



**Will You Be My Valentine?**  
**Molly Brown House Museum**  
**History@Home**

Do you enjoy sending Valentine's Day Cards to your family and friends? A lot of people nowadays discount Valentine's Day and view it as a "Hallmark Holiday", but the Victorians were the first people to get into the full commercialized idea of the holiday.

In the 1800s, the reduction of postage made sending Valentines affordable for the masses. In 1841, one year after Uniform Penny Postage, 400,000 Valentines were posted throughout England. Valentines were sent in such great numbers that postmen were given a special allowance for refreshments to help them through the extraordinary exertions of the two or three days leading up to February 14th.



Enthusiasm for Valentines quickly travelled from England across the Atlantic to the United State. By the mid-1850s Valentine's Day cards were so popular that the New York Times published sharp criticism on February 14, 1856:

*"Our beaux and belles are satisfied with a few miserable lines, neatly written upon fine paper, or else they purchase a printed Valentine with verses ready made, some of which are costly, and many of which are cheap and indecent. In any case, whether decent or indecent, they only please the silly and give the vicious an opportunity to develop their propensities and place them, anonymously, before*

*the comparatively virtuous.”*

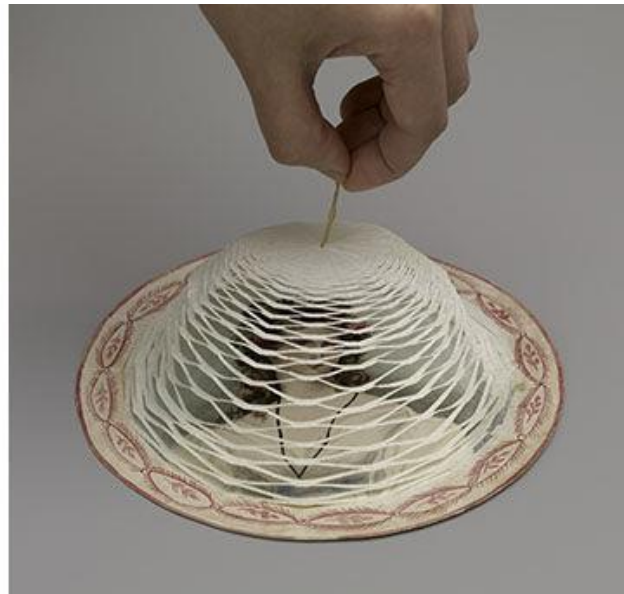
On February 4, 1867, the New York Times wrote that in 1862 post offices in New York City had accepted 21,260 Valentines for delivery. 1863 showed a slight increase, but the number fell to 15,924 the year after, likely due to the ongoing Civil War. However, in 1865, perhaps with bitter memories of the war starting to fade, New Yorkers mailed more than 66,000 Valentines, and more than 86,000 the following year. By 1871, three times that number passed through the General Post Office in London alone!

### **Activity: Cobweb Valentine's Day Card**

A popular Valentine's Day Card sent in the Victorian era was the Cobweb Valentine. Cobwebs are an example of a movable valentine consisting of a minimum of two layers of paper. First, a web or cage would be cut from a piece of paper by making a pattern of concentric circles, leaving attachment points at regular intervals. In the center of the spiral, a delicate thread would be attached and its outer edges would be pasted directly on top of a second sheet on which an image or message would be written.



As a cover, the cobweb formed the perfect sanctuary to enclose a private message that could only be revealed when the recipient of the card carefully pulled up the thread, causing the concentric circles of the web to rise and magically expose its hidden compartment. The concept of secrecy and the element of surprise frequently recurs in valentines, as they speak to the intimacy that has always been a part of the language of love and is one of the reasons why the cobwebs were so popular.



Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Now it's your turn! Create your own Cobweb Valentine from the outline on the next page! Share your finished picture on Facebook or email to [education@mollybrown.org](mailto:education@mollybrown.org) and you could be featured in a special online exhibit!

Directions for children ages 10 and above:

1. Print out the Cobweb Heart Template on regular paper and cut it in half down the dotted line. Cut a sheet of decorative paper in half on the diagonal and fold the paper in half, right sides together. Staple a "half heart" template along each side of the fold of the decorative paper.
2. Use a hole punch to make a hole in the center, as indicated on the template. Starting at the inner edge, cut along the lines with scissors or an exacto-knife. Continue until all the lines are cut. Open the heart to see the cobweb-like effect, and fold it half again.
3. Place a piece of scrap paper in between the outer ring. Apply glue to the outermost ring of the heart and place onto card stock. Smooth down and repeat the process on the other side. Cut out the card stock to match the shape of the heart.
4. Cut a piece of twine about 10 inches long. Glue the twine to one side of each heart and place the other heart on top. Thread the twine through the holes at the top of the card and tie it through the center. Adjust the length of twine to fit inside the card and make a loop on the outside to pull the card open.

For children under the age of 10, have an adult help you cut the template as described above. You can also decorate the Cobweb Heart Template with crayons, markers, glitter, and other decorative materials to create a valentine of your own!

