

25 March 1916 “Wounded Men at the Collection Point.” Soldiers’ letters were strictly censored during World War I to maintain morale at home and prevent espionage. Illustrations became a popular way to circumvent the censors, thus many of Otto Schubert’s trench postcards depict the tragedies of war like this one of injured soldiers. However, Schubert also illustrated scenic landscapes of northern France and soldiers reading the newspaper, despite the war’s bitter realities.

All photos courtesy of Irene Guenther.



A Surprise Discovery: Making Art History Public Art

By Mercedes Del Riego

Founder of the University of Houston’s Art History Department and Public Art program, Peter Guenther, and his wife, Andrea, died a few short months apart. “I should not have been surprised given the deep love they still felt for one another after fifty-eight years of marriage,” their daughter Irene Guenther wrote in the preface to her book, *Postcards from the Trenches: A German Soldier’s Testimony of the Great War*. Irene, who is a history professor in the UH Honors College, recalled searching bookcases in their home one last time at two in the morning for any sentimental things she might have overlooked before



the house was sold that morning at nine. Sure enough, she had missed two large envelopes that had fallen flat on the top of the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. What she uncovered in one of the envelopes were eighty postcards dating from November 1915 to May 1916, hand-painted with accompanying text, by a German soldier named Otto Schubert.

Irene spent eight years researching and writing a book about this young soldier/artist and how her father had come to possess the postcards. With just a month before her manuscript deadline, she found a letter in her father’s files between the artist’s second wife and Peter, who planned to mount an exhibit of the postcards. Irene rushed to send a letter to the artist’s wife and family and received by email permission to publish the book from Schubert’s daughter and his wife, who died the following day. If that was not serendipitous enough, with only three days remaining to turn in the manuscript, Guenther was double-checking Schubert’s art oeuvre, which spanned almost sixty years, when, she recalled, “I discovered that he illustrated my grandfather’s poetry book in 1920. And I just ... I had goosebumps all over me because I can’t think of [a better example] of overlap between professional and personal [life].”

25 November 1915 “The Village Beauty.” Beginning on the postcard’s back and continuing to the front, Schubert wrote to his beloved Irma, lamenting his lack of mail from her for two days, while also wishing her well. He reflected on his second winter at the front and his fond memories of classes at the art academy prior to being drafted, before closing with, “... take from my heart a thousand greetings, from your Otto.”



Schubert titled this woodcut he did in the 1920s Irena, which may have been a reference to the goddess of peace, Eirene.

Marking the centennial of the end of World War I, the book was released in 2018. Soon after, the BBC broadcast an interview with Guenther across Europe. “About a day after that interview,” she recalled, “I received an email from the grandson of Otto Schubert ... telling me that he didn’t know anything about his grandfather, that all of those records had been destroyed with the bombing of Dresden in World War II, and that he was forever grateful to learn more about him.” Schubert survived both world wars, but his first wife, Irma, the recipient of his trench postcards, was killed in the 1945 Dresden bombing. Additionally, Schubert lost his son on the Russian Front, while his two daughters fled. Irene explained, “When he climbed out of the rubble, he was in the Soviet Zone. So from that time on [until he died in 1970], he was in East Germany, on the [Soviet] side of the wall, and that’s why it seems nobody in the art world knows anything about him.”

Another moment of synchronicity happened when a friend called Guenther from Berlin to let her know that one of Schubert’s rare surviving woodcuts from the 1920s was being auctioned. Her friend excitedly told her, “It’s a woodcut of a young woman holding a big bunch of flowers, and he titled it ‘Irena,’” which is Irene’s name in German,

but “Eirene” is also the goddess of peace. The peace that was desperately hoped for after the devastating war.

In addition to publishing her book, Guenther collaborated with Dr. Marion Deshmukh to mount exhibitions of the postcards, artwork, and trench art of both American and German World War I soldiers in Houston, Washington, D.C., Berlin, and Salzwedel. Just as her father had done before her, Irene Guenther made the important connections between art and history and humanity, spreading the same joy and love for art to UH students, readers, and anyone who appreciates creative expression. **HH**

Mercedes Del Riego earned her bachelor’s degree in history from the University of Houston. Born in a lush tropical valley of Cuba, she lived in the Houston area for over twenty years before moving to Austin. A true antiquarian, when she is not flipping through old newspaper clippings, she is filling her sketchbook or caring for cats and dogs at the animal hospital where she works.



15 December 1915 “Small Village in France.” Schubert wrote, “Dear Irma! Many thousand greetings. Your Otto Just write me a lot. No letter from you for so long. Yesterday I received the field postcards. I also send a card to your brother. I’m really fed up with life!!!”



24 January 1916 “Evening Mood at the Front”



16 February 1916 “Peaceful Village in the Ardennes.”

In 2022, Irene Guenther and her husband visited the French countryside Schubert had painted. They were moved that the landscape had not changed until, she said, “you looked very closely and saw small crosses here and there across farmers’ fields (all marked with World War I dates), craters overgrown with trees and shrub, and so on. The colors, too, were eerily similar. We felt like we were following in his unit’s footsteps.”