


Touching Sentiment: The Tactility of Nineteenth-Century Valentines




During the month of February, the shelves of most retail spaces overflow with red roses, chubby cherubim, and arrowed hearts—unmistakable symbols of Valentine’s Day. Far from a twentieth-century “Hallmark holiday” invention, Valentine’s Day and the exchange of sentimental cards and tokens has a long history. The tradition became popular in the eighteenth century with legendary origins stretching back to the Romans. In its heyday, from about 1840 to 1890, the exchange of valentines was an immensely popular social activity in the United States. Valentines evolved as newer and cheaper manufacturing processes emerged, benefitting from developments such as chromolithography and the standardization of paper lace production. Growing increasingly three-dimensional and more ornate with every added layer of material, sentimental or “fancy” valentines, as they were called, were harbingers of hope, fondness, and desire (fig. 1). More than just an aesthetic assemblage of colorful pictures and paper lace, valentines both delivered and evoked sentiment. An 1853 article in *Gleason’s Pictorial* expresses the rush of physiological and emotional feelings experienced on February 14 in anticipation of receiving a valentine:

There is the earnest fluttering of the pulses as the postman advances—hopes and fears alternately swaying the desires for a valentine, replete with

tender expressions and soft inducements. The postman knocks—the face is flushed—the heart beats, and the beautiful missive, all decorated with hearts slung up in a halter, or pinned together with butchers' skewers is opened. Who can paint a feeling? We will not try to do it (fig. 2).


 1. Valentine card, "Yours For Ever," by Esther Howland (Worcester, Massachusetts, ca. 1860-1880). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.


 2. In "St. Valentine's Day" (from *Gleason's Pictorial*, February 12, 1853, Boston) the illustrator conveys the valentine recipient's excitement, evidenced by the envelope she casts onto the floor as she hurriedly opens the card mere moments after it arrives.

While this florid observation directs our attention to the high emotional stakes of Valentine's Day, it also points to the challenge of depicting sentiment, something that is *felt* rather than seen. Indeed, *Gleason's*, a heavily illustrated periodical, which prided itself on capably communicating through text accompanied by plenty of images, highlights the difficulty in conveying emotion through purely visual media. Nineteenth-century valentines themselves, through their complex assembly, relied on more than just texts and pictures to impart meaning. Tactility, achieved through the inclusion of sensuous textures and interactive features, such as flaps that lift to reveal hidden messages, are vital components of the nineteenth-century valentine (figs. 3-7). By having to hold, touch, and interact with the valentine, recipients were made to *feel materials* in order to *feel sentiment*.

[This video has been made private by owner.]

3. Video clip showing the layers of a Valentine card, ca. 1875, sent to Walter E. Marsh of Keene, New Hampshire. The embossed envelope is postmarked February 14 from Winchendon, Massachusetts. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

 4. Embossed envelope for valentine, ca. 1875, postmarked February 14 from Winchendon, Massachusetts, addressed to Walter E. Marsh, Keene, New Hampshire. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

 5. Valentine card, ca. 1875. Sent to Walter E. Marsh, Keene, New Hampshire. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Physical experience is crucial to understanding these valentines. As a gifted object, the valentine becomes a conduit for human emotion, thereby giving the idea of “touching” dual significance in the valentine’s simultaneous tactility and sentimentality. By engaging theories related to materiality and signification, the Western intellectual history of touch, and the medium of paper itself, this essay will look critically at the affective power held by valentines and how they were experienced or understood during the mid- to late nineteenth century. This investigation pays particular attention to the valentine as an object and to the haptic aspects of receiving one.



6. Inside of valentine card sent to Walter Marsh, first page with pasted scrap featuring a floral bouquet and text, ca. 1875. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.



7. Inside of valentine card sent to Walter Marsh, second page with pasted bordered poem, ca. 1875. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Valentines, in general, resist close, singular visual analysis. As I detail below, visually and textually, they often appear to be interchangeable and arbitrarily constructed. However, their material complexity nonetheless demands serious consideration. Valentines, as a category of simultaneously similar yet unique objects, challenge inherited methodologies of interpretation in art history and material culture studies. Most investigations of a singular valentine via close looking and careful interpretation come up short; a sustained study of the iconography of one card yields little beyond frustration. However, and at the same time, to investigate valentines as a homogenous group grossly overshadows the different affective properties any given valentine might offer, at least momentarily. Paying closer attention to the material heft, textural diversity, and interactive dimensions of valentines enables us to consider their capacity for material signification, their non-linguistic, non-visual methods of communication.

The Big Business of American Valentines

The American market for commercial valentines began when stationers and bookshops started importing cards from England and continental Europe in the early nineteenth century. Germany was known for its tremendous output of colorful lithography, while English papermakers excelled at embossing (the process of pressing a raised pattern or image into paper), and later at the production of lace paper—all technological innovations in the nineteenth

century. Historians and collectors widely credit Joseph Addenbrooke, a paper embosser for a large English firm, as the inventor of lace paper when he began filing down the raised areas of embossed paper to create a delicate, perforated effect. Addenbrooke's technique was adopted by firms throughout England and was exported in great numbers to the United States and elsewhere.



8. Esther Howland, carte-de-visite by Photographic Studio of J.M. Devine & Co. (Charlestown, Massachusetts, ca. 1870s). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.



9. A typical early Howland valentine. Esther Howland, American, 1895-1924, untitled valentine (Two Putti in a Wreath), 1850/59, collaged elements on cut and embossed (designed) ivory wove paper, 121 x 83 mm (folded sheet). Bequest of Paul E. Pearson, 1986.808, the Art Institute of Chicago.

English firms, such as those of Joseph Mansell, Jonathan King (Jr. & Sr.), and Dobbs & Co., combined colorful scraps and embossed and lace paper and sent these valentines to shops and independent dealers for sale in the U.S.—but at a very high cost. Beginning in the 1840s, American firms began assembling their own valentines. One of the most notable valentine companies, and the one most associated with the multi-layered, ornate sentimental valentine, is that of Esther Howland's New England Valentine Company, based in Worcester, Massachusetts. Howland's ascendancy to "Mother of the American Valentine" is described in as much lore as Valentine's Day itself (fig. 8). Most accounts say Howland, the daughter of a bookstore owner, received an English valentine from a family friend and was so taken with the object that she endeavored to create her own. With lace paper, scraps, and other materials imported by her father, Howland constructed a number of sample cards, which she then gave to her brother to show potential clients on an upcoming sales trip (fig. 9). Upon his return, Howland's brother brought orders amounting to \$5,000, making the valentines much more successful than Howland anticipated. After hiring several women to assist her in meeting the demands of the initial orders, Howland's company was born.

Stationer George C. Whitney also anchored his business in Worcester, Massachusetts, and eventually absorbed Howland's company in 1881. During the 1880s, curiosity about the Whitney Manufacturing Company's valentine-making process resulted in numerous articles. These reports opened the factory doors to readers, describing the use of German scrap and English embossed paper, while remarking on the "taste and skill" of the "young girls" employed to assemble the cards. Readers also learned about the sale and distribution of valentines: the salesmen who visited town after town, presenting samples and taking orders from stationers and other shop owners, and about Whitney's newly

opened seasonal shops, which allowed customers to buy valentines directly from the source. Despite their revelatory tone, these articles preserved and perpetuated the allure of valentine production. Even as these articles highlighted the handmade assembly behind the valentine, they also drew positive attention to the many rational and efficient production processes used by popular stationers. Far from sullyng the romance of the cards, exposure to the factory's processes was itself mysterious and fascinating to nineteenth-century readers.

The Making of a Valentine

Nineteenth-century sentimental valentines are recognizable by their overwhelming assemblage of delicate paper lace and small chromolithographed pictures called "scrap." Many of the components employed—flowers, hearts, lovebirds, Cupid, and affectionate phrases—wouldn't look out of place on a valentine today. Some, however, are more period-specific, such as Christian symbols and depictions of innocent children or animals, staples of nineteenth-century popular imagery. Makers relied on this generalized sentimental iconography to craft attractive cards that would have been immediately legible as valentines. While there were certainly valentines that emphasized text (as in the presentation of a lengthy poem or "comical" taunting prose), these collaged valentines instead relied on images, textures, and interactive features to convey sentiment. In this way, the sentimental valentine appealed to the recipient through the senses, especially touch, on a more immediate level.

That a valentine should invite or even require significant handling by its recipient has been an integral component of the genre since its early days. During the eighteenth century, many valentines took the form of a folded rebus or puzzle, with numbered verses to be reassembled by the recipient. By the mid-nineteenth century, a valentine could demand physical interaction in a multitude of ways. Some might reveal images when the recipient pulled on a lever or a string. In the "cobweb" or "beehive" valentine, for example, an intricately cut spiral pattern can be pulled out and extended to reveal a sentimental image beneath (fig. 10). More complex than simply lifting a flap to reveal a picture, the webbing of the cut paper forced the viewer to move around to view the image and to peer through the spaces in the paper, similar to other valentines that partially occlude images with perforated paper lace.



10. "Cobweb" or "Beehive" valentine; the names refer to the spiral cut into the paper which enables it to be pulled out, revealing an image beneath. Unknown artist, English, Be Thine, color print valentine with lace border, 229 x 178 mm (c. 1830). Gift of Emma B. Hodge, 1919.292, the Art Institute of Chicago. Click on the image to see a GIF of the valentine in action.



11. The illustration “Making” shows the assembly line of female employees as they put together the many components of the sentimental valentine. “Manufacturing Valentines” from *The London Illustrated News*, February 14, 1874.

Before about 1840, valentines were commonly made by the giver or were quite expensive when crafted by others, but by the mid-nineteenth century, commercially produced valentines became the norm. These valentines were crafted by hand, but not by the sender. In companies like Howland and Whitney’s, groups of workers, usually young women, assembled valentines with the aforementioned “scrap,” resulting in collages of standard imagery (fig. 11). The anonymity of the maker was an asset in the valentine business: it enabled for the evocation of sentiment, as if the giver had produced the item himself. At most, a valentine might include the company’s stamp (a “W” for Whitney, for example) but never the name of any specific makers. By diffusing and mystifying the labor expended in its creation, the valentine became an object with no authorship until the giver personalized it by simply signing the card. Very little space, if any, was left for other significant additions on behalf of the purchaser. Despite their seemingly handmade charm, designers and factories produced an overwhelming number of valentines, making Valentine’s Day a profitable industry built on feminized labor. Ultimately, there was a tension between the erasure of this labor and its popularity in the media, which continually credited the valentine’s beauty to the “nimble fingers of expert young ladies.”

The basic look and form of a sentimental valentine was relatively standardized, with thousands of valentines adopting virtually the same compositions but with different pieces of scrap or paper lace. The assembly-line process used in the production of valentines makes them especially difficult to interpret individually, as they are the product of several different hands, each contributing a piece to the whole by means of alienated labor. While the women employed by Howland and Whitney were praised for their “artistic eyes” and aptitude for assembling items in a pleasing manner, the seemingly nonsensical, almost happenstance arrangement of images and phrases simply reiterates the broader valentine vocabulary of sentimentality, prettiness, and delicacy. Many of these valentines demonstrate a haphazard application of layers and a disregard for the visual precision of the finished product. For example, in one valentine from 1855, a layer of paper lace cuts off the head of an unfortunate dove (figs. 12, 13), a clear indication that the makers were quickly heaping on the necessary materials and perhaps disregarding some of the included imagery.



12-13. Despite the decapitated dove, this elaborate valentine also features a satin layer that lifts to reveal a message. Joseph Mansell, “Yours Forever”

(1850s). Collaged elements, with watercolor, on cut and embossed (designed) ivory wove paper, with the blue tissue paper insert, 251 x 202 mm. Bequest of Paul E. Pearson, 1986.603, the Art Institute of Chicago.



14. This valentine features a background paper that resembles needlework and a heart-shaped paper that mimics crochet. The heart lifts up to reveal a small photograph of a dog sitting on the front steps of a stately home. Unknown artist, American or English, nineteenth century, "My heart is open to my blue-eyed forget-me-not." Collaged elements and watercolor on cut and embossed (designed), ivory wove paper, 180 x 179 mm, obj: 207127, the Art Institute of Chicago.

Even the text used on valentines reads as generic and regurgitated—and in many cases it was. Booklets consisting of romantic verses suitable for copying, or "[valentine writers](#)," as they were called, were popular throughout the long nineteenth century. Even though publishers emphasized the newness of each annual edition, the same poems appear again and again, and even the most novel could be reproduced on numerous valentines in one season. Many pieces of mass-produced scrap, too, combined word and image, with pictures of flower banners displaying the same phrases such as, "truly thine!" and "yours forever!" Repeatedly, poetry and pictures that alluded to the uniqueness and perpetuity of a romantic bond were mass-reproduced and deployed on these cards, which simultaneously supported their importance while cheapening the sentiments.

These elaborate cards typically employ a collaged, homemade style, despite their mass production. One such valentine features several layers of mass-produced, perforated papers that are imitations of needlework roses and crocheted doilies. These materials blur the lines between fabric, paper, and textiles as well as between the handmade and the industrial (fig. 14). Even the most technologically advanced variations of valentines sought to retain some reference to the handmade. Valentines, which were usually not painstakingly or thoughtfully crafted by one person to give to another, maintain these qualities in an effort to evoke the handmade and all of its discursive associations (though as historian Leigh Schmidt has argued, the popularity of crafting one's own valentine grew exponentially alongside the increasing popularity of manufactured valentines). The tactile evidence of the labor expended in handicraft helped import feelings of authentic and deep sentiment as *if* the giver had spent a considerable amount of time creating the object. By incorporating allusions to the handmade, the valentine makers redeemed the mass-produced material they used during production, and touch was a way to reactivate that material, to bring it back to the personal and away from the commercial.



15. The fabric leaves, feathers, printed scrap, gauze, and other assorted materials of this dense valentine are piled high—resulting in a card nearly half an inch thick. Unknown artist, American, “Affections Offering” (c. 1850). Collaged elements with watercolor and silver and gold paint on cut and embossed ivory wove paper (lace), 245 x 201 mm (folded sheet), Gift of Emma B. Hodge, 1919.334, the Art Institute of Chicago.



16. This valentine features fabric flowers and green feathers as stems. Berlin and Jones, American, nineteenth century, untitled valentine (Country Couples), 1860/69. Collaged elements and gold paint on cut and embossed (designed) ivory wove paper, 79 x 124 mm (folded sheet). Bequest of Paul E. Pearson, 1986.769, the Art Institute of Chicago.

Hampered by the practical considerations of fitting the card into an envelope that could be sent through the post, valentines necessitated some degree of flatness that would enable them to retain their status as objects-in-motion. Despite this, makers sought to create these valentines as three-dimensional objects, and in effect, intended for them to surpass their mere two-dimensional “paperiness.” Through their work of trimming scrap, folding paper, and pasting details, these hired hands maximized the material dimension of an otherwise flat, pictorial medium. Layer after layer, the valentines became something more physical than visual (fig. 15). Most collaged valentines created by American producers adhere to standard book production sizes, with many measuring roughly seven inches by five inches (“twelvemo”), comprising about a quarter inch of layered paper and objects. Most feature ornate pieces of perforated, faux lace layered over colorful, patterned paper. Along with the scrap images, the makers often applied pieces of satin or velvet ribbon along with other fabric details, such as fabric flowers (figs. 16, 17). The printed scraps, which initially engage the viewer visually, add an important element of tactility as well, as they are heavily embossed.



17. Blue velvet ribbon and an embroidered center medallion offer different textures while also materially referring to domestic comforts and pursuits. Unknown artist, American, “True Love” (c. 1881). Collaged elements and gold and silver paint on cut and embossed ivory wove paper, laid down on gold paper, 153 x 122 mm. Gift of Miss Florence L. Notter in memory of her parents, John G. and Emma A. Notter, 1937.287, the Art Institute of Chicago.



18. Valentine card, “We Live to Love,” by Esther Howland (Worcester, Massachusetts, ca. 1860-1880). Includes envelope to Miss Ida Lamb, Clappville, Massachusetts. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.



19. Boxed valentine (ca. 1870). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

The tactile experience of a valentine began almost immediately, as most valentines were contained in an embossed envelope upon delivery (fig. 18) or were encased in an elegant box (fig. 19). Running fingertips over the textured surface of raised floral filigree, for example, would have been an apt precursor to the tactility of the valentine itself.

Many of these valentines employed flaps or folds to enable the recipient to lift a layer to reveal additional text or images. For example, one valentine features folded, paper lace flaps that effectively act as an attached envelope (fig. 20). Once opened, they reveal an ornate, gilt layer of embossed paper with a chromolithographed image of an anonymous young girl (fig. 21). It is highly unlikely that the tiny, mass-produced portrait has any particular significance. Instead, the physicality of the card itself is more meaningful. The act of opening the card is more emotionally potent than whatever is actually depicted inside.



20. Valentine card, "Truly Thine," by Esther Howland (Worcester, Massachusetts, ca. 1860-1880). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.



21. Valentine card, "Truly Thine," inside view of chromo of small girl, by Esther Howland (Worcester, Massachusetts, ca. 1860-1880). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.



22. Boxed valentine, side view out of box, showing paper "springs" (ca. 1870). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Paper springs, found on most of the densely layered valentines of this era, added three-dimensionality and often encouraged the recipient to lift off the top layer of paper lace. After years in an archive, these springs have become flattened, limiting the valentine's mobility and its interactive qualities. Yet when they were first produced, these springs between the layers would have allowed the valentines to "pop" as the recipient freed the valentine from its envelope. One card, preserved in a box, features still-functioning springs that provide depth between its many layers (figs. 20, 22).



23. "The Purchaser of the Sentimental Valentine," from *Harper's Weekly* (February 13, 1858, New York). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In addition to a busy visual composition, valentines provided a variety of textures for the recipient's fingertips to explore. This overt sensuality, however, was not only limited to touching and seeing. Some valentines included perfumed elements, such as a fragrant sachet or scented ink. Some included chocolates or other sweets, appealing to the sense of taste, or included scrap pictures of delectable treats. While technology did not yet allow for music to be included in the valentine (although some very expensive valentines could arrive attached to a music box), references to music are constantly included with scrap depicting musical instruments or singing birds. The valentine was an object intended to captivate and sensually overwhelm the recipient. It engaged every bodily sense, enabling the recipient to gather sentiment through their fingertips, eyes, nose, or taste buds. The recipient would recognize the valentine not merely as something to be looked at, but rather as an object to be touched and sensually experienced.

Touchy, Feely: Or, How Valentines Mean

In a February 1858 issue, *Harper's Weekly* devoted several pages to historical and contemporary celebrations of Valentine's Day. While the accompanying illustrations, like those in *Gleason's*, also do not attempt to render the feeling of receiving a valentine, they do point to the importance of touching and holding them. Two images in particular, "The Purchaser of the Sentimental Valentine" and "The Recipient of the Sentimental Valentine," demonstrate the close physical connection between the giver, the card, and the receiver—a connection that relied upon the hands and bodily interactions. "The Purchaser" features a dandy gentleman in a crowded shop, hunched over a pile of valentines, running his fingers across potential selections (fig. 23). His close bodily engagement, leaning in and feeling each card's textures and weight, reinforces the importance of touch and interaction with the valentine.

Paper lace, velvet ribbons, and satin fringe all provide textures that appeal to the recipient's sense of touch; they also evoke connections to the material culture of domestic environments. In "The Recipient," a young woman clutches a valentine (fig. 24). The card is trimmed in lace, a pattern almost indistinguishable from the lace that graces the curtains behind her and that frame her décolletage. Even the vase of flowers on the table beside her recalls the many examples of floral scrap found on valentines, and perhaps even the floral scents that were sometimes added to the cards. The various components used in the sentimental valentine are material referents to the home and the body, allusions to the domestic happiness and romantic encounters that a well-received valentine could engender. "The Purchaser" and "The Recipient" each reinforce the importance of physically experiencing the valentine, a process more viscerally involved than merely looking at or reading the card.



24. "The Recipient of the Sentimental Valentine," from *Harper's Weekly* (February 13, 1858, New York). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

With its almost iconographically inscrutable visual components, it is really the materiality of the valentine that imports sentiment from the giver to the receiver. The ubiquitous McLuhanism "the medium is the message" applies here, with the glossy, colorful, raised pieces of scrap comingling with the perforated sheets of paper lace to signify sentimentality, regardless of the particular images depicted. While the "language of flowers" was popular in Victorian America and may have played some role early on in the construction of valentines, the cards' ubiquity and rapid mass production likely obviated the task of composing and encoding specific messages through pictures. Hearts, butterflies, lovebirds, flowers—all of these motifs are discursive shorthand for "sentimental valentine" and are not intended to be deeply symbolic. Even the messages included in the valentines read as generic, empty, and interchangeable. The valentine's visual and textual components take a back seat to the significance of its material heft and diversity. In other words, in the experience of receiving a valentine, the images and text are supplemental to the material and the haptic experience.


Several scholars have recognized that the methods used for interpreting images or texts are inadequate for material culture, and sentimental valentines, as objects that communicate best through material and tactile interactions, have yet to be examined in a way that takes this kind of communication into consideration. Offering a corrective to text- and image-centric methods of interpretation, anthropologist Lambros Malafouris has explored the "material sign" in contrast to a linguistic sign, which he argues does not *symbolize* a concept but is, instead, a tangible manifestation of that concept. He writes, "The material sign ... brings forth the concept as a concrete exemplar." Malafouris emphasizes that material signs are activated through our interaction with them, stating that they "operate on the principle of participation rather than that of symbolic equivalency. ... In the case of material signs, we do not read meaningful symbols; we meaningfully engage meaningless symbols."


Thinking of the valentine as a material sign, or a collection of material signs, opens useful avenues of interpretation. The recipient engages meaningfully with the material in her hands, material that may not offer much by way of direct representations of specific messages, but which nonetheless proffers rich physical metaphors for affection, desire, or admiration—the specifics of which vary from recipient to recipient. While it is tempting to read the valentine like a text, with each image or word clearly representing a specific concept or idea (i.e., white daisies = innocence), the valentine's material signification is more complex and not reducible to code. Rather than simply conveying any particular sentiment, the many and varied material

components of the valentine, in essence, aid in the creation of meaning, enabling the recipient to glean something personal (to her) from that material. This meaning-making occurs when the recipient engages physically with the valentine. In other words, since no single message was carefully encoded by way of iconography, the general signaling of “sentiment” or “feeling” opened a space for the recipient to elaborate specific personal meanings on her own.

A recent interdisciplinary study of touch conducted by a team of psychologists and physical therapists has noted the variability and subjectivity of touch: “Response to touch is highly individualized. The same tactile input may be barely noticed by one, perceived as pleasurable by another, and noxious and intolerable to someone else. For example, a wool sweater feels cozy and warm to some and scratchy and itchy to others.” Similarly, the tactile experience of the valentine becomes unique to the receiver, granting each one an individualized inroad into the material presented. Put simply, the recipient is able to “make sense” of the valentine through her own personal senses.

Psychologist Martin Grunwald has outlined how touch has been culturally constructed as a powerful sense often linked to the “real” and to sensuality. Historically, philosophers have associated touch with sexuality, which might explain the importance of tactility in these romantic tokens. Thomas Aquinas asserted that touch is the defining sense of sentient beings, that it makes humans sensitive and that all other senses are derived from the sense of touch. Aristotle believed touch to be the most reliable sense, especially in situations where the other senses may be deceived. The Bible, too, frequently cites touch as the most effective way to prove something is real (recall the story of “doubting Thomas” invited to probe Christ’s wounds with his fingers). As Grunwald notes, this elevation of touch in the Bible likely engendered the medieval cult of relics, which encouraged touching the remains or clothing of saints in order to commune with the divine. While the hagiography of St. Valentine is exceedingly convoluted, this figure, like most saints, was seen as a mediator between intangible divinity and material humanity, a function similar to the valentine card. These historical examples of touch’s significance in philosophy and Christianity might explain why a close, haptic interaction with valentines was so critical; it attested to the veracity of any expressed sentiment for those who participated in the tradition. Touch and tangibility were believed to offer the most proof that something was real. Touch, like the valentine itself, is closely related to the sensual and emotional, as well as the trustworthy, true, and concrete.

 25. “Arts scrapbook” (ca. 1880-1890). Courtesy of the Winterthur Library, Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera.

 26. In this scrapbook, hands and flowers frame an Easter card. Greeting cards like these became popular during the 1880s and borrowed motifs from valentines.


“Arts scrapbook” (ca. 1880-1890). Courtesy of the Winterthur Library, Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera.


The importance of touch, and of the feeling hand, is supported by the proliferation of scrap featuring these subjects. One late nineteenth-century scrapbooker demonstrated the popularity of this motif by gathering trade cards and individual pieces of scrap that feature hands touching a variety of materials (figs. 25, 26). Disembodied hands grasp the velvet stems of daisies and the prickly thorns of roses, urging the viewer to imagine touch as they look. They hold pens that wrote messages, reminding the receiver to consider the hand on the other end of any written text. One card (not pictured) features scrap with two clasped hands (one male, one female) and is captioned “Faithfully yours,” reminding the receiver of the skin-to-skin sensations to which a successful valentine might lead. In essence, the valentine provided a tactile link from one hand to another—an idea that is of course complicated further by considering the many “delicate hands” of the female makers that enabled this exchange.

Valentine components materially refer to familiar textures of the home, referencing domestic comfort. Paper lace in particular lent itself to the imitation of textiles and upholstery fabrics, Gothic ornamentation and architecture, perforated screens and other decorative objects. Through his investigation of the needlepoint motto, a popular domestic craft, historian Kenneth Ames asserts that perforation, such as that seen in the paper lace of valentines, was ubiquitous during the Victorian era. Dwelling particularly on the perforated cardboard that served as the base for these needlepoint mottos, Ames illuminates mechanical and visual connections between other forms of perforated paper in the mid-nineteenth century, most notably the perforated edges for stamps, pierced metal sheets for colanders or lanterns, and the pierced patterns on the backs of chairs and benches. Perforated surfaces were a central motif in Victorian Gothic Revival architecture, and likewise appeared in architectural details like the pergola, meant as a transitional feature that mediated between inside and outside and acted as a penetrable barrier. Perforated paper lace is undoubtedly a critical component of the sentimental valentine, and appears in nearly every iteration, in some form or other. The paper lace reveals while simultaneously concealing an image or brief text. As described above, touching and interacting with the valentine would often enable the recipient to lift the lace and view the hidden layer unobstructed. Still, the paper lace invited a particular kind of looking as well, one that was especially active. By at once looking at the paper lace on the surface and then visually penetrating it, looking through it to view pieces of the material beneath, the viewer’s gaze moves between the layers. This visual movement, combined with the card’s visibly varied textures, enables a kind of visual tactility, an almost synesthetic way of experiencing the valentine. Not only does the valentine demand literal touch, but it encourages touching through a particular kind of looking.

Forget Me Not: The Ephemera(lity) of Valentine's Day

In nineteenth-century newspapers, the ephemerality of valentines was juxtaposed with the perceived fading celebrations of Valentine's Day. A slew of newspaper articles cited the demise of the sentimental, collaged valentine, evoking the valentine's complex composition only to lament that this innocent tradition had become a thing of the past, an ephemeral fad only celebrated by children. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, valentines were no longer confined to exchanges between lovers; friends and family members began exchanging the missives as well, which, to some, seemed to dilute the purpose of the holiday. Others bemoaned the popularity of the "comic" or "vinegar" valentine and its vulgar, teasing contents. With the tradition of exchanging sentimental valentines reportedly always in jeopardy, headlines like "Valentine's Day: The Former Day of Days Now Almost Forgotten" have a particularly ironic resonance with the countless pieces of valentine scrap that read, "Forget me not" and "Remember me."

 27. "Token of Love" train, a fold-out valentine (c. 1900). Courtesy of the Winterthur Library, the John and Carolyn Grossman Collection, Col. 838.

 28. "To My Sweetheart" blimp, a fold-out valentine (c. 1910). Courtesy of the Winterthur Library, the John and Carolyn Grossman Collection, Col. 838.

By the late 1890s, the multi-layered valentines described in this essay fell out of fashion; they were quickly replaced by flatter, single-layer cards and by three-dimensional "pop-up" valentines. Building upon the sentimental valentine's physical heft and interactive qualities, the pop-up valentines arrived as a flattened pile of embossed chromolithographs but folded out to become multi-tiered paper monuments. These freestanding objects were printed on heavy cardboard stock and remained popular well into the twentieth century (figs. 27, 28). Simultaneous with the rise of pop-up valentines, a flatter version of the sentimental valentine hit the market. These mass-produced, single-layer chromolithographs, akin to bi-fold greeting cards today, became the dominant form for the valentine. Though they consist of a single chromolithograph, printers alluded to the multi-layered valentine popular in prior years through embossed textures, scalloped edges, paper lace backgrounds and scrap-like details—printed representations of these once-tangible components. Though the production of valentines later became simplified and more streamlined, the style and iconography of these ubiquitous tokens of affection—hearts, flowers, and angelic cherubs—are integral to a visual and material legacy that remains today.

By considering the material complexities of the valentine as a paper object and

vehicle for emotion, we must ultimately consider the limitations and possibilities of paper as a medium, one that is often seen as disposable and ephemeral. French theorist Jacques Derrida has described the “unstable hierarchy” that exists with paper—that even fine paper can be disposed of as refuse or litter. Paper is somehow simultaneously more official and less official, more stable and less stable, more permanent and less permanent than other media. Valentines resonate with this idea of paper, simultaneously delicate but hefty, romantically binding but ephemeral, treasured but disposable. After all of my insistence that valentines are material conduits for sentiment, cherished physical proof of affection, these paper objects were susceptible to the same dangers as other papers. While many of the valentines illustrated in this essay were selected and purchased by collectors and are currently safely tucked into boxes and binders in archives, countless others—because of their susceptibility to the continually made and remade emotional relationships between people and their things—landed at the bottom of a trash bin.

But perhaps the nineteenth-century valentine represents emotion even more than I’ve argued here. For I’ve only told one side of the story, that of strong feelings of affection, anticipation, and admiration forever preserved in paper lace and printed hearts. But to discuss valentines as ephemera is to also consider the ephemerality of emotion: heavy, all-encompassing and insistent in that moment, but then so often fleeting, flattened, discarded, or destroyed.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Jennifer Jane Marshall and my colleagues at the Department of Art History at the University of Minnesota for their encouragement and feedback throughout various stages of this project; Jeanne Solensky at the Winterthur Libraries and Nan Wolverton at the American Antiquarian Society for their help and resources; Suzanne Karr Schmidt and the Prints & Drawings Department at the Art Institute of Chicago for introducing me to these materials and enabling my continued study of them; and Ellery Foutch and Sarah Anne Carter for their support.

Further Reading

The most comprehensive texts on the history and production of valentines were written by passionate collectors. These resources offer a thorough introduction to the many varieties of valentines produced in the U.S. and abroad: Ruth Webb Lee’s *A History of Valentines* (1952), Frank Staff’s *The Valentine and Its Origins* (1969), and the Ephemera Society of America’s special issue of *The Ephemera Journal: A Valentine Source-Book* (1990). For a more in-depth discussion of the economic and cultural significance of valentines, including more information about Esther Howland, George C. Whitney, and other valentine producers, see *Consumer Rites: the Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (1995) by Leigh Schmidt, *A Token of My Affection: Greeting Cards and American Business Culture* (2004) by Barry Shank, and *Market Sentiments: Middle-Class*

Market Culture in Nineteenth-Century America (2010) by Elizabeth White Nelson.

The literature on materiality and sensory engagement is vast. For more about objects as cognitive extensions of the human body, or material signification specifically, see *How Things Shape the Mind* (2013) by Lambros Malafouris. For more on touch and haptic experience, see *Human Haptic Perception: Basics and Applications* (2008) by Martin Grunwald and *The Handbook of Touch: Neuroscience, Behavioral, and Health Perspectives* (2011) edited by Matthew Hertenstein and Sandra Weiss.

This article originally appeared in issue 16.2 (Winter, 2016).

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