

The Swiss Post pioneers the “vignette postal card” in 1923

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Switzerland was the first country in Europe to issue postal cards with drawn or photographed vignettes. Many European countries followed the Swiss lead in the years following: The Netherlands in 1924, Austria, Germany and Luxembourg in 1927, Belgium in 1929, Liechtenstein in 1930, Italy in 1933, etc. Especially many and long series were issued by Switzerland, Germany, Austria and Italy.

Vignette postal cards are cards with an indicium (postal stationery) and a vignette on the address side, less frequently on the back or on both sides, all imprinted and issued by the Post Office. The vignettes are mostly rectangular or square and in the same colour as the indicia (later also multicolour).

Vignette postal cards should not be confused with some other cards with similar characteristics, i.e.:

- View cards with a vignette but without an indicium.
- Postal cards with a private imprint of a vignette (on either side of the card (fig. 1)).
- Privately ordered postal cards with a vignette (fig. 3).
- Pseudo vignette postal card for advertising purposes (fig. 2).

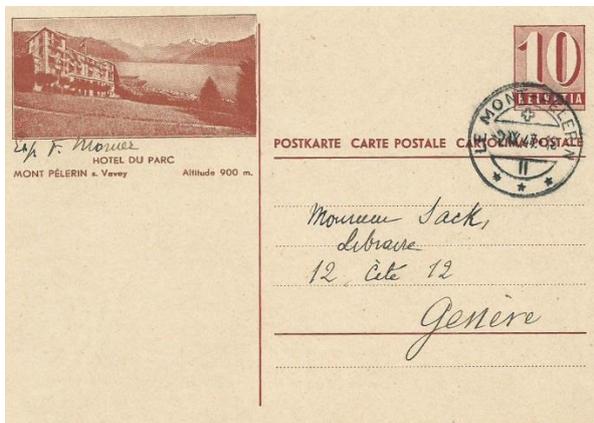


Fig. 1. Postal card with a private imprint of a vignette.

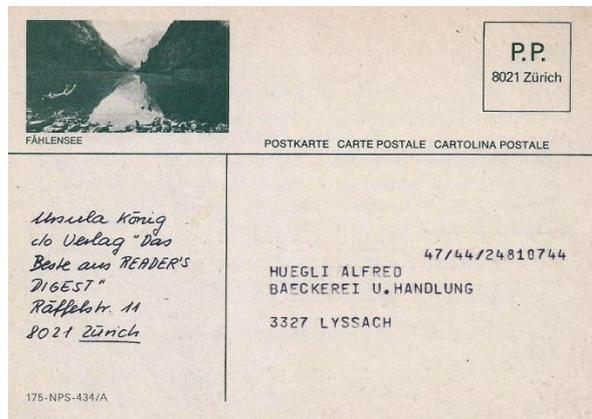


Fig. 2. Pseudo vignette postal card for advertising purposes.



Fig. 3. Privately ordered postal card PrP 56 with an imprinted picture on the back.



Prologue

Illustrated postal cards as precursors to vignette postal cards appeared in 1882 in Bavaria – special postal card for the industrial exhibition in Nuremberg with a photograph of the exhibition building (fig. 4), in 1890 in Brazil – postal card with an overprint of a drawn motive of the sugar loaf (fig. 5) and in 1894 in Portugal – postal card to commemorate Henry the Navigator (fig. 6). The famous Mulready postal envelopes issued by the British Post Office showing Britannia can be considered as precursors to vignette postal stationery (fig. 7).



Fig 4. Bavarian postal card 1882



Fig. 5. Brazilian postal card 1890.

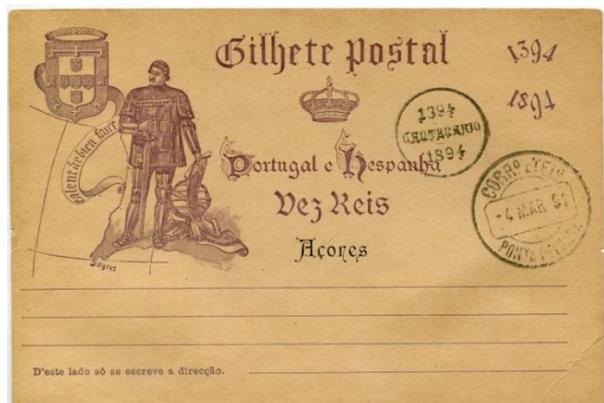


Fig. 6. Postal card from the Azores (Portugal) 1894.



Fig. 7. One penny Mulready-envelope from Great Britain 1840.

The New Zealand Post Office issued in 1899 a series of vignette postal cards. These so called “pictorial postcards” show on the address side various views. These were followed in 1900 by a further series, this time with 16 different scenes of the Boer War, and in 1901 by a third series with views of New Zealand.

Switzerland’s Post Office, the first in Europe to issue vignette postal cards, could thereby solve a decade old problem. In the early 1900s the Swiss tourist industry requested the issue of Swiss stamps with designs to stimulate tourism. In spring 1907 the Association of Swiss Tourist Offices submitted a demand to the Swiss Federal Council: The planned definitive issue of the Tell Boy and Helvetia Bust should be replaced by aesthetically

more attractive subjects. The Swiss Federal Council rejected this demand because it was impossible to produce graphically effective landscapes on stamps of this size in letterpress. In the following years the Swiss postal administration repeatedly received similar requests from organizations and private persons. In 1914 the Swiss Post issued for the first time large size stamps with mountain landscapes in considerably more expensive copper plate printing (face values of 3, 5 and 10 Swiss Francs).

The development of the first Swiss vignette postal cards

In 1922 the tourist office of the town of Berne submitted a request to the head post office to suggest that Swiss postal cards be overprinted with landscapes and city views. This request was apparently so detailed and attractive, that the Post signed in January 1923 a contract with the tourist office of Berne, which stipulated the details for the issue of the first vignette postal cards for domestic and international use. The following was agreed (PTT-archive, PAA 02057):

- The vignettes should represent towns and landscapes, but also the postal bus services on Swiss alpine routes.
- The tourist office of the town of Berne was responsible for acquiring the pictures and drawings, which were to be approved by the Post.
- The maximum size of the vignettes was to be 52 x 23 mm, and these were to be printed in the same colour as the indicia.
- The tourist office could request from interested parties a printing cost contribution not to exceed 400 Swiss Francs for domestic cards and 150 Swiss Francs for international cards.
- The vignette postal cards would be sold by the Post Office at the face value of the indicia.
- The first printing run would cover 9.6 million domestic and 1.6 million international cards.
- The tourist office of Berne was to reimburse half of the net profit in excess of 4000 Swiss Francs to the Post.

The tourist office of Berne wrote to 125 towns and villages and their tourist offices to obtain pictures or drawings for this purpose. Many did not reply or said they were not interested. Therefore the first issue could only cover half of the 96 planned subjects; 20 were used for domestic and 28 for international cards. The vignettes showed 43 times a town, village, hotel or bath and 5 times a pass route with a postal bus (fig. 8). Six artists produced pen drawings of these selected pictures for printing purposes.



Fig. 8. Postal card 85.07.

The graphic artist Karl Bickel received the order to design the indicia and the layout of the cards (note: Karl Bickel was later asked to design many Swiss stamps). The desire was to get away from the traditional stamp subject of Wilhelm Tell and his son and produce a very simple design, which would not interfere with the impression the vignettes were to give. From the various drafts, the Post selected a decorated numeral for the two face values of 10c and 25c (fig. 9 and 10).

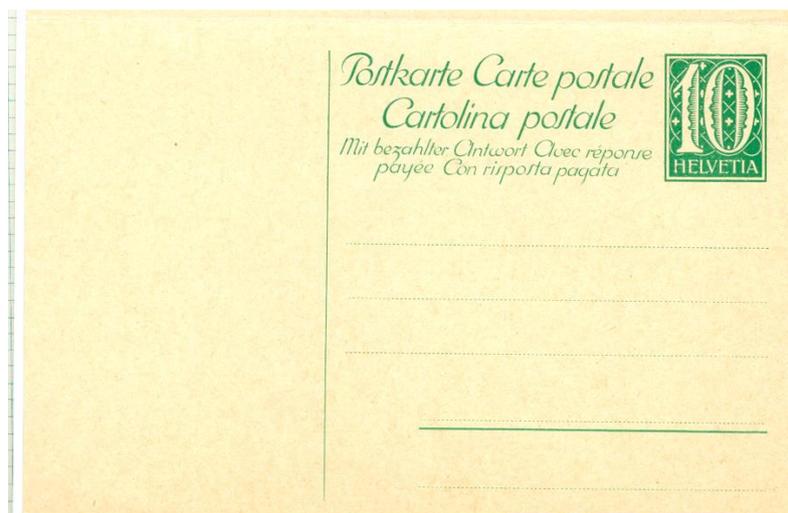


Fig. 9. Draft card by Karl Bickel (MfK)



Fig. 10. Design by Karl Bickel accepted for printing.

The issue of 1923-1924

Already on the 1st of June 1923 the first vignette postal cards were available for international use and on the 6th of June those for domestic use. During the following months several other postal cards were issued based on the same design: postal cards without a vignette, booklets of postal cards with and without vignettes, reply paid postal cards at 10c + 10c and 25c + 25c without vignettes. At the beginning of 1924 the 10c postal card and the reply paid postal cards were re-issued, this time with a vertical bar, which was forgotten in the first issue. In 1924 the 25c postal cards (together with older international cards) received an overprint of the indicium with 20c because of the reduction of the tariff for international postcards (fig. 11). Of interest for postal stationery collectors are the gift booklets donated to high officials in the years 1923-25. These contain the vignettes of the postal cards and one especially large postal card at 10c and 25c each (later 20c). See also my separate article in "Der Ganzsachensammler" N° 105 of December 2013, which provides a lot more information on these gift booklets.



Fig. 11. Postal card 95.21 with ZN° 181.1 A.09 and ZN° 191.

Public reactions to this novelty

The vignette postal cards received an overwhelming welcome by the public and the 10c cards were completely sold out by the autumn of 1923.

Despite this public success, the Post received a number of critical comments. Many newspapers reported that the Post Office had lost its taste for art and was merely imitating the German stamps of 1921. This was the era shortly after World War I, where anti-German sentiment was high under

the Swiss population. Therefore, it was not surprising that many journalists were complaining about the copying of German designs in the absence of any Swiss ideas, etc. An unknown person created a card representing German stamps next to the 10c indicium and mailed it on 27.6.23 in an envelope to the head office of the Post in Berne (fig. 12). He or she wrote on the reverse side of the card: *“When one buys a new postal card one comes to believe that we have a German Post Office. Why does one always copy foreign foolishness? and especially that from Germany. Don't we have any artists in Switzerland? we all want Swiss craft and not foreign works. We are still an independent nation. Germanisation must be eliminated in Switzerland. The heirs of Wilhelm Tell.”* (PTT-archive, PAA 02057).



Fig. 12. Anonymous card, 82.02 with addition of ZN° 153, MiN° 179 and MiN° 182.

Karl Bickel, who designed these cards, was so upset and insecure that he fled into the Alps, where he was hiding in a remote lodge during the summer. He wrote from there on 23.6.23 to the head office of the Post in pencil: *“I have received your letter in a remote alpine hut, where there is plenty of milk but no ink. The conceptual design of the indicia was totally independent from the German stamp design.”* The Post accepted his defence and calmed down the situation. They wrote to the newspapers which had denigrated the new vignette postal cards.

The “Neue Zürcher Zeitung”, which had for years a well-known philatelic column, repeatedly wrote critically about the vignettes, considering them as bad style and displeasing to the eye. They found fault with the graphic layout

of many views overloaded with details, like Engelberg (fig. 13), Leukerbad, Solothurn-Bastion, etc. The three vignettes printed in upright format were displeasing because one had to turn the card to contemplate the picture (fig. 14 and 15). The vignettes of the series issued between 1924 and 1964 were printed without exception in rectangular or square format.

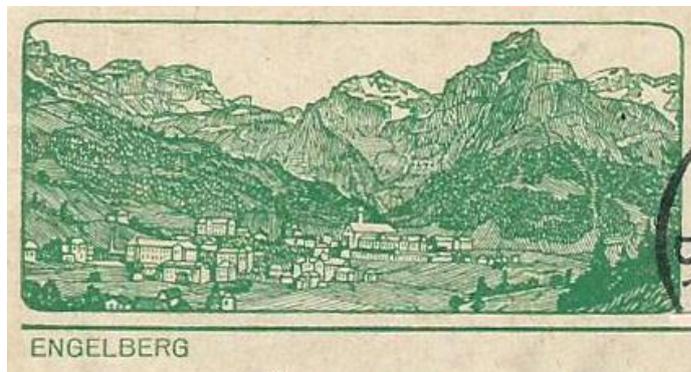


Fig. 13. Vignette of postal card 82.08.

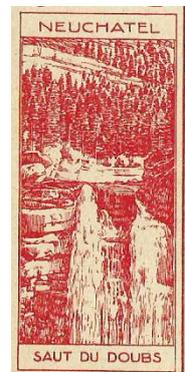


Fig 14. Vignettes of postal cards 82.13 and 85.17.

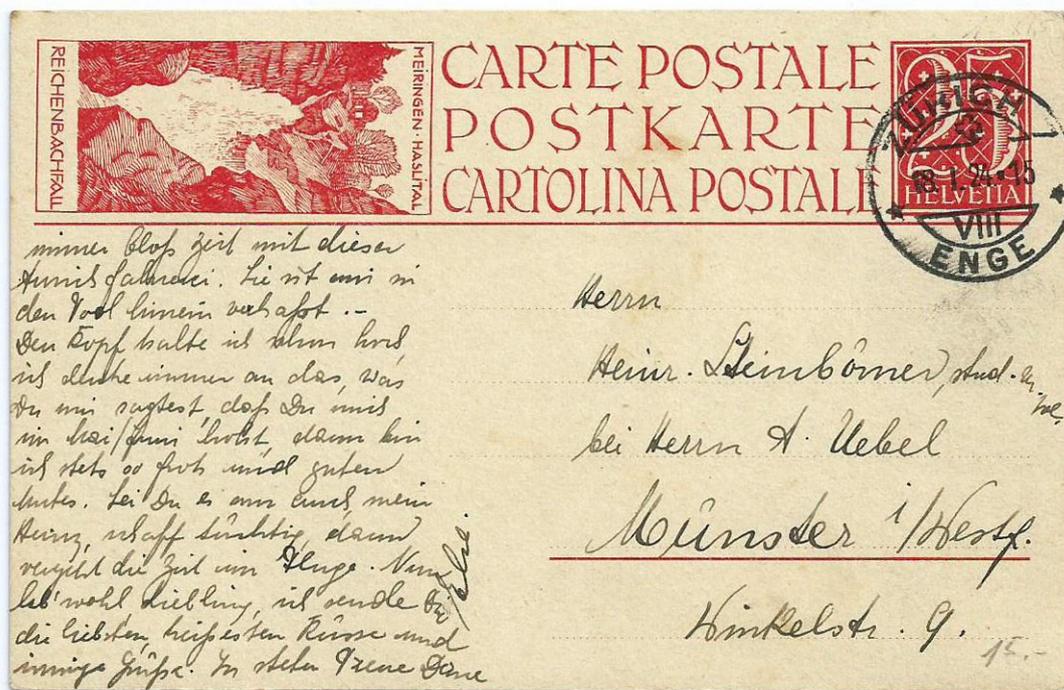


Fig 15. Vignette postal card 85.12.

Many towns, villages and organisations felt ignored by the selection of the pictures for the 1923 vignettes. It was noticed that sizeable towns and known tourist places were not represented (Biel-Bienne, Genève, Grindelwald, St. Moritz or Winterthur). The Post could answer with a smile on their face that they were contacted several times without success and were welcome to enlist for the coming issues. From a few larger places, which were contacted regularly, no cards were produced at all: the cantonal principal towns of Aldorf, Appenzell, Glarus, Sarnen, Stans and further places like Biasca, Bodio, Grenchen, Langnau, Visp, Wettingen, Wetzikon, etc.

In the years after 1923 the critical voices were quietening, also there were always details getting attention, e.g. the indicia of 1929/30 with the Mater Fluviorum (“housewife emptying her water jar such that it really is pouring”, as per “Das Werk”) or the indicia of 1931-1934 with the contours of Switzerland (“a picture puzzle where one hardly guesses that it represents a postage stamp” as per the “Appenzeller Zeitung”).

Reactions to the Swiss vignette postal cards abroad

Despite some crabby voices within Switzerland the vignette postal cards witnessed a success abroad. On 12.7.1923 Minister Schenk, the director of the Berlin post, wrote to the head office of the Post: “Dear Dr. Furrer, during my holiday I received your letter with the new Swiss postal cards, showing on the face landscapes and town views opposite the indicium. I find this idea original and very successful; it will diffuse the beauties of your country throughout the whole world and bring new admirers and friends. One can merely wish you wholehearted success in the realization of this concept. Hoping that you, your honoured wife and your children are well, I remain with my best wishes and regards, yours faithfully W. Schenk.” (PTT-archive, PAA 02057).

The Postal Ministry of the German Reich wrote on 10.10.1923 from Berlin: “By all accounts the subject postal administration issued a series of postal cards, which pursue publicity purposes, and are officially sold at the Post Office counters. Since we have also received many requests to produce similar postal cards here, I would be pleased to receive information on the experiences made with these cards, the type of publicity made, and whether the sale of these cards is made with a deviation to the standard tariff for postal cards”. (PTT-archive, PAA 02057).

This letter was answered by the director of the head office of the Post on the 20th of October: “In reply to your letter of the 10th of October, I am pleased to provide the Postal Ministry of the German Reich with a copy of the Official Swiss Post and Telegraph Gazette, which contains the details on the introduction of postal cards with vignettes of landscapes and city views. In addition I would like to point out the following: This first issue is a trial for which we employed a number of artists for the graphical-artistic editing of the individual pictures. However, not all artists were fully familiar with the techniques to be applied. This resulted in differences in the graphic-technical layout of the individual pictures for this trial series. To avoid a competition with the private view card industry we kept the vignettes in modest size and monochrome. (The tourist industry would have preferred multi-coloured vignettes). These measures resulted in modest additional production costs and allow these vignette postal cards to be sold at the

normal tariff for postal cards without any additional charge. However, the tourist office of Berne is under contract to acquire the pictures and to pay for the original printing plates for this series of cards and thereby is authorized to collect a reasonable fee from the interested parties (tourist offices and private organizations). This novelty has generally been well received by the public so that we already plan to issue a new series in spring of next year. To which extent the sale of postal cards was stimulated by these vignette postal cards is difficult to assess." (PTT-archive, PAA 02057).

Letters with similar contents were received by the Post also from the postal administrations of The Netherlands and Belgium, and a few years later from the United Kingdom. One usually wrote a letter back summarizing the success of these cards.

Epilogue

For the Post and the tourist office of Berne the promotion with these cards brought a financial success. Already in the autumn of 1923 the tourist office of Berne paid to the Post a surplus of 600 Swiss Francs and was allowed to continue for the next several years to acquire the pictures for the new series. Then in 1930 the Post decided to do this themselves and thereby reduced the fees for the vignettes to 150 Swiss Francs for domestic postal cards and to 100 Swiss Francs for international postal cards.

For the 1924 issue of the vignette postal cards the Post asked the artist Walter Reber to design the new indicia. New pictures were selected for the vignette postal cards to be issued, 20 each for domestic and international use. Many of the towns and villages which felt excluded from the 1923 issue managed to get their pictures on the cards during the following years.

Some years later the Post had to defend itself on two occasions against compensation claims by third parties. In 1930 Mr. H. Clare, a printing shop manager, claimed to be the inventor of the vignette postal cards. He was reimbursed for his invention with a mere 100 Swiss Francs by his earlier sponsor, the tourist office of Berne. Even though the Swiss post had profited from H. Clare's idea, they rejected the demand for additional compensation. In 1932 Mr. W. Peyer affirmed in the "Papeterist" that "the illustrations of landscapes and city views on postal cards issued by the Swiss Post were severely damaging the business of view cards and the tariff increase would practically strike dead the view card business." The post head office answered that this could not be true, because the number of view cards handled over the years at the printed matter tariff had increased substantially more than the sales of the vignette postal cards and also that the space available for the vignette was considerably smaller than the picture side of the view card.

The Swiss Post printed vignette postal cards for many years, but discontinued this in 1964 to the distress of many postal stationery and local postal history collectors.

Literature

- Dr. Ernst Schlunegger: Die Bildpostkarten der Schweiz 1924-1964, 2010
- Historisches Archiv und Bibliothek PTT Bern: PAA 02057/Nr. 680 and GB 0105

(Catalogue numbers as per Zumstein Ganzsachen Schweiz und Spezialkatalog Schweiz Zumstein, Deutschland-Katalog Michel)

Picture credits

- Fig. 3: Armando Lualdi, Glarus
- Fig. 4: Bernd Schwabe, Hannover (Internet; postal card)
- Fig. 5 and 6: Peter Bamert, Solothurn
- Fig. 9 and 10: Museum für Kommunikation, Bern (Draft postal card 10c; draft „10“ for postal cards)
- Fig. 12: PTT-archive Berne, from PAA 02057
- All other figures scanned by the author

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[Anmerkung der Redaktion:](#)

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