

Holy Cards Inspire Collectors of ‘Visual Faith’



TRADITION: Holy cards show Mary with baby Jesus, and the Last Supper. The custom of making and circulating the cards was particularly strong in Mediterranean countries

TROVE: Julie Ann Brown has collected about 40,000 holy cards depicting saints, Jesus and Mary. After Vatican II Council in 1962, the cards receded to the background for Catholics.

Popular among Catholics for centuries, the keepsakes went out of fashion. Now some enthusiasts pay top dollar for the relics.

By Arin Gencer, LA Times Staff Writer
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To Julie Ann Brown, they are "visual scriptures, visual faith."

Brown collects holy cards, simple expressions of faith that have been popular in the Roman Catholic Church for hundreds of years. The cards — some smaller than a playing card, some larger — feature images of Jesus or saints, sometimes with a prayer printed on the back.

Ten years ago, the Oxnard resident and marketing professor at Santa Barbara City College found a set of 300 holy cards in a Palmdale antique shop. That discovery brought back memories of attending Mass as a child, when she would use dimes meant for the collection basket to buy cards depicting Jesus.

Always an antique aficionado, she fell into an old passion. Now with 40,000 religious cards stored throughout her house and garage, Brown is determined to preserve as many examples as possible of what she calls "people's art" for posterity.

Her obsession is shared by a small, eclectic group of collectors spread across the country, including such places as New York, Ohio, Texas and points west. As children amass baseball and Pokemon cards, these people — priests, teachers, housewives and academics — seek the prayer cards.

They scour EBay and antique stores, religious relic shops and flea markets in France, Italy and Switzerland in hopes of fresh finds.

"They renew my spirit when I look at them," said Mildred Lee Bozeman, a collector in Wichita Falls, Texas. "They increase my joy in my God and faith."

For Bozeman, Brown and others, there is something too beautiful for words in the glowing eyes of a Jesus by early 20th century Italian artist Adolfo Simeone or the hand-cut paper lace on First Communion cards crafted in 19th century France.

"They are to Catholics what icons are to the Eastern Orthodox," said Daniel Callahan, director of exhibitions at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington, D.C. Last summer, the center held a four-month display, "Holy Cards: Picturing Prayers," based on a 2004 book titled "Holy Cards."

The cards "invoke a memory, a consolation, a prayer," Callahan said. "They're portable objects of daily devotion."

The tradition was particularly strong in Mediterranean countries, where the use of imagery was more common than in northern Europe, he said.

Like stained-glass windows, Brown added, they made religion more accessible to the illiterate masses, sometimes telling a biblical story through a single image.

Although they are connected by bonds of faith and artistic appreciation, today's collectors are drawn for diverse reasons.

Bozeman uses the cards to minister to people. When she began her collection a year ago, Bozeman scanned them into her computer to design her own cards with a prayer on the reverse side.

Bozeman would leave about 50 cards out at churches and find them all snatched up by the end of Mass. She posts them at <http://www.holyreflections.com>.

The cards of Father Eugene Carrella, a Staten Island priest who supplied some of the Washington cultural center's exhibit, reflect his childhood fascination with the lives of saints. Carrella is mainly enticed by cards depicting unusual saints, such as the Greek Telesphorus — a martyr and pope — or the Irish Brendan the Navigator.

He and Brown prefer the beauty of older European cards, which, in Brown's eyes, have "more soul."

One of her rarest finds is a 16th century card depicting Jesus on the cross, with an intricate paper-lace background and border that took nuns in a Swiss convent as long as three years to cut. The asking price: \$1,200. Brown paid for it over the course of three months.

Ann Ball, a Texas-based writer of books on saints and Catholic traditions, says she is a collector by default: Through her research, she acquired five file boxes full of cards — including unusual variations such as relic cards, which bear pieces of a saint's clothing or even hair.

Contemporary prayer cards have cultural followings, particularly among Latinos, said Carlos George, who owns Glendale-based San Francis Imports, which sells religious products. In the wallets and cars of Mexicans, Cubans and Puerto Ricans, it's not unusual to find the Virgin of Guadalupe, Our Lady of Charity and the Divino Niño, or divine child, respectively.

Though younger Catholics might be unaware of the rich history behind holy cards, older ones often remember them as rewards from nuns in parochial schools, bookmarks for their Bibles or keepsakes from baptisms, confirmations and ordinations.

But with the modernization of the Catholic Church — spurred by the Vatican II Council in 1962 — holy cards receded to the background, along with Latin Masses and some other customs, Ball said.

The old pictures were dismissed as "too pious, too sweet," Ball said. Images of a blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus and effeminate saints were perceived as outdated, said Father Thomas Rausch, a theological studies professor at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.

The growing interest in preserving the cards could be tied to increased curiosity about the spirituality and devotion of common people, said Todd Wilmot, a reference librarian at the St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Wynnewood, Pa.

The library has a 1,000-card collection, mostly pulled from books donated by elderly priests over the years.

"There's a lot of interest in what the so-called ordinary person did — popular piety," Wilmot said.

"Tens of thousands" of cards also reside at Boston College's John J. Burns Library, said Robert K. O'Neill, the director, in the Liturgy and Life collection. Among them are Mass cards sent from all over to the Kennedy family after President John F. Kennedy's assassination.

For current collectors, the primary meeting ground is EBay, where they compete in a subcategory made just for them.

Cards that once sold for a penny or 50 cents can go for more than 1,000 times their original price. George has been amazed to see cards that his company printed 10 years ago resurface on EBay for \$20. (Stores usually sell them for 75 cents or \$1.25 at most, he said.)

"People are willing to pay big bucks," Carrella said. "And so am I, if it's a saint I don't have." Carrella said he has bid as much as \$70 on the Internet auction site.

More recently, Brown has spent more time exhibiting her cards rather than expanding her collection.

She scans high-resolution images onto her website <http://www.holycards.com> and encourages people to print those that are in the public domain and make personalized cards.

But for the aspiring enthusiast, the first step toward launching a collection might be even easier — and free.

"The best thing for a kid to do is run to all his grandmother's friends and say, 'Dump out your prayer books; let me see what you've got,' " Ball said.