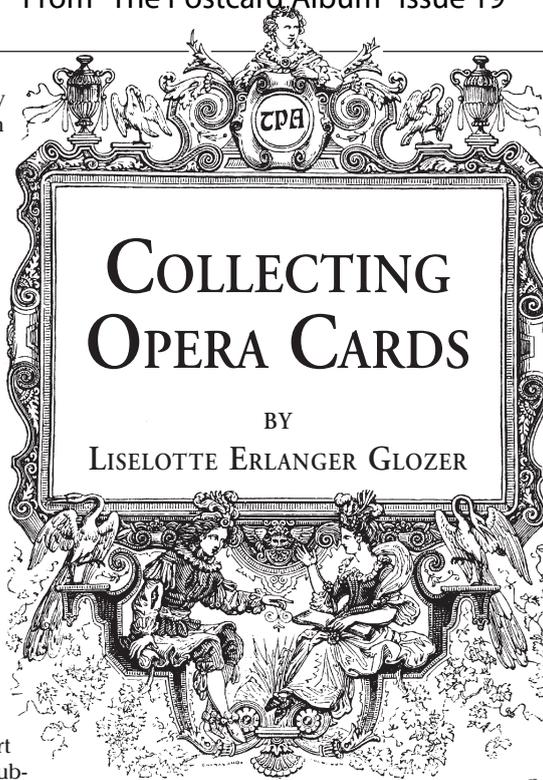


Opera presents a combination of auditory and visual thrills, the latter a combination of acting and scenic design. Collecting opera cards is therefore a pleasant way to remember past pleasures and fill the gap until the next opera season is upon you. The collector of opera cards might specialize in opera houses or portraits of singers. I mainly collect two types of opera cards: artist rendered (fantasy) cards or pictures of actual stage settings, with or without singers.

The most desirable opera cards are, undoubtedly, artist rendered art nouveau cards. The firm of Ricordi, Milan published a number of these by various artists. Of those, two sets (of 12 cards each) were designed by Leopoldo Metlocovitz (1868-1940), painter, graphic artist and lithographer, "Madama Butterfly" (*illus. 1*) and "Tosca" (*illus. 2*). Highly varnished, these color lithographs, present an almost three dimensional aspect. Together with the outlining of clothing and bodies in black – especially in the "Butterfly" set – these cards are masterpieces of art nouveau. The "Butterfly" cards were first published with undivided backs to coincide with the premiere of the opera and later reprinted with divided backs. A third printing was used by the American theatrical entrepreneur Henry W. Savage; the verso of these cards advertising the dates, cities, and opera houses in which the opera was to be performed. This set appears to have been printed on inferior stock and without varnish and is somewhat lackluster.

According to a surprising recent survey "Carmen" has been relegated to the backburner and Tosca is now one of most performed operas worldwide. But it must have enjoyed a measure of success even in the early 20th century judging from the number of cards dedicated to it. One set, original photographs, by a (to me) unidentified publisher with the letters PH in black on a white triangle (*Ed. note: this is the logo of Rotophot AG, Berlin*), issued cards for the German, as well as the



French market. The German set contained a line of text but not the French (*illus. 3*). Both set were hand tinted; the German less elaborately than the French. The same publisher did a "Boheme" featuring a singularly unattractive Mimi leaving one to wonder who would want to hold her "icecold little hand."

Other Tosca cards were issued by Alterocci of Terni, who used photos as the basis for black and white half tones, adding a line of music and text on undivided cards. One set, with the photos heavily retouched has stock numbers in the 2820s (*illus. 4 - p18*); the other set which names the photographer as Griggi has numbers in the 4140s. Dating probably from the early 30ties is the typical Italian sepiacard of that period, published by Crosio.

Alterocci was one of the main Italian publisher of opera cards, among them a "Barbiero

di Siviglia", an "Othello" a "Pagliacci", a "Trovatore", all similar to the Tosca cards in concept. A "Cavalleria Rusticana" (3334 - 3339) (*illus. 5 - p18*), however shows the players in close-up conveying the drama with great intimacy. This set was mailed in Malta in 1903. Sonami, another Italian publisher of opera cards did a numbered (probably 12) set of undivided "Il Trovatore" cards also using photographs of actors with the background, drawn in and even identified as the work of one CL. Another Sonami set that could be mistaken for Alterocci, is one of "Pagliacci". An interesting card, published by the American Rotograph Company is an undivided photocard of Puccini's "Girl of the Golden West", with the singers identified by name.

German opera did not enjoy the popularity of Italian and therefore Mozart operas were not frequently performed during the golden age of postcards. However, an early lithograph, undivided, no publisher, shows the three ladies of the "Zauberfloete" killing the snake (*illus. 6 - p19 color*). M. Munk of Vienna published some artist renderings, among them a "Zauberfloete". From the Viennese "Mozart Gemeinde" comes a set of cards, very art deco, signed AK (*illus. 7 - p19 color*). These offset lithographs use rather unusual colors or sometimes an absence of color. Other Mozart cards in my collection are photographs of actors on stage at various German opera houses.

The postcard craze of the early 20th century coincided with the Wagner cult that flourished during the composer's later life and persisted after his death. Thus Wagner cards outnumber even the most popular Italian operas and space here permits only a small sampling. The most desirable Wagner cards might well be the identical set of color lithographs published by M. Munk, Vienna, and Faulkner, London, by artist Ferdinand Leeke, one card for each opera (*illus 8 - p19 color*).

*illus. 1*



*illus. 2*



*illus. 3*



Other artist rendered sets are unsigned cards by Franz Stassen for publisher E.S.D. numbered 8157-1864 (*illus. 9 - p19 color*). Each number comprises six cards per opera, making this a 48 card set! Tuck reprinted the identical cards with English titles, numbered 960 and up.

Joseph Hoffman, a Viennese landscape artist and friend of Wagner, produced drawings for the stage settings of "the Ring". They proved to be too detailed and underwent modification through the years. However, they were printed twice by unnamed publishers as postcards. Both sets are undivided: one is numbered, the other has titles in 3 languages (*illus.10*). Sets of all Wagner's operas 10-12 cards per opera, show the modified Hoffman designs. They were published simultaneously by Schwalb, Berlin and, with English subtitles, by the music publisher Breitkopf und Haertel, London. These cards are based on real photographs of the stage setting with the singers (or understudies) added, sometimes obviously pasted in (*illus.11*). As indoor photography was not well developed most of these cards are darkish, although they are of great historical value for the style of the setting as are later cards of Bayreuth productions which show the stage in an expressionistic mode; a place, any place, anywhere.

By the time "Parsival" was composed Wagner had at his command an opera house built after his own specifications (Bayreuth) and he could demand that this opera would not be performed elsewhere. Wagner lovers unable to attend, had to console themselves with postcards. But soon concert versions of the opera were produced and an unauthorized version was performed in New York by Henry W. Savage who issued a set of cards, half tone, poster style for the event. (*illus. 12*)

A "silk added" rarity is a "Tannhaeuser' no publisher, undivided, artist name given as Eugene Klimsch. Tannhaeuser's shirt and vest are added in silk on a very heavily laquered card (*illus. 13 - p19 color*).



illus. 4



illus. 5

French opera cards lead with a surfeit of Carmen. One set even shows the opera performed by puppets. A pretty set, gold framed, comes from the American Post Card Co. of New York, undivided color lithography, series 1570. An undivided, colored halftone "Adriana Lecouvreur" by Cilea brings us to operas which, although greatly appreciated at the beginning of the 20th century, have gone out of the repertoire, even of summer stock. Among them must be counted Thomas' "Mignon, now only remembered for the aria "Connais-tu le pay..." (Kennst du das Land..."). I have cards from 4 different sets, both German and French. This is understandable, considering the music was composed by a Frenchman, the story based on Goethe's "Wilhelm Meister." (*illus. 14 - p19 color*).

Another opera, now forgotten is Flotow's "Martha", known for "The Last Rose of Summer". Lots of cards around though!

Serious opera collectors will certainly want to add recent cards to their collection. Russian opera cards which were almost impossible to find have suddenly surfaced as reprints of cards from the 30's and 40's. And who can resist picking up chromes at present day opera festivals such as Glyndebourne or Bregenz, Austria. And one chrome series issued around 1950-60 certainly warrants collecting. The York City Opera, (New York's "second" house), under the management of Beverly Sills had the most varied repertoire, ranking from Handel to Janacek's "Makropulos Affair" all of which were documented on cards.

To this date little material has been published on collecting opera cards. Like opera itself, opera cards are truly international, and the new globalisation might well help produce a comprehensive guide.

illus. 12



illus. 10



illus. 11





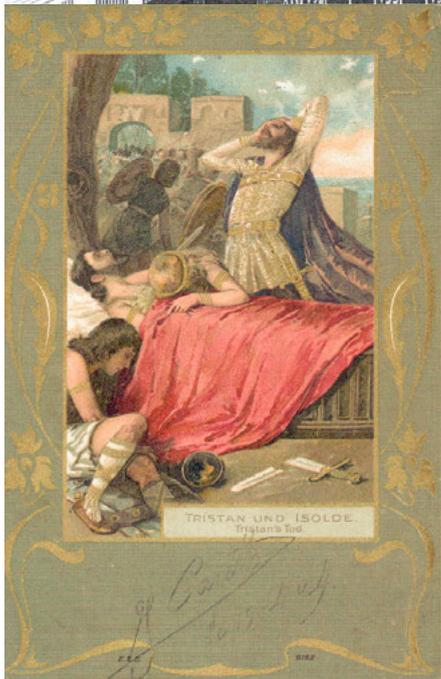
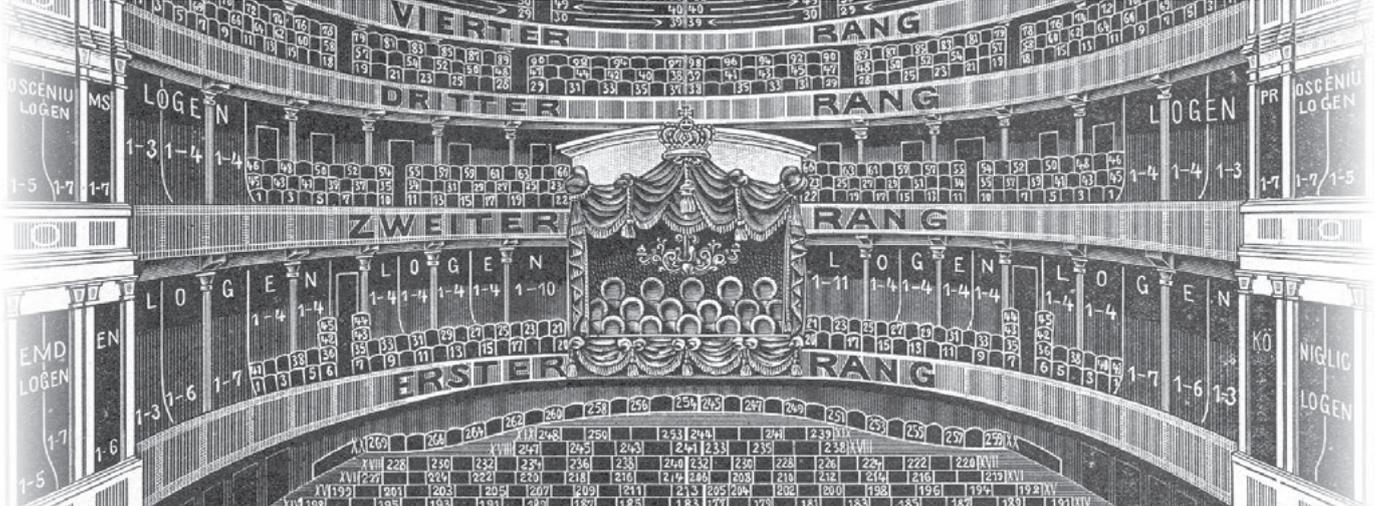
illus. 6



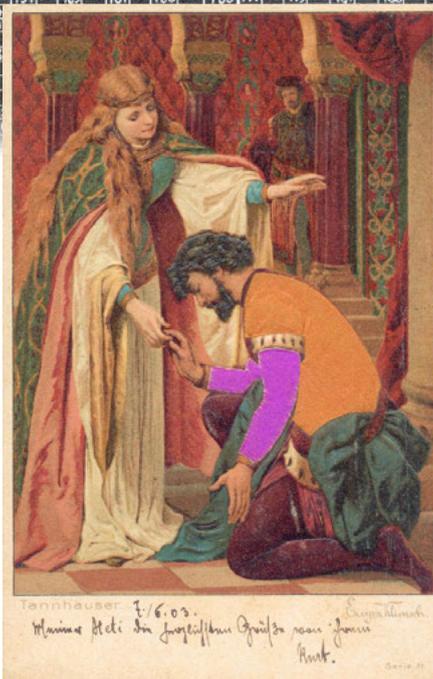
illus. 7



illus. 8



illus. 9



illus. 13



illus. 14