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# V alentine

Story by Abby Luby

Photograph/Artwork by Simone Eisold



An English Victorian era Valentine card located in the Museum of London. Courtesy of Wikipedia

The Valentine  the adored, double-lobed crimson shape that sparks romantic love and whose eponymous day brightens up bleak wintry Februaries with amorous gifts of candy and flowers. The

heart shape is solely derived from a vital human organ — so how did it evolve into the universal symbol of passion and affection?

The valentine has been around for eons and has a remarkable historical arc. According to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the first known heart shape dates back before the last ice age (10,000–8,000 B.C.) long before it appears in ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome. When it finally does appear in Greece, it was the heart-shaped seedpod of the silphium plant — likely a type of giant fennel plant — grown on the North African coastline near the ancient Greek colony of Cyrene. Silphium was a heavily traded plant for culinary and medicinal uses and, not surprisingly, as a popular contraceptive. It seems the human race has always been drawn to heart shaped plants — think the shiny Sweetheart Philodendron or the plump bleeding heart with its pointed droplet.

But wait. There's more ancient history that carries us to February 14th with its indulgences of chocolate-dipped strawberry meringue roses or aphrodisiac passion fruit cocktails. Before it became St. Valentine's Day, the corresponding day was the ancient Roman wild fertility feast of Lupercalia, when Roman men would chase women. Historians surmise that it was Pope Gelasius I who Christianized the festival by calling it St. Valentine's Day after a catholic priest named Valentine. The Catholic Encyclopedia actually tells us of three different priests named Valentine: one was a Roman priest in AD 496, another was a bishop of Interamna (Terni, Italy) in AD 197. The

Loved  
you yesterday  
Love  
you still.  
Always have,  
Always

I only sleep  
to dream forever  
with you!

and  
suddenly  
all the  
love songs  
were about  
you.

third St. Valentine was believed to be in the Roman province of Africa. It was the first Valentine of Rome, however, who was jailed for helping men to marry in order to avoid military service, and in jail he fell in love with the jailer's daughter and wrote her a note signed, "from your Valentine." This was considered by many to be the very first Valentine's card.

love is more thicker than forget  
more thinner than recall  
more seldom than a wave is wet  
more frequent than to fail

it is most mad and moonly  
and less it shall unbecome  
than all the sea which only  
is deeper than the sea

love is less always than to win  
less never than alive  
less bigger than the least begin  
less littler than forgive

it is most sane and sunly  
and more it cannot die  
than all the sky which only  
is higher than the sky

By E.E. Cummings



Fast forward to the infamous 14th century poet Geoffrey Chaucer who wrote "Parlement of Foules", significant for its reference to St. Valentine's Day. In the 15th century when the French Duke of Orleans was imprisoned in the Tower of London as a consequence of the 1415 battle of Agincourt, he wrote to his wife calling her his 'valentine'— the letter still exists as part of a collection at the British Library. One hundred years later Shakespeare mentioned St. Valentine's Day in Hamlet when Ophelia says "To-morrow is Saint Valentine's day/All in

the morning betime/And I a maid at your window/To be your Valentine."

When you think about it, the big advantage of the Valentine's Day Card for those shy and hesitant lovers is the furtive exchange on paper that saves one from embarrassment if spurned. For some, it's much easier to express our desires in writing rather than in person. Yesteryear's valentine card could well be the forerunner of today's ubiquitous heart emojis replicating the placement of Valentine's cards under a door or quietly slipped into a pocket to today's cameo appearance on a digital screen.

The pre-printed Valentine's Day card was popularized in early 19th century Victorian England. England's postal service was up and running, making it easier to send words of yearning through the mail. By mid-19th century, America is producing cards with extravagant designs of embossed lacework and flowery lines. American artist and businesswoman Esther Howland of Worcester, Massachusetts, first created and sold Valentine's Day greeting cards in 1849. Sixty-four years later (1913) American businessman Joyce Clyde Hall founded Hallmark Cards, leaving us a legacy of card-giving days.

Since then cards have become creative, original works of art. Handcrafted cards today are more interactive, inviting one to gently untie strings binding delicate flaps that open to reveal words of love. Whether original or mass-produced, cards are aimed to entice and woo, using the basics of romantic verse intertwined with flowers, love knots or a fluttering Cupid steadying his arrow's aim.

Of course, a true valentine moment is opening those cards and gifts while sipping a sultry red cocktail like a Red Velvet, (beer and raspberry-flavored Lambic) or Savoy Daisy (ruby port and muscovado) or the yummy Manhattan Ice Cream Float (creamy vanilla ice cream, bourbon and a high-quality black cherry soda). Dinner and flowers are now a major traditional activity of Valentine's Day. Last year sweethearts in the United States each spent about \$140 according to a National Retail Federation survey totaling some \$19.6 billion.

While you're considering how much pampering to do for your loved one, consider where the valentine came from: the heart. This life-giving organ has been cherished for ages like no other part of our body. It's where we create the energy for love. 🍀

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But wait. There's more ancient history that carries us to February 14<sup>th</sup> with its indulgences of chocolate-dipped strawberry meringue roses or aphrodisiac passion fruit cocktails. Before it became St. Valentine's Day, the corresponding day was the ancient Roman wild fertility feast of [Lupercalia](#), when Roman men, brandishing skins of sacrificed goats would chase and whip women, believing somehow the lashing would make the ladies more fertile. Historians surmise that it was Pope Gelasius I who Christianized the festival by calling it St. Valentine's Day after a martyred catholic priest named Valentine. The [Catholic Encyclopedia](#) tells us of three different priests named Valentine were all martyred: one was a Roman priest in AD 496, another was a bishop of Interamna (Terni, Italy) in AD 197. The third St. Valentine was believed to be a martyr in the Roman province of Africa. It was the first Valentine of Rome, however, who was jailed for helping men to marry in order to avoid military service, and in jail he fell in love with the jailor's daughter and before he was killed, wrote her a note signed, "from your Valentine." This was considered by many to be the very first Valentine's card.

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Read article on the *Hook Magazine* website.