

Art, Culture And Birthday Cards

'The greatest innovation in the history of humankind was neither the stone tool nor the steel sword, but the invention of symbolic expression by the first artists' article on 'The Origin of Art' National Geographic Jan 2015.

Birthday cards have been around since the ancient Chinese and Egyptian civilisations. The genre has stayed the same for hundreds of years and the traditional art of these civilisations and that of South America, the Middle East, China and India defines them. Art was, and still is, part of their daily life and to that extent people maybe take as little notice of it, as we do with the art on our birthday cards.

We take little conscious notice of what's in our birthday cards for the most part; paradoxically we are wounded if people don't send them.

Mark's artwork prompts me to think about what is really happening with birthday cards. If we take a good look at them (before throwing them in the bin) do we see a reflection of ourselves and our habitat? The 'handsome' blonde model with a cheesy smile? An idyllic walker with Panama hat walking along a deserted green country lane with a golden retriever? For many people this bares no relation to their lives or their aspirations. The colours are saturated with an intense green of the green and pleasant land. The Panama hat tells you immediately what tribe the person belongs to; their tastes and whoever does these illustrations assumes that people of a certain age all aspire to being in this tribe. We all like a beer and a newspaper after a hard day's shooting (I know I do). It's your birthday, have a look at the kind of life you can dream of having! The irony is that what is left of this green and pleasant land will slowly disappear under the weight of felled trees, pointless unread birthday cards, dumped on landfills.

Children's cards are gender specific, and so the stereotyping begins. Trains, action men, fighter jets for boys and teddy bears and princesses for the girls. The card designers are telling us how to behave and what we have to like and dislike from the moment we are born. So whilst we may consciously ignore the illustrations, subconsciously they are directing us in how to behave in just the same way as any other media, there is no space for race, sexuality, variances in what you want to drink, wear, the kind of house you live in..it's so much easier and neater to put people in a box with a label, and it continues because we let it; apathy is a common theme addressed in much of Mark's work. The intergalactic fighter jets are about to smash into the idyllic pint of beer and the freshly shot grouse while the owner has gone to the lavatory, what is happening here, is this anarchy? Would we notice? Sometimes little subversive motifs appeared in the art of the ancient civilisations - a symptom of someone wanting to break free from the same old same old. Mark's artwork juxtaposes similar subversive motifs onto the tired illustrations. His art suggests that we should ditch the clichés and stereotypes and instead make art that has a positive impact on someone, touches them. Surely that's the point.