

# RCA Secret BY LIDIJA LIEGIS

A picture speaks a thousand words: it can inspire us and stir memories and emotions. Cards with messages had been sporadically created and posted by individuals since the creation of postal services. The earliest known postcard was a hand-painted design on a card, posted in London to the writer Theodore Hook in 1840 bearing the world's first adhesive postage stamp. Since the image is a caricature of postal office works, he probably created and posted the card to himself as a practical joke on the postal service.

Every year in November, around 2,500 postcards go on display at the Royal College of Art in London. Better known as RCA Secret, this is a unique annual exhibition and sale of original postcard-sized art, made by professional artists, designers and illustrators, plus current postgraduate students at the Royal College of Art.

The cards are all sold to the public in a huge sale, with every postcard costing just £45, regardless of whether it has been made by a famous name or a young art student. A maximum of four cards can be purchased per person. Proceeds raised from the sale go to the RCA Fine Art Student Award Fund, which helps emerging art students at a formative stage in their careers. To date, the sale of postcards has raised over £1 million.

Last year's event included original, hand-made postcards donated by over 1,000 artists including Sir Peter Blake, Yoko Ono, Tracey Emin, photographer David Bailey, fashion designers Paul Smith, Stella McCartney, Mary Quant and Manolo Blahnik, and animator Nick Park. Artists may choose to paint, draw, sketch or even produce a 3D sculpture as long as it's postcard-sized.

So what's the secret? Each postcard is displayed anonymously and only signed on the back, so buyers don't know the identity of the artist until they have made their purchase. Although it can help if you know the difference between a David Hockney and a Peter Blake, a lot of it is down to pure luck and many buyers don't realise whose work they have chosen until they have paid. Postcards can only be bought on a first come, first served basis, with no sealed bids or reservations in advance.

RCA Secret is not just about the big names though. The beauty is in buying something by one of the artists, taking the work home and discovering more about that particular artist. It can open your eyes to a new realm of contemporary British art. Started in 1994, it has become an established date in the British art calendar.

Many of the younger artists are postgraduates from the RCA and are exhibiting across London and internationally. Looking for talent is always a good strategy – your favourites may very well be by the art stars of the future. Above all, choose something you like and you'll enjoy it for years to come. We recommend preparing a list of cards you like in advance: the exhibition and website are open for viewing for just over a week before the sale.

To purchase a card at RCA Secret 2011, you must have an RCA Secret Collector's Number: [www.secret.rca.ac.uk](http://www.secret.rca.ac.uk)

