Sports and Erotica: Erotic Postcards of Sportswomen during France's Années Folles

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In Paris during the "Années Folles," erotic postcards were exchanged in secret, in the street, or in brothels. During these post-war years, French society was torn between the obligation to rebuild and a colossal need to forget the war, have fun, and lead carefree lives. Above all, these cards provided entertainment and even an outlet: they were as "naughty" as the years were. They were more than just another solution for living more intensely in the present. They were basically recreational, without any particular intent to diffuse any political, artistic, or cultural message. But even if the photographer was unaware of it, depicting feminine nudity necessarily revealed to some extent the way one wished to see or imagine a woman. From this point of view, the naughty cards were also a vehicle for ideology and a mirror for representation and perceptions. These cards depicted women—usually prostitutes—in what seems like an infinite variety of poses, costumes, and settings, including a number of sports scenes where the equipment and technique were used as a pretext for sensuality. One could easily interpret the cards at a superficial level, considering the costumes and disguises merely as a traditional form of recreation, amusement, or derision. However, during

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the twenties, postcards portraying women "dressed up" in athletic disguises could also
be read more sociologically, resulting not so much in a new look at portrayals of women's
bodies as in a reassessment of the status of women's sports and how the sportswoman
became "implicated" in erotic play. When the image of the sportswoman became
"naughty," did it preserve the standard characteristics of the sport (and even artistic)
iconography of the period, or did it merely turn the feminine body into an instrument?
In other words, taken in the specific context of women's conquest of sports, what was
the specificity of the erotic postcards that used sports as a pretext, with respect to the
history of erotic iconography on the one hand, and sport iconography on the other?

**Sports, Eroticism, and Images**

Just like any message, the sports image can be edifying, commemorative, or docu-
mentary when it is used to report on a specific event, or it can be propagandist, political,
scientific, or artistic. This is also true for the specific case of portrayals of the nude
woman athlete. The purpose of such portrayals might be distinctly esthetic, as in the
collections of bodybuilder E. Desbonnet\(^2\) and of the naturist movement;\(^3\) scientific or
comparative, as in the stereotypes of Georges Démenij or Georges Hébert;\(^4\) or artistic,
as in some of the paintings of Henri Matisse\(^5\) and (though a different genre) Anton
Rädgerscheidt.\(^6\)

From the *Belle Epoque* to the *Années Folles*, or "crazy years," as the Roaring Twenties
were called in France, this type of picture was even common. Representations of nude
or semi-nude athletes and gymnasts were a legacy from antique statuary and common-
place in teaching, artistic, and scientific circles—usually male bodies, but occasionally
of woman. It is true that the erotic content of sport itself remained latent or even denied
by those most closely concerned.\(^7\) However, as long as the athletic poses respected the
standards for decency, any stigma of immorality was mitigated by the very efficiency
that was required to hold them. It is not always reasonable to equate nudity and eroti-
cism. Eroticism does not always need nudity to be expressed in an athletic scene. For
example, in an apparently innocent scene, Jean Béraud's painting *Le café des cyclistes au
Bois de Boulogne* (1900) gives special prominence to the women's figures. The sensual
content of the painting is even more accentuated by the contrast between the opened
legs of the bicyclers and the closed legs of the seated women, as well as by the effect
produced by the vertical elements around them that, by comparison, recall an omnipres-
ent masculinity. Eroticism does not always involve making an instrument of the woman
on the pretext that she becomes an object of desire either, and nudity can be as revela-
tory of emancipation as it can of humiliation, for example in Picasso's *La course* (1922).

In the case of erotic photographs and postcards, however, the purpose is clear:
Whether or not the image has esthetic value, the objective is above all a promise of
carnal pleasure, the representation of anticipation based on a direct view of the object of
desire. Consequently, nudity or semi-nudity is essential to the purpose; the artistic
aspect is no more than a pretext and is often absent. There were, however, a number of
ways to make a card more attractive and more adapted to a large range of expectations
and sexual urges. For instance, the source of arousal could be the fascination of a
woman's body that closely approached the ideal for feminine beauty at the time; it could
be a more or less sophisticated comic scenario, in which the added erotic element favored -pleasantly ambiguous feelings; or it could be a more or less aggressive expression of male power that transcended social and moral taboos or that clearly reinforced the inequality of the gender relationship between men and women by emphasizing masculine domination and, simultaneously, showing female fragility or dependence. This last case afforded the opportunity to treat women in a deliberately indecent or even degrading way because immorality and humiliation are two drivers for fantastical pleasure. The image seeks out obscenity, literally "that which is openly injurious to decency."9 It is different from the pornographic image, however (even today in France, from a legal point of view), although the boundary between the two categories is ever so fragile and notably subjective.10 Even when the pornographic photograph is also erotic; its meaning and technical construction differ from those of an erotic photograph. The pornographic photograph is based on a treatment of the "object" that is not far removed from an architectural approach.11 It is explicit about the act of penetration,12 while the erotic photograph stages the "anticipation" of the partner by making freer use of the iconographic and symbolic features of the image.

In the end, the erotic image always had to be a source of pleasure, whether the source was the beauty of the female body, the humorous, even mischievous scenarios, or assertion of male power. This is equally true in the case of erotic postcards that used sport costumes and poses. The women featured in them were attractive for the standards in France during the twenties, and the scenarios were easily humorous. In a contradictory way, however, they could be perceived both as a way of tarnishing women's images and as a way to "play" with morality, two ideas which require more thorough exploration.

**The Erotic Postcard, Censorship, and Laws**

The illustrated postcard originated in 1869 in the Austro-Hungarian Empire but did not catch on in France until the late 1880s, specifically when the 1889 Paris World Fair resulted in an extraordinary craze for them.13 Within a few years, what had been a cottage industry innovation turned into a veritable industrial sector that reached its heights just before World War I. By 1907, 300 million postcards per year were being produced in France, placing it fourth in international markets behind Germany, the United States, and Great Britain.14 In the mid-1920s, the French were still putting out more than 150 million cards per year.

As early as its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century, the postcard was already serving as the medium for a confidential distribution of erotic photographs in the form of daguerreotypes.15 Although in France postcards were officially under the authority of the postal administration until 1875, they were immediately used for personal, advertising, or artistic purposes. There was no period of transition during which the postcard might have been "preserved" from scenes that were presented as being immoral; taking their cue from artists, photographers and postcard publishers started immediately to use the explicitly seductive woman as the object of their work or passion. According to historian of modesty Jean-Claude Bologne, the erotic photograph even played an important role in the qualification of the postcard as a potentially artistic
production, a status that gave it potential license with respect to censorship and legislation.\textsuperscript{16}

As a matter of fact, as early as 1850, the specific nature of the "obscene photograph" led to a law that made it illegal as "an offence against morality,"\textsuperscript{17} one of the four levels defined by French law on such matters: rape, indecent assault, public indecency, and offence against morality. The last category was stipulated in Article 283 of the French Code of Criminal Law and concerned the representation and promotion of nudity and sexuality, notably by means of photographs, reproductions, and books. The text provided for the exclusion of the scientific and artistic fields. Because the erotic photograph exploited the "esthetic sensibility" aspect, it could be presented as being immoral but legally tolerable—especially after the Act of July 29, 1881, proclaiming the liberty of the press had been issued. In reality, moral censorship developed simultaneously, limiting or banning licentious publications. Furthermore, Article 28 of the 1881 Act (later incorporated into the Order of June 11, 1887) specified that offence to morality by any means involving publication, verbalization, drawings, engravings, paintings, emblems, or images constituted a limit to the liberty of the press. The text underwent a number of changes between 1881 and 1914, in demonstration of how fragile the definitions of what was perceived as socially acceptable can be.

With the prospect of war and the fear of the "degeneracy" that would result from a feminized nation once the men left for the front, censors became more oppressive prior to 1914. The year 1910 appears to have been a turning point in the repression of pornography, to judge by the impressive increase in lawsuits: 175 from 1910 to 1914, compared to only fourteen from 1881 to 1910.\textsuperscript{18} The fight against immorality (equated with weakness) was intensified, notably because eroticism was becoming a commonplace phenomenon in all the artistic circles. Before World War I, literary production averaged twenty-one erotic books per year; forbidden places such as convents were used as settings, and far-off regions, especially the Asian, Caribbean, and African colonies, were the backdrop for stories designed for fantasizing.\textsuperscript{19} In 1907, Picasso unveiled his \textit{Les Demoiselles d'Avignon}, Matisse his \textit{Nu bleu}, and with the publication of \textit{Les Onze Mille Verges},* Guillaume Apollinaire ripped into bourgeois values, already much abused two years earlier by Sigmund Freud’s revelations in \textit{Three Essays on the Theory of Sexual-}

A veritable "nude war" broke out in Paris, where daring exhibitions and lawsuits flourished alike. In 1905 and 1906, Mata-Hari’s demonstrations at the Olympia or those of writer Colette at the Moulin Rouge were only curtain raisers to a craze that was turning nudity and debauchery into artistic catchwords. Even cinema was not spared: the first pornographic films date back to 1910. Those in the 1920s already boasted the technical characteristics of contemporary productions: skimpy scenarios and close-ups of penetration.\textsuperscript{21} At the same time, censorship was busy, causing films to be pulled out of circulation and police to raid movie theaters.

**The French \textit{Années Folles}: Going Erotic**

\*Translator’s note: A title that played on the double entendre \textit{verge}, which could mean a rod for beating or a penis, and the orthographically similar \textit{vièrge} (virgin).
When the First World War was over (and we know the effect it had on reinforcing the traditional relationships between men and women in spite of the "taste of liberty" women had experienced\textsuperscript{22} ) the memories of trench warfare were destabilizing. The fear of death led to a more cynical outlook on the world and encouraged a \textit{carpe diem} mentality. The need to live intensely for the moment led to new types of behavior dedicated to the "crazy years." But even as the desire for modernity became more widespread, French society tightened its grip on its traditional values, for example by applying an ambitious pro-birth policy during the twenties and enforcing the laws against abortion more strictly.

This paradoxical situation had its consequences on women’s place in society, radicalizing the contrast between what was said and what was done. According to French historian Françoise Thébaud, "More than ever, feminine sexuality is locked into the mother / prostitute alternative, and the family considered as the basic unit."\textsuperscript{23} Prostitution itself was the object of contradictory ideas. On the one hand, feminine immorality was considered to be a betrayal to men because of the suffering endured by soldiers on the front lines; on the other, prostitution was tolerated as an evil necessary to the relaxation of those very same soldiers. And the prostitutes who were gradually removed from the street were forced into brothels where indecency became hidden to public view.\textsuperscript{24}

Of course, the wife-mother was not the only standard, because new role models such as Suzanne Lenglen and Marie Curie were emerging to open the way for a broader emancipation of women. Historian Mary Louise Roberts considers that France produced three female models during the 1920s: the modern woman, source of anxiety for the patriarchal tradition; the mother, reassuring; and the chaste, unmarried active woman, who turned out to be the link between the past and the new society taking shape.\textsuperscript{25} Nevertheless, the revolution was restrained, and the women were generally sent back to their traditional roles. Victor Margueritte’s book \textit{La Garçonne} (\textit{The Flapper}) may have been a great success in 1922 with a million copies sold, but its publication triggered a scandal and the author was thrown out of the French Legion of Honor.\textsuperscript{26} More generally speaking, "masculine literature express [ed] the sentiment of a feminine plot against male power and the quest for new-found virility based on the domination of women and children."

The case of sports is exemplary from that point of view. The 1920s context gave Frenchwoman Alice Milliat the opportunity to be in the vanguard of the international struggle to give women equal access to competitive sports. She fought both the male chauvinism of athletic circles and opposition from the International Olympic Committee, and it can be said that a certain number of changes abroad followed in her wake. Meanwhile in France, her activity was being compared negatively with the French Women’s Federation of Gymnastics and Physical Education, which had expectations that were more in line with the requirements of the patriarchal tradition. The direction advocated by Alice Milliat "cumulat[ed] all the signs of 'social abnormality': health and eugenic risks, reprehensible specialization, a scarcely moral spectacle, and few [were] those in the end who could support the course chosen here."\textsuperscript{27}

In French society, the ambivalence of the situation—the tightening moral censorship, a reinforced conservative idea of women, and the demand for post-war plea-
sures—fostered the development of erotic productions. Thébaud observed that this was true not just for postcards but also for show business and the press. Although the production of erotic publications was slightly lower than the pre-war production, there was still an average of nine books published every year from 1919 to 1929. Almanacs show that thirty-three new erotic periodicals were published in France during the interwar years. That is quite a lot, even compared to the 64 sports magazines, 80 literary reviews, and 143 general news magazines that were put out during the same period. Some well-known authors even combined sports and eroticism, for example Henri de Montherlant and Jean Prévost.

The erotic postcard’s development was in keeping with the state of flux of these “crazy years” between a hunger for life on one hand and censorship on the other. To a certain extent, the fact that erotic production served as a vehicle for such ambiguous images of women can help to explain the tolerance for the growing eroticism of French society at the time. The woman surrendering her body to the desire of all, selling her image like a product was considered to be immoral and depraved, without a doubt. For all that, it capitulated to the gender hierarchy by depicting in an ideal-typical way male domination over passive, submissive women who were trapped in an exclusively sexual function that was reassuring. In the same way as the erotic art studied by Carol Duncan, the erotic card is the expression of a form of male supremacy. If erotic pictures are culturally tolerated, it is because they caricature the return to a rationalization that is presented as natural for the dispensing of sexual roles. In a society where women had to be put back in their place, the erotic card had a considerably different meaning compared to its meaning at the turn of the century. Ultimately, the danger was less moral than social; after all, was not the postcard meant to challenge the political order by exploding “the idea of a society based on the predominant role of the family unit and of duty”?

The erotic postcard upset the political order but restored the gender hierarchy, so it was always positioned somewhere between the licit and the illicit. Though it was exempt from the more or less strict application of the law concerning offence against morality, it was on shaky ground: difficult to conceal the bodies or claim the status of an artistic work, which were two frequent methods for getting around censorship in other types of erotic production. In consequence, although the cards were illegal, they could be obtained relatively easily. Besides established places such as brothels, they were exchanged or sold at a number of outlets such as stationery stores, bookstores, train stations, hotels, cafés, or on the sidewalk. Only if they were too prominently displayed did the police confiscate them.

The Erotic Postcard: Five Levels of Social Impertinence

Given the context, a number of professional postcard publishers became involved in making erotic cards along with postcard enthusiasts. Many of them signed the cards with their initials only. The main parties concerned were Elf and Pisa, two Paris-based publishing houses that were not among the large production companies of the moment. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the scenarios were suggested by real-life situations, especially in connection with activities such as bathing or dancing. The first
erotic photographs merely used a setting where the woman's body was either already partially unclothed (the bather) or in a seductive pose (the dancer). At the turn of the century, they started using a greater variety of themes to highlight feminine physical charms. The challenge was to flout the moral conventions of the day without violating the law. Depicting a kiss, for example, was considered scandalous, and parts of the body such as thighs, shoulders and arms, as suggestive as genitalia. The navel was highly erotic. Body hair was thoroughly obscene—so much so that in 1904 Senator Béranger, who was also the founder of the Société générale contre la licence (an "anti-licentiousness" league), introduced a law prohibiting any body hair on anatomical reproductions, notably those shown on postcards. After World War I, standards loosened up with respect to the conduct and body parts that could be shown, and to the themes and scenarios that could be used as a pretext for eroticism. During the 1920s sportswomen began to appear as explicit "props" on erotic postcards.

The postcards can be classified by sub-theme and analyzed as a function of the degree of explicitness with respect to the human body or even to the sexual act. This type of classification stresses the association that is manifest between a theme and a specific sexual symbolism, or even between a theme and the violation of a law. On the other hand, it does not shed much light on the specific treatment of the athletic theme. A tennis racquet could be used for very different purposes—no more than a symbolic accessory in one case, or the very real equivalent of a phallus in another. While the erotic postcards could and did lead to arousal using humor and fascination for the body, they were also a way to explore the excitement of prohibition by playing with power and domination. Therefore, by considering the postcards less as a function of their illegality or their degree of euphemization than of the moral illegitimacy of their object, it is possible to classify them hierarchically according to their degree of "social impertinence"—in other words, their subjective distance from the standards of the day. The pleasure lay less in breaking the law than in defying the moral taboo that gave the image its degree of suggestive power. The more naughty the postcard, the more it stimulated the customer's imagination and arousal. There appear to be five distinct levels of social impertinence (and these may subsequently be used to characterize the case of the sportswoman) that can be identified through a number of archetypes: the voyeur, the promise, the stranger, incongruity, and ridicule.

At the first level, the postcards used traditional feminine activities where nudity is "normal" and justified by the situation itself. For example, a bathing scene in a bathroom would stage a partially unclothed woman, not necessarily posing in an intentionally provocative way. The overall erotic character emanated from the fact that the photographer's eye had surprised the individual in an intimate context. These photographs are clearly voyeuristic, even with the idea that the observer is only a witness, prey to the "mirror" the woman is posing seductively in front of.

At the second level, the nude woman was photographed in a pose in keeping with stereotypes of feminine seduction, clearly in anticipation of a tryst, with all the outward signs of awaiting the man's arrival. To remove all doubt, the scene took place on a bed or sofa, in a bedroom or alcove, and the staging specifically emphasized submissive and lewd attitudes. The bedroom eyes and body posture suggest readiness. The invitation
sometimes goes so far as to include a man in the scene, or a "debauched" practice (sadomasochistic, for example)—but always remaining in the realm of promise.

At the third level, the images reinforced the aspect of potential surprise by delving into exotica. Portraits of women from Africa, Asia, or the Pacific, with characteristic clothing and facial markings that reflected their remote origins, were meant to stimulate the imagination. Such images gave rise to the anticipation of something different, the promise of a surprise and the appeal of things mysterious: unusual places, new sexual techniques, foreign pleasures. Furthermore, at a time when colonialism was going strong in France and fostering myths around the idea of dominated civilizations, the cult of exoticism was inevitably fed by a bolstered sense of domination. The woman from Madagascar or Algeria became the promise of a masculine conquest that was both sexual and political. Along with literary exotica, the postcards were consistent with the standards of domination at the time. By evoking regions outside the confines of the censorship and morality that raised barriers in France to any "depraved" utilization of the body, the "stranger" approach pushed the erotic photo up a rung on the ladder of social illegitimacy.

At the fourth level, the scenario revealed the woman during some ordinary daily activity (family or professional) where nudity would be socially unthinkable. The seductive appeal of the photo lay in how such trivial pursuits were treated. The portrayal of a woman cooking, settled comfortably in an armchair reading a book, or working away at a typewriter would have been insignificant if the photo did not reveal part of the woman's anatomy furtively (or not!), or a deliberately sensual pose. This type of setting was based on the incongruous approach, using nudity that would be unthinkable in a normal context as the basis for an interlude that was delightful and exciting precisely because it was impossible. The incongruity also generated a ridiculous aspect that victimized the woman this time, reinforcing the observer's feeling of superiority and domination.

At the fifth level, the scenario not only applied the previous characteristics but also showed the woman in a traditionally masculine role. As she repaired a vehicle or posed in a uniform—policeman, judge, etc.—or an exaggeratedly masculine accessory, she was the heroine of a scene that was even more of an incongruity because not only was the situation impossible, it was also socially inconceivable. Consequently, the card created a paradox that was almost ridiculous because women were not supposed to be capable of such things. It is even possible that there were allusions to homosexual fantasies. Given the context of the 1920s, the postcards very likely did exploit a certain ambiguity around gender. In the ridiculing approach, however, the seductive power lay in the pleasure of humiliating: putting a woman in a context where she took on a man's role was to flaunt and confirm Woman's supposed incompetence. The pleasure lay in caricaturizing her incompetence and tarnishing her image in a crude way.

Can Sport Be a Basis for Eroticism?

Associating women, sports, and erotica was not really possible before the inter-war years (1918–1939), simply because women's sports were almost nonexistent in France before then, with the notable exception of a handful of gymnastic and swimming clubs, or a few examples of bicyclers, swimmers, or dancers whose activity did not enter into
the definitions of sport at the time. During the 1920s, however, women's sports experienced a spurt of growth in France. A number of Paris-based associations that had sprung up during the war began to develop. Fémina-Sport, for example, had 3,350 members in 1924. In 1928, the French Women's Federation of Gymnastics and Physical Education (one of the two federations for women's sports at the time) had more than 500 member associations. The mainstream in France was still basically conservative, however, and the sportswoman was the object of heavy criticism in sports, medical, and political circles. The most widespread attitude was that women should avoid practicing sports as much as possible. For example, the famous French doctor Maurice Boigey thought that competitive sports not only served no purpose for women but also was dangerous for them, since "all exercise that involves colliding, bumping, and tugging is dangerous for the uterus." The main concern, however, was morality. During the Années Folles, involvement in sports became a conspicuous sign of belonging to the most modernistic fringe group of women—along with wearing new styles of clothing (Chanel) or flapper haircuts, reading women's magazines (Marie-France), learning new provocative dances (the Charleston), and being relatively liberated sexually.

Therefore, it would be too restrictive to explain the appearance of the athletic theme in erotic postcards by a simple presentation of either bodily esthetics or comic situations being reinforced by wearing costumes, even if both cases were staged so as to stress the erotic aspect of the pictures. However, if one takes into account both the status of sportswomen in France during the "années folles" and the fragile post-war relationship between men and women, the analysis goes beyond mere beauty or humor. With respect to the previously mentioned typology, these images were highly favorable to fantasy because they also reinforced the asymmetry in gender relationship. From that point of view, given the conviction that a woman placed in a masculine context basically expressed her own inferiority and therefore, in a sort of mirror image, the superiority of men, the sportswoman had the same status as the lady pump attendant or lady-soldier in the post-war society: mimicry provoking humiliation. This type of interpretation showed up even in the scenarios where the woman was placed in a context that was more consistent with the feminine stereotypes—for example, the skater who, from postcard to postcard, accomplished a series of skating steps that ended in a fall and the unveiling of certain parts of her anatomy. But this explanation can by no means account for all meanings behind the images, and it would be appropriate to delve more thoroughly into the characteristics of these last.

To that end, I studied a set of fifty-three erotic postcards based on athletic themes that I pulled from a larger batch of 5,000 erotic cards on a variety of themes; out of those, 1,000 had been published. Many of the cards tell a story (a fairly standard method at the time) and should be considered as a movie or a comic book. Each card shows a partially unclothed woman, sometimes two. The breasts are usually bare, with the lower body covered by something that could be breeches or a skirt; the private parts themselves, never really shown, are only suggested. All in all, the cards make up a relatively chaste set for the period. To a lesser extent the thighs, calves, and arms are put to advantage.
On these cards, the athletic theme is recalled by the sports accessories and the poses adopted. Some type of sports equipment is always present: chest expander, racquet, skates, bicycle, boxing gloves, riding quirt, discus, sword, etc. On the other hand, the model is wearing either sports shoes or typically feminine pumps. The figures were photographed in action (although due to technical limits, the photographer must have requested a freeze in the action), only rarely posed, in which case the impact of the "athletic appearance" is less. Except for one series taken in an alcove (a resolutely nonathletic setting!) on a badminton theme, the figures were placed against neutral backgrounds that call no specific environment to mind. On the other hand, the poses and accessories do evoke various sport disciplines that were all considered at the time as being basically male activities: athletics (track and field), gymnastics, boxing, wrestling, fencing, cycling, skating, badminton, and horseback riding. There are some puzzling absences in the lack of dancers or swimmers, which reinforces the "manly" character of the set. Although the themes are athletic, the models were not well-known sports-women. (That actually could have been the case. At the time, there were champion women athletes, for example Violette Morris, who openly engaged in deliberate provocation, including in their sexual behavior.) They were probably models who specialized in erotic photography, perhaps prostitutes. This is corroborated by the presence of some of the models in photographs with totally different settings. The postcards contain neither title nor text, other than a brief mention of the publisher (ELF, for most of the cards, or Pisa), location (Paris), and a number. The hairstyles and clothing worn indicate that the cards originated during the 1920s.

The description of the set suggests that erotic postcards based on sports follow a pattern: the idea is not to show an unclothed sportswoman directly but rather a contrived image that is more or less close to that. The pose and clothing worn furnish clues that help to persuade the observer that the vision is more genuine. The card's primary function, however, is to use artifice in order to create desire (necessarily masculine). Semiologist Roland Barthes once said, in connection with that which is "horrible," that "merely signifying (what is erotic) is not enough to make us experience it." Beyond its primary function, the card provides symbols that give it a greater reach than a mere fabrication of sexual anticipation. Semiological theories are based on the interplay of analogies, signs, and symbols. Knowledge of these makes it possible to study the primary signification of the images by means of the different iconic, plastic, and linguistic signs that are structured and made decipherable by the images.

A Semiological Test

The image of the sportswoman as the object of an erotic postcard is very different from the image offered by the athletic photography of the twenties that was characterized by the search for an aesthetically pleasing effect and a demonstration of good technique, along with a use of redundant archetypes around the notions of elevation and descent, multiple vertical lines symbolizing transcendence and purity, and a growing taste for histrionics. The originality of the erotic postcard on an athletic theme is due primarily to certain "plastic" choices, which can be identified by analyzing indicators such as the type of framing, choice of backdrop, exposure, composition, shapes developed, dimensions, and choice of colors and lighting.
Photographers gave priority to a blurred background without much depth of field. They generally used average overall dimensions and artificial diffuse light that gave a soft-focus effect. Most of the postcards were done in monochrome black and white, and some of them had a reddish tint added for a warmer effect. All such technical tricks are well known to reinforce the feeling of a universal context, that the photograph could have been taken anywhere. At the same time, they force the eye to read the image from the center outwards, putting the human figure in it to much greater advantage. All the postcards show the figures in mid-shot—that is, full-figure with a small portion of the setting visible. The shots were taken at breast height with a straight-angle lens, probably 50mm. These are choices that are made routinely to give a real-life effect and as direct a view as possible of the scene.

Once it is established that "reading" a photograph involves interpreting certain physical points (the "center" and the "primary" points, to use semiological terms), the lines of force, and the focus of the gaze, and that the reading process can be affected by any inconsistencies in the photograph, the composition of the images can be studied by interpreting a handful of technical indicators. Here, the postcard centers are clearly focused on the individuals’ sexual parts: the genitalia (18 times) or the hips (13 times). Analyzing the strong primary points shows up other notable areas of the body, in particular the knees (19 times), the shoulders (17 times), the breasts (13 times), the arms (12 times) and, to a lesser extent, the calves (6 times), the thighs (3 times), and the hands (twice). The other points appear only very occasionally. All of these initial indicators reinforce the technical choice of highlighting the obvious signs of femininity through feminine sexuality and seduction. Certain lines of force add to this perception, either because they make the eyes converge directly on the individual’s genital area or because they organize the evocation of a penetration though the action of mounting a bicycle or straddling a chair.

There are four series (about fifteen cards in all) that include lines of force with significantly different meanings. These show up disconcerting systems of contrasting vertical, horizontal, and diagonal lines between typically masculine and feminine elements: a tennis racquet versus women’s pumps, dark boxing gloves against white breasts, or a sword against breasts. In these cases, the postcard reveals a gender ambiguity that requires interpreting. The individuals’ eyes are usually horizontal and convey no univocal message, apart from two series where a downward gaze clearly suggests a humble, subordinate attitude, and two other series where an upward gaze evokes dreaminess or reverence. In several cases, the postcard shows some inconsistencies. Sometimes the woman is dressed in a costume that is athletic and sophisticated at the same time, or placed in a pose that is absurd because it is exaggeratedly masculine. We can consider that these images played on what is ridiculous in the situation, since a spontaneous reading reveals a woman discredited. There is a glaring absence of dynamism in the overall shapes in the photographs and even an accentuated immobility that are in disharmony with the athletic theme—given that the scene is supposed to show an activity—but consistent with the suggestion of feminine anticipation and carnality.

So the "plastic" message conveys the idea that the postcards were constructed to suggest a universal and authentic scene in which the sexual zones and feminine seductive
characteristics are emphasized and the woman herself is presented as submissive or ridiculous. A number of the cards treat the scene ambiguously through the use of contrast or gender confusion. Both of these major orientations are also present in an iconic analysis of the same set of cards. By using the specific elements that appear in the images, such as the parts of the body that are highlighted or the sports equipment, it is possible to expand their signification in order to arrive at their connotations, i.e. the symbolic universes that are suggested. It cannot help being observed that the hundred or so items identified fall within the province of just a few broad concepts that are more or less equally represented in the set of cards. It is no surprise to find womanhood covered by two major characteristics: femininity (indicators for feminine corporality) and seduction (indicators for a recognized social function for women). What is odder is that manhood appears to be covered equally as well, through symbols for virility, the phallus, power, and expertise. This type of gender ambiguity also shows up in the third theme, the sexual act, where the variants refer back to penetration or lesbianism.

**Conclusion: Interpreting the Sportswoman's Role in Erotic Postcards**

All in all, these erotic postcards are quite original in the treatment they inflict on the image of Woman. They are sensual without being obscene, only slightly erotic at a time when standards were pushing sensitivity thresholds upwards. The cards are not even very exhibitionist from a sexual, behavioral, or anatomical point of view, since they suggest more than they expose. On the other hand, at a time when sportswomen were still being criticized by much of French society for moral or physiological reasons, the photographs constituted an authentic aid to male arousal, using different strategies than other types of erotic postcards. They were appealing because of the particularly high level of social impertinence underlying them, because they placed the woman in an athletic situation (typically masculine at the time) and also because they toyed with gender codes by heightening the confusion between masculine and feminine. Because they ridicule both the sportswoman’s behavior and the ambivalence of the modern woman, the postcards can be interpreted in two different, although complementary, ways as the illustration of male anxiety in the face of a changing relationship between men and women in France during the Années Folles.

The first impression is that the cards stigmatize women who imitate men, by ridiculing them. The technical artifices and scenarios that were used—the inconsistencies in the clothing, the artificiality of the athletic poses, and the incorrect use of the equipment—converge to tarnish the image of the character portrayed in the image and of all sportswomen by extension. The use of derision put them in a situation that highlighted their "incompetence" and even increased the appeal of the postcard. Humiliation is a potential producer of arousal since, according to a certain stereotype, male desire is all the better satisfied with a subordinated woman. But that is not what is important. The discrediting of women by displaying their unsuccessful attempts to resemble men can only be understood as a reaction in fear of the masculinization of women. This was precisely a major source of apprehension for men in the 1920s, who were goaded by the memory of all the industrial jobs taken over by daughters and wives during World War I. Nothing could be more dangerous than a self-sufficient woman who no longer needed a
man! According to French women’s historian Christine Bard, everything had to be done to preserve specifically masculine realms, particularly in professional, artistic, and athletic circles. Humiliating an athletic woman was a way to flaunt the authentic manliness of sports at a time when women could aspire to compete with men. However, the derision probably targeted a certain type of woman more than just the sportswoman herself.

The cards also feature individuals who are rendered even more androgynous by the feigned aggressiveness of the postures and poses, by the priority given to combative sports, by the symbols laid bare by a semiological analysis, and even by the choice of anatomical parts revealed. As previously noted, the breast was given the most importance. The impression is not of a maternal, nourishing breast, though, but one without rounded forms that is more evocative of adolescence or the “third sex.” The hair is very short, the bellies flat, and the clothing vaguely unisex, as though the individuals portrayed were being denied the status of archetypal female or even of femme fatale. There was no lack of words for designating the “flapper” who hid behind the sportswoman: sapphist, tribade, homosexual, uranist, lesbian, "mannish woman," amazon, hermaphrodite, invert, etc. The sheer number of terms indicates how strong a preoccupation it was. The association was not fortuitous. In France, the 1920s corresponded to a boom in the visibility of feminine homosexuality, a development that was personified in the mythical figure portrayed in Victor Margueritte’s La Garçonne. His bisexual, nymphomaniac heroine did not correspond to the definition of the modern woman proclaimed by feminists any more than it did to that of the traditional woman.

Although the gender “inversion” was subversive at first, it rapidly became a fashion and a new reference for the middle classes. Women pursued their quest for thinness through treatment and dieting, flaunted what were considered as specifically masculine accessories such as cigarettes and monocles, and began to wear their hair in flapper cuts. They imitated Coco Chanel and put on trousers, shirts, and bowties. Breasts were out, and it became commonplace to bind them in order to flatten them. Some women even considered amputation! But as fashion trivialized androgyny, it only reinforced the fears of homosexuality and gender confusion, considered to be a prelude to the decline of the human race. Therefore, given the anxiety generated by women who took on masculine appearances, using the sportswoman as a subject of erotic postcards became a way of ridiculing women who were trying to undermine the gender codes. The image not only gave rise to fantasy with respect to women who were still attractive and seductive but also reassured traditional French sensitivities.

In the France of the Années Folles, the erotic postcards featuring the woman athlete shared a number of characteristics with other erotic postcards. On the face of it, they staged women in a form of instrumentalization that, depending the situation, could either enhance the beauty of body attitudes and shapes, or merely organize an unusual, amusing, or pleasing sport scenario. They were sufficiently ambiguous to risk being perceived as immoral and degrading for women or, paradoxically, as an example of how such women could bewitch, seduce and exert a fascination. And even if they were amusing and “recreational,” their purpose was still to stimulate the sexual fantasies of the purchaser. However, as it turns out, they cannot be analyzed just as another innova-
tive theme or scenario meant to guarantee arousal insofar as they did receive relatively "special" treatment. A semiological analysis shows that they involve two distinct aspects: derision and a confusion in gender codes. In that sense, the card's appeal for the observer lay less in the display of nude body parts or suggestive poses than in the social impertinence of the situation in which it placed the woman. In light of the sharp criticism directed at the development of women's sports at the time, it appears that the treatment inflicted on the sportswoman's image reflected the buildup of anxiety in post-war French society. This society, shaken in its beliefs about gender roles and yearning for a return to normal, took it out on women who exhibited (almost to the point of caricature) behavior that was considered to be appropriate for men only.

2 For example, Edmond Desbonnet, Pour être belle et le rester (Paris: Librairie athlétique, 1911), which includes 103 photographs of nude women.
5 For example, "Un jeu de boules," 1908.
9 Pet" Robert 1 dictionary, 1986 ed., s.v. "obscene".
10 Guttmann, The Erotic, 177-179.
11 Alain Fleisher, La pornographie: une idée fixe de la photographie (Paris: La Musardièr, 2000), 22.
13 The "Eiffel Tower," published in 1889 by the newspaper Le Figaro, is considered to be the first commercial French illustrated postcard. See Alain Ripert and Claude Frère, La carte postale: Son histoire, sa fonction sociale (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1983), 23.
14 Ibid., 42.
16 Bologne, Histoire.
19 Ibid.
20 Bologne, Histoire, considers that 1907 was a turning point in the history of decency.
21 Pornographic films from 1925 can be watched at the Museum of Erotism in Paris.
23 Thébaud, La Grande Guerre, 116.


Stora-Lamarre, *L'enfer de la IIIe République*, 204.


Areas of ambiguity that Helen McDonald deconstructed in her analysis of contemporary erotic art to show that they originate out of an essentially masculine desire, see Helen McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art* (London: Routledge, 2001).


Stora-Lamarre, *L'enfer de la IIIe République*, 44.


Ibid.


Encyclopédie des sports, 1924 ed., s.v. "L'éducation physique et sportive de la femme, " by G. De la Frete.

*L'Auto*, 24 November 1928.


Sabatès, *1000 Cartes Postales*. The total number of cards based on sports in the batch, the selection criteria used by the particular collector, or the number of reproductions made and how widely they were actually distributed could not be determined.


Thanks is expressed to French historian of gender Michel Zancarini-Fournel for confirming the dating, which does not tally exactly with the date provided by the postcard publisher.


As already mentioned, the absence of text on these postcards makes the last aspect irrelevant, so the analysis is limited to the iconic and plastic aspects.
For analyzing purposes, the fifty-three cards in the set were classified by series, which gave fifteen distinct groups.

The primary points of an image are located at the four intersections of the lines that separate the image into two horizontal and two vertical lines.

A term invented at the end of the nineteenth century to designate people with the anatomical characteristics of both sexes.

Concerning this point, see Bard, Les garçonnnes.