

# Lesbian Relationships on Postcards

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## Background

Tracing a lesbian history is a difficult task, as it begins even before the word “lesbian” was established as a label for women who are attracted to other women. Not every lesbian woman has labeled themselves as a “lesbian,” as the term did not exist as a category until the 1800s when the word was first used by sexologist Havelock Ellis. However, lesbian history traces further back, stretching all the way to Ancient Greece to Sappho, who is regarded as the first designated as the first lesbian and first lesbian poet. Lesbian relationships between women have frequently been regarded as close, passionate, female friendships, escaping the scrutiny of gay relationships between men. This is especially applicable to relationships between feminine-presenting women, as masculine women have been repeatedly stereotyped as lesbians in history and even into the modern century.

Early 20th-century postcards are a useful medium for examining the otherwise taboo lesbian relationships because they were accessible, everyday artifacts of everyday culture that were also subtly subversive. These postcards are representations of how lesbian women have been stereotyped and perceived throughout history, so they are a cultural artifact of lesbian history.

This research examines different postcards depicting relationships between women to analyze the rhetorical strategies utilized to encode or create plausible deniability of lesbian relationships. The postcards feature a wide variety of different types of images, and each has a relationship to lesbian culture, whether overtly or subtly. This research reflects the ambiguity of lesbian relationships throughout queer history, as similar to lesbian figures and couples, the lesbian label may not be strictly applied to the women featured in these postcards. Looking at historical postcards, many of the images encoded lesbianism through visual strategies that employed plausible deniability of lesbian relationships. However, other postcards included bold, unapologetic visual depictions of lesbian relationships. Together, they provide insight into subversive representations of lesbian women throughout history.

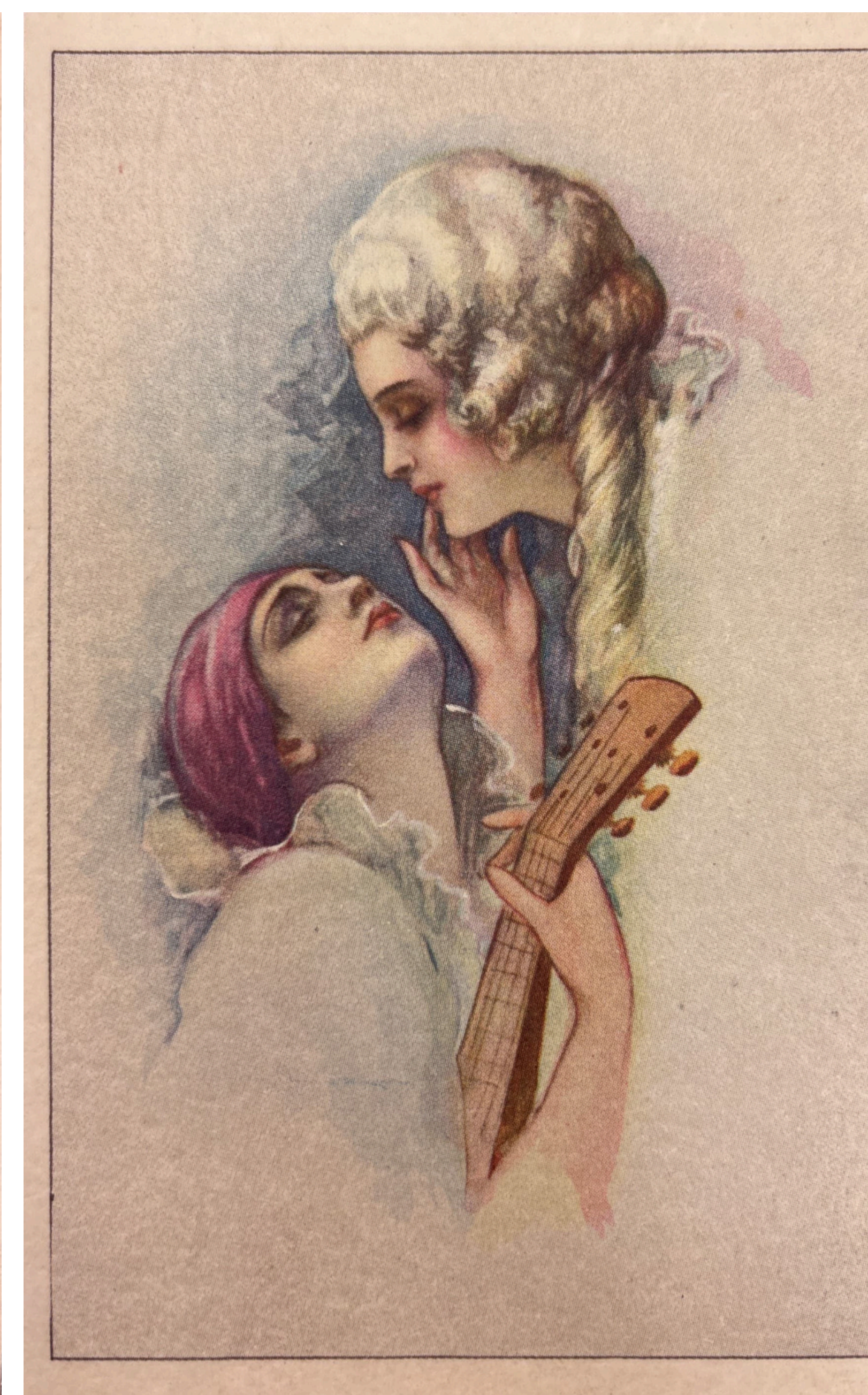


## Methods

- I began by searching online through second-hand websites to find postcards that depict lesbian relationships.
- Next, I used my search to develop my central research question: how do postcards use visual strategies to either encode or create plausible deniability of lesbian relationships?
- Based on the number of postcards that you found, I inductively identified these visual strategies:
  1. Sapphic imagery.
  2. Ambiguity.
  3. Childhood relationships.
  4. Feminine lesbian stereotypes.
  5. Masculine lesbian stereotypes.
  6. Romantic illustrations.
- Then I conducted secondary source research for sources about lesbian history, lesbian relationships, and lesbian stereotypes in order to frame and analyze my primary research on the visual representations on the postcards.

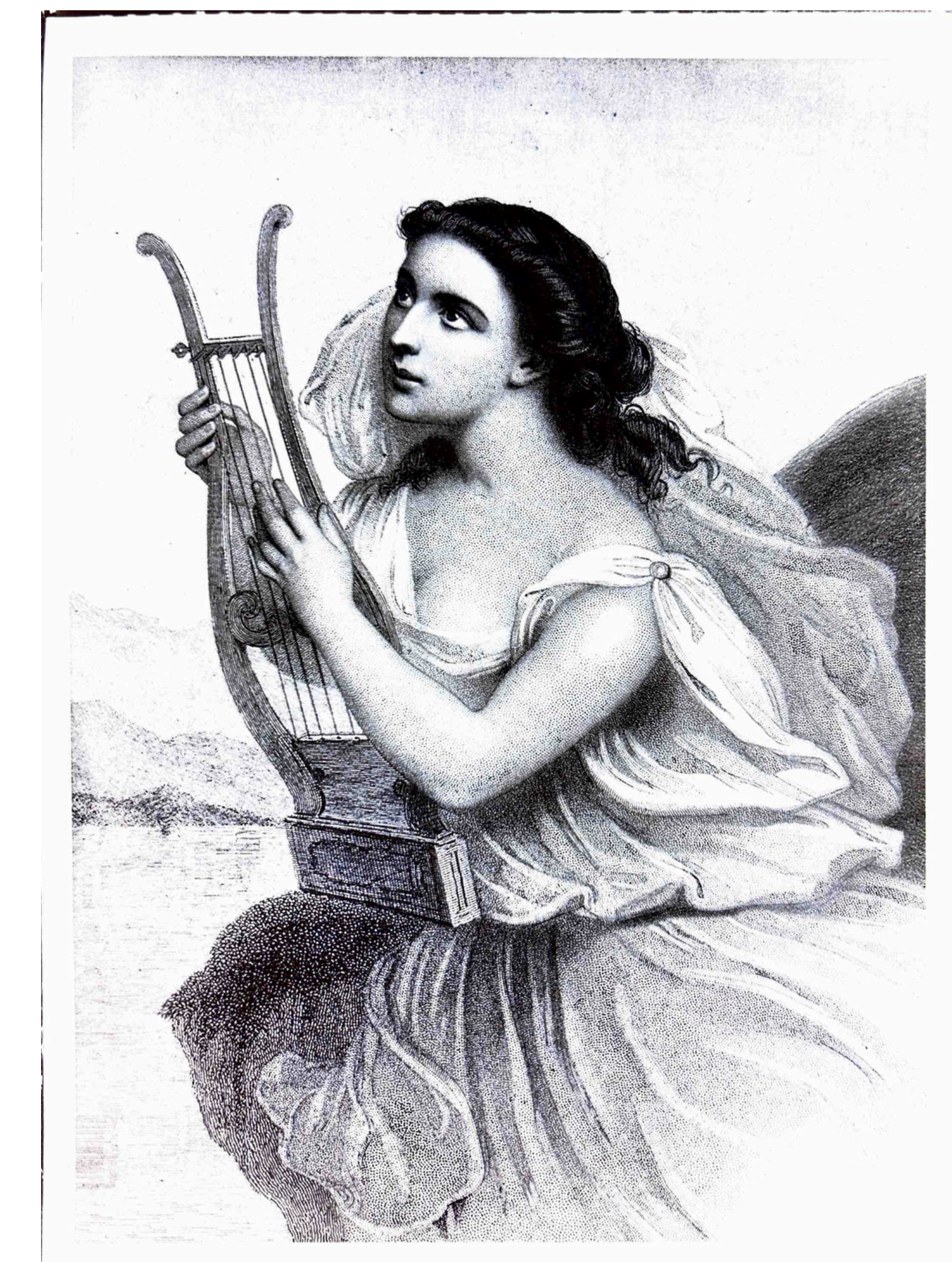
## Central Research Question

“What visual strategies are present on early twentieth-century postcards that either encode or create plausible deniability of lesbian relationships?”



## Conclusion

- The Sappho card encodes lesbianism for Sappho’s importance to lesbian culture.
- Cards with masculine lesbians encoded lesbianism in their illustrations.
- The cards depicting feminine lesbians were the most overt in encoding lesbian relationships.
- The cards with childlike imagery reinforced and subverted predatory rhetoric about lesbians.
- The cards of romantic illustrations primarily encode plausible deniability of lesbian relationships.
- The cards depicting ambiguous relationships encode the most plausible deniability of lesbian relationships.
- Further research can be conducted on a larger sample of cards to analyze more representations of lesbians on early 20th-century postcards.



## References



This QR code links to the full exhibit I have curated for the FSU Postcard Archive, including a references section.