

Stamps in Love

The Secret Language of Stamps on Pre-WWI Postcards

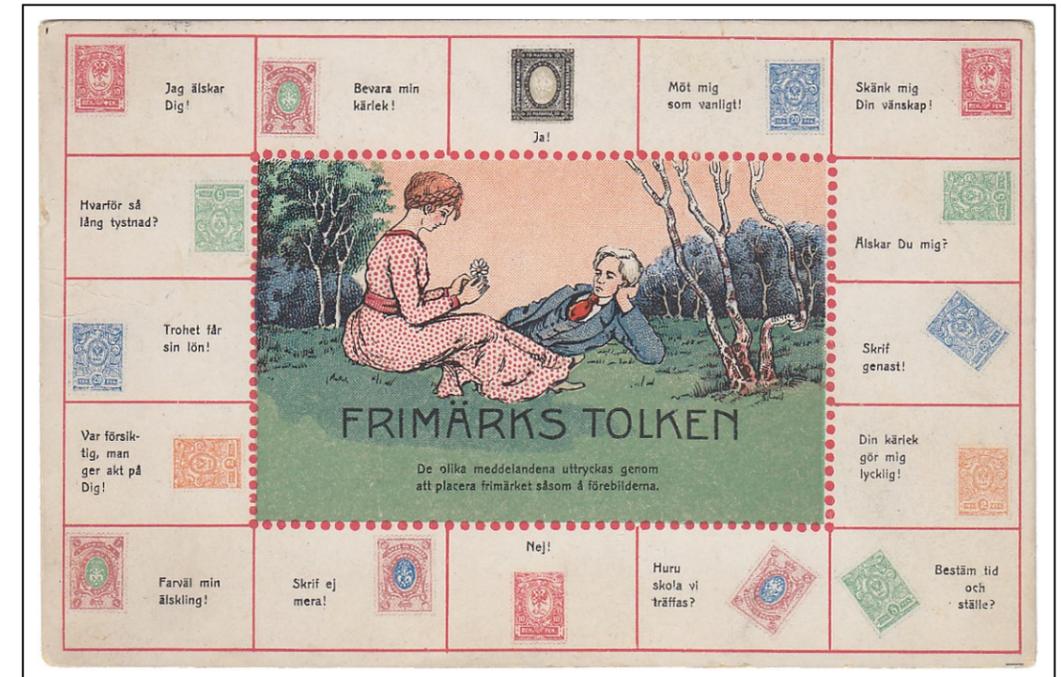
As the postcard craze spread across the world in the early 1900s, numerous innovative ideas emerged about the design and use of postcards. One of these ideas was to use the stamps on the cards for sending secret messages, and to print postcards with “keys” to such messages. These “stamp language” or “secret of stamps” cards show postage stamps in different positions associated with different messages, usually about love and affection. One can also find postcards with stamps affixed in peculiar positions, suggesting that they have been used for sending such secret messages.

This five-frame exhibit starts with a short introduction explaining the need for a secret language. It then shows stamp language cards from a range of European countries in order to document the variety of such cards in use before WWI. The cards are divided into two main groups. Multiple stamp cards show several stamps in different positions. Single stamp cards were printed in series, with each card showing only one stamp and its associated message. Then follow examples of the use of secret (or not so secret) languages. The exhibit ends with a few examples of other ways of sending secret messages by postcard.

For most cards, information is provided (if available) about publisher, stamps and date. As messages were supposed to be secret, the keys were often sent under cover and therefore lack postmarks and dates. In these cases – and when cards are unused – the stamps printed on the cards and the layout of the address side (divided vs. undivided) may help to decide approximate printing date. For single-stamp cards, translations of the messages are often provided. The symbol ➤ on top of each page signals the storyline of the exhibit.



The message on this card is a short poem:
The stamp placed like this reveals very tender feelings that will never fade



French single stamp card
 Publisher: Saint-Just, Paris (AS)
 Stamp: 10 centimes Sower (semeuse) type of 1907
 Divided back, used 1910

Multiple stamp card from Finland
 Unknown publisher
 Stamps: Russian type (penni values 1911, markka values 1901/1903)
 Divided back, used 1913



Exhibit website

“The Language of European Stamps”, text in Dutch
 Publisher: Marco Marcovici, Brussels
 Stamps from twelve different European countries
 Undivided back, unused

Introduction (page 1-4)

Stamps in Love • The Postcard Craze • Messages of Love and Affection • The Need for a Secret Language

Multiple Stamp Cards (page 5-26)

Secret Languages of Stamps Across Europe • Different Publishers, Same Language • Competing Languages • Multilingual Cards • International Cards • Multinational Cards • Multiple Stamps in Series • Stamps and Images • Cards With and Without Messages • Different Types of Keys • Fantasy Stamps • Messages in Postmarks

Single Stamp Cards (page 27-34)

Single Stamps, Single Ladies • Single Stamps, Loving Couples • Single Stamps in Male and Female Series • Stamp and Flower Language

Cards with Messages (page 35-38)

Secret Messages • Not So Secret Messages

Other Secret Communication (page 39-40)

Secret Messages • Secret Languages

Publications on stamp languages usually treat individual countries, but an article by the exhibitor takes a more international perspective.

Baldus, W. 2016. Der Briefmarken-Code und andere Heimlichkeiten. *Philatelie*, no. 472-473.

Gustafson, P. 2019. Tidiga vykort med frimärkspråk. *Posttrytaren*, vol. 69.

Heijtz, G. 1989. Vykort med frimärksspråket. *Skillingtrycket*, no. 4.

Spanke, W. 2003. Die Briefmarken-Sprache. Über 100 Jahre alt – Wer kennt sie heute noch? *Philatelie und Postgeschichte*, no. 314-315.

Speirs, D. 2006. Stamp position on covers: From romance to political protest. *Postal History Journal*, no. 133.

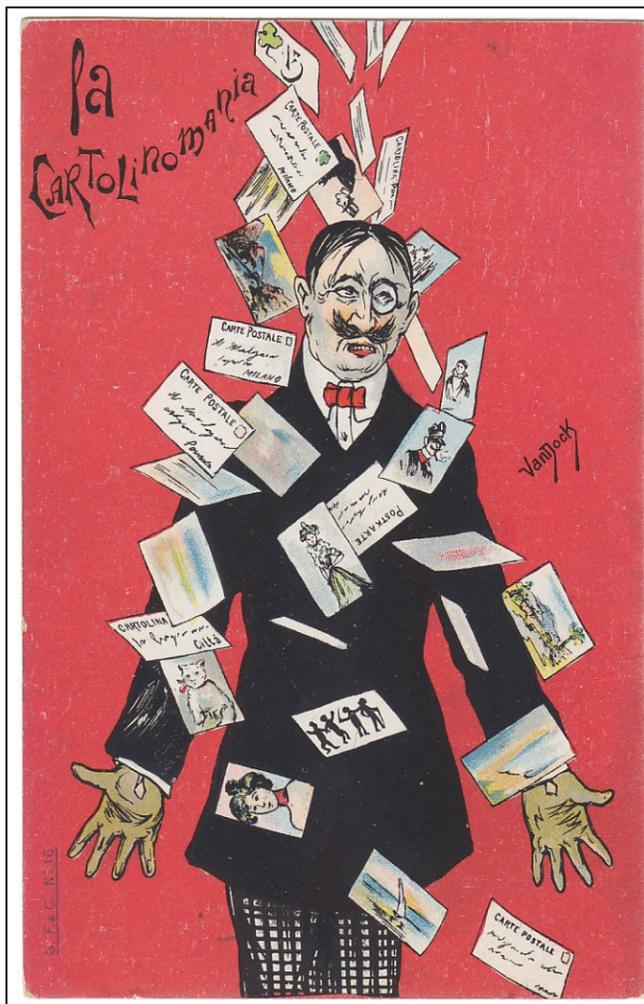




Publisher: M. Kimmelstiel, Hamburg
Undivided back, used 1900

A card illustrating the "postcard craze" of the early 1900s.

► During the "golden age" of picture postcards, from the 1890s to World War I, postcards became immensely popular. Postcard sales skyrocketed and millions of cards were exchanged among friends, relatives and collectors all over the world.

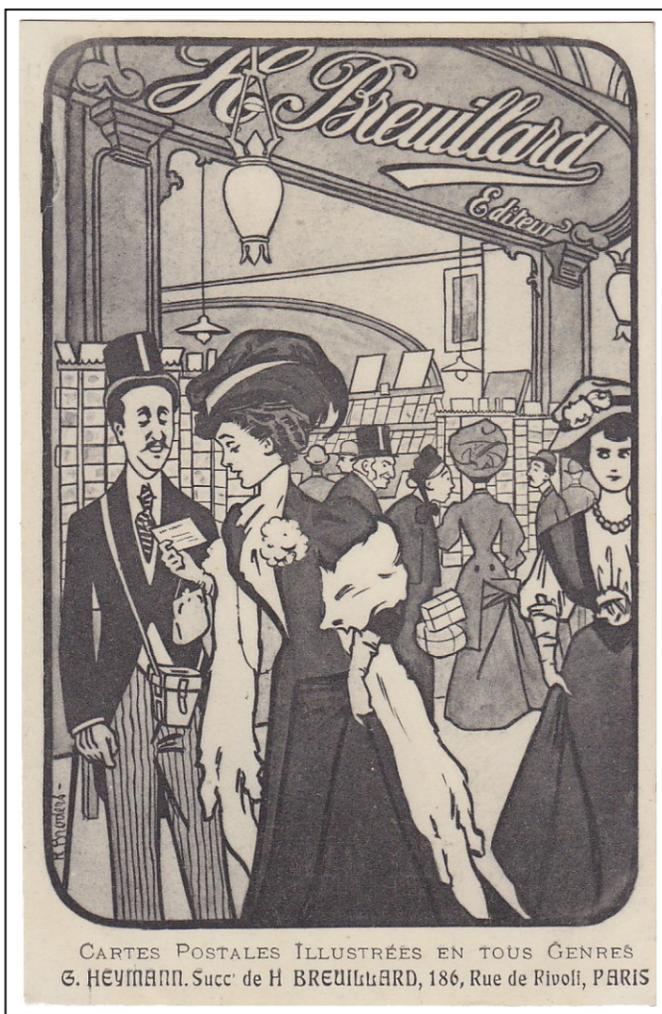


Publisher: G. F. & C.
Artist: Vincenzo Nasi (Italy), who signed his cards "Van Dock" or "Enzo".
Undivided back, unused
La cartolinomania, the postcard craze in Italian, illustrated by a not too happy-looking gentleman in a rain of postcards.



Above: A girl surrounded by postcards, advertising the publisher's cards:
It is no longer a secret, not for the collector, for you, for me, for anybody, that the most charming, artistic, interesting cards are the Bergeret cards.

Publisher: Albert Bergeret & Cie, Nancy
Divided back, unused



Postcard advertising the postcard store of H. Breuillard, Rue de Rivoli, Paris.
In the early 1900s, postcard collecting became a very popular hobby. Some collected unused cards, but many exchanged cards, by mail, with collectors around the world in order to get cards from distant places.
Publisher: G. Heymann, Paris
Artist: Roger Broders (France, 1883-1953)
Divided back, sent under cover, dated 1911



A postcard salesman from the *Types de la Rue* series of Collas, advertising and selling the publisher's cards.
Publisher: Charles Collas et Cie, Cognac (CC&CC)
Undivided back, used 1903



Messages of Love and Affection



Publisher: Saint-Just, Paris (AS)
Divided back, unused

*How should I write on my card
That which my lips would like to say?*

► Postcards provided a new way of showing love and affection. For a cheap price, you could send a nice picture and a greeting that expressed your tender feelings. Romantic postcards was a popular genre, and many postcards were sent between lovers.



Publisher: Peter Michaelis, Berlin (P.M.B.)
Divided back, used 1912

*A greeting for your darling
Often have I read
Your beautiful poem,
Because on every line
Your heart speaks to me.*



Publisher: Saint-Just, Paris (AS)
Divided back, used 1905

*Read with your heart those two words that I write
On my postcard with its splendid colours.*

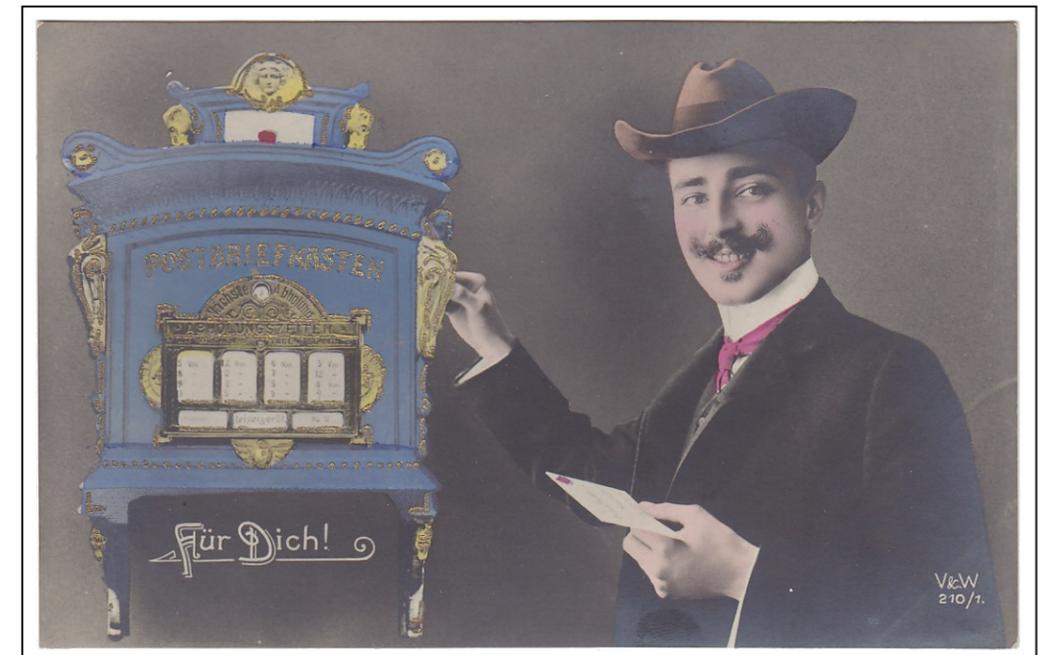
Woman putting a letter or postcard in a letter-box: *For You!*

Publisher: Vogel & Wahl, Leipzig (V&W)
Divided back, unused



Man about to post a greeting to his loved one: *For You!*

Publisher: Vogel & Wahl, Leipzig (V&W)
Divided back, unused



► Lovers might not want others to read their most intimate messages. But unlike letters, which were sent in envelopes, postcards could be read by any person who handled the card. This created the need for a secret language.

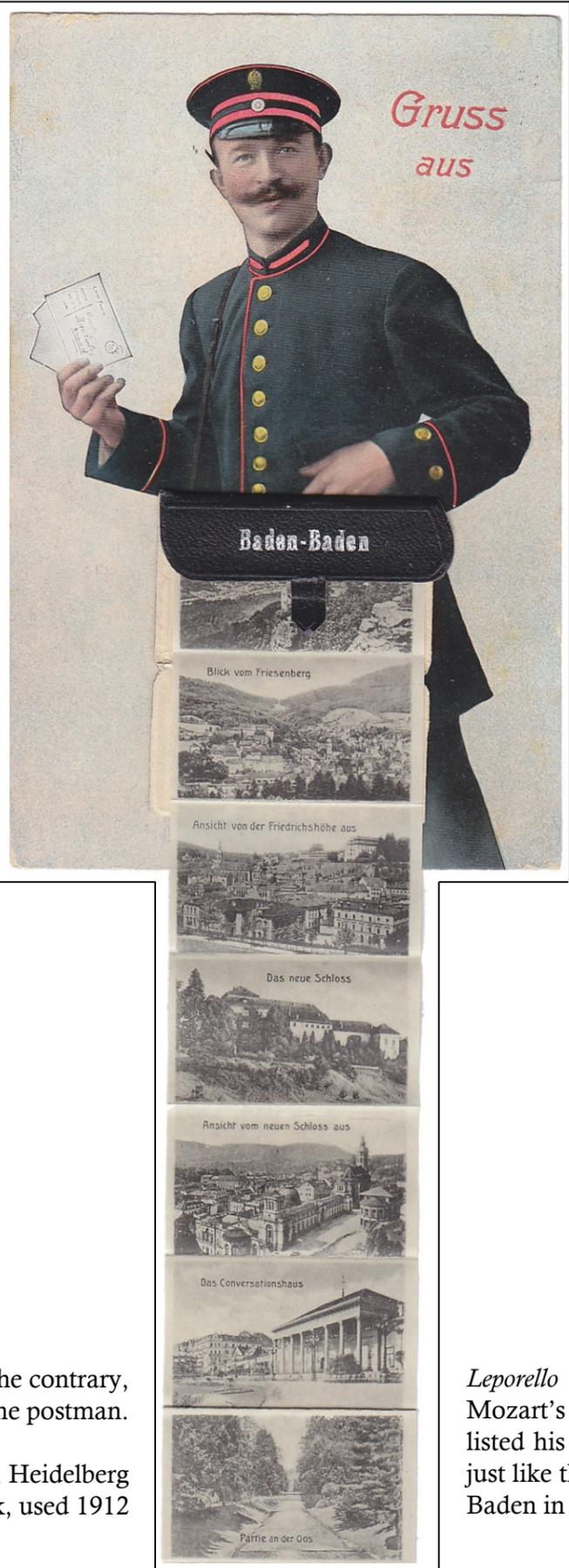
Sealed letters could not be read by the postman.



Publisher: Saint-Just, Paris (AS)
Divided back, sent under cover, dated 1906

Messages written on postcards, on the contrary, could be seen and read by the postman.

Publisher: Edmund von König, Heidelberg
Divided back, used 1912



Leporello cards are named after Casanova's servant in Mozart's opera Don Giovanni. Leporello meticulously listed his master's erotic affairs. The list got very long – just like the concertina folded strip of views from Baden-Baden in the mailbag of this handsome postman.

A curious postman enjoying himself:
Ho-Ho! he-he! Haw-haw!
The funniest card you ever saw...

Postmen were obviously not supposed to read the postcards before delivering them. Or were they? At least in some countries, postmen were instructed not to deliver postcards with indecent messages!



Unknown publisher
Divided back, used 1907



Publisher: Pictorial Stationery Co., London
Artist: Robert Sauber (UK, 1868-1936)
Undivided back, unused

Not only postmen, but maids, servants and family members who handled the cards could read any message written on them. No wonder that lovers sometimes wanted to complement their open correspondence with secret messages. The stamp language provided a convenient way of doing so.



The *Familiar Figures of London* postcards were based on a series of twelve lithographic prints by Robert Sauber from 1898, and published under the "Peacock" brand by The Pictorial Stationery Co.

Secret Languages of Stamps Across Europe



Publisher: J. Farine, Locle and Villers-le-Lac
 Stamps: 10 centimes Mouchon (France, 1900)
 Undivided back, unused

On the card below, messages for lovers illustrated by stamps are complemented, in the centre of the card, by a set of messages for postcard collectors.

Unknown publisher
 Stamps: 10 fillér Turul and Saint Steven's Crown (Hungary, 1900)
 Divided back, unused



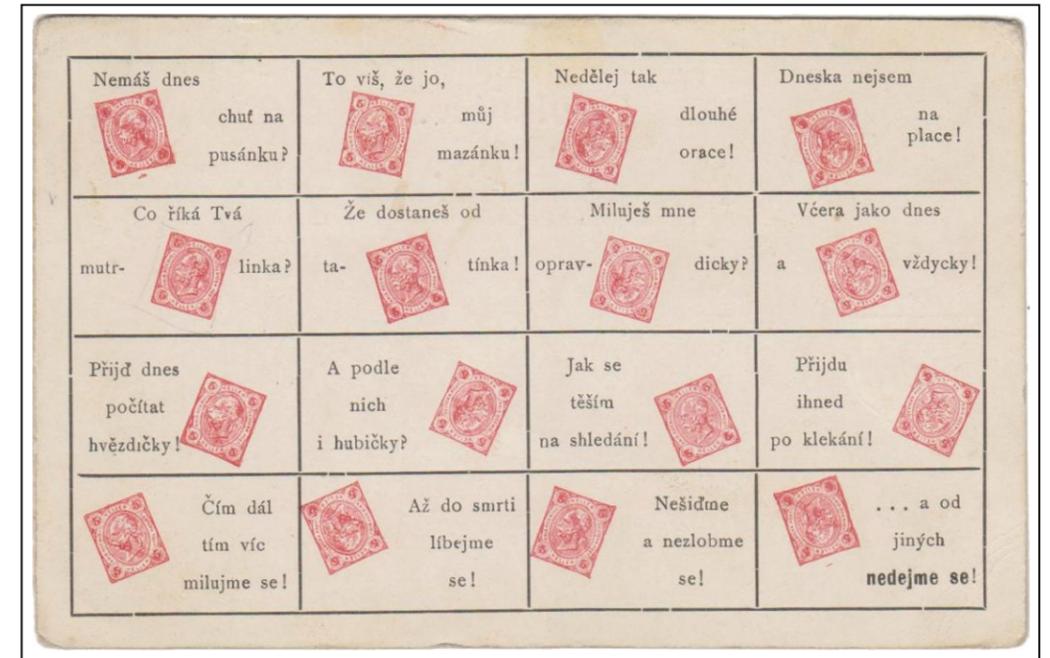
► In the early 1900s, postcards with keys to secret languages of stamps appeared in Europe. They usually showed stamps in different positions and orientations, and their associated messages.

This page shows cards from France, Hungary, Finland, Austria and Switzerland.



Publisher: O. Y. Launis A. B., Helsinki
 Stamps: 10 penni Imperial Arms (Russian type) of 1901
 Divided back, sent under cover, no date

In 1901, the previous Finnish stamps with the Finnish arms were forbidden by the Russian authorities in their attempts to "russify" Finland.



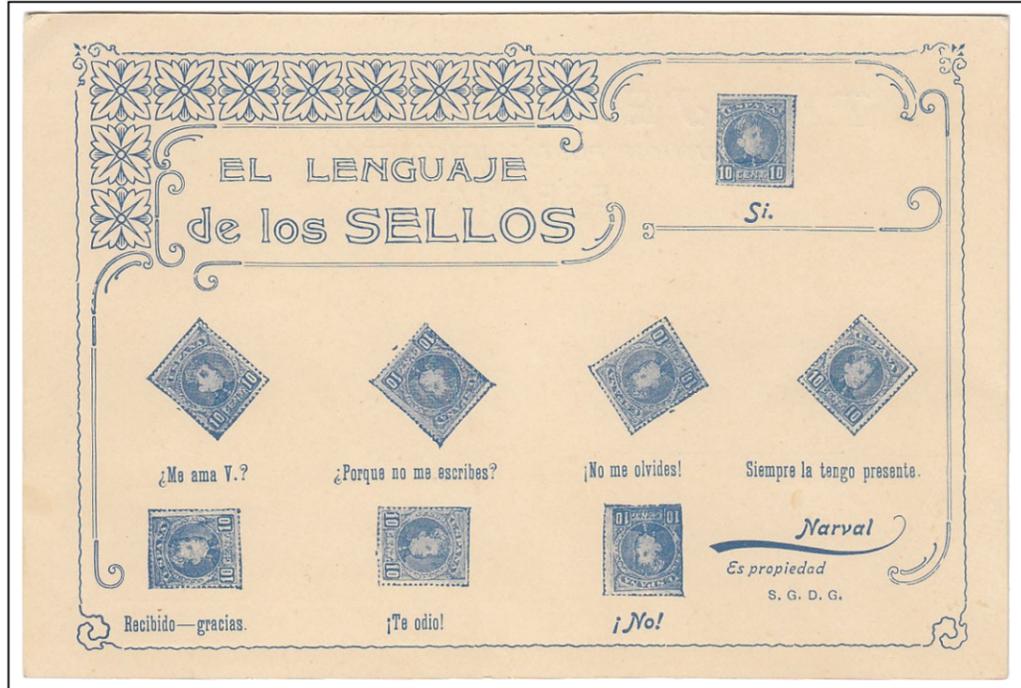
Publisher: O. K. P.
 Stamps: 5 heller Franz Josef I (Austria, 1899), although the real colour of this stamp was green
 Undivided back, unused

Several different languages were used in the Austrian empire. The messages on the card above are in Czech.

Publisher: Jacques Brien, Brussels
 Stamps: 10 centimes Cross and Numeral Type (Switzerland, 1882-1906)
 Undivided back, used 1903



Secret Languages of Stamps Across Europe



Publisher: Narval
 Stamps: 10 centimos King Alfonso XIII (Spain, 1901), originally in red colour
 Undivided back, unused

Some countries did not allow reproductions of stamps on postcards, as they were afraid that such stamps would be cut out and used to pay postage. Showing cancelled stamps (below) may have been a way to circumvent such rules.

Unknown publisher
 Stamps: 3 kopek Imperial Arms (Russia, 1889)
 Divided back, unused



► Just like many other early postcard-related innovations, the idea to use stamps for sending secret messages quickly spread from one country to another.

This page shows stamp languages from Spain, Russia, Great Britain, Belgium and Norway.



Unknown publisher
 Stamps: 1 penny King Edward II (UK, 1902)
 Divided back, used 1911

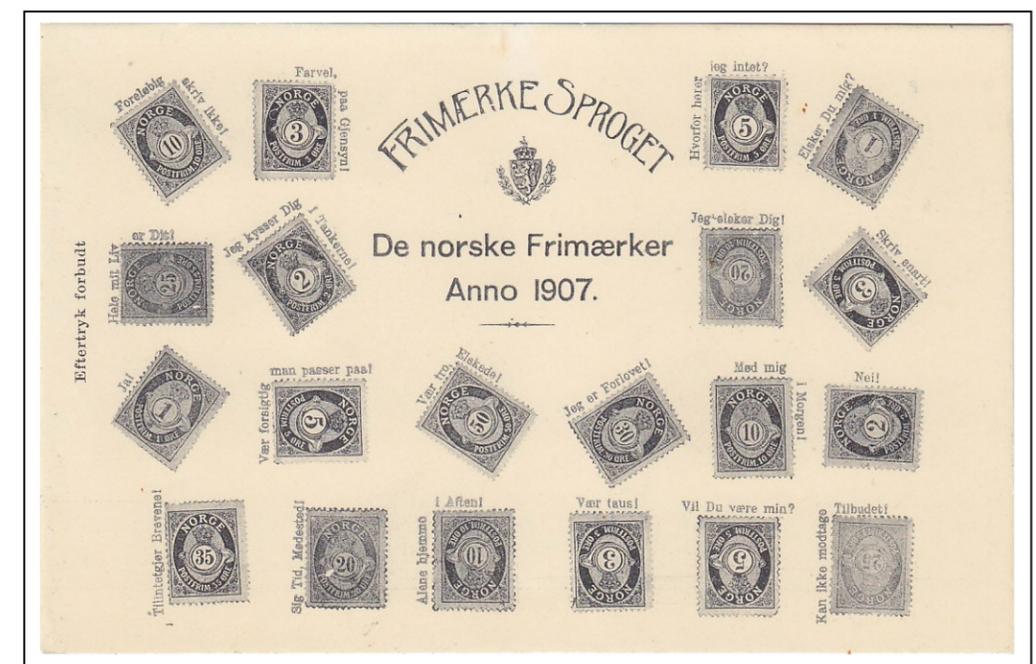
An unusual semi-topographic postcard, combining a stamp language with a view from the village of Edzell in Angus, Scotland.



Publisher: Jacques Brien, Brussels
 Stamps: 10 centimes King Leopold II "Fine Beard" (Belgium, 1893-1900)
 Undivided back, used 1904

The sender of the above card added a discreet "x" beside the stamp saying *I will always love you.*

Publisher: Peter Alstrup, Kristiania
 Stamps from the Posthorn issue (Norway) in use in 1907
 Undivided back, unused





Publisher: Le Moine & Malmeström, Gothenburg
Undivided back, unused

The card above, with 20 stamp images, seems to be the earliest version of this stamp language. Later versions came with 22 or 24 stamp images.

Publisher: Le Moine & Malmeström, Gothenburg
Undivided back, unused



► In Sweden, one specific “language of stamps” became so well established that different publishers used more or less the same key. Here are six different versions, from two different publishers.

Stamps:

The cards to the left show stamps from the King Oscar II copperplate recess issue (1891-1896) and the Bicoloured Numeral type issue (1892).

The cards to the right also include the 1 krona stamp, issued in January 1900.



Publisher: Le Moine & Malmeström, Gothenburg
Divided back, unused

On the card above, the Oscar II stamps are retouched. Göran Heijtz, in an article about Swedish “stamp language” postcards, suggests that this may have been done after the death of king Oscar II (1907), and that the intention was to make the portrait resemble the new king, Gustaf V. If that was the case, the attempt was highly unsuccessful!

Another possible reason is that the Swedish Post Office, in 1905, issued a circular that prohibited realistic pictures of stamps on postcards.



Publisher: Solléns förlag, Stockholm
Undivided back, unused

The card above has 22 stamp images, the card below has 24. All cards on this page show many different stamps, but the two cards to the right explain that it did not matter what stamp the sender used. What mattered was its position.

Publisher: Solléns förlag, Stockholm
Undivided back, used, no date



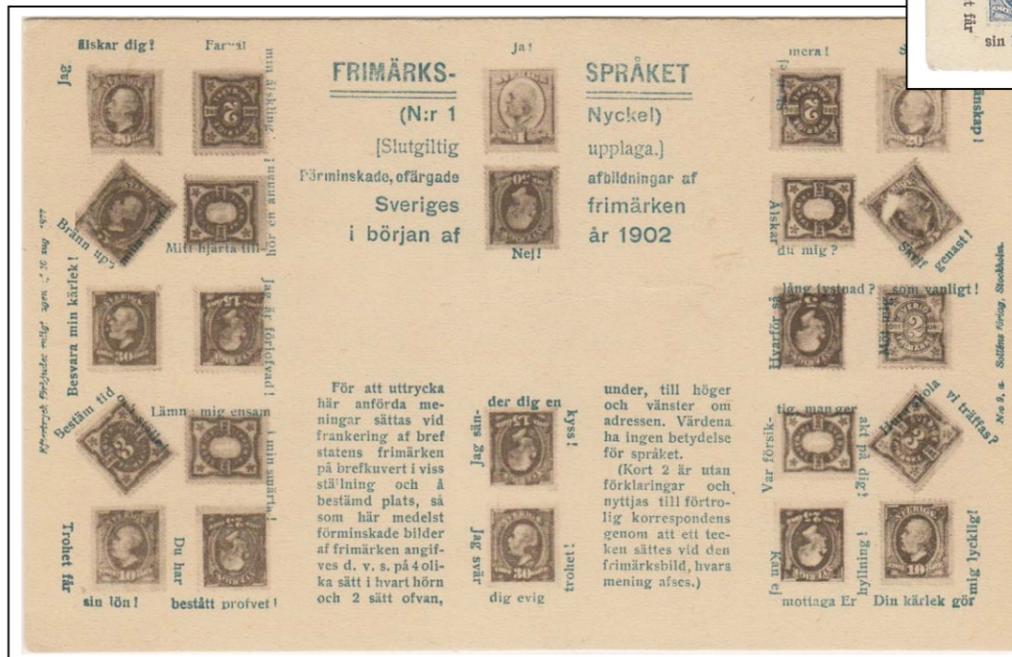
Different Publishers, Same Language • Sweden (and Norway)



Publisher: Solléns förlag, Stockholm
Undivided back, unused (or possibly sent under cover, no date)

Stamps from the King Oscar II copperplate recess (1891-1900) and Bicoloured Numeral type issues (1892)

Publisher: Solléns förlag/Svenska Litografiska, Stockholm
Divided back, unused



► The cards from Le Moine & Malmeström and Solléns were very popular in the early 1900s. In an article about Swedish “stamp language” cards, Göran Heijtz has identified as many as 15 different versions of the card with the Oscar II stamps.

The two cards to the left are both marked *slutgiltig upplaga* (final edition). Yet even the final edition came in three different variants: with red (left), blue (bottom left) and black text (page 21), with black being the most common.

Below is a rare printing error and to the right are two other versions, with different sets of stamps.

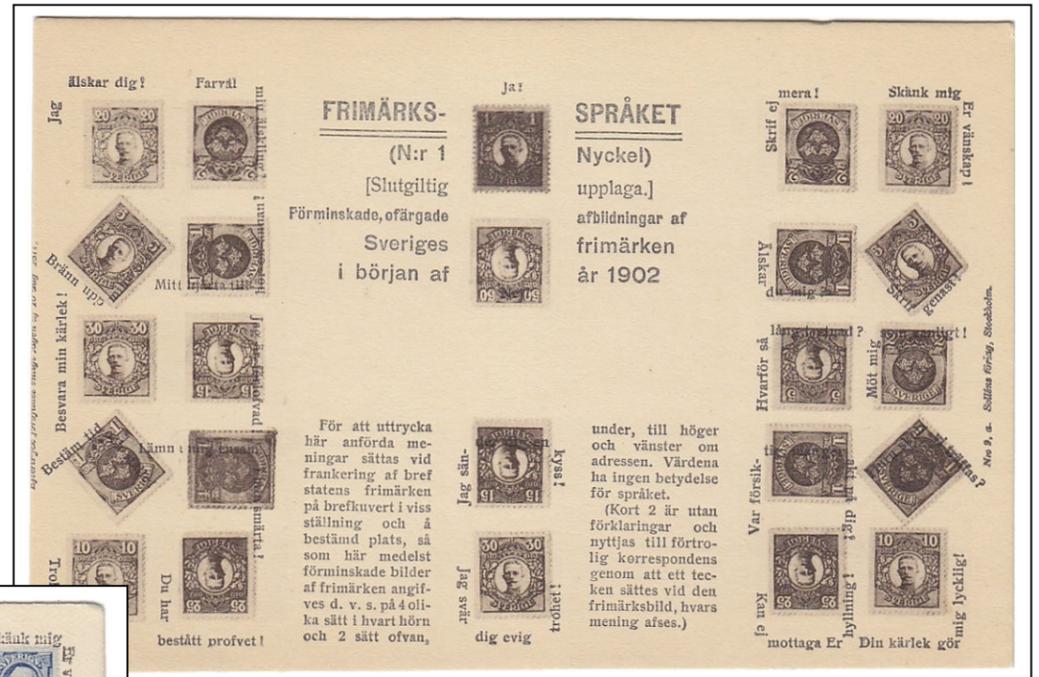


Publisher: Solléns förlag, Stockholm
Undivided back, used 190x

Rare printing error:
Two stamp images to the right are missing!

Not only is the design of this Norwegian card identical with the Swedish ones. All the text – headings, messages and instructions – is directly translated from Swedish to Norwegian.

The Swedish-Norwegian union was dissolved in 1905, but even before the dissolution Norway had its own postal administration and stamps.

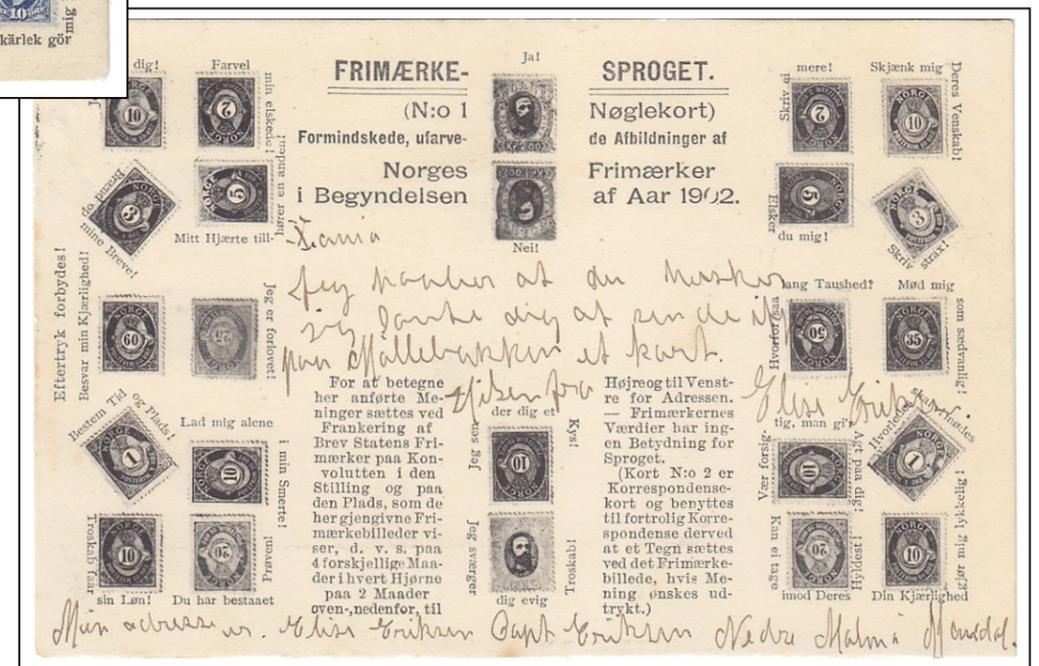


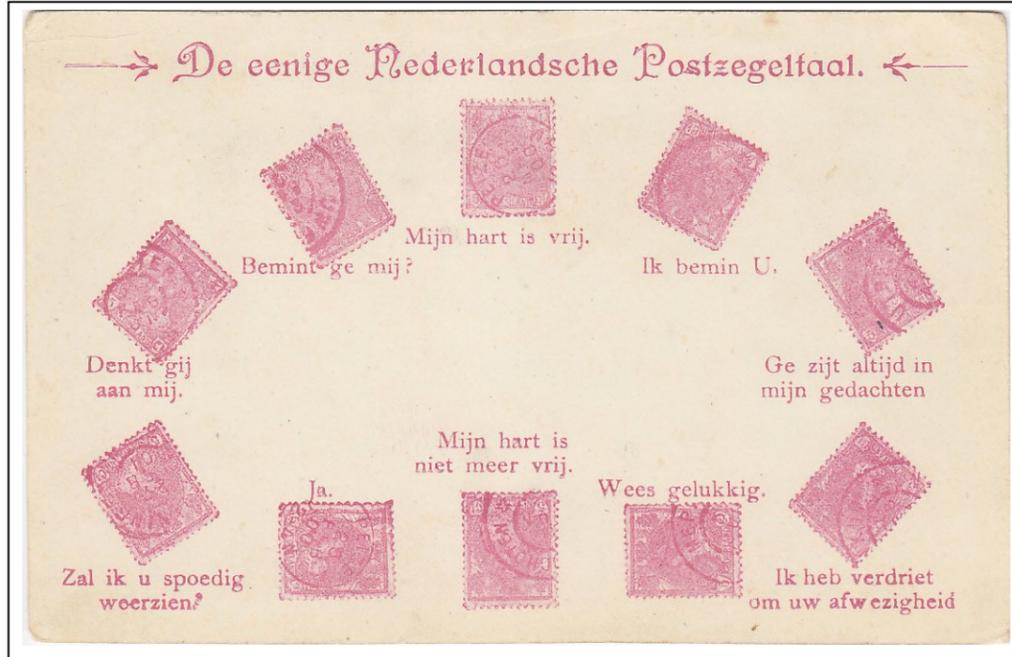
Publisher: Solléns förlag, Stockholm
Divided back, unused

Above: Stamps with King Gustaf V and the Small National Coat-of-Arms were issued from 1910 onwards. But when Solléns printed cards with the new stamps, they forgot to change the text – “The stamps of Sweden in the beginning of the year 1902”!

Below: Card from an unknown publisher with the same design as the Swedish cards, but with Norwegian stamps from the Posthorn (1893) and King Oscar II (1878) issues

Undivided back, used, no date





Unknown publisher
Stamps: 5 cent Queen Wilhelmina (1899)
Undivided back, unused

These cards show the competition between different languages. The card above is *The only Dutch Stamp Language*, the card to the right is the *New Stamp Language*, and the card below is the *Newest Inter-National Stamp Language*.

Unknown publisher
Stamps: 2½ cent Figure in White Circle (1899)
Undivided back, unused



► In many larger countries, several competing or complementary stamp languages were in use. One reason for this was the competition between postcard publishers. But another reason probably had to do with the secret messages. If one single key became predominant – and well-known – messages were not so secret anymore.



Publisher: J. H. Schaevers, Amsterdam
Stamps from the Figure in White Circle and Queen Wilhelmina issues (1899)
Undivided back, used 1910

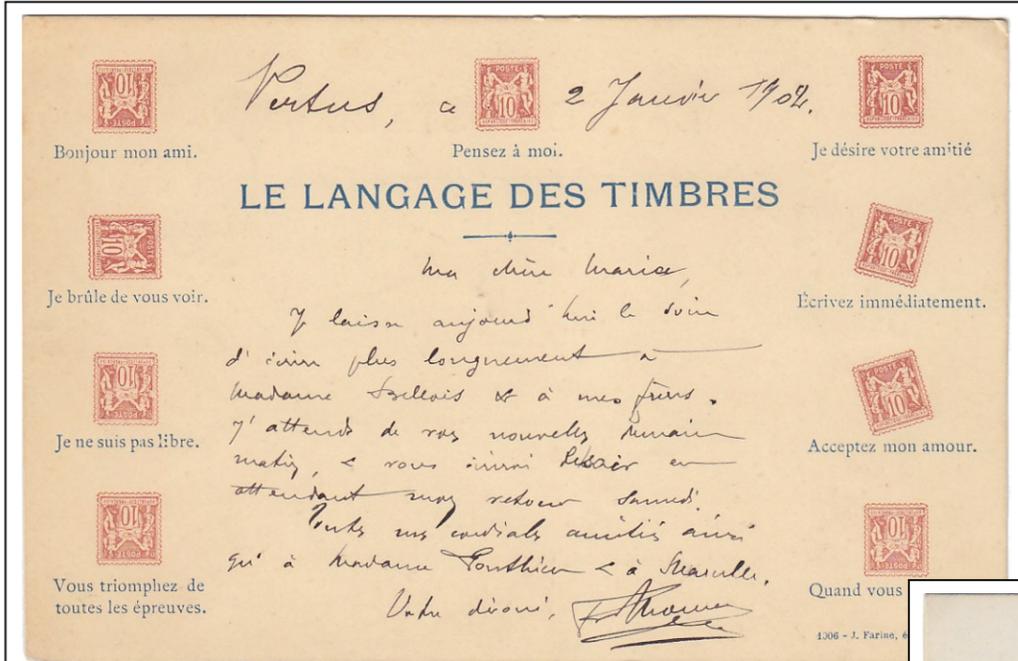


Unknown publisher
Stamps: 2½ cent Figure in White Circle (1899)
Divided back, unused

The two cards on the bottom of the page agree that a 2½ cent stamp placed in the indicated position in the top left corner of a card sends 1000 kisses. On the card above, the same stamp says *I hope for the future*.

Unknown publisher
Stamps from the Figure in White Circle and Queen Wilhelmina issues (1899)
Divided back, sent under cover, no date

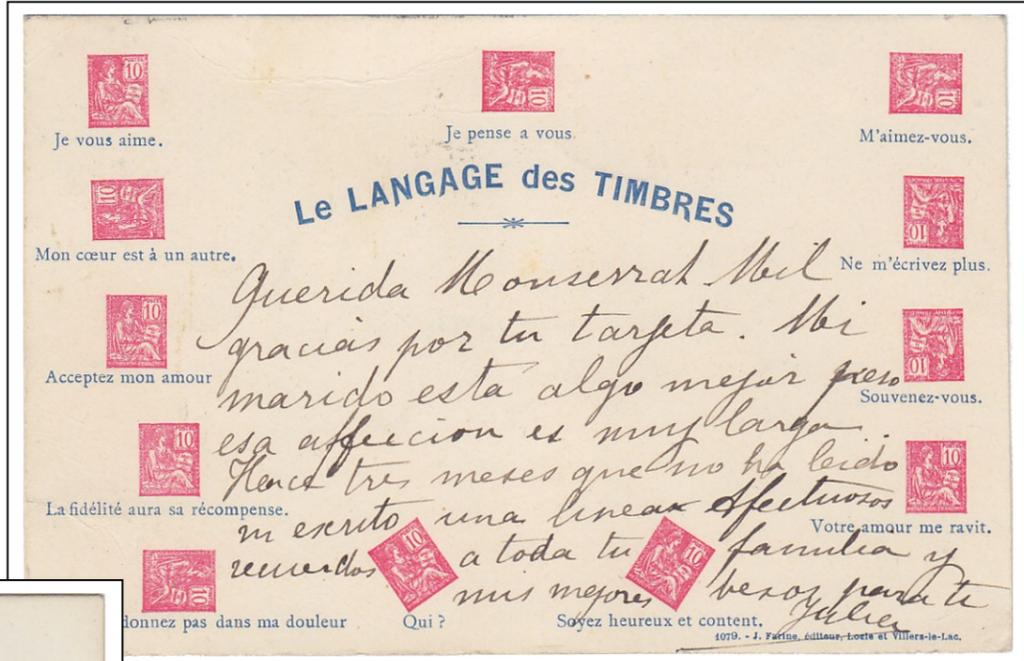




Publisher: J. Farine, Locle
 Stamps: 10 centimes Sage/Peace and Commerce (1876-1898)
 The original colour of the stamp, except for the very first year it was printed, was black
 Undivided back, used 1902

► France was probably the country with the largest number of different stamp language postcards in the pre-WWI period. Numerous publishers produced various types of cards with different languages.

In France, therefore, the secret messages conveyed by oddly placed stamps were indeed secret. There was no way for a curious postman or parent to know which specific language the correspondents were using!



Publisher: J. Farine, Locle & Villers-le-Lac
 Stamps: 10 centimes Mouchon (1900)
 Undivided back, used 1902

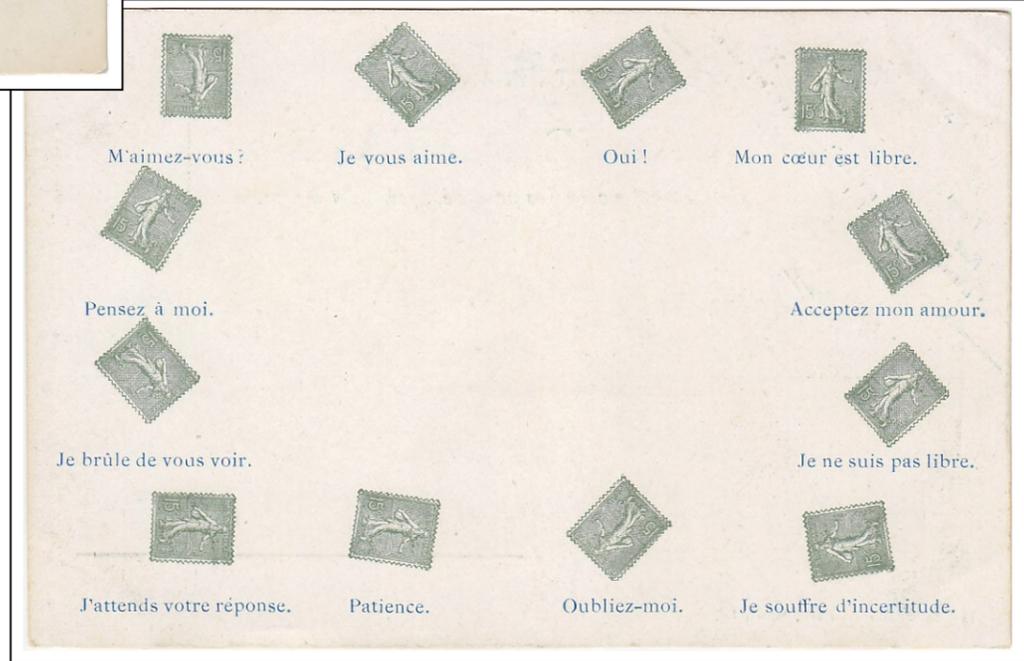
Most French stamp language cards show 10 centimes stamps, (top left and top right) representing both the inland and the foreign postcard rate. Inland letter rate (until 1906) was 15 centimes (bottom right) and foreign letter rate 25 centimes (bottom left).

Unknown publisher
 Stamps: 25 centimes Sower (1903)
 Undivided back, used 1906



Publisher: Vanderauwera & Cie, Brussels
 Stamps from the Merson issue (1900)
 Undivided back, sent under cover, dated 1902

Most secret messages were about love and affection. The above card, on the contrary, asks the question *Why don't you love me?* and suggests a number of replies – *My heart is broken, My heart belongs to another, I can't stand mothers-in-law, and so forth.*



Publisher: Timothée Jacot, Neuchâtel
 Stamps: 15 centimes Sower (1903)
 Undivided back, unused



Publisher: Victor Gisquière, Brussels
 Stamps: 5 centimes Small State Arms (1893) and 10 centimes King Leopold II "fine beard" (1893-1900)
 Undivided back, used 1901

The *Language of Stamps in 1901* (above) and *The New Language of the Stamp* (below) are from the same publisher. Changing the key may have been a way to keep the language secret.

Publisher: V. G. (Victor Gisquière), Brussels
 Stamps: 10 centimes King Leopold II "fine beard" (1893-1900)
 Undivided back, used 1905



Unknown publisher
 Stamps: 5 centimes Small State Arms (1893), 10 and 20 centimes King Leopold II "coarse beard" (1905)
 Undivided back, unused

► In Belgium, too, a number of competing "stamp languages" existed. Postcards with several different designs and stamps of different denominations were in use more or less simultaneously.



Publisher: Vanderauwera & Cie., Brussels
 Stamps: 10 centimes King Leopold II "fine beard" (1893-1900)
 Undivided back, unused

Most Belgian stamp language cards had text in French only. The card to the left is an exception, with all text being written in both French and Flemish.

Publisher: V. G. (Victor Gisquière), Brussels
 Stamps: 10 centimes King Leopold II "fine beard" (1893-1900)
 Undivided back, used 1902

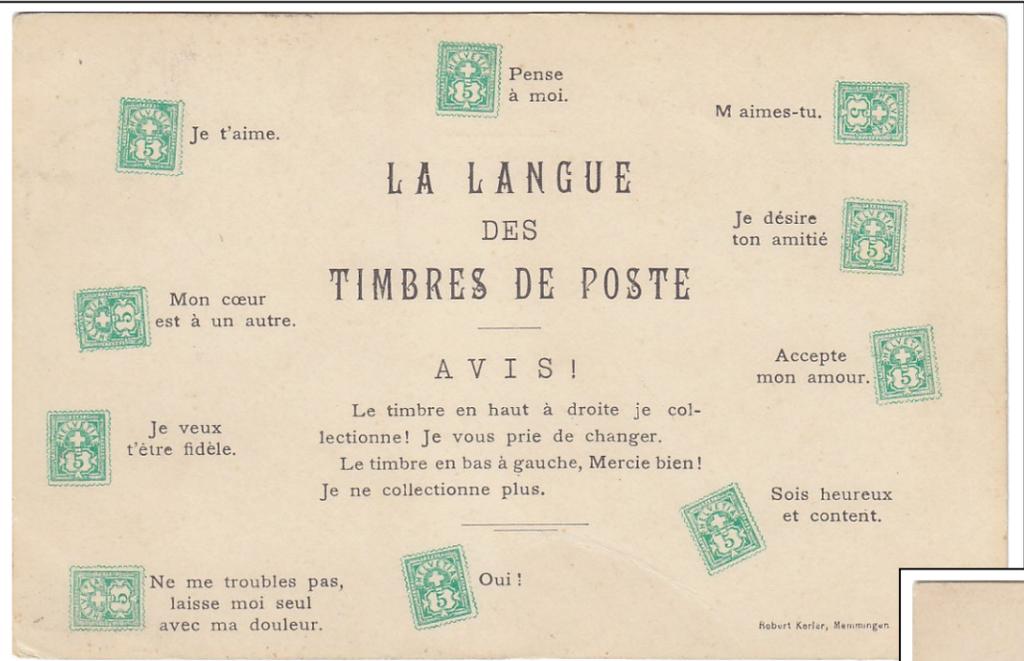


Unknown publisher
 Stamps: 5 centimes Small State Arms (1893), 10 and 20 centimes King Leopold II "coarse beard" (1905)
 Undivided back, unused

The two cards to the left show stamps with the peculiar Belgian "Do not deliver on Sunday" tab. Correspondents who wanted their mail delivered on a Sunday had to tear off the tab before posting the letter or postcard.

The card to the right shows stamps with smaller tabs, with the secret messages written on them.





Undivided back, used 1900

Publisher: Robert Kerler, Memmingen, Bavaria (upper left and lower left card)

► In multilingual Switzerland, the same stamp could speak more than one language.

To the left and right are French and German versions of the same sets of messages. In the middle is a trilingual card, where the stamps speak German, French and Italian – all at the same time!

Stamps (all cards on this page):
5 centimes Cross and Numeral type (1899/1906)



Undivided back, unused

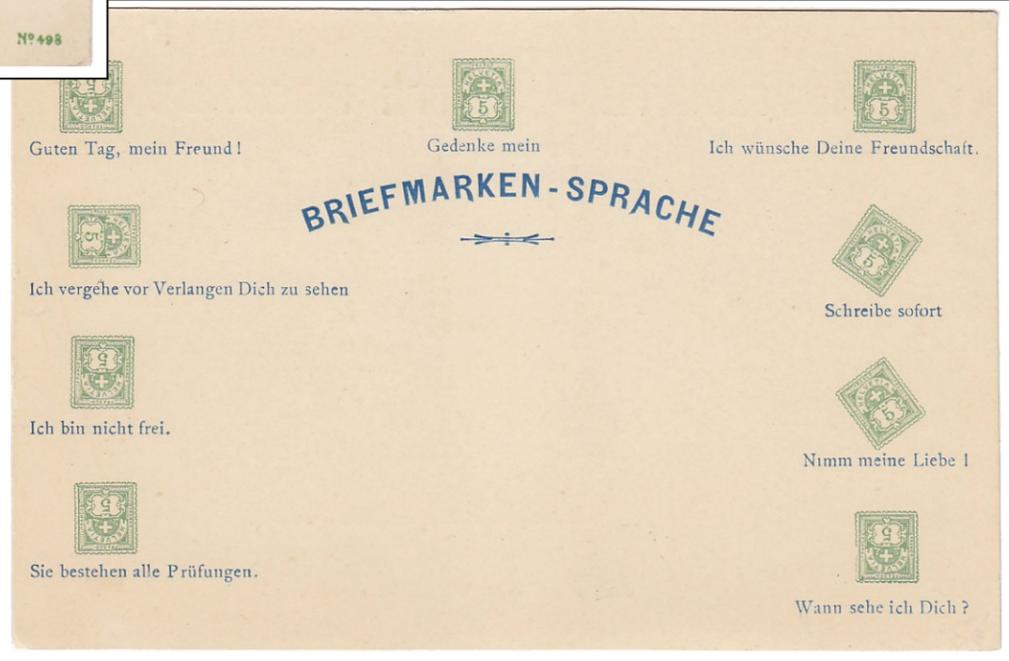
Publisher: J. Farine, Le Locle, Switzerland (upper right and lower right card)

Undivided back, sent under cover, no date



Publisher: Carl Künzli-Tobler, Zürich, Switzerland (CKT)
Divided back, unused

A printed instruction on the card above says that personal correspondence on the address side was only allowed if the card was sent within Switzerland, to France or to Italy. This suggests that the card was printed in 1904 or (not much) later.



Undivided back, unused



Publisher: B. B. & O. L. (Bruno Bürger & Otilie, Leipzig)
 Stamps: Germany, 5 and 10 pfennig Germania (1902)
 Divided back, unused

Guggenheim printed this type of cards with stamps from many different countries, either in their own name and or on behalf of local publishers. On the card below, the address side has both the name and address of the local South African publisher and the Guggenheim logotype.

Publisher: R. O. Füsslein, Johannesburg, and H. G. & C. Z.
 Stamps: British South Africa Company, ½d and 1d (1898)
 Divided back, unused



Publisher: H. Guggenheim & Co., Zürich
 Stamps: UK, ½d and 1d King Edward VII (1902)
 Divided back, used 1912

In most countries, green stamps represented the inland postcard rate and red stamps the foreign postcard rate. That was the case for all countries represented on this and the following page except for France, where green 5 centimes stamps represented the inland and foreign printed matter rate and red 10 centimes stamps were for the inland and foreign postcard rate.



➤ The early postcard craze was an international phenomenon. Various innovations rapidly spread between publishers, from one country to another, and the secret language of stamps was no exception.

The layout of the cards shown here is a good example. It appeared around 1910 and its origin was H. Guggenheim & Co. in Zürich. But cards with red and green stamps in these positions were soon for sale in many European countries. There were even Guggenheim cards with local stamps exported to Africa (bottom left)!



Publisher: H. G. & C. Z. (H. Guggenheim & Co., Zürich)
 Stamps: Denmark, 5 and 10 øre King Frederik VIII (1907)
 Divided back, unused

- There were four main versions of these cards:
- 1) no illustration and plain white background
 - 2) national arms, golden border, white background
 - 3) national arms, golden border, grey/silver background
 - 4) kissing couple, golden border, grey/silver background

Publisher: V. Müllers Kunstforlag (Copenhagen)
 Stamps: Denmark, 5 and 10 øre King Frederik VIII (1907)
 Divided back, unused





Above and below:
 Publisher: H. Guggenheim & Co., Zürich
 Stamps: Switzerland, 5 and 10 centimes Cross and Numeral type (1899/1882-1906)
 Divided back, unused

The card above with text in French (serial number 12086), the card below with text in German (serial number 12085)

Somewhat surprisingly, the French and German messages are completely different. For example, *I love you* in the French version corresponds to *You have forgotten me* in the German version!



► The design with red and green stamps in this formation existed in many countries. The positions and orientations of the stamps were the same on almost all cards (the bottom right card here is an exception). However, the messages associated with the stamps differed between countries and even within countries. In spite of the standardized design, there was not one unified international language of stamps.



Publisher: H. Guggenheim & Co., Zürich
 Stamps: France, 5 and 10 centimes Sower type (1907)
 Divided back, unused

This Swedish card has a minor "error". The two red stamps to the left have different orientations than on the other cards.



Publisher: H G & Co Z (H. Guggenheim & Co., Zürich)
 Stamps: Sweden, 5 and 10 öre King Oscar II (1891)
 Divided back, unused

Two cards (above and below) with Swedish stamps, from different publishers and with different messages.

Publisher: Jolin & Wilkenson, Gothenburg
 Stamps: Sweden, 5 and 10 öre King Gustaf V in medallion (1910)
 Divided back, unused





Undivided back, used 1901

Unknown publisher

Stamps from Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Russia, Switzerland and the United States, in use around 1900

The card above has German text. The card below has French text – and the colours of the British and Danish stamps mixed up!

Undivided back, unused



► There were also multinational stamp languages, with stamps from several different countries.

The cards to the left and below could be used as keys for secret messages. The two cards to the right, on the contrary, were intended for open messages.

An instruction on these two cards tells the sender to “underline” the appropriate message.



Unknown publisher
Stamps from Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Monaco, Russia and Switzerland, in use in the early 1900s
Divided back, unused

Each stamp is combined with a romantic picture. These seem mostly to show anonymous persons, but the Belgian stamp depicting King Leopold is accompanied by Cléo de Mérode.

The cards to the left illustrate the UPU rules about the colour of stamps: Green for international printed matter rate, red for postcard rate and blue for letter rate.



Divided back, unused

Publisher: Marco Marcovici, Brussels (M. M. / Br.)

Each card (above and below) shows stamps from twelve different European countries, most of them in use in the early 1900s

The cards are not quite as cosmopolitan as they pretend to be. Several postmarks are misspelled – Lisabon instead of Lisboa, Copen(hague?) instead of Kjøbenhavn, and so forth.

Divided back, used 1905





Divided back, unused

This was obviously a popular card, even though it does not seem very useful for secret communication. It seems to be inspired by the Marcovici cards on the previous page, but without the explicit instruction to “underline” the appropriate message.

Divided back, unused



➤ H. Guggenheim & Co. in Zürich produced many different stamp language cards, including this multinational card that came in a number of versions.

Stamps from Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, Monaco, Russia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland, the most recent ones in use from 1908 onwards. The card in the middle is slightly different, see below.



Divided back, unused

The card came in several different printings, with white or grey/silver background, and in both German (left) and French (middle and right). The messages are the same in both languages.

Both cards with German text have serial number 14026 and all three cards with French text have serial number 14024.



Divided back, unused

The card above differs from the other four in two respects.

- 1) To the bottom left is a 10 centimes Belgian stamp instead of the 1 centime stamp of Monaco.
- 2) Each stamp has a hand-drawn postmark from the country's national capital.

In spite of these differences, the card has the same serial number as the two other cards with French text.



Divided back, used 1912

Multiple Stamps in Series • France

► In order to provide a broad range of possible messages, and to sell many postcards, some postcard publishers produced series of multiple stamp cards.

Here are two such series, both featuring the French 10 centimes Sower (*semeuse*) stamp of 1903 – *The Secret of the Stamp* and *The New Secret of the Stamp*. All cards with divided back.

Publisher:
Jacques Brien,
Brussels



Unused



Used 1904



Sent under cover,
no date

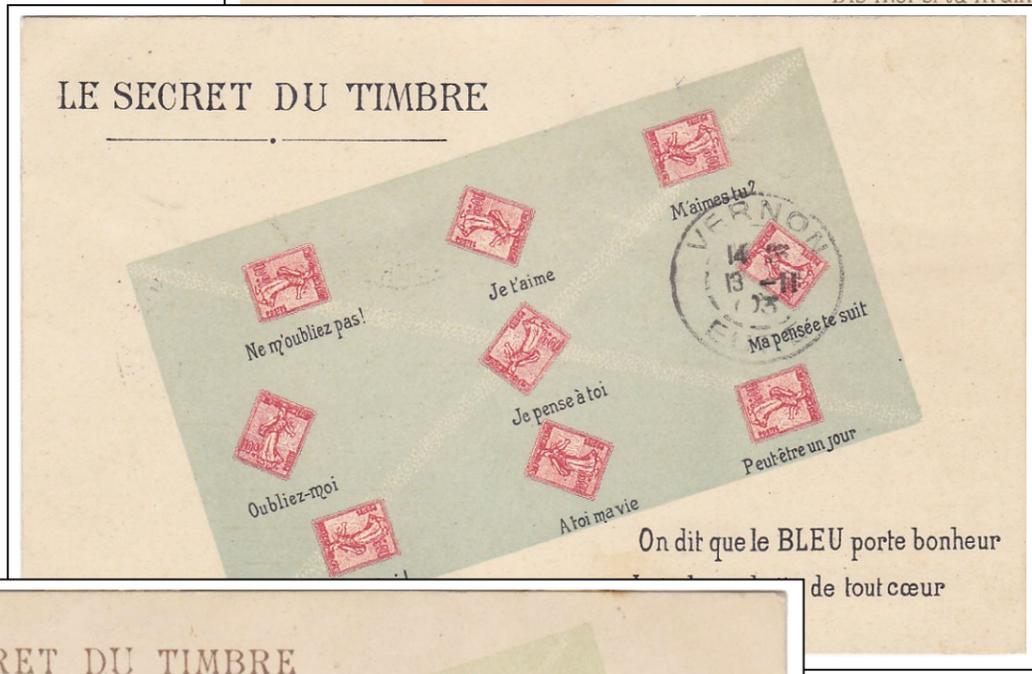
Used 1904

Sent under cover,
no date

Unused



Publisher:
G. I. Paris
(top and
bottom) and
G. J. H. A.
(left)



The Secret of the Stamp series to the right suggests that the stamps should be placed on the back of an envelope, which is somewhat unusual. The meaning of the different colours (red, blue and green) indicated on the three cards is unclear.





Image showing a young couple surrounded by a landscape with a car and a ship, possibly referring to communication or mail transport
 Unknown publisher
 Stamps: 10 centimes Sower (1907)
 Divided back, sent under cover, dated 1911

Images of flowers, women and loving couples
 Publisher: Künzli Frères, Paris (K.F.)
 Stamps: 10 centimes Sower (1903)
 Divided back, used 1908



➤ In addition to stamps in various positions and orientations, stamp language cards might have additional images or decorative elements, often referring to love and mail exchange.



Image of a loving couple, flowers, envelope(s), and an art nouveau decoration
 Unknown publisher
 Stamps: 5 centesimi King Victor Emmanuel III (1906)
 Divided back, used 1912



Image showing a loving couple in a heart with an arrow
 Publisher: Fritz Schardt, Nuremberg (F. Sch. N.)
 Stamps: 5 pfennig Germania (1902)
 Divided back, used 1909

Image showing a man in a heart and roses on the back of a sealed envelope
 Publisher: Lotus (?)
 Stamps: 10 centimes Sower (1907)
 Divided back, used 1909



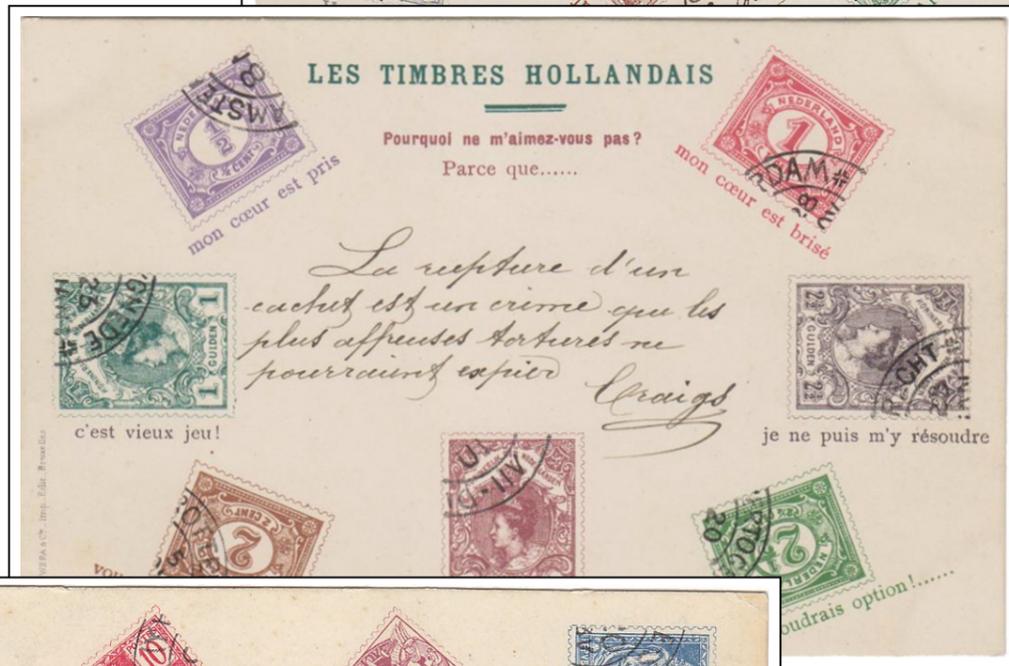
Cards With and Without Messages • Netherlands and France

► One type of stamp language cards were sold in two different versions – with (left) and without (right) printed messages.

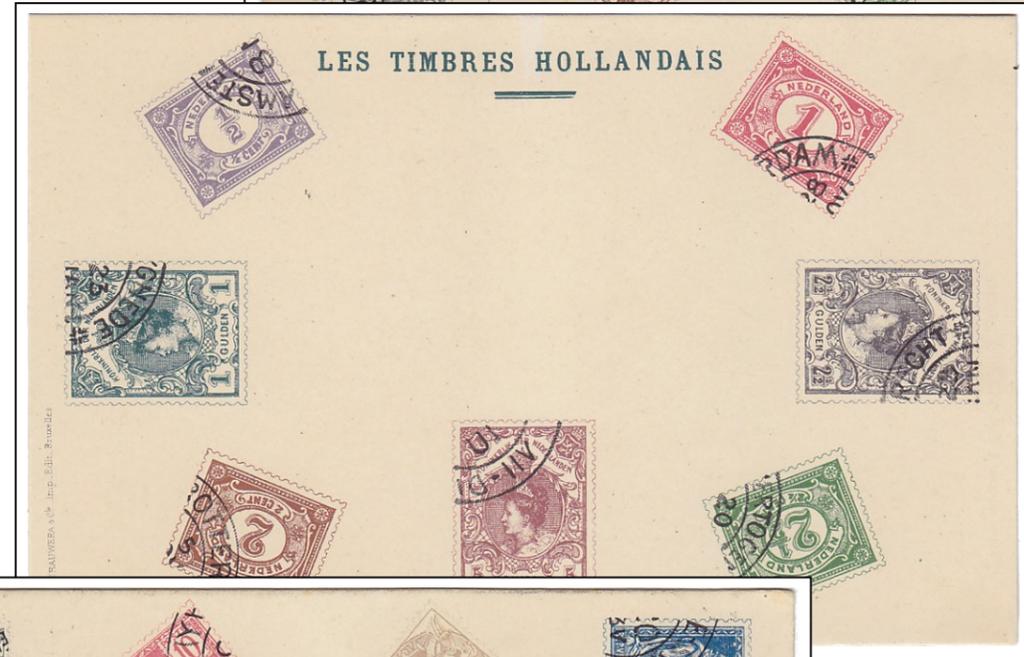
The idea was that correspondents should first exchange the key (the card with the messages) and then use the cards without printed messages for communication by marking a suitable stamp.



Stamps from the Queen Wilhelmina issue (1899)
Undivided backs
Left card used 1901
Right card used 1902



Stamps from the Figure in White Circle and Queen Wilhelmina issues (1899)
Undivided backs
Left card sent under cover, no date
Right card unused



Stamps from the Blanc and Mouchon issues (1900)
Undivided backs
Left card unused
Right card used 1903



Publisher (all cards): Vanderauwera, Brussels
On the card to the left, a signature under the 15 cts stamp indicates that the sender has been in love with the addressee for a long time.
This way of using the stamp language never became very popular. Most correspondents preferred the original idea, to use real stamps.

► The most popular Swedish stamp language from the early 1900s (page 7–8) was used both on key cards with printed messages and on “correspondence cards” without messages.

The correspondence cards are far less common than the key cards, and seem to have been in use only around 1902.



22 stamp images

Key card used 1902

Correspondence card used 1902



24 stamp images
4th edition

Key card used 1902

Correspondence card used 1902



24 stamp images
Final edition

Key card unused

Correspondence card used 1902

The key card to the left was the most widely used Swedish stamp language cards.



4:de Tillökade upplagan!

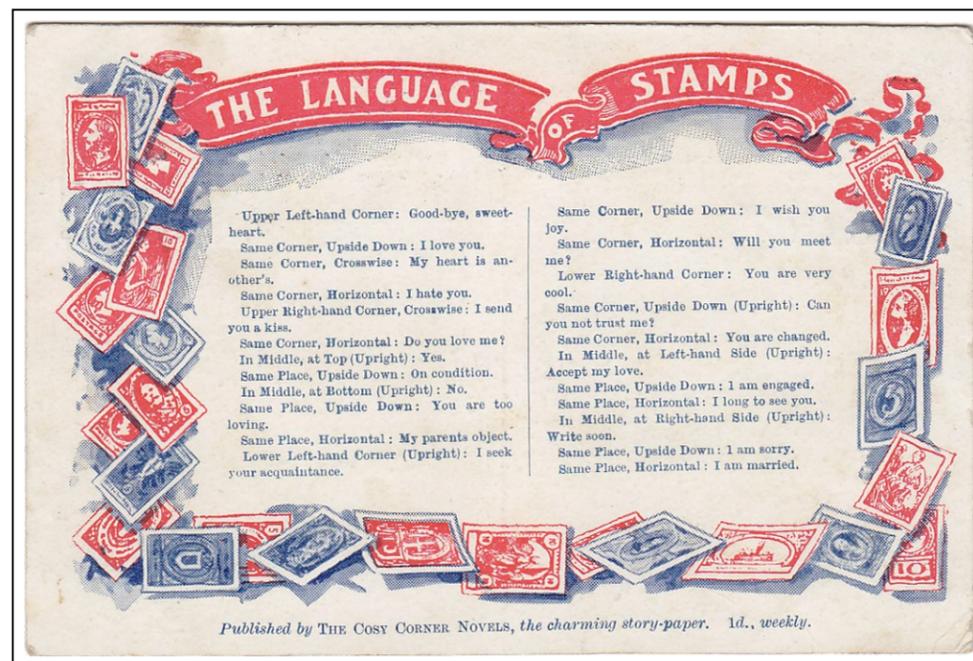
Publisher (all cards): Solléns, Stockholm

Stamps from the King Oscar II copperplate recess issue (1891-1900) and the Bicoloured Numeral type issue (1892)
All cards with undivided back



Above: French trade card (forerunner of picture postcards), advertising Cirage Nubian shoe polish, with a secret language of stamps on the back
Stamps: 15 centimes Sage (1876-1900) showing orientations, text indicating positions

► The standard version of stamp language cards was a key showing stamps in different positions (different places on the card) and with different orientations (upright, upside down, crosswise, etc.). But before this standard became established, different types of keys existed.



British postcard with "The Language of Stamps"
Entirely text-based descriptions of both positions and orientations of the stamps
Publisher: The Cosy Corner Novels ("the charming story-paper")
Undivided back, used 1905



Above: British card with stamps showing orientations and text indicating positions
Stamps: 1d King Edward VII (1902-1911); undivided back, unused; unknown publisher



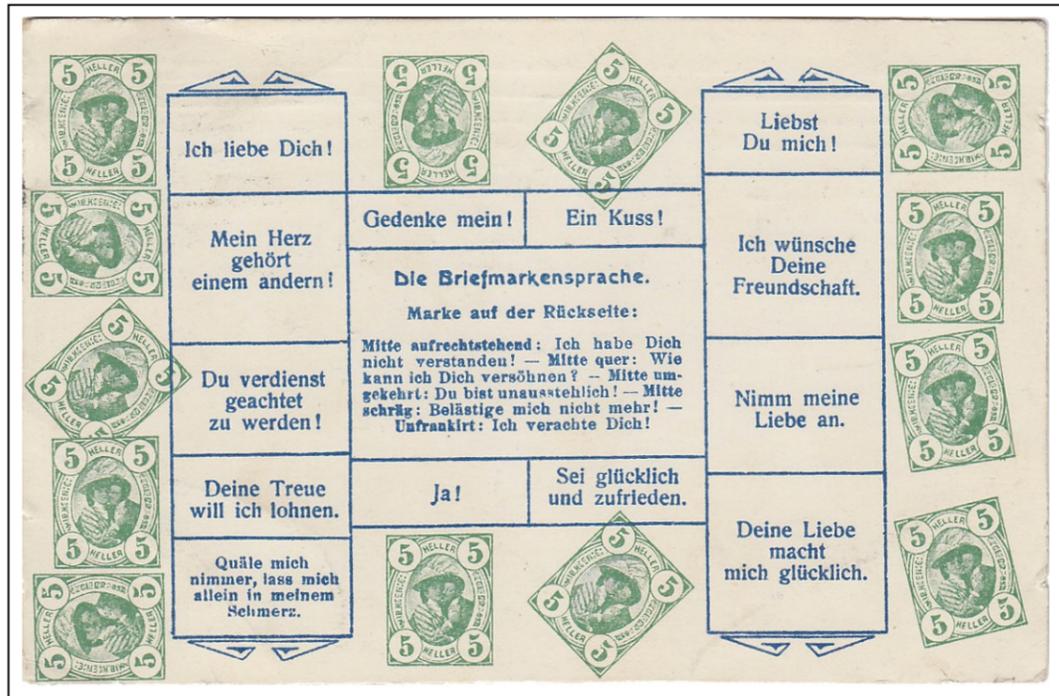
Two Italian cards with fantasy stamps showing portraits of King Victor Emmanuel III
These are more complicated versions of secret languages. Stamps in eight/six different orientations are shown, and each orientation may have three different meanings, indicated by letters a, b and c.
The idea was probably that the sender should affix a stamp with the appropriate orientation and then add a letter to clarify the meaning of the stamp.
Nothing is said about the position of the stamp.

Publisher: B. G., Bologna
Undivided back
Used, no date

Publisher: D. Codanti, Milano
Undivided back, unused



N. B. - Questa cartolina, di semplice ammassamento, è la chiave di una corrispondenza tacita che si può stabilire con qualunque cartolina illustrata o no, applicandosi il francobollo in uno dei sei modi indicati - per esprimere ciò che è segnato nella spiegazione.



Unknown publisher
Stamps: 5 heller Franz Joseph I of Austria (1906), with the head of the emperor replaced with a loving couple
Divided back, used 1911

Unknown publisher
Stamps: A hand-drawn stamp with a burning heart!
Undivided back, unused

This German-language card shows not only stamps but entire envelopes with the stamps affixed in different places and orientations.

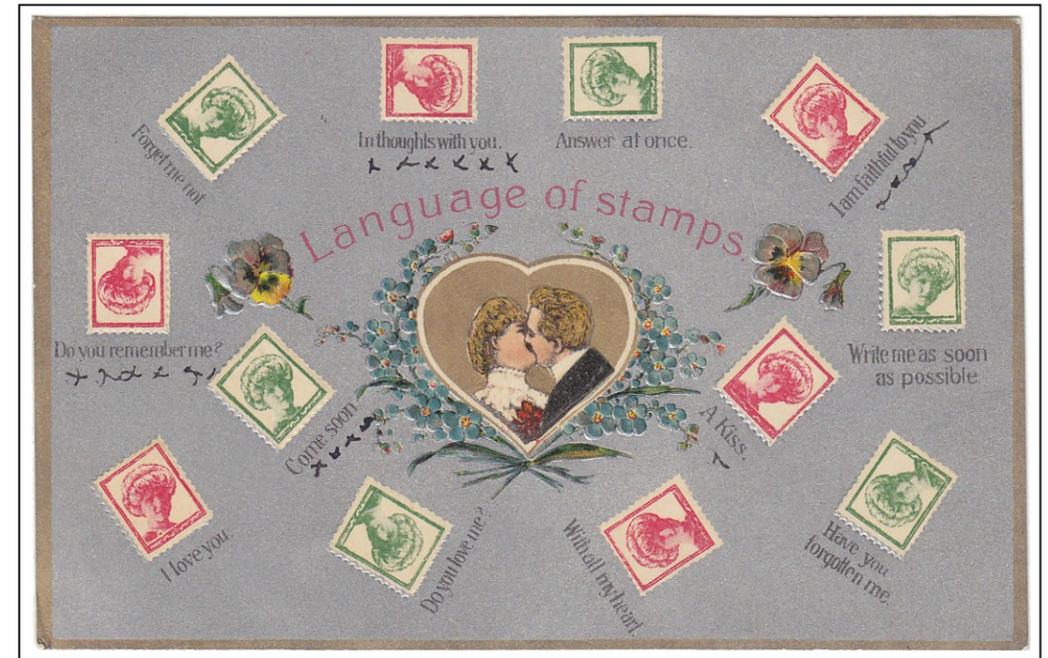


► Stamp languages were sometimes illustrated by various kinds of fantasy stamps rather than by pictures of existing stamps. In many cases, this probably just reflected the inventiveness of postcard publishers. Yet an additional reason may have been that the postal authorities of some countries did not allow reproductions of existing stamps on postcards.



Publisher: M. Marcovici, Brussels
Stamps: Fantasy stamps in different colours and denominations, showing Cupid
Divided back, used 1907

Cupid was the god of desire, affection and erotic love in classical mythology.



Publisher: H. Guggenheim & Co., Zürich, and Newman Brothers, Glasgow
Stamps: Red and green fantasy stamps showing a woman
Divided back, used, no date

These two cards (above and below) have the stamps arranged as on the international cards with red and green stamps shown on pages 13-14. The messages associated with different stamps are the same on both cards.

Publisher: Alfred Stiebel & Co., London
Stamps: Red and green fantasy stamps showing a man
Divided back, used, no date



► Paris editor Croissant published this series of cards with fantasy stamps showing elegant women.

Different portraits and stamps in different colours, but the same messages on all cards.

All cards shown have divided backs.



Sent under cover, no date



Sent under cover, no date



Used 1911



Used 1909



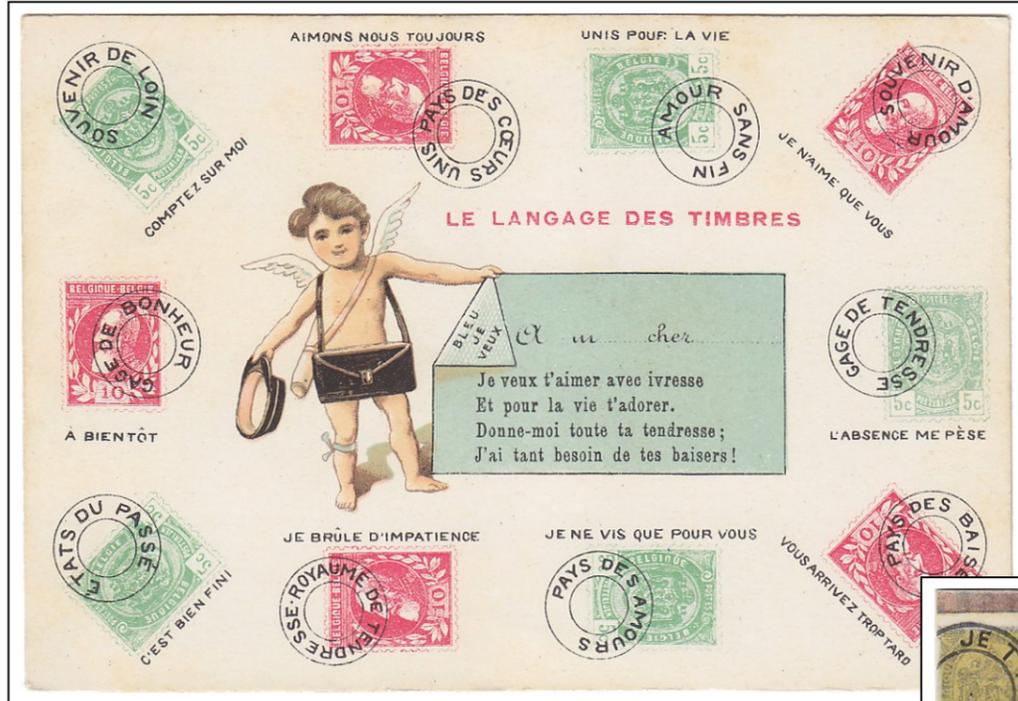
Unused



Postally used, no date

For each fantasy stamp there is both a message in the stamp (below the portrait) – *I love you... A little, A lot, Passionately, Not at all* – and a message printed beside the stamp.

The combinations of messages are sometimes confusing, for example (top right) *I love you a little / I can no longer live without your love.*



Publisher (above and below): J. Brien, Brussels
 Stamps (above): Belgium 5 centimes Small State Arms (1907) and 10 centimes King Leopold II “coarse beard” (1905)
 Stamps (below): France 10 and 25 centimes Sower (1903)
 Both cards with divided back and unused

These cards combine messages printed beside the stamps and messages in the postmarks that obliterate the stamps – *United for life / Never-ending love, I only live for you / Country of love, etc.*

► Most multiple stamp cards had the messages printed beside the stamps. Some publishers took the postal theme one step further and showed messages in postmarks.

Several cards had messages both beside the stamps and in postmarks. The results could be confusing, as the combination of *You arrive to late* and the postmark *Country of kisses* on the card to the left. Below is a card where the postmarks alone convey the messages.



Unknown publisher
 Stamps: 5 centimes Small State Arms (1893)
 Divided back, used 1908

On the card above, the messages are only shown in the postmarks that obliterate the stamps – *I love you, Are you thinking of me?, A thousand kisses, and so forth.*

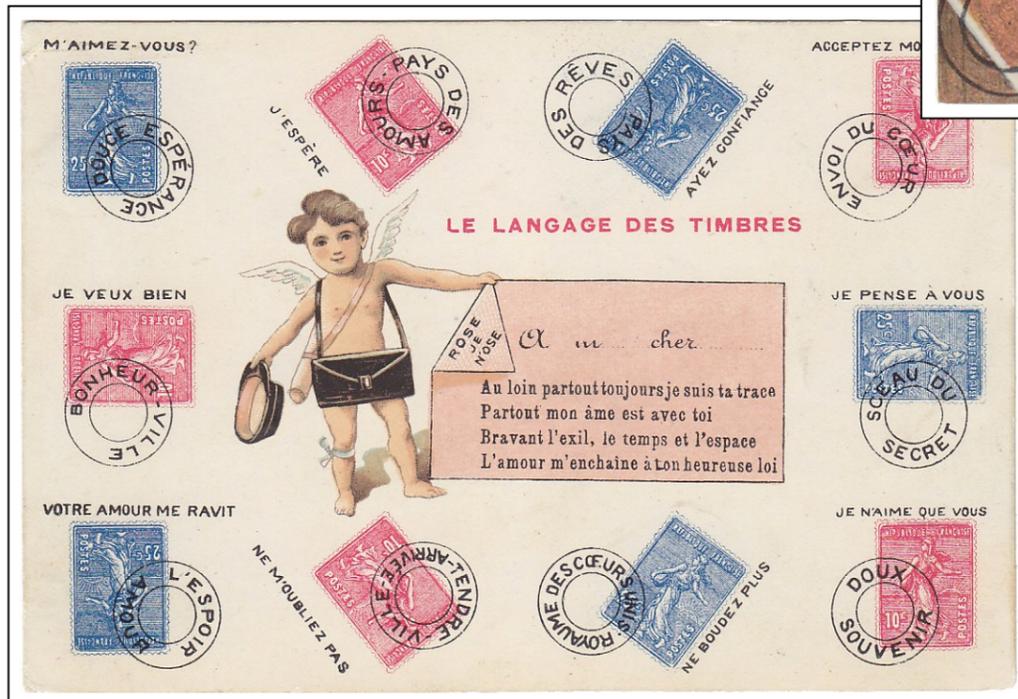
The stamps are printed in five different colours/shades, none of them corresponding to the original green colour of the 5 centimes stamp (as shown on the upper left card).



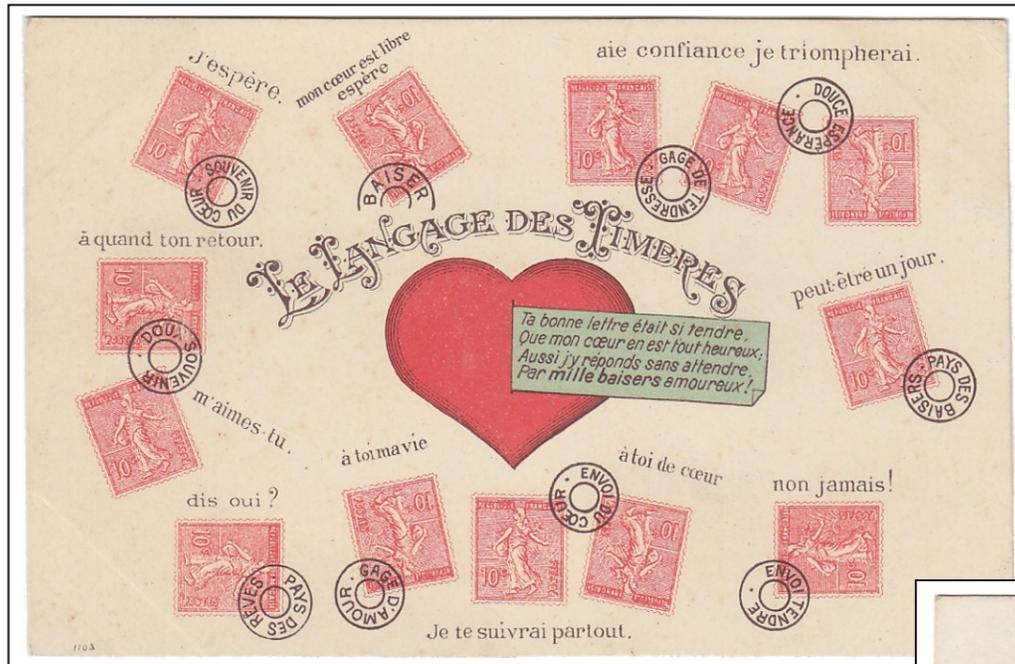
Publisher (above and below): Croissant, Paris
 Stamps: 10 centimes Sower type (1907)
 Both cards with divided back and used, the card above in 1907, the card below no date

Messages in the postmarks are combined with messages printed beside the stamps.

The cards are entitled “Language of the new stamp”. It seems that the 10 centimes stamps are overprinted on a set of fantasy stamps, as shown on the cards on page 24.

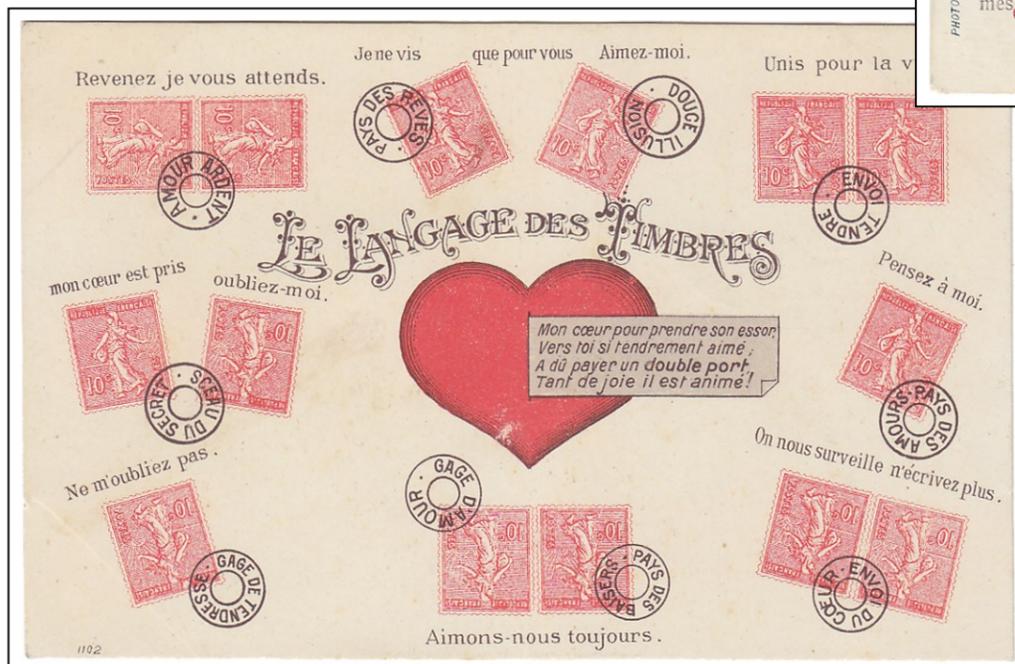


Messages in Postmarks • Phototypie La Mouche



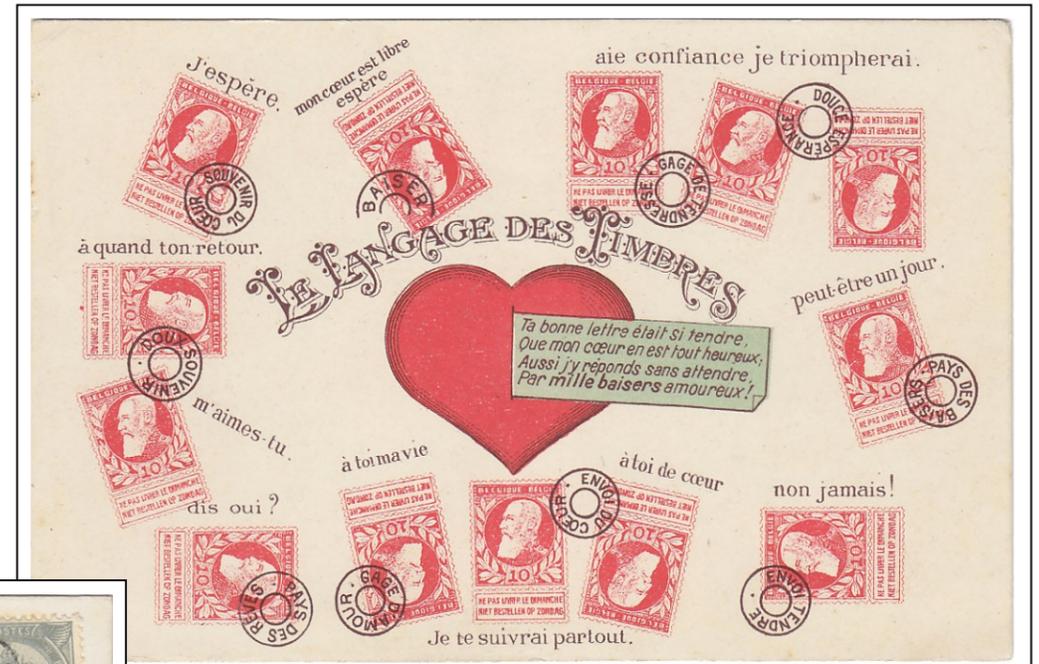
Stamps (above and below): 10 centimes Sower type (1903)
Both cards with divided back and unused.

The pairs of 10 centimes stamps on the card below is surprising, considering that there was no common 20 centimes postal rate for postcards or letters in France at this time.



► This series of cards, with messages both in the postmarks and beside the stamps, was published with French, Swiss and Belgian stamps. The publisher was Phototypie La Mouche, Braine-L'Alleud (Belgium).

Some of the cards are confusing, with postmarks that obliterate more than one stamp (top left and top right) as well as a pair of stamps obliterated by two different postmarks (bottom left).



Stamps: 10 centimes King Leopold II "coarse beard" (1905)
Divided back, unused



The card above is from the same series, with Belgian stamps. It was sent in 1906 by the publisher, Phototypie La Mouche, to a retailer with a printed advertisement and information about purchasing prices:

I have the pleasure of sending you an example of the most recently published stamp language...
The price was 30 francs per 1000 or 6 francs per 100 cards.

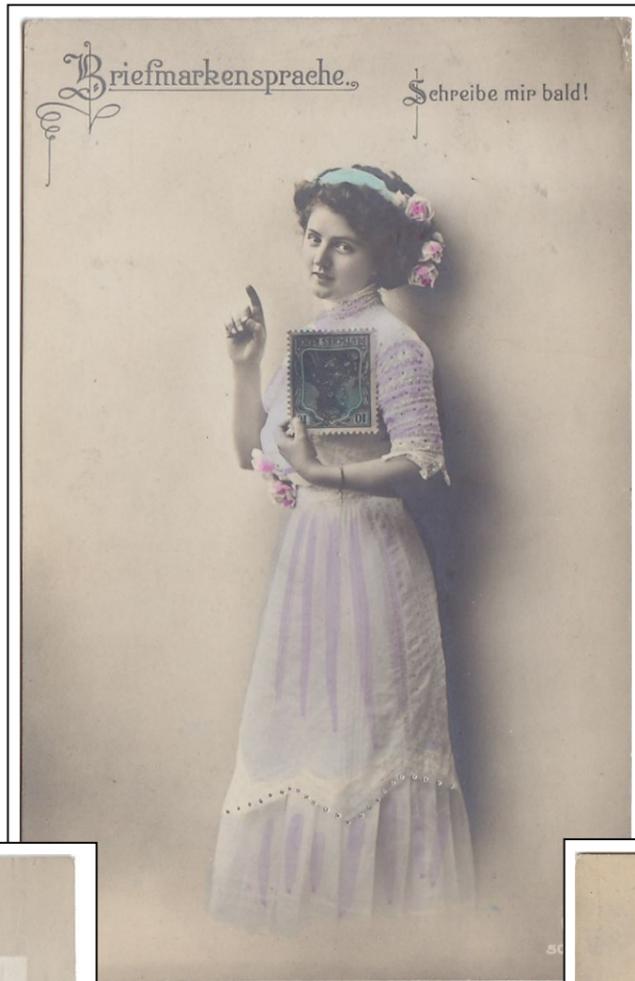


Stamps: 10 centimes Cross and Numeral Type (1882-1906)
Divided back, sent under cover, no date

► In addition to cards with multiple stamps for different messages, there were also series of cards with single stamps – each with only one message. If these cards were to be used for secret communication, the sender had to start by sending the whole series of cards to the recipient. Not very convenient for the correspondents, but good business for postcard publishers!

Here are cards from two German single-stamp series.

Stamps: 10 pfennig Germania (1902)
The stamp's original colour is red.



Write soon!
Divided back,
used 1912



I love you endlessly!
Divided back,
used 1911

Publisher (upper series):
S. Bluch, Wien/Vienna
(S.B.W. above a Rotophot logo)



Publisher (lower series):
Rotophot/Heinrich Ross,
Berlin (RPH)



I'm longing for you!
Divided back,
sent under cover,
no date



When will we meet again?
Divided back,
used 1910

*When and where can
I talk to you?*
Divided back,
used 1910



Single Stamps, Single Ladies • France

► Single-stamp cards seem to have been particularly popular in France, where postcard publishers produced numerous different series of cards. Here are examples from five different series with single ladies.



My heart is close to you
Unknown publisher,
Paris
Divided back,
used, no date

I am all yours
Publisher: AÉRO (?)
Divided back,
used 1911



Le langage du timbre

Stamps on all five cards are of the Sower (*semeuse*) type, 5 centimes (1907) on the bottom middle card and 10 centimes (1903/1906/1907) on the other four.

10 centimes was the domestic and foreign postcard rate and, from April 1906 onward, also the domestic letter rate.

5 centimes was the domestic and foreign printed matter rate, frequently used for postcards with only short messages.

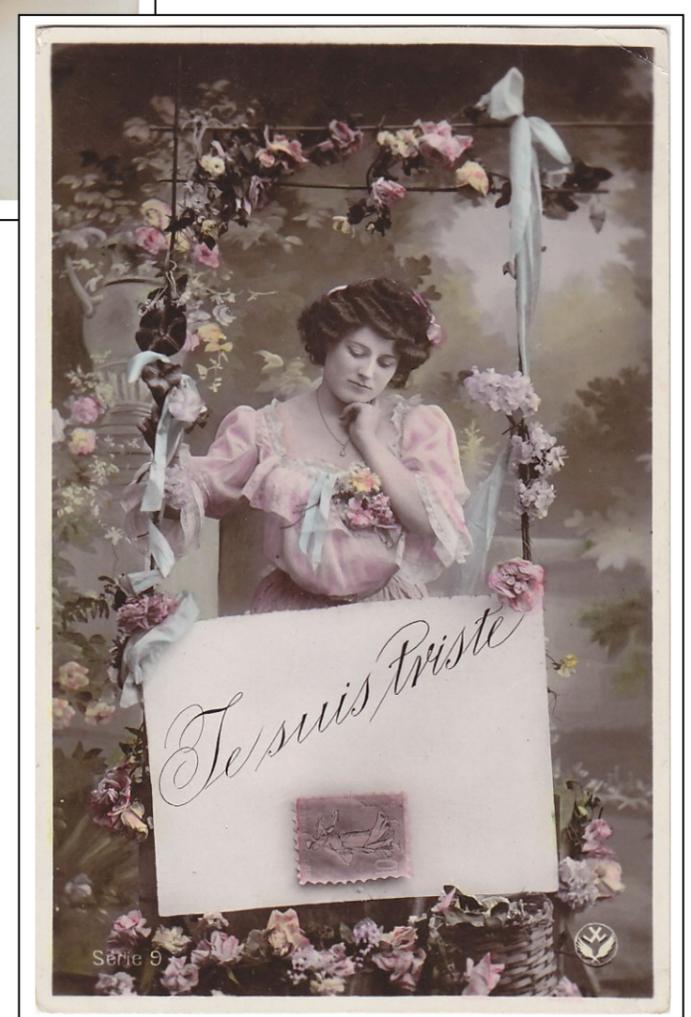


I am thinking of you
Publisher:
M.F., Paris
Divided back,
used, unclear date

Do not forget me
Publisher:
Croissant, Paris
Divided back,
sent under cover,
no date



I am sad
Publisher:
Lévy Fils & Cie., Paris
Divided back,
used 1909





I am waiting.

Publisher: Katz (J.K), Rueil



My heart is free.



► If a couple wanted to use single-stamp cards as “keys” to a secret language, they first had to exchange the entire series of cards. This series of five cards was sent on the same day, 5 July 1904, from the same sender in Paris to a lady in St. Georges sur Cher.



I am hoping.

Stamps: 15 centimes Sower type (1903)
Undivided back, used 1904



Distant from my eyes, close to my heart.

I will overcome everything.



Single Stamps, Loving Couples • France and Germany



Publisher: E. P., Paris
 Stamp: 10 centimes Sower type (1903)
 Divided back, used 1907

We will be reunited.

► An alternative to using the whole series of cards as a key for secret communication was to simply send a single card with an appropriate message. Not so secret, but considerably lower costs for postcards and postage!



I send you a kiss.

Publisher: M. F., Paris
 Stamp: 10 centimes Sower type (1903)
 Divided back, used 1906



Publisher: M. F., Paris
 Stamp: 10 centimes Sower type (1906)
 Divided back, sent under cover, no date

I will always love you.

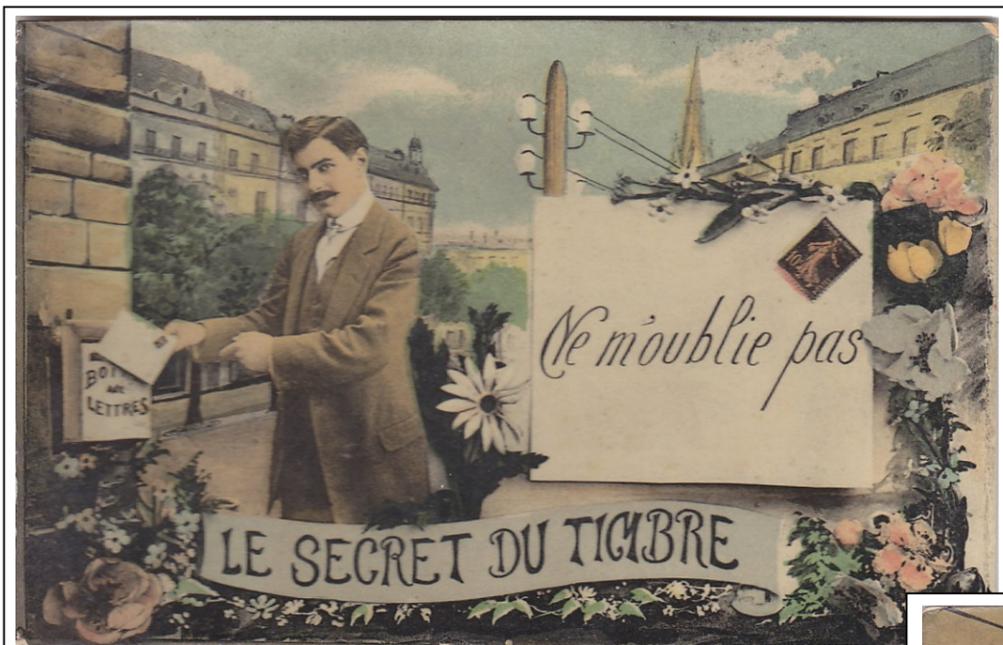


Publisher: Saint-Just, Paris (AS)
 Stamp: 10 centimes Sower type (1907)
 Divided back, used, no date

*Be careful not
 To place the stamp like this
 That would mean: "My heart
 Is at your mercy."*



Publisher: Rotophot/
 Heinrich Ross,
 Berlin (RPH)
 Stamp: 10 pfennig
 Germania (1902)
 Divided back, used 1913
I will always be faithful to you.



Do not forget me

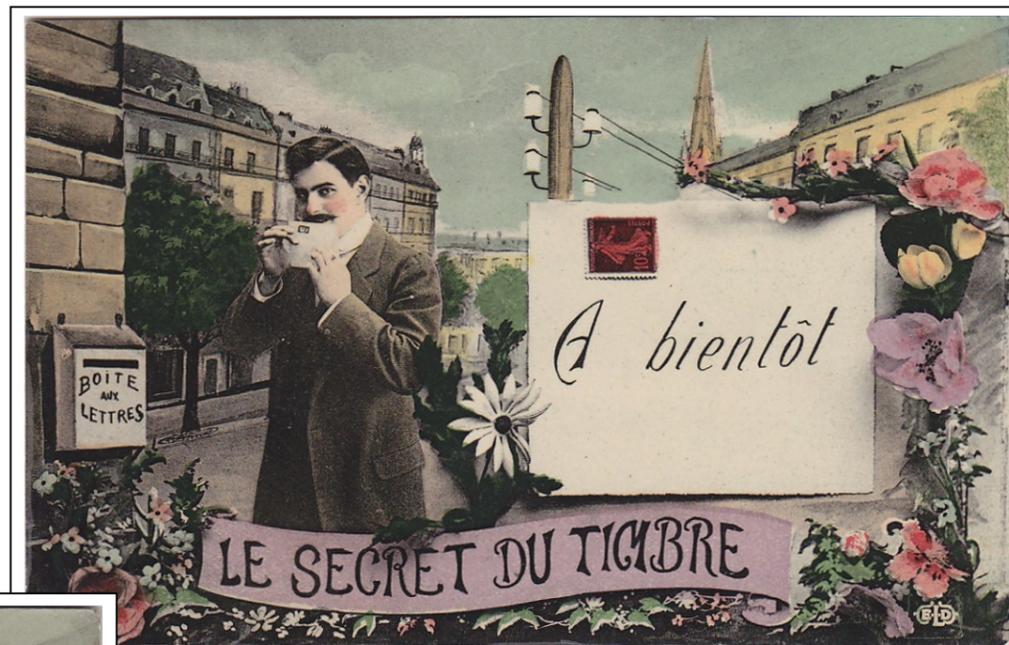
Publisher: Ernest Le Delay,
Paris (E.L.D.)



My greetings



► To further extend the range of postcards for sale, French publisher Ernest Le Delay published two series of single-stamp cards with the same messages – but separate series for men and women! This page shows the male series.



See you soon



My life is yours



Believe in me

Stamps: 10 centimes Sower type (1907)
All cards with divided back
All cards sent under cover, one dated 1910



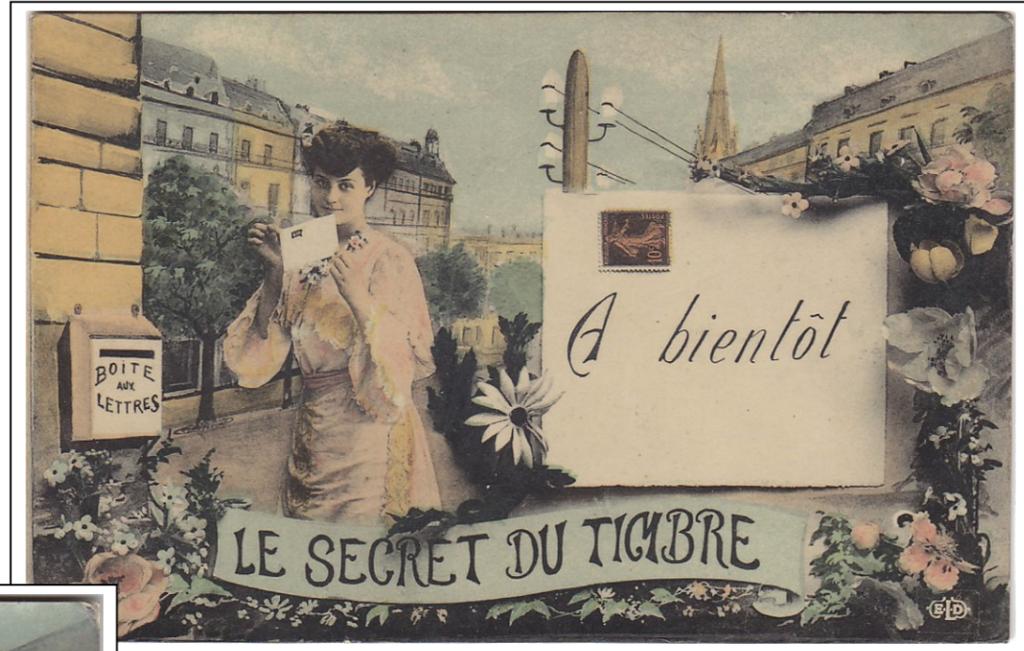
Do not forget me

Stamps: 10 centimes Sower type (1907)
 All cards with divided back
 One card unused and four used, two dated 1909 and 1910

My greetings



► This page shows the female series of cards corresponding to the male version on the previous page. Note that the letters that the persons are about to post have the stamps affixed in the same positions as the secret messages shown on the large envelopes to the right!



See you soon



My life is yours



Publisher: Ernest Le Delay,
 Paris (E.L.D.)

Believe in me





Pansies / Memory of a sincere friendship.

Publisher: Fauvette (France)



► The stamp language was not the only secret or symbolic language illustrated on early postcards. The most common language, apart from the stamp language, was the flower language. This series of single-stamp cards shows an innovative combination of stamp language and flower language.



Marguerite / I love you. Do you love me?



Stamps: 10 centimes King Leopold II "coarse beard" (1905)

Rose / Receive this pledge of my love.



Forget-me-not / Joy and happiness. Do not forget me.

Marguerite / I love you... a little... a lot...



All cards have divided backs. The card in the centre was used in 1911, the other four in 1912.

► The combination of stamp and flower language also came in a version with French stamps. Yet in the French version, the names of the different flowers are not explicitly mentioned on the cards.

Some of the messages also differ between these French cards and the Belgian version on the previous page.



I am thinking of you.

Yours of all my heart.



Do you love me?

Have hope for the future.



I would like to be with you.

See you soon again.



Publisher: Fauvette (France)

Stamps: 10 centimes
Sower type (1907)

All cards with divided back and unused.

► Once two correspondents had exchanged the keys to their secret stamp language, the conversation could begin.

In countries with several competing stamp languages, such as the Netherlands, we can only guess what messages oddly placed stamps on postcards such as these conveyed.



Answer immediately?
(card to the right)



My heart is free?
(card to the right)



I love you?
(card to the right)
...or perhaps
Do not forget me?
(card on top)



Stamps: 1 cent Figure in White Circle (1899), valid for the inland printed matter rate
All three cards unused and from unknown publishers
Middle card with undivided back, top and bottom card with divided back

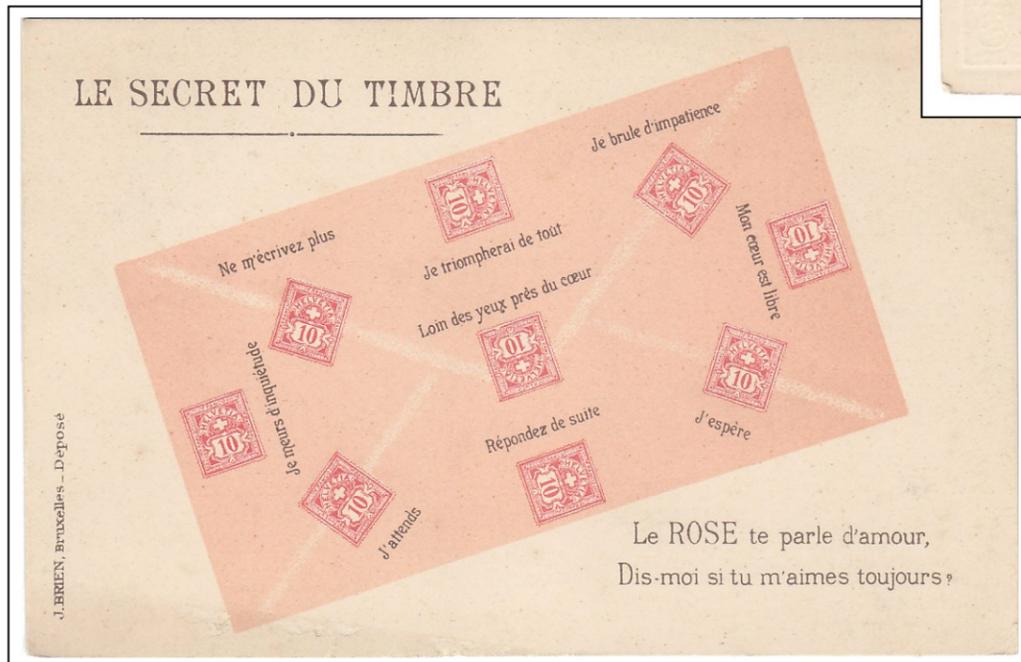


I will be faithful to you.

Publisher: Robert Kerler, Memmingen
Undivided back, unused

Publisher: J. Brien, Brussels
Undivided back, unused

I am dying of worry.



► In Switzerland, several competing languages made messages difficult to interpret.

The example shown here – a 10 centimes stamp in upright position to the left on the card – could have at least four different meanings.

We will never know for certain what message the addressee received on the card below, or if the stamp was even used to convey a secret message...



The 10 centimes stamp is of the Cross and Numeral type, issued 1882-1906.

In the early 1900s, 10 centimes represented the foreign postcard rate from Switzerland.



You have stood the test.

Publisher: Verlag von Fr. Voegelé, Luzern
Undivided back, postally used 1902

Publisher: Jacques Brien, Brussels
Undivided back, unused

When will you return?





Decide time and place!

The messages on this page are interpreted using the most common version of the Swedish stamp language, published by Solléns (Stockholm) and Le Moine & Malmström (Gothenburg).

I am forever yours!



► Messages could be more or less secret, depending on the local market for stamp language postcards.

In the case of Sweden, where one single stamp language dominated the market, the meaning of the “secret” messages can be interpreted with some certainty.



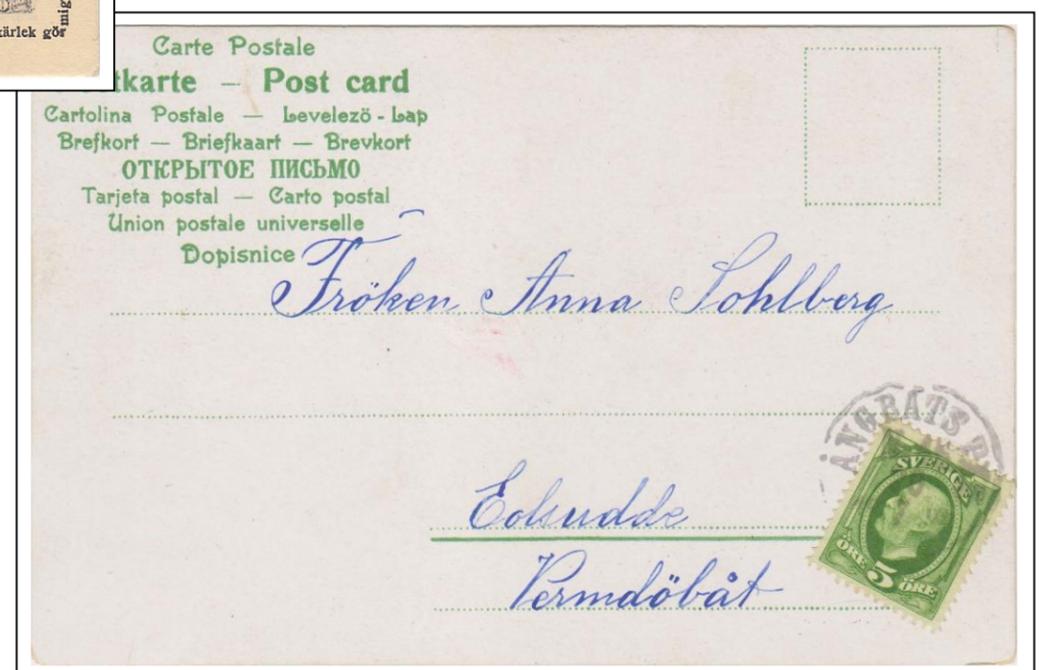
Write to me at once!

Most cards of this kind brought positive, affectionate messages. After all, who would exchange the key to a secret language with someone just to tell him or her that *I'm already engaged* or *My heart belongs to someone else?*

How should we meet?



Publisher: Solléns förlag, Stockholm
Stamps from the King Oscar II copperplate recess and the Bicoloured Numeral type issues (1891-1900)
Undivided back, unused





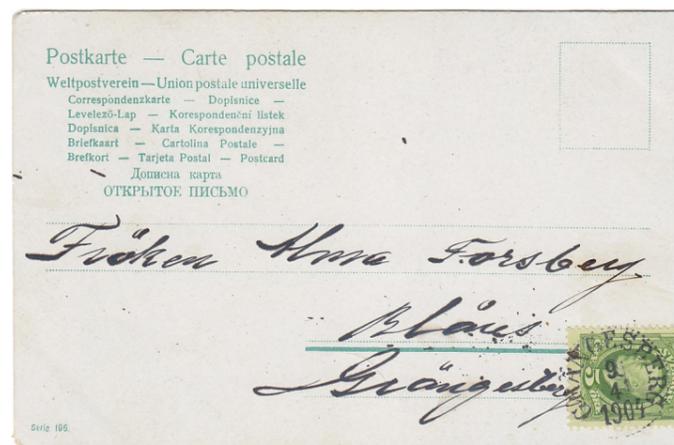
- The secret language of stamps was often used on romantic postcards. One may sometimes find whole series of such cards, sent between a pair of correspondents, with more or less playful secret messages.

These four cards (publisher: Th. Bauer, Vienna) were sent to miss Alma in Grängesberg from the same person on the same day. All cards have stamps in positions corresponding to the most common Swedish stamp language. Below are copies of the address sides, showing the place/orientation of the stamps.

I love you!



Be careful, you are being watched!



Do you love me?



Fidelity will have its reward!

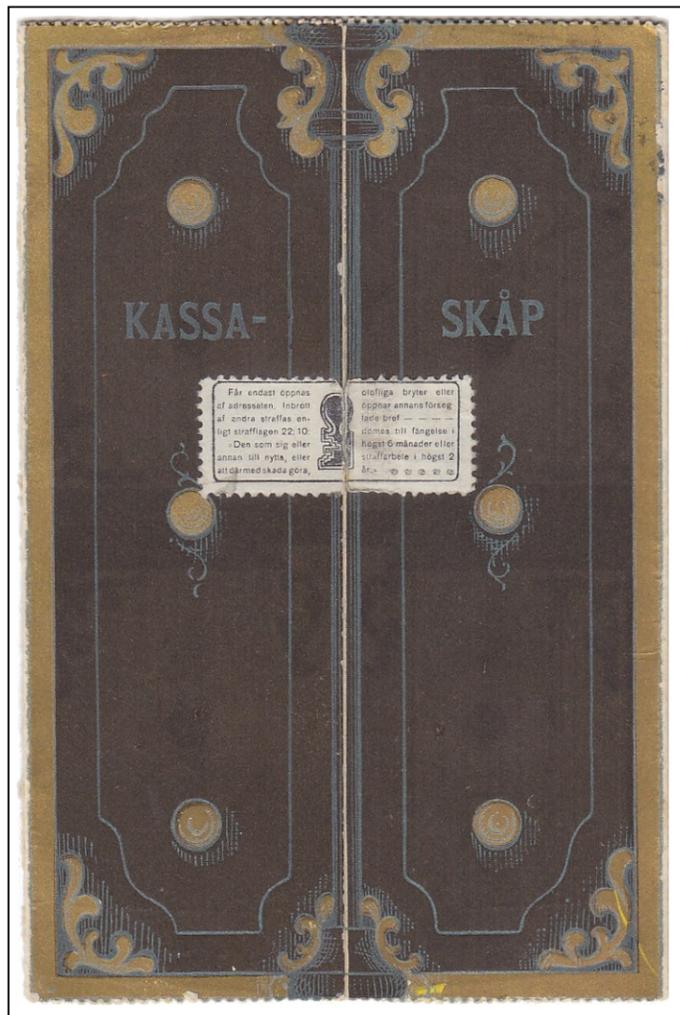


► There were also other ways of using postcards for sending hidden, secret messages. Yet, due to postal regulations, such cards were usually taxed as letters. That made them more expensive to send than an ordinary postcard with a stamp conveying a secret message.



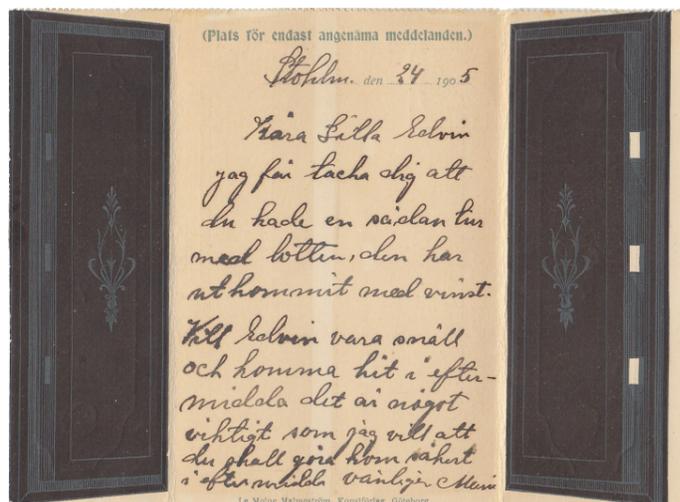
Publisher: J. Mart. Abrahamssons
Konstförlag, Stockholm
Undivided back, used 1906

At the bottom of the card is a pasted piece of paper entitled *Vänskaps-Kuriren* (the Friendship Courier). When unfolded, it provides a space of 9 x 9 cm for “Congratulations, Greetings and Intimate Messages.” The message was protected by two red paper seals.



Publisher: Le Moine & Malmeström, Gothenburg
Undivided back, used 1905

Inside the safe doors of this card is a “Space for pleasant messages only”, according to the printed instruction. The sender closed and sealed the card before sending it.



A double postcard, where a secret message could be slipped into the letter-box. An instruction to the right explains that the addressee had to cut up the card in order to empty the letter-box and receive the message. On the back of the card, an additional instruction points out that letter postage was required as the card was double.



Unknown publisher
Undivided back, unused

The white paper seal on the “safe card” to the left cites the penal law, and threatens anyone who breaks the seal with up to six months in prison – or up to two years of penal servitude!

Because of the blue envelope, the sender of the card to the right had to pay the inland Danish letter rate (10 øre) rather than the postcard rate (5 øre) for this *Brev-Brevkort* (Letter Postcard).



Publisher: Stenders Forlag, Copenhagen
Undivided back, used 1904

Postcards with attached envelopes for secret messages were quite common in the early 1900s. According to the postal regulations, they did not qualify for the postcard rate, but required letter postage. A cheaper way to send secret messages was to use the secret language of stamps.





Language of handkerchiefs
 Publisher: Marco Marcovici, Brussels
 Undivided back, unused

Language of playing-cards
 Publisher: H. Guggenheim, Zürich
 Divided back, used 1911

The sender has crossed out the queen of hearts (bottom left).
 Apparently, he or she was not yet ready to suggest *Marriage soon!*



► The success of the stamp language inspired postcard publishers to produce cards with numerous other secret or symbolic languages. There were languages of birds, butterflies, colours, eyes, feet, flowers, fruits, handkerchiefs, hair, hearts, kisses, months, names, perfumes, playing-cards, seals, and more. Here are a few examples.



Language of flowers
 Publisher: A. Bergeret & Cie., Nancy
 Undivided back, unused

A "single-flower card" from a series of postcards illustrating the language of flowers. Mimosa signifies hidden love and security.



Language of hair
 Publisher: H. Guggenheim, Zürich
 Divided back, used 1910

Some of these languages were probably more decorative than useful. For example, it is not obvious how a secret language of hair colours should be used in practice.

Language of feet – or rather of foot-flirting, although the sender found it *Somewhat tame!*
 Publisher: Marco Marcovici, Brussels
 Undivided back, used 1905

