VI

POSTCARDS

Many different subjects including issues of political commentary and satire were treated in the postcard at the turn of the century. In effect, the Affair coincided with the period when the picture postcard enjoyed a popular vogue. First appearing in Austria in 1869, the correspondence postcard quickly spread throughout Europe. Illustrated postcards became very popular during the 1890’s and collecting was extensive: at an exhibition in Leipzig in 1898 it is recorded that around ten thousand different series of cards were shown.

Traditional printing techniques were used alongside newer media, providing artists with an opportunity to make highly imaginative and creative contributions. It appears from the researches of Granoux and, more recently, Bruno de Perthuis that dreyfusard postcards were in the majority. Certain important works on the Dreyfus Affair appeared in thematic series. Such works presage the art of the strip cartoon, with textual narrative and designs linked. In Léon Couturier’s celebrated Story of a Crime all phases of the case are graphically revealed with wit, pathos, and virtuoso illustrative technique. The artist not only incisively explored the machinations against Dreyfus but speculates on the desirable resolution—namely the inculpation of the Minister for War who had initiated the proceedings against the innocent man. (PC. 26-40, PC. 168-9).

A large volume of postcards was produced in response to the Affair, both in France and also abroad, notably Italy and Germany. All the genres displaying the creativity of the frequently anonymous or obscure artists involved are represented in the collection—in works of photographic documentation, in satire of personalities, social transgressions, and in exposés of political chicanery. (See PC.19-21, PC.3, PC.5, PC.43, PC.44). A large number of works were devoted, as in the press, to the figure of Zola. Max Marcus in Berlin was one of the most prolific publishers and produced several series of dreyfusard cards. Although to modern eyes a somewhat modest means of expression, in the epigraph of his catalogue of the Affair in postcards, published in 1903, Charles Fontane was apt to point out the significance, with reference to the opinion of cartophile Emile Straus that “from the political point of view, the postcard is undoubtedly a formidable addition to the illustrated satirical press and pamphlet.”

In France, there was an initial tendency to repeat imagery which had already met with success in the organs of the periodical press, e.g. Le Rire, Le Sifflet, and Les Temps Nouveaux. The particular advantage of the postcard was its cheapness and its ability to be widely disseminated. It was, however, only after the turn of the century that the floodgates opened and the political and satirical postcard had its heyday. Following the successful attempt of Jean Jaurès to reopen the case for Dreyfus’ innocence around 1902-3, the Affair became a major feature of political commentary in postcards.

Etching and lithography were utilized by the artists as well as photomechanical and photographic methods. This mediatic flowering undoubtedly allowed for some highly imaginative and creative contributions. (PC.64-9). Orens Denizard was one of the most successful artists, but there were many others. Several of the most important of the artistic treatments of the Affair in thematic series are in the collection including Bianco’s spectacular panorama, "The Centenary of the Affair." (PC.188).

Postcards were highly-valued by collectors during the period. Fontane notes that Couturier’s Story of a Crime” was initially made available at a price of 1 franc 50 centimes for the series: but within a few years the same series was being sold for 100 francs! Soon the market became flooded, with complaints of decreasing quality, and interest seems to have waned. The postcards in the Lorraine Beilier Collection represent a rich sampling of the thousands of cards published and offer an evocative historical and artistic array. They demonstrate the importance of the new format and the various styles and positions adopted in France and internationally to the events and issues of the Affair.