

Exhibition in a Pocket: The *Cartes Postales* of André Kertész

NANCY REINHOLD

Among the photographs by André Kertész in the Thomas Walther Collection at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, are twelve photographic postcards made in Paris in the 1920s. These photographs, which Kertész made by contact printing on silver gelatin developing-out postcard stock, are a group whose beauty and scale make them uniquely interesting among Kertész's works. The postcards, inexpensive and printed in a makeshift darkroom in the artist's rented room, were made between 1925 and 1928, after he arrived in Paris and before he became a successful photojournalist. They provide an intimate window into this period of personal and creative transition.

Kertész's life is, in most respects, well known. He published at least twenty-one books and carefully cultivated his image and legacy. He has been the subject of countless books, catalogues, and articles. Lovingly described by his friend and associate the author and curator Robert Gurbo as a "true hoarder," he kept many of his letters, diaries, accounts, and documents, which are now located in the archives of the Mission du Patrimoine Photographique, in Paris.¹

He was born Andor Kertész in Budapest in 1894, the second of three brothers. In 1912, when he was sixteen, his mother gave him and his younger brother, Jenő, a camera, and the brothers became close collaborators. By 1913, André was signing his works, although he later said that some of them had actually been made by Jenő.² Although the brothers were self-taught photographers, it is clear from the pictures they made together that they had quickly become both formally and technically sophisticated. Made at night with a long exposure, *Bocskay-tér, Budapest* (1914; MoMA 1715.2001), for example, is visually arresting, an abstract yet mysterious image, deceptively complex with both glowing highlights and deep shadows. (It is likely that the enigmatic figure posed next to the building is Jenő.)³ To make this picture required a thorough understanding of the medium, and the print has survived in excellent condition, with no significant image deterioration, a testament to the brothers' darkroom expertise.

As a young conscript in the Austro-Hungarian army during World War I, Kertész carried a handheld camera and took photographs during his military tours and convalescences. Although it seems surprising that the army permitted this activity, soldiers were in fact encouraged to raise money for war widows and orphans by taking photographs and selling them as postcards; the Hungarian



fig. 1 André Kertész. *Self-Portrait (André in the Darkroom)*. December 1927.
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pictorial magazine *Érdekes Újság* also published photographs taken by the troops.⁴ It is famously said that much of soldiering is tedium, and many of Kertész's images show soldiers and civilians going about their daily lives as they coped with war's effects, but he also made some pictures in combat; both kinds of photograph require tact, speed, and anticipation, qualities evident in much of Kertész's later work.⁵ During the war, Jenő continued to work with André, sending him advice and a new camera and printing the negatives that he sent home. In October 1925 Kertész moved to Paris to become a photojournalist, among many other aspiring artists, and his images printed on postcard stock are among the first works he made there. A year later the Hungarian newspaper *Magyar Hírlap* called him the "sensation of Montparnasse."⁶ By 1927 he was a successful artist and photojournalist; in 1936 he left Paris for New York, where he lived until his death, in 1985.

The cameras used by Kertész have been remarkably well documented by authors such as David Travis and Sandra Phillips. Throughout his life he preferred small, discreet cameras that enabled him to respond quickly to the scenes around him. In the 1920s he used the small and lightweight cameras favored by reporters, which produced film or glass-plate negatives in two sizes, 9 by 12 centimeters ($3\frac{9}{16}$ by $4\frac{3}{4}$ inches) or 4.5 by 6 centimeters ($1\frac{3}{4}$ by $2\frac{3}{8}$ inches), suitable for contact printing because of their

moderate size and fine grain. In 1928 he bought a Leica, an even smaller camera, with a fast shutter and roll film that advanced quickly, making it easier for him to spontaneously capture images. Kertész felt that the Leica was made for him.⁷ This camera changed his work in the darkroom, too, since its 36 by 24 millimeter (1 7/16 by 1 inch) negatives were too small for producing contact prints, therefore making it necessary for Kertész to print them by enlargement.

Kertész was an expert printer and a precise technician, even as he strove for spontaneity and naturalism in his imagery and, with the exception of cropping, was apparently averse to manipulations such as experimental darkroom techniques and photomontage.⁸ He was opinionated on the subject of how his photographs should be made: in 1923, still struggling for recognition, he refused to reprint in bromoil an image he had submitted to a competition, which cost him the silver medal. He later said of the episode, "I have always known that photography can only be photography."⁹ In a letter from 1926 Jenö complimented his work, calling it technically impeccable, but Kertész also believed that technical perfection by itself "overshines the boot," explaining, "You have beautiful calligraphy, but it's up to you what you write with it."¹⁰ In an interview near the end of his life Kertész said, "Technique is only the minimum in photography. It's what one must start with. I believe you should be a perfect technician in order to express yourself as you wish and then you can forget about the technique."¹¹ Based on the postcards in the Walther Collection, which represent some of Kertész's early work, it is clear that such exceptional technique was there from the beginning.

The postcard format, which had become popular by the 1890s, would not have been unknown to Kertész when he arrived in Paris. He had written postcards to his loved ones during the war, and although some of his images from World War I were destroyed or lost, a few commercially produced postcards were made from the negatives that survived. Among Kertész's acquaintances and contemporaries in Paris there were some photographers who used postcard stock, including Man Ray and Germaine Krull, and although Kertész stopped using it around 1928, the format continued to be employed by both artists and amateurs. Luna Park, an amusement park in Paris, featured a photographer who made souvenir photographs on postcard stock; Man Ray and Lee Miller were photographed together there.¹² While postcards were made popular by amateurs and were often frivolous, for Kertész they were not casual or disposable.

The use of postcard paper by artistic photographers is often explained as a function of economy. Postcard stock was relatively inexpensive, and in an improvised darkroom such as Kertész's the process of contact printing from glass or film negatives was simpler than printing enlargements. Certainly these factors must have mattered to Kertész, who did not have much money when he arrived in Paris. After working briefly at a photographic studio, perhaps as a retoucher, he lived off of his savings while trying to establish

himself as an artist and photojournalist, professions that were not mutually exclusive. Money was tight enough that at one point his older brother, Imre, encouraged him to return to Hungary because of the difficulty of his circumstances.¹³ Kertész kept a careful record of his expenses in account books, and he moved numerous times between October 1925 and February 1926, making a portable darkroom a necessity. He photographed himself in one of these darkrooms in 1927 (fig. 1): the setup in the image is basic, but the processing trays are large enough to accommodate photographs bigger than a postcard; in fact there are several extant enlarged photographs from this period.

Based on price lists and advertisements published at the time, we know that postcard stock for photographers was often more expensive than single-weight papers, by about ten percent.¹⁴ Postcards were made on heavyweight paper in order to withstand the wear and tear of being sent



fig. 2 Advertisement for photographic paper manufactured by R. Guilleminot, Boespflug et Cie



fig. 6 Page from a catalogue published by R. Guilleminot, Boespflug et Cie, listing photographic papers available for purchase. August 1924. George Eastman House

Together these observations and data tell us that the twelve photographs are not identical, although Kertész is said to have exclusively used one paper, identifiable by its logo. One possible explanation is that the manufacturer may have changed the formula for the paper stock during production. Precisely which of the Guilleminot papers Kertész used, however, is still unknown. The art historian Christian Caujolle has written that Kertész sold portraits of the artists and intellectuals he met at the Café du Dôme in Montparnasse, and that these were printed on Guilleminot postcard stock, but otherwise there is little mention of the paper in major publications about the artist.¹⁷

The Guilleminot company, one of the oldest manufacturers of photographic papers, films, and chemicals in France, was based in Paris, although paper production had been moved to Chantilly in 1892. On the verso of the Kertész postcards is the company's classic horsehead logo (Chantilly is home to a famous racecourse), with a five-pointed star beneath it (fig. 3). Early Guilleminot postcards bear only the

company name, and a version with the horsehead alone was in circulation by the end of World War I (figs. 4, 5). The company advertised in trade publications and published price lists, and according to a 1924 price list, it offered no fewer than nine different *cartes postales* (fig. 6). (Some of these papers were available in standard sizes as well as postcards.) It is possible to eliminate from the list some of the papers, such as Citrate, a printing-out paper. But the postcard stock, perhaps a gaslight paper (a slow developing-out paper ideal for contact printing), has not been identified with certainty. One of the artist's account books, from November 1, 1926, to January 31, 1927, contains some clues about his materials, with a list of expenses that includes everyday items such as rent, meals, and soap, as well as — tantalizingly — paper, plates, films, and enlarging equipment, but none of the entries refer explicitly to postcards.¹⁸

The varying margins, irregular sizes, and graphite inscriptions give these works an idiosyncratic personal quality. Four of the twelve postcards in the Walther Collection were trimmed by Kertész to the edge of the images, leaving them without margins, and he printed the other eight with margins, some very narrow and some very wide, so they do not readily seem like postcards. He trimmed them precisely, probably with a sharp tool: under magnification some of the edges exhibit the sort of directional fine cracks that are consistent with the use of a blade (fig. 7). The images are not necessarily centered on the paper from top to bottom or even from side to side (figs. 8–11). All of these eight, except for an untitled self-portrait (July 1927; MoMA 1725.2001), are signed and inscribed "Paris" in graphite on the recto. None of them are

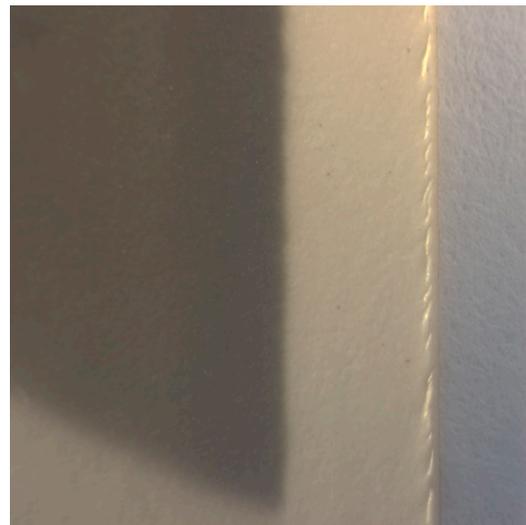


fig. 7 Detail of Kertész's *Mondrian* (see fig. 15), showing cracking along an edge consistent with the use of a blade



Above:

fig. 8 André Kertész. *Latin Quarter (Étienne Beöthy's Cousin)*. 1927. Gelatin silver print, c. 1927, image: $3\frac{7}{8} \times 3\frac{1}{16}$ " (9.8 x 7.8 cm), sheet: $4\frac{15}{16} \times 3\frac{3}{16}$ " (12.6 x 8.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Grace M. Mayer Fund (MoMA [1718.2001](#))

Right:

fig. 9 André Kertész. *Mondrian's Glasses and Pipe*. 1926. Gelatin silver print, c. 1928, image: $3\frac{1}{8} \times 3\frac{11}{16}$ " (7.9 x 9.3 cm), sheet: $3\frac{3}{8} \times 5\frac{3}{8}$ " (8.5 x 13.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Grace M. Mayer Fund (MoMA [1721.2001](#))

fig. 10 André Kertész. *Grands Boulevards*. 1926. Gelatin silver print, 1926-35, image: $3\frac{1}{16} \times 4\frac{5}{16}$ " (7.8 x 10.9 cm), sheet: $3\frac{5}{16} \times 5\frac{1}{16}$ " (8.4 x 12.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Thomas Walther (MoMA [1728.2001](#))

fig. 11 André Kertész. *Magda Förstner*. 1926. Gelatin silver print, c. 1929, image: $3\frac{3}{16} \times 1\frac{1}{2}$ " (9.1 x 3.8 cm), sheet: $5\frac{1}{8} \times 1\frac{11}{16}$ " (13 x 4.3 cm), mount: $14\frac{1}{2} \times 10\frac{11}{16}$ " (36.8 x 27.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Thomas Walther (MoMA [1731.2001](#))

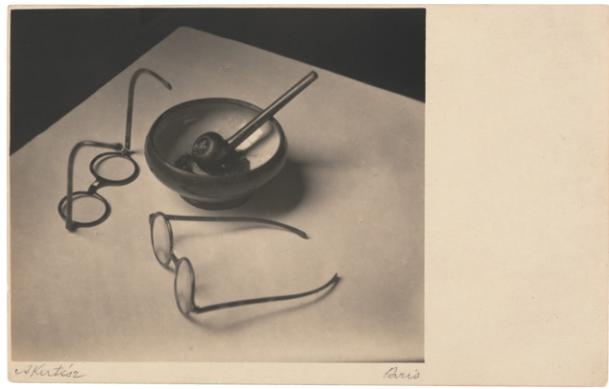




fig. 12 André Kertész. *Magda, Mme Beöthy, M. Beöthy, and Unknown Guest, Paris*. 1926–29. Gelatin silver print, c. 1929, image: 3 1/8 × 3 7/8" (7.9 × 9.8 cm), sheet: 3 5/16 × 5 3/16" (8.4 × 13.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Thomas Walther (MoMA [1732.2001](#))

wet stamped (stamped with the photographer's name, so that he could receive credit for it), presumably because they were small prints, not meant for reproduction.

The postcards are beautifully executed and finished works. *Mondrian's Studio* (1926; MoMA [1722.2001](#)) is one of several prints made from a single negative, as Kertész refined this now-famous image by cropping it. Most of the prints, such as *Magda, Mme Beöthy, M. Beöthy, and Unknown Guest, Paris* (1926–29; fig. 12), have been expertly retouched or etched with a sharp tool in order to remove technical flaws in the image, such the dust spots that inevitably occur during printing (fig. 13). Kertész also retouched his negatives to reduce what might be considered flaws in the appearance of his subjects, such as, in *Mondrian* (fig. 15), the lines around the artist's mouth (fig. 16). Other prints show slightly more invasive interventions, where various design elements have been reinforced with an unidentified medium that has been so skillfully applied with a brush that it is difficult to see even under magnification (fig. 14). Such subtle alterations have been used by photographers since the invention of the medium. The retouching applied to the image, on *Mondrian's* hairline, is less subtle: it seems unnecessary to the composition and more likely was added to produce a more flattering



fig. 13 Detail of Kertész's *Magda, Mme Beöthy, M. Beöthy, and Unknown Guest, Paris*, showing fine etching

fig. 14 Detail of Kertész's *Magda, Mme Beöthy, M. Beöthy, and Unknown Guest, Paris*, showing subtle brushed-on retouching to the shoes



fig. 15 André Kertész. *Mondrian*. 1926. Gelatin silver print, c. 1928, image: $4 \frac{5}{16} \times 3 \frac{1}{8}$ " (10.9 × 7.9 cm), sheet: $5 \frac{3}{16} \times 3 \frac{3}{4}$ " (13.2 × 8.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Thomas Walther (MoMA 1720.2001)



fig. 16 Detail of Kertész's *Mondrian*, showing retouching to negative to lighten the lines around the subject's mouth



fig. 17 Detail of Kertész's *Mondrian*, showing retouching on the image to the subject's hair

likeness (fig. 17). Although this is another common technique used by many photographers, it is an alteration of the image rather than compensation for a technical flaw; if the retouching is original, it may argue against Kertész's assertions about the nature of photography.

Overall, the photographs are in excellent condition, and there is little fading or discoloration and no major physical damage, such as large creases or tears. There is evidence in most of them of conservation treatment, and they are generally free of surface grime and accretions. Silver mirroring, a deterioration process that causes a metallic sheen to form on dark areas of the image, commonly occurs on photographic papers containing the matting agents (such as silica) that create velvety surfaces, and it is clearly visible in some of the Kertész works and more faintly in others. Some of the postcards appear to have been cleaned or treated to reduce the silver mirroring, which would explain the fine abrasions present on their

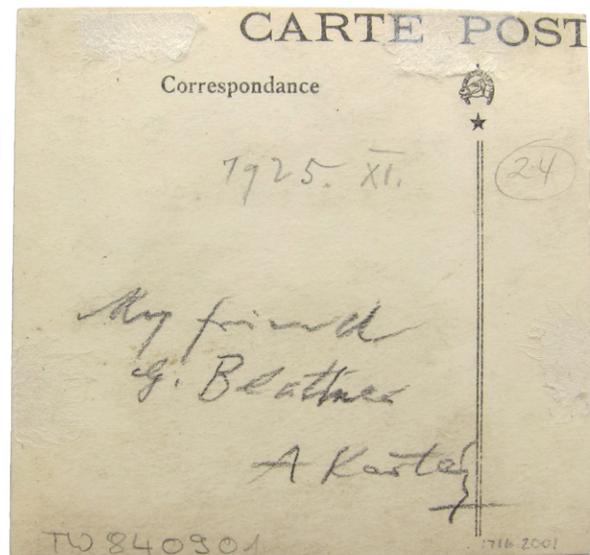
surfaces. Géza Blattner (1925; MoMA 1716.2001) is very clean on the recto under normal illumination; in raking light, however, faint silver mirroring is visible in smudges that create an uneven appearance (fig. 18). On the verso of the print, indistinct and grimy shadows around the inscription indicate that the photograph was cleaned as much as possible to reduce the amount of surface dirt without disrupting the graphite inscriptions (fig. 19). Gurbo has observed that most of the postcards he has examined exhibit some degree of silver mirroring.¹⁹ The lack of it on some postcards, as well as the surface disruption of others, strengthens my conjecture about previous conservation treatments.

Inpainting, or retouching done by someone other than the photographer or photographer's proxy, is often present in this group of prints. It is usually done to replace original retouching lost during previous treatment, less frequently when a flaw in an image, acceptable perhaps when the photograph was made, is later deemed objectionable. If



fig. 18 Raking-light view of Kertész's *Géza Blattner* (MoMA 1716.2001), showing faint silver mirroring

fig. 19 View of the verso of Kertész's *Géza Blattner*, showing surface dirt and inscriptions



similar mediums and techniques are used, it can be difficult to determine whether the applied medium is retouching applied by the photographer or inpainting applied later. On the Kertész postcards the inpainting is likely to be the work of different individuals. Some of it is crudely executed, such as the unrefined, warm-toned inpainting on the artist's chin in *Mondrian* (fig. 20), which is quite dissimilar from the other examples. Given the value and desirability of Kertész's postcards, it is not at all surprising that they have undergone conservation or restoration treatments to aesthetically enhance them.

Although Kertész sent some of his postcards to family and friends, not one of the postcards in the Walther Collection was stamped and sent through the post; rather, if they were mailed, they must have been enclosed in envelopes. *Étienne Beöthy in His Studio* (1928; MoMA 1729.2001) is the only one of the twelve that remains in an artist's mount, although others may have been mounted at an earlier time



fig. 20 Detail of Kertész's *Mondrian*, showing warm-toned inpainting on the subject's chin

for use as exhibition prints. Kertész used a variety of mount materials, including a "cockled-surface" paper, which has been described as vellum, and others, including poster board.²⁰ For exhibition prints, Kertész is thought to have preferred single-weight papers mounted to the cockled-surface vellum, and he printed some of the same images on both postcard and single-weight paper.²¹ *Mlle Jaffée* (1926; MoMA 1719.2001) is printed on matte single-weight paper mounted to laid paper (perhaps a lingering Pictorialist influence), but the image exists also on postcard stock.²²

Kertész's photographs on postcard stock are among his most iconic images, but he only made them for a short time, and the last one was probably printed in 1928. The purchase of the Leica camera and, possibly, the discontinuation of the Guilleminot postcard stock may have led him to turn to other papers and processes. And after his first exhibition at Galerie Au Sacre du Printemps in Paris, in 1927, his work began to be shown in traveling exhibitions, to be purchased by museums, and to appear in art magazines, literary journals, and the popular press. He would have therefore needed to produce larger prints for exhibition and reproduction. As a successful photojournalist, with an income from assignments and commissions, he had less time for his personal work.

Although "postcard" has become a shorthand for these prints, it is probably more useful to consider them photographs made on postcard stock. They are not materially identical, but similar. They are recognizable as a group by their scale, delicacy, tone, and finish, and they remain a source of fascination. Kertész's use of postcard stock was distinctive and personal: the format itself seemed not to matter, as he obliterated its original size and purpose by trimming and mounting. Peter MacGill, former director of LIGHT Gallery and current president of Pace/MacGill Gallery, tells of traveling in 1981 on a train with Kertész, when the

artist produced from his pocket a set of twenty or thirty of his postcards from the 1920s.²³ Were they too valuable to leave at home? Too personal? Was Kertész, recognizing their desirability, carrying with him what Maria Morris Hambourg has called an “exhibition in his pocket”?²⁴ Whatever the

reason, after many years, the postcards were still important to Kertész. What had started as a set of limitations—cost, size, practicality—became, in Kertész’s hands, work of enduring beauty.

NOTES

1. Robert Gurbo, “Tiny Pictures, but Sharp,” in Gurbo and Bruce Silverstein, *André Kertész: The Early Years* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), pp. 7–8.
2. Sarah Greenough, “A Hungarian Diary, 1894–1925,” in Greenough, Gurbo, and Sarah Kennel, *André Kertész* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2005), p. 5; Kertész changed his name from Andor to André when he arrived in Paris in 1925.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
4. Michel Frizot, “From Andor Kertész to André Kertész,” in Frizot and Annie-Laure Wanaverbecq, *André Kertész* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 23; and Greenough, “A Hungarian Diary,” p. 8.
5. Gurbo, “Tiny Pictures, but Sharp,” p. 18.
6. See Greenough, “To Become a Virgin Again, 1925–1936,” in Greenough, Gurbo, and Kennel, *André Kertész*, p. 69.
7. David Travis, “Kertész and His Contemporaries in Germany and France,” in Sandra S. Phillips, Travis, and Weston Naef, *André Kertész: Of Paris and New York* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985), p. 59.
8. Preface to Phillips, Travis, and Naef, *André Kertész*, p. 13.
9. André Kertész, *Kertész on Kertész: A Self-Portrait* (New York: Abbeville, 1985), p. 32.
10. Greenough, “To Become a Virgin Again,” p. 64; Ben Lifson, “Kertész at Eighty-five,” *Portfolio* 1, no. 2 (June–July 1979): 62.
11. Thomas Cooper and Paul Hill, “Interview with André Kertész,” *Camera*, no. 11 (November 1979): 33.
12. Frizot, “The Distortions,” in Frizot and Wanaverbecq, *André Kertész*, p. 157. Kertész visited the park in 1930 with Carlo Rim, the editor-in-chief of *Vu*, to make photographs in the funhouse.
13. Greenough, “To Become a Virgin Again,” p. 62.
14. Thomas Walther Collection research files, Department of Conservation, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The research was conducted by Lee Ann Daffner in 2013.
15. Phillips, Travis, and Naef note Kertész’s use of “velox” paper, a slow-reacting silver chloride developing-out paper marketed as “gaslight paper.” The process was invented by the Nepera Chemical Company (marketed under the trade name Velox) and purchased by Kodak in 1899. The paper used by Kertész could have been a gaslight paper from a European manufacturer; his accounts contain tantalizing references to what might be Sedar (a Guilleminot paper) and Lypa (perhaps Lypaluxe paper made by Lumière). “Catalogue,” in Phillips, Travis, and Naef, *André Kertész*, p. 259. On the artist’s giving up of the postcard format, see *ibid.*, p. 266; and Gurbo, telephone conversation with the author, October 2013.
16. Raking light photomicrographs of the surface of each of the photographs in the Walther Collection may be viewed on the *Object:Photo* website (see the “Surface” tab on the page for each print). For more information about Messier’s research for the Walther Collection, see “Texture Imaging for Surface Texture” in the Materials Reference section of this website. For a discussion of this research and its applications, see Messier’s essay “Image Isn’t Everything: Revealing Affinities across Collections through the Language of the Photographic Print,” on this website.
17. Christian Caujolle, “André Kertész,” *Camera International*, French edition, no. 32 (Spring 1992): 62.
18. Kertész account book, November 1926–January 1927, Mission du Patrimoine Photographique, Paris. The author consulted a photocopy housed in the Department of Photographs, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
19. Gurbo, conversation with MoMA conservators, March 20, 2013.
20. Phillips, Travis, and Naef, *André Kertész*, p. 256.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 266.
22. The postcard version is in the collection of Nicholas Pritzker.
23. Peter MacGill, telephone conversation with the author, May 27, 2014.
24. Maria Morris Hambourg, telephone conversation with the author, May 23, 2014.

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