The calling card as we know it today is an invention as recent as the Age of Reason. Its use implies a certain social sophistication, even duplicity, for it is a token often left when a caller has a hunch that the object of his call is, or may prefer to seem, out. There are earlier mentions of such a token, left in a more ingenuous spirit. According to Pliny "Protogenes was living at Rhodes when Apelles landed there to see the paintings of an artist whom he knew only by reputation. Going at once to the studio, Apelles found Protogenes away, but saw an easel bearing a large panel prepared for painting. Apelles took a brush and drew on the panel a line of supreme superiority. Protogenes, on his return, instantly exclaimed: 'Apelles has been here! No one but he could make a work so absolutely.'" A name, which alone can record the less distinguishable presence of the common rest of us, can be dispensed with only by a genius whose very doodles achieve such a scratch of the lion. A kind of "proto" or "ur" calling card was developed by the Chinese, as might be expected from the intricacy of their social ceremonial, or so it is reported by two Jesuit missionaries, who wrote in 1688 that when one Chinese gentleman made a call on another he first sent in a long scroll setting forth his titles and honors. The length of such a document makes it perhaps more like a butler's prompt book.

The calling card differs in use rather than appearance from the business card, which is carried by a man who, hoping to gain by an interview, never wishes to regret not finding his host. It may be this sincerity of greed that led to the invention of the business card a generation before nonchalance devised the calling card. As business seems to have used printing almost since Gutenberg for posters, wrappers, handbills, and labels, it is odd that business cards should have come along so late. What may be the earliest one, dated 1673, lists the address and wares of a Paris merchant printed on the back of a playing card, which was always left blank in France. Once the idea was started, playing cards began to be used for everything—bookmarks, "thank you" notes, invitations to parties and even funerals. Duly inscribed and countersigned, they regularly served as banknotes (monnaie de carte) in Canada from 1685 to 1764, whenever the pay for the French troops failed to arrive from France. The notion of re-using playing cards...
must have been inevitable in a day when the lack or the expense of other diversions made card playing far commoner among all classes than it is today. The wonder is that cards were not turned to varied uses long before, since they were among the first—perhaps the very first—pictures printed on paper in Europe.

Some time elapsed before persons of quality started to write their names on playing cards as records of their visits. No such practice seems to be mentioned by Madame de Sévigné, that all-seeing appraiser of trifles, but twenty years after her death in 1696 a poem was printed describing them as a novelty in universal use:

J'ai sous Louis le Grand, commencé d'avoir cours,
Mince, long, plat, étroit, d'une étoffe peu forte. . . .
Sous mille noms divers je parois tous les jours. . . .
Civil, officieux, je suis né pour la Ville. . . .
Et, quoique fort commodé, à peine m'a-t-on vu,
Qu'aussitôt négligé, je deviens inutile.

The last two lines explain why the commonest print usually becomes the rarest.

There is a perfectly good social reason for the appearance of calling cards at just this late moment. As long as enough of feudalism survived to confine society within the walls of castle or palace, calling cards were as little needed as they would be within a large family. French high society continued to huddle in such familiar concentration until the aging of Louis XIV and the abandonment of all but sacramental pomp made Versailles so gloomy a place that numerous members of the court broke bounds and sneaked away to Paris to build themselves snug little town houses. Once they had lost the intimacy that comes from sharing one roof, of no matter how vast an acreage, they kept contact with greater formality by paying calls. One can guess the welcome that must have been given to calling cards from what a diarist says about the pleasure they caused in Florence when they were introduced there by Spanish diplomats in 1731. It seems that the Florentines took to the innovation because they had long been annoyed by the laziness or spite of lackeys that failed to tell their masters who had called.

What chance first suggested the calling card in Paris? Did some marquis, sitting in his coach before a vacant house, find it amusing to imitate his tailor by scribbling his name on the back of a playing card out of the pack that could hardly help being in his pocket? Or was finding a use for broken packs of cards the kind of pinchpenny gesture by which the very rich often justify expenditure in other directions? The origins may have been various;
A card engraved in Munich by Franz Xaver Jungwirth (1720-1790); a Roman card with a view of the Pantheon; an Italian card, in imitation of Greek vase painting, about 1770 sometimes cards were stingily clipped in two, four, even six pieces, with a name written on each, or else printed twice. Yet economy could not always have been the motive, for a Milanese family preserved (at least until recently) a fresh complete deck of playing cards, each inscribed “Le Marquis Busca” for an ancestor who had bought them in Paris. This must be the kind of “cartes pour visite” advertised by a Paris paper merchant in 1760, as in the spring of that year sixty inscribed playing cards, now in the Munich State Archives, were left on the Bavarian ambassador in Paris.

Yet in Italy the fashion had changed at least three years before from writing on the backs of playing cards to writing in specially printed little engravings, as is shown by a card engraved with a ring made of two snakes surrounding the written name of an Italian who died in Lombardy in 1757. While the calling card was an invention of French politesse, the idea of turning it into a thing of beauty arose in Italy, where Europe’s longest steady tradition of making pictures has insinuated them into every operation of life and thought. That playing cards must have continued in use long after decorated cards became the fashion, is indicated by one fantastic Italian card engraved to represent the owner’s card tossed on the top of a jumble of mixed playing cards and decorated cards.

While the Museum owns no inscribed playing cards, the engraved calling cards, a forgotten specialty of old printmaking, may be enjoyed in some abundance in a little old scrapbook which was lately acquired. The literature on prints seems to mention only three other contemporary scrapbooks of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century cards, besides our chubby little book in its homemade cover of cardboard that use has worn as smooth as eggshell. Over two hundred cards have been crammed into it by sticking two or three to each small page. Would that it had been made more ample, for time and again a card has been pulled out to make room for another.

The place or places where the book was put together may be guessed by the nationalities of the names, of which forty-four are, or seem to be, Italian, forty Spanish, thirty-two German, thirty French and nine each Russian and English. The collector’s profession is hinted at by a swarm of excellencies, ambassadors, and chargés d’affaires, and especially by one card on which is written “pour avoir
One of the cards of Étienne Félix d’Hénin de Cuvillers, possibly etched by him in Venice; a card etched by Johann Adam Klein, Vienna, 1814

l’honneur de prendre congé de Monsieur l’ambassadeur de France.” The trail leads closer still by showing the name of the Chevalier d’Hénin on five cards, from one at the beginning dated 1783 to one toward the end dated 1790 (illustrated above). This probably indicates the writer on animal magnetism, Étienne Félix d’Hénin de Cuvillers, who was in the French diplomatic service at Coblenz in 1784, London in 1785, Venice from 1786 to 1793, and Constantinople from 1793 to 1795. This career would not, however, account for the Spanish cards, which occur more or less in a group toward the end of the book, among the cards of a later type. Whoever put the book together certainly lived in the polyglot etiquette that rules whenever and wherever there is diplomatic palaver. With such an abundance of Spanish cards of about 1800 it is a pity that the book does not also contain the card which Goya painted in a bright magpie’s beak as a signature to his portrait of Don Manuel Osorio in the Bache Collection.

The Museum’s book does, however, contain a card (see p. 94) which figures in one of Casanova’s last adventures. He considered himself ill used by a Bolognese Marchese Albergati, who later left his card at Casanova’s lodgings. On inquiring why this card styled the marchese a general, he found that Albergati had picked up the title of adjutant general by getting himself made chamberlain to the King of Poland. Casanova then wrote, and the next day printed, a satire on the major general or the lieutenant colonel who lops off the belittling prefix to his rank and the man who values bought titles above inherited nobility. Though the next card that Albergati gave out made no mention of military dignities, all Bologna ever after spoke of him as the General.

Even after decorated cards became a general fashion in Europe, France seems to have produced almost as few as England. Was this because persons of quality did not care to vie with the French and British tradesmen who issued superbly fancy trade cards? Or did French and English society need fewer calling cards because each country had one great capital city where all polite society could meet at some season each year? It is certainly a fact that most calling cards before 1800 were printed in Italy and Germany, where society moved about among many small towns. In Italy there was the added incentive of a flourishing trade for tourists, who usually need cards more than stay-at-homes. Crowned heads, whose cards are very rare, need them indeed only when traveling, as one is reminded by an advertisement of 1912 stating that a certain firm which printed cards “had been selected for this service by royalty stopping in Paris.”

Luckily over a third of the cards in the Museum’s little scrapbook are Italian, for Italy designed the greatest variety of them, from the soberest frame to the most frivolously inhabited landscape. The endless inventiveness
of these Italian cards is spiritedly touched off by a Lombard poet about 1765: “Your great name may blaze in plain majesty or it may be engraved on the picture of an antique stone. Or would you prefer to contemplate your family arms uplifted and sublime, while here a ramping lion roars, there a thunder-bearing eagle spreads his wings, and yonder drums, standards, lances, and swords, or scepters, diadems, robes, and ermine tumble in an apt cascade.” These allegorical caprices sometimes came in unexpectedly handy, as is shown by a letter from an engraver in Leghorn to a Marchese Trivulzio in Milan in 1766. The engraver was not sure if the name were Trivulzio or Trivulzi, so he left off the e as it might look as though the cupid who was represented carving the name on a stone “had not yet got around to cutting the last letter.”

Cards designed to special order, like Trivulzio’s, were created for the same minority who hedge their individuality nowadays by sending out specially designed Christmas cards. But while the Christmas cards have the advantage of being expended in one season, the special calling cards must have bored the people who had to keep on handing out the same old picture year after year. Yet it cost money to change, if the prices charged were anything like the £20 that Lady Bessborough had to pay Bartolozzi in 1796 for engraving her card, or “visiting ticket,” to use a phrase on a contemporary engraver’s notice. Some of the Italian nobility, who have forever proliferated in their ancestral palazzi like swallows in a barn, managed to reconcile exclusiveness with economy by printing only the family name and reserving a blank space before it for all the generations to write in their various given names. The common run of mankind wrote or printed their names on cards bought out of stock, just like the common run of Christmas card users today. The practice became so usual that from about 1780 to the end of the century calling cards were sold in big sheets or sets of frames, landscapes, or views to be cut apart by the purchaser. In 1791 a publisher advertised a little book of Roman views “each the size of a large calling card, and may be cut up for such use,” which must mean cards like the little view of the Pantheon on page 95, inscribed with the name of Prince Galitzin. This friend of Voltaire’s, who was Russian ambassador in Paris and The Hague, was not the only man who found that calling cards with Italian views made the ideal souvenir of the Grand Tour; they packed flat, were sometimes as cheap as postcards at forty cents a hundred and impressed the folks back home.

This very cheapness and plenty may have helped to kill the pictorial card shortly after the French Revolution, when the vogue for white rooms, white muslin slips, and Parian marble turned the calling card into a frosty little square on which a mere name nests in an embossed cake icing of nymphs or a garland. The restoration of Bourbons to many of the thrones of Europe, however, brought a
revival of everything that recalled the safe old times—cabriole furniture, full skirts, and decorated calling cards. For some reason or other Belgium produced a vast number of the decorated cards dating from the 1830's to the 1850's, when the romantic right to one's own notions inspired more caprices than ever before, and lithography made it cheap to create new designs in case one were to regret some extremity of whim. These Belgian cards, printed on glazed cardboard (*carte porcelaine*) in rainbow blends of silver, gold, and bronze, are well represented, along with almost every other variety of calling card, in the rich and human collection of ephemeral printing that Mrs. Bella C. Landauer has generously built up for the Museum. Her collection has furnished the illustrations on page 97 and one on page 96.

These selfconsciously personal lithographed cards were as much the sign of a cult of individuality as was the fashion for dog-earing cards left in person. In 1831 some of the cards that had gathered in the Paris house of the Comte Joseph d'Estourmel during his absence were forwarded to him in Rome. On opening the package he was puzzled to find many cards turned up at the corner until a friend explained that this meant they had not been left by a lackey. "Ah," said d'Estourmel, "Signs of the Real Presence." In 1867 a Paris printer sold cards with polite abbreviations printed at each corner, so that any one of four messages could be conveyed in code by dog-earing. There was P.C. for *Pour Condoléance*, P.P.C. for *Pour Prendre Congé*, P.R. for *Partie Rémise*, and a smiling N. P. for *N'Oubliez Pas*. Could token friendship go further?

After the decorated card had fallen into final disuse in Europe it hit the United States where, like measles striking an adult, it took a more violent form. Our embossed cards of the 1840's were as glossy and elaborate as those made abroad, and in the 1880's chromolithography embellished the embossing. We then developed a kind of card that seems to have been peculiar to us, in which the name is covered by a bright paper flap that often presents a hand languidly extending violets and moss roses or other vivid and sentimental vegetation (see p. 97). One enterprising firm developed a double flap—the upper one disclosing a girl's head and the lower one the name. If even this did not satisfy at thirty-five cents a dozen, the printer advertised, "Instead of the ladies' pictures we will put your own photograph on 12 of these cards for 60¢. Send your photograph or tin-type to copy from." Most characteristically, we Americans seem always to have been sold our decorated cards from stock catalogues and to have had nothing printed to individual order except the bare name. The surviving abundance of gaudy mass-produced cards shows how wide were the circles in which they made life gayer, even though they were not carried by "nice people like ourselves." Indeed, some of them may have been bought, not to use when visiting, but to paste in the scrapbooks which were then the rage, for one such scrapbook has yielded a card that represents a hand holding out the card of Lizzie Post, its upper left corner turned down, with the encircling inscription: "My card and my compliments. Please give yours in exchange." The decorated calling card was clearly on its way to becoming a curiosity.

In time, indeed, the whole world knuckled under to the good form of trite script on flat pasteboard. The completeness of the surrender was but driven home by a German attempt in 1908 to revive the gay diversity of old days by offering generous prizes for the best cards to be designed for the Crown Princess of Prussia and Princess John George of Saxony. When thousands of drawings were submitted hopes ran high that official patronage from two such *Hoheiten* would re-establish a bygone mode, as though governments could decree fashions by act of legislature. Once their Serene Highnesses had awarded the prizes, they did not even have the prize designs printed, much less leave them on their friends. It had been better to let the dead bury the dead. What if the silly, pleasant little cards are not for our iron times, they still serve to remind us that there was once an age that could afford the urbanity of being amused by the other fellow's whim and difference.