, tasselled belts and layered jewellery were heightened chromatically to intensify their allure. The manipulation of colour often bore little relation to actual dyes or materials; instead, it amplified a richness.

For an audience attuned to material culture, such postcards offer more than ethnographic fragments. They reveal how dress and textiles could be used as a visual shorthand for otherness. Costume was not simply recorded, it was staged. Fabrics were draped, layered and adjusted to conform to a dream. Moreover, they speak to continued impact of the global textile trade and European consumers' interest in adapting woven patterns and motifs from the Middle East.

Almost immediately after the invention of the postcard, erotic variants began to circulate. In Europe, 'indecent cards', ranging from bathing scenes to explicit imagery, were sold widely, even where postal regulations prohibited their official transmission.

In the Middle East, the erotic postcard took on Orientalist qualities. As the exhibition also shows, for example, the figure of the 'sensual oriental woman' is a recurring motif. Women reclining on carpets, divans or low cushions, or posing in translucent garments, sought to signal the historical harem, an interior space imagined rather than documented.

Textiles again play a decisive role. Carpets, cushions, striped hangings and heavy draperies construct a *mise-en-scène* of abundance and enclosure. Yet these interiors were typically studio constructions assembled for the camera. The hand-tinted cloak, the carefully arranged carpet, the strategically loosened veil: each is part of a visual economy of facts and fiction.

Today, historical postcards function as miniature time capsules. They serve as records of architecture, everyday life, cultural traditions and textile history as well as glimpses into European projections of an exotic world. The postcard's small scale, its handwritten note and its personal address, contrast with the vast cultural narratives it carried. A simple 'Bonjour' becomes layered upon the meaning of the postcard's image of the great mosque of Mecca. Together these elements may evoke much more.

If postcards were the social media of the past, they were also curators of longing. They invited envy, sparked daydreams, and circulated fantasies stitched together from architecture, fabric and light. ❦