

I, a Letter from Avignon



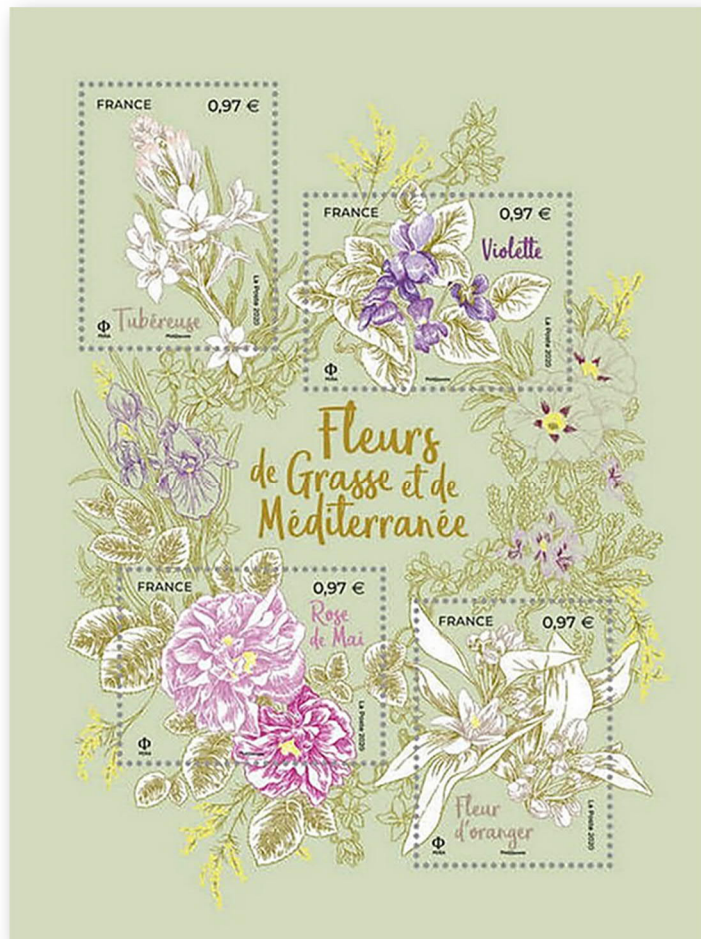
I was posted on April 30, 1859, in Avignon, a city that at the time thrived on the trade of wine, liqueurs, and agricultural products. My sender was the trading house J. E. Giraud Fils, a respected firm in the Vaucluse region. The oval company stamp in blue ink on my front bears witness to my origin, and along the lower edge of my sheet, in fine embossing, one can read: J. Giraud Fils – Négociant à Avignon.

I had been written already on March 22, 1859, on pre-printed company stationery — carefully and in a businesslike manner. Several weeks passed between my creation and my posting; perhaps I was set aside for a time because a shipment was still pending, or because several letters were to be sent together. In everyday commercial practice, this was nothing unusual: letters were often prepared in advance and then dispatched along with other documents once shipments were ready or a reply seemed forthcoming.¹

¹ Jean-René Vidal, *Commerce et négociants en Provence au XIX^e siècle* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 1998), 52–58

The Giraud family traded in wines, spirits, colonial goods, and plant essences produced in Provence or imported through Marseille. Their business was solid and well connected within the region — not a large enterprise, but one with stable commercial relationships, especially with craftsmen and manufacturers in the south of France.

I was a business letter, not a personal one. My lines were probably written by an employee or a family member — concise, polite, and to the point. Perhaps I concerned the price of a shipment, terms of payment, or the announcement of a delivery. Such correspondence was part of the daily rhythm of trade.



My journey took me to Grasse, to the Cavallier brothers, whose names are clearly stated in my address: “*Messieurs Cavallier frères = Cavallier, Parfumeurs et Distillateurs à Grasse (Var).*”²

The Cavallier brothers operated a distillery and perfume factory there. By that time, Grasse was already the most important center of French perfume production. In the surrounding countryside grew roses, jasmine, lavender, and orange blossoms, which were distilled into fragrant essences in the town’s workshops — later including the May rose and jasmine used for *Chanel No. 5*. The Cavallier brothers were among the established firms whose roots went back to the eighteenth century and who, in the nineteenth, introduced new industrial methods. Their products — essential oils and aromatic bases — were traded throughout Europe.

It is likely that I referred to a shipment of alcohol or raw materials. Perfume makers required pure wine alcohol to dilute and preserve their essences, and this often came from the Rhône region. In this way, I connected two characteristic branches of the Provençal economy: the wine and alcohol trade of Avignon and the fragrance production of Grasse.³

I was not an envelope, but a single sheet of paper, neatly folded so that my contents would remain protected and sealed with a small drop of red wax — a practice still common in southern French business correspondence of the time. When I was finally taken to the post, I received my blue 20-centime stamp bearing the portrait of Napoleon III. This stamp belonged to the first imperial definitive series (*Empire français, effigie de Napoléon III tête nue*) and covered the postage for a simple domestic letter weighing up to 7.5 grams.⁴



² Pierre Roggero, *L'industrie de la parfumerie à Grasse: XVIII^e–XX^e siècle* (Nice: Éditions Serre, 2007), 84–93.

³ Alain Corbin, *Le miasme et la jonquille: L'odorat et l'imaginaire social, XVIII^e–XIX^e siècle* (Paris: Flammarion, 1986), 176–180.

⁴ Jean-François Chevalier, *Histoire postale de la France: Des origines à 1876* (Paris: Éditions Bertrand Sinais, 2016), 140–147.



My round date stamp on the front — “AVIGNON – 30 AVRIL 59” — came from the local post office. A second, rectangular auxiliary stamp, “APRÈS LE DÉPART,” indicates that I was handed in after the last mail dispatch and could therefore only be sent the following day with the next mail coach. My route led through Marseille, where I received the transit mark of the city’s main post office before continuing on toward Grasse. By the 1850s, the French postal system was well organized: mail coaches carried letters along fixed routes, and railway lines were increasingly taking over the longer distances. Between Avignon and Grasse, a

postal journey of about 220 kilometers, delivery at that time would have taken roughly two to three days.⁵

When I arrived in Grasse, I was sorted at the local post office and handed to a messenger for delivery. I was probably opened in the office of the Cavallier brothers — among papers, glass bottles, and small samples of fragrance materials. Perhaps one of the brothers, Jean-Baptiste or Louis, read my lines, noted a reply, and then placed me among the filed business correspondence.

Nothing of my content has survived, yet my exterior tells enough: I bear the clear handwriting of a commercial clerk, the crisp stamps of the imperial post, and the trace of a connection between two regions bound together by trade. Today, I am one of those countless documents that reflect the everyday life of

French commerce in the nineteenth century. I am not an important record, nor the bearer of great events — but I stand for a functioning, reliable world of trade, for trust committed to paper, for communication that traveled the country roads and was sealed with a drop of wax.



⁵ Archives Nationales de France, *Direction générale des postes (1850–1870), Série F/90* (Paris: Archives Nationales de France).