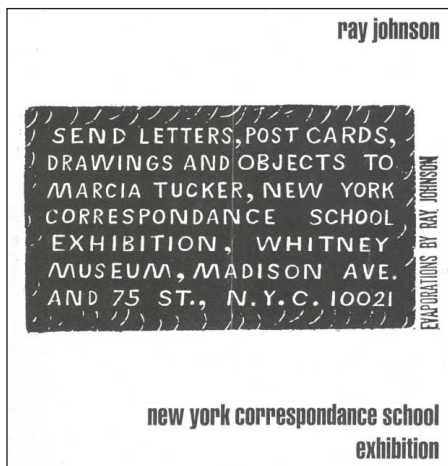


PAPER: MAIL ART



DISCOVER MORE

Do you communicate with friends by texting? Texting is useful. It's fast to do, and you can get an instant reply. Communicating by mail—on paper—is less common in the digital age; partly because it is slower. But it can still be worthwhile.



Ray Johnson invitation, 1970, Ray Johnson Estate, Courtesy Richard L. Feigen & Co.

Here is a challenge for you: Choose one of your friends and send them a piece of mail art. Mail art includes anything sent through the mail that has art on it, whether it is stickers or drawings or rubber-stamped images. Mail art usually refers to a decorated paper envelope, but it can also include what is tucked inside— a small piece of art such as a mini painting, a collage, or even a simple page of doodles. The wonderful thing about mail art is that it is a surprise for the person receiving it. It can also be fun for the person sending it.

Do a search online using the term “mail art.” You will find lots of interesting examples, and even museum collections of mail art. The so-called “father” of mail art was artist Ray Johnson (1927–1995). He was a founder of a popular mail art movement among artists in the 1960s. There have always been people who create mail art, and people continue to send mail art today. But because digital media has created so many new ways to communicate, we likely write fewer letters, send fewer cards, and send less mail through the post than in the past. So, receiving something personal in the mail (besides a bill or an advertisement!) can be an unexpected surprise. It feels (and is) different from a text message because it is something that you can hold in your hands, and save for a while or forever if you want to.

PLAN HOW YOU WILL USE PAPER

The basis of mail art is paper. Because paper is flat it is inexpensive (and easy) to mail, as opposed to sending a package. Start by collecting some friends' addresses. You will also need envelopes and stamps.

Gather some art materials: envelopes, paper, markers and colored pencils, a good glue for paper, and wide clear tape (for protecting your art if it features stickers or glued-on bits.) Collect some ephemera. Ephemera includes all kinds of paper artifacts, new or old, that were not meant to be saved and may be visually interesting in some way. Look for junk mail ads, stickers, doodles, handwritten notes, magazine images, old greeting cards, discarded books, food labels, etc. These are useful for creating an artwork; especially for making a collage (cutting up images and gluing them together on a sheet of paper.)



Mail art by György Galantai, 1981, Hungary, Courtesy of Keith Bates.



Mail Art by A.D. Eker, THE THUISMUSEUM.
Courtesy of Keith Bates.

1. Choose a paper backing for your art. Any paper will do. Large index cards are useful; or trim artist papers such as drawing or watercolor paper to a size to fit in the envelope.
2. Create and Decorate: Decide if you want to decorate both the envelope and the piece you tuck inside. Or just write a note for the inside and concentrate on decorating the envelope. Play with ideas and materials. Your mail art could be as simple as stickers of butterflies mixed with drawings of butterflies. Or it could be more complex. You can write a simple message or motto on the work. Your mail art could include any of the paper craft ideas in this packet, such as a paper cutting, a piece of handmade paper, a foldable paper sculpture, a small handmade booklet, or a pop-up card, as long as they fit in the envelope.
3. For the envelope, it's a good idea to first mark out a space lightly with pencil where you will write the address and also a space for your return address. Then you can decorate all around those areas.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

You made a piece of mail art and sent it off. Think about the process and the result.

Did you enjoy making your piece of mail art? What did you like and not like about the idea, the process, and the result?

Did you feel inspired with ideas for future mail art?

Do you like the idea of your mail art being ephemeral; something you just let go? Or do you like the idea of recording your art by taking a photo? Is there a benefit to each of those choices?

Did you hear from the recipient? (You may have to wait awhile.) What was their reaction?

WHAT'S NEXT?

Here are some ideas:

- If you enjoyed making mail art, you might decide to do it regularly. You can expand your list of recipients to more friends and relatives.
- You can make mail art-style greeting cards to have on hand for special occasions like holidays or birthdays.
- You can look for a creative friend who wants to trade mail art with you. Or, form a shared mail art group for collaborative work. Each member starts a piece of mail art and sends it to the next person on the list. That person adds something to the mail art, and so on, until the mail art returns to the original artist.