Variations a la Française

by "Napoleon"
napoleon@voyager.net

Those who read the Canadian Philatelist's series on French cancellations saw a lot of information on cancellations, many of which carried no noticeable value premium. But printing varieties usually do sell for more than the basic stamp. This article is a chance to read about French varieties and their values. As it's easier to spot a variety if one has seen a copy of the stamp, this article illustrates early French varieties using images of actual stamps, accumulated from various sources. To the reader with lots of early French stamps, I wish you good hunting!

The price multiples given for each stamp are the price of the variety divided by the price of the normal stamp, using prices from the 1997 Yvert et Tellier Volume 1 catalog. This is a basic French catalog, not a specialized version. With one exception, all stamps shown were available for sale at a normal discount from Scott's Standard Postage Stamp Catalog prices.

The first variety is on the 20 centime blue from the 1853 imperforate Emperor Louis Napoleon stamps. In the variation, the "E" in "POSTES" is missing the bottom bar and looks like an "F" (Fig. 1) The variation only exists on Type I (in which the two lines in the hair curl below the "R" of "EMPIRE" are so close they appear to be one line). The ordinary stamp catalogues at 7 francs used. The variety's catalogue price is 500 francs, a multiple of seventy! The large price multiple does not carry over to the unused stamp where the multiple is only 5.4. The price differential between the unused normal stamp and the variety is, however, a large amount--5,900 francs.

Figure 1

In 1863, Emperor Louis Napoleon is given a laurel wreath on a new issue, and a cigarette on some copies of the 1 centime stamp. The variation looks like a cigarette in Louis' mouth and smoke drifting across the bottom of his beard (Fig. 2). The used stamp multiple on this variety is sixty, with the ordinary stamp being 100 francs. The dealer with the stamp had marked it as being the variety but priced for only the value created by the red "printed matter" cancellation. The multiple for the unused stamp is one hundred, and the difference in price between the ordinary stamp and the variety is 17,325 francs, a tidy sum at the current exchange rate!
In the same laurel wreath issue, the 20 centime blue comes with a white growth on Louis Napoleon's nose (Fig. 3). The multiple for the used stamp is almost ninety. This stamp is another one where the unused multiple is somewhat low, being 6.7. Still, there is a difference of 8,500 francs between the unused ordinary stamp and the variation.

In 1871, France continued the perforated Head of Ceres stamps first issued in 1870. These were new values to complete replacement of the Napoleon-with-laurel-wreath stamps whose removal was delayed by the Franco-Prussian War. The 1 centime olive green occurs with a large break in the bottom frame line (Fig. 4). On a used stamp this break carries a modest multiple of about four with the multiple for the unused stamps about 2.5.

Several denominations of this set come with a thin line below the bottom frame line. On an unused 5 centime green stamp, the variety is about twelve times the price of the normal stamp (Fig. 5). The multiple for the unused variety is only 1.5.

The twenty-five centime blue stamp comes in three types. One has a horizontal blue bar across the white border between the top center panel and the upper right corner ornament (Fig. 6). The used stamp is 6 francs, while the used variety is 175 francs, a multiple of almost 30. The multiple for the unused stamp is less than 2.

There are three major varieties of the 40c orange perforated Ceres stamp. In two plate positions, the number "4" was damaged and retouched. As this variety is listed in Scott's, there is no reason to expect to obtain the variety inexpensively. But there is a variety missing the bottom frame line, and this catalogues at ten times the value of the basic used stamp (Fig. 7). The multiple for the unused stamp is below two. (This variety is not catalogued in the basic Yvert et Tellier but is listed in the specialized edition.) The third variety lacks the lower left corner of the design (Fig. 8). The multiple for the used stamp is ten and the unused
The first French issue of the 20th century shows Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. One of the more interesting variations is on the 4 centime brown (Fig. 9). During the 19th century, AFFRANCHISSEMENTS appears in circular date stamps when a stamp pays a fee for a special mail service. In the 20th century, the same term, as AFFRANCHts, becomes the usual pre-cancellation. The Liberty, Equality, Fraternity issue itself comes in two types. Type I has only one line of shading in the gown below the "E" of FRANCAISE" while Type II has two lines in the same place. (See Fig. 9a for the location.)

The 4 centime stamp without precancel exists only as Type I. The precancel exists in both Type I and Type II. Type I with precancel is 6 francs and Type II is 115 francs, a nice multiple of almost twenty. In this case, one prefers unused stamps--the unused Type II is 3,000 francs while the Type I is only 22 francs.

In 1900 and 1902, France issues two sets honoring the "Declaration of the Rights of Man." In both sets, the 15 centime stamp has a variety. The 1900 issue has a square background for the numerals of value. The variety has a very long nose on the numeral "1" such that the nose touches the frame line (Fig. 10). As usual, there is a significant multiple for the used variety (80 francs versus 3 francs), but a much lower one for the unused one (350 francs versus 55 francs).

The 1902 issue's variety is a long tail on the numeral "5" (Fig. 10a). The tail curves up and reaches the frame line of the shield which serves as background for the denomination. The used multiple is forty; the unused multiple is a similar sixty.

Also in 1900, France issues the first of the Liberty and Peace stamps designed by Merson. A variety occurring on several denominations is the absence of the center color (Fig. 11). For the 50 centime brown and gray stamp (Fig. 11a), the used variationcatalogues at 750 francs, while the ordinary stamp is 10 francs, yielding a nice multiple of 75. The multiple for the unused stamp is about 4.5, but the differential between normal and variety still is high--2,550 francs.
Only one Liberty and Peace denomination was issued as a precancel. While not there is no plate flaw or difference in type, the AFFRANCHISSEMENTS precancellation itself carries a large multiple for a used stamp. The pre-canceled 45 centime green and blue has a multiple of twenty-six (10 francs normal, 260 francs variation) used, but less than 1.5 unused (150 francs normal, 275 francs variation).

Issued along with the 45 centime, the 2 franc orange and blue has a variety priced at 2,000 francs, well above the 3 franc value of the normal stamp. The variation is a break in the lower right corner of the shield-shaped background for the denomination (Fig. 12, 12a). The multiple for the unused stamp is only twenty-five and pales in comparison with the used-stamp multiple of almost seven hundred. This is another variety, however, with a large price differential between the unused basic stamp and the variety--7,675 francs!

In 1903, France issued the first of its lined-sower stamps. The design has a background of horizontal lines and a foreground of a woman sowing seeds. The 75 centime lilac-rose stamp comes in the normal design with only one horizontal white line between the bottom of the fold of the gown and the top of the "c" of "75 c" (3 francs used) and a redesign with two white lines between (1,000 francs used) (Fig. 13, 13a). The unused multiple is a healthy one hundred forty-five with a differential of almost 5,700 francs.

Soon after release of the lined-sower stamps, France released similar stamps with a solid-color background. The 35 centime violet with thick letters and numerals (Scott Type II), comes with both the first and last "S" in "POSTES" the same (6 francs used) and with the first S retouched such that the bottom loop extends distinctly upward (260 francs used, (Fig. 14). The multiple for the unused stamp is seven, with the variety priced at 425 francs.

In 1930, France honored the centenary of its conquest of Algeria with a stamp. On some of the stamps, the French word "ALGERIE" appears to be "ALCERIE" (Fig. 15). The normal used stamp is three francs, while the variety is 450. The unused numbers are 30 francs for the normal stamp and 1,000 for the variety. Both the used multiple (150) and the unused multiple (33) make this stamp some hunting.

We'll close with the first French Colonies general issue. The 5 centime green eagle stamp normally has parentheses...
around the "5 +" in the lower right of the circular band of text. This stamp is priced at 100 francs used and 160 francs unused. There is, however, a variety without the parentheses (Fig. 16, 16a). The variety is priced at 750 francs used and 1,000 francs unused, creating multiples of 7.5 used and 6.25 unused.

You'd have to find many copies of most of these stamps to pay for a world cruise, but the fun is in the hunt. If you are going to be looking at early French stamps anyway, you might as well keep your eye out for bargains. But remember the CP articles on French cancellations--the postal marking seems always to sit on the spot you need to see to find a variety.

As a reminder, only four of the varieties shown have as high multiples for unused stamps as for used ones. With five of the stamps, the unused multiple is so low as to have little real significance.