

by Alessandro Arseni

The Valentines

In 1415 Charles d'Orleans, confined in the Tower of London, passed his time by writing romantic verses for his wife in France

Switzerland



Great Britain



In our modern world subject to sudden and fast changes some rituals are perpetuated centuries after centuries standing eternal against the attacks of time. Between those rituals the declaration of love holds a place of honour. Anyone faces this crucial moment at least once in a lifetime. It is almost an obligatory stage because the loved person always demands some kind of commitment. Sighs, flowers, presents and looks are not enough.

Today the media are extraordinary and among the youngsters it is very common to declare love via text messages or emails, while our ancestors had only the post. The discretion of a letter could be the only mean to find the way into the heart of the loved person. The declaration of love via post requested an adequate presentation and therefore the letter had to be really special to surprise and gain the love of the addressee. The problem was how to enclose the strength and enchantment of a feeling in a letter, which could amaze and also seal the authenticity of love even from many kilometres far away.

The answer was the Valentine letter which was a mixture of poetry, flowers decorated on the paper and a lovely object to keep as a gift. The lover imagined the hoping and dreaming look of the loved person when she received the letter. It was a special moment as it was for the lover when he looked for

the Valentine letter and found one, thinking that it would be opened by his "Valentine".

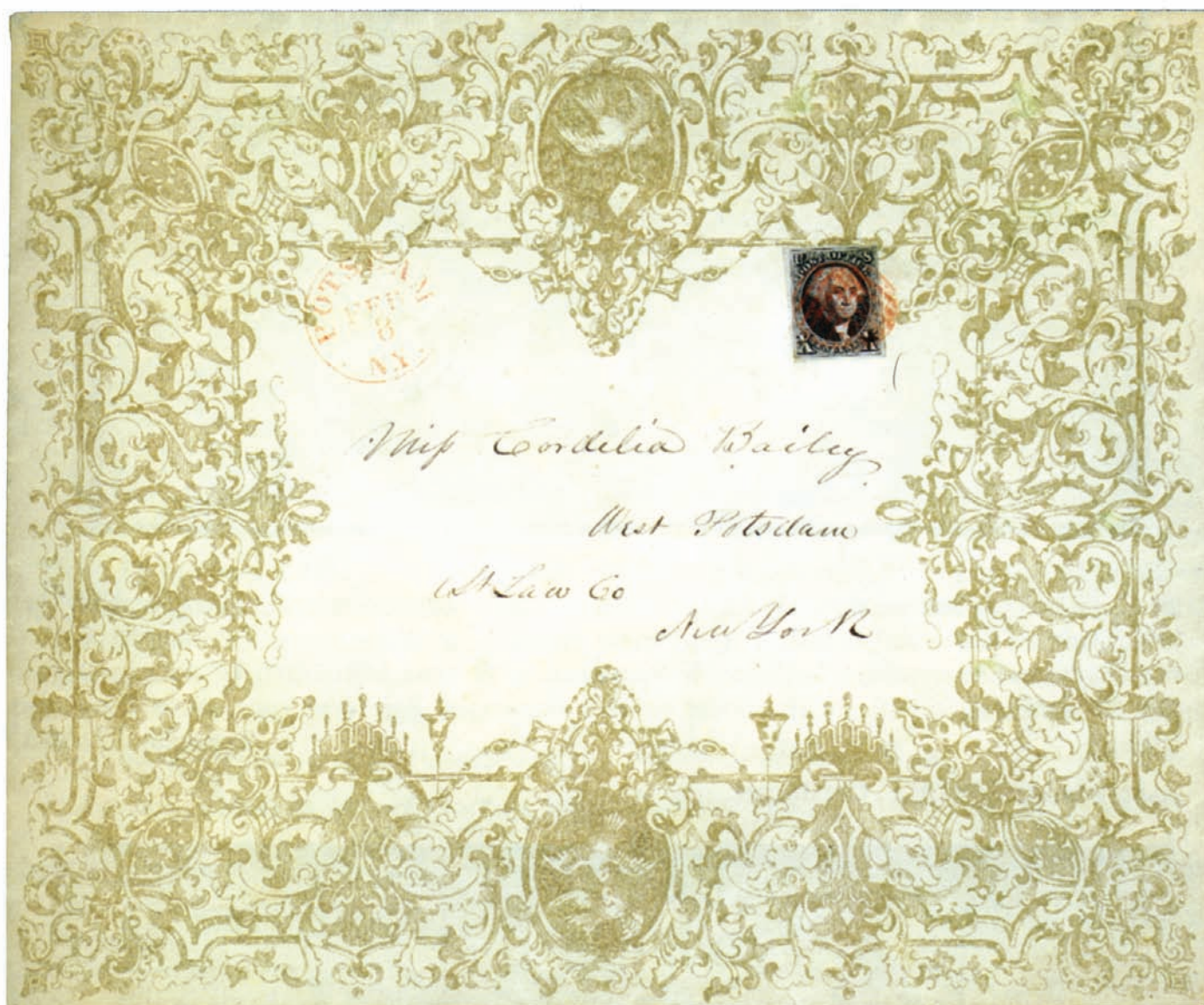
Collectors have always called "Valentine letters" envelopes or letters with flowers, decorations and love symbols which were sent to declare love or to propose. A Valentine letter is a letter sent on Valentine's Day or the day before or the day after. They were frequently used in the 19th century. They are collected for their lovely look, which distinguish themselves from common envelopes. They gave refinement to a collection. There were many varieties: declaration of eternal love, correspondent love, passion, proposal, courtship, pathetic appeal and desperate hearts.

Valentine's wishes have been very popular since the Medieval Times, when lovers sang and acted their romantic words. In 1500 love declarations were sent also by post. In England, where this ritual was very fashionable, Charles of Valois, Duke of Orleans, wrote the first Valentine letters. In 1415 he was imprisoned in the Tower of London after the defeat of France in the battle of Azircourt. He wrote passionate love letters to his wife Bonne de Armagnac during his long years of jail. Today about 30 love letters written by Charles of Orleans are kept with the royal documents at the British Library in London and they are considered the first Valentine letters in the human history.

Top left: Valentine cover from Wald, Switzerland, March. 11, 1844, addressed to Zürich, franked with 6 Rp., ornated with cupids representing Arts, Nature and a couple of lovers.

Center and below left: Embossed valentine cover from Southampton, England, Feb. 13, 1865, to Bridport, franked with 1 penny. Enclosure with elaborate design, hand colored center with the words "Ever Loving" and "Forget me not" on the back of the envelope. Vaccari Magazine N. 15, May 1996.

United States



Top: Valentine cover, and her enclosure, from Potsdam, N.Y., Feb. 8, to nearby West Potsdam paying a double rate. This is the only known cover from Potsdam franked with 10c. 1847 issue. Considered one of the showpiece of 1847 philately, was sold by Matthew Bennett in September 2003 for \$47,500.



The first religious Valentine letters were produced by nuns who cut the paper like a lace. The production of this kind of decorated paper took several days while the mechanic punch began only 50 years after.

At the beginning of the 19th century Valentine letters were produced in small factories. They had a really simple design and decorations and they were printed in black and white. Then the production became more sophisticated. The decorations were sometimes hand-painted with garlands and ribbons. Poetic words were often matched with drawings of flying doves, golden or silver love ribbons, cupids and bleeding hearts.

During the Victorian Age stamp techniques improved thanks to the introduction of new typographic techniques and Valentine letters became more popular. In 1840 they were also largely widespread thanks to the introduction of the one penny rate.

In Europe Valentine letters were well-known in Austria, Italy and Germany. The rarest letters were from the Kingdom of two Sicilies and the Papal States while they were most used in Lombardo Veneto.

The majority of the European Valentine Letters were hand-painted such as the Ladies Envelopes. They were simpler in the floral pattern and less decorated, but still really beautiful. Ladies envelopes could be sent to family or dear people.

In United States Valentine Letters were for the first time produced by a woman, Esther A. Howland, who imported special papers, laces and other accessories from England and later they were assembled in her company in Worcester in Massachusetts.

Her trademark was a small red "H" on each envelope and her business did so well that in the first year of activity her small company earned \$5,000.

Valentine letters could be acrostic, bendable, with a small theorem or crossword to be solved or with poetic words which could be read only after solving a rebus or a riddle. The enigma was sometimes really hard; therefore the love message became more mysterious and intriguing. A wanted Valentine letter was the "mechanical". Thanks to a system of latches, small windows were opened and a secret message was shown or small images appeared. Other letters had a mirror in the centre of a decoration and the addressee could see her image reflected.

In United States Valentine letters became very fashionable during the Civil War (1861- 1865). There were only five Valentine's Days during the Civil War, and the adverse conditions in the South made elaborate Valentines and stationery scarce. Only a handful have survived. Letters showed the loved soldier to the lover under a small bend of the paper. This kind of Valentine letters was called "window". At the end of the war the soldier was replaced by the entrance of a church, which showed a groom waiting for his bride. There was also the possibility to enclose a lock of hair in the envelope.

The first photograph changed the way to send love messages. In the first photo shop a picture could take hours and hours. Photographers competed to invent new subjects for the background in order to satisfy every client who wanted to surprise the lover with its own image. The best photo shops employed a person just to hand-paint the photographs. A picture was a memory of the lover or a possibility to avoid unpleasant surprises as a lot of marriages were arranged. Men in search of a wife just needed to know that the sister or the cousin of a friend was looking for a husband to start a correspondence. They will often get married thanks to a Valentine letter.