



CLASSIC FRANCE: POSTAL HISTORY OF THE CERES AND NAPOLEON ISSUES OF 1849-75

This synoptic exhibit of selected pages from a larger collection surveys French postal history with the stamps issued in 1849-75. France's first stamps, issued January 1, 1849, used the head of Ceres, Roman goddess of grain. In 1852, Louis Napoleon became president and issued two stamps with his portrait. On declaring himself emperor in 1853, Napoleon used the same head for the Empire stamps. These issues were imperforate until an 1862 series of perforated stamps with new low values for printed matter. Napoleon added an olive leaf laureate for the 1863-70 issue.

The 1870-71 Franco-Prussian War brought the Empire's fall and a return to Ceres. Perforated stamps were issued by the government in Paris during the Siege of Paris. A government in exile in Bordeaux issued an imperforate locally printed series. Four values of the Paris stamps were issued in 1872-75 with larger numerals.

The domestic postal history is complex with many changes in issues, regimes, rates and the services provided and the effect of the war on French soil. All the domestic rates and their changes are shown including first days, the rare 1 franc vermillion and the scarce 5 franc Napoleon which was used on valuable registered letters. Most of the periodical rates are very scarce.

The Siege of Paris led to the world's first regular air mails sent by balloon out of Paris from September 1870 through January 1871. There were also attempts to use submerged canisters (boules) to send mail from outside the siege area down the river Seine into Paris. Letters were smuggled in and out of Paris too. There is also a posted receipt for pigeon mail.

The uses abroad in military and maritime mails reflect the rich fabric of postal networks in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. France's foreign bureaus, agencies and consular post offices were present on five continents excepting only Australia and Antarctica. As shown in this exhibit, there were many of them in the Middle East and southern Mediterranean countries as well as the Caribbean area, Mexico, South America and eastern Asia.

The military mails reflect the army and naval expeditions in Italy, the Crimean War, in West Africa, the Mexican Wars, Indo-China, China, Italy and the Franco-Prussian War. Some others are found in destinations of mail to colonial forts such as French Guiana and New Hebrides.

This exhibit shows an uncommonly wide variety of foreign destinations with varying rates and maritime routes. Many of those rates, both direct and forwarding, were paid by scarce to rare mixed frankings of French stamps with issues of other countries.