



Women and violets in France (1800-1920) – a visual journey

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Notes on Ethnobotany

Abstract

Violets were an important trade plant, sold in the streets and markets of European and North America cities throughout the nineteenth century up to the 1920's, when they began to be out of fashion. France was a major producer of violets and many activities associated with them, such as picking and selling, were commonly done by women. Here we present a selection of photos from Beja Botanical Museum's collection that represents cultural interactions between women and violets during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

All commercial grown or wild gathered violets belong to the genus *Viola* L. (Violaceae). In Europe, the oldest records of their cultural uses, can be traced to the writings of classic Greek poets, such as in the *Odyssey* (5.78), where the legendary Homer (c.VIII century B.C.) describes the garden that surrounded Calipso's grotto, in the island of Ogygia, where Odysseus was kept for seven long years, as having '*through beds of violets*' (Homer 1961). The VI Homeric hymn, devoted to Aphrodite, describes the meeting of the goddess with all other Olympic gods '*each one of them prayed that he might lead her home to be his wedded wife, so greatly were they amazed at the beauty of violet-crowned Cytherea*' (Anonymous 1914). A fragment attributed to the poet Pindar (c.518-438 B.C.) to celebrate the victory of the Greeks over the Persians, associates violets with the city-state of Athens: '*shining and violet-crowned and celebrated in song, bulwark of Hellas, famous Athens, divine citadel*' (Pindar 1997). Another fragment describes the arrival of Spring to Athens when '*the nectar-bearing flowers bring in the sweetmelling Spring. Then, then, upon the immortal earth are cast the lovely tresses of violets*' (Pindar 1997). The 'father of botany', Theophrastus (c.371-c.287 BC), also refers violets as the flowers that announce Spring, in his *Enquiry into Plants* (6.8.1): '*Of the flowers the first to appear is the white violet*' (Theophrastus 2016). The same tradition was found in Rome, according to Pliny's *Natural History* (21.38): '*The first flower to herald the approach of Spring is the white violet*' (Pliny 1961), a set of books written and published in second half of the first century A.D.. In this same century, Dioscorides, a Greek physician of Nero's armies, recommended violets as anti-inflammatory and antiepileptic, in his work *De Materia Medica* [Salamanca Manuscript 4.121]. Many copies of his manuscript were made as it was the most valuable medical treatise used in the Middle Ages. The American historian Daniel Boorstin (1914-2004) correctly highlighted the importance of Dioscorides' treatise, when he wrote, in the book *The Discoverers*: '*Like Galen, Dioscorides had studied Nature, but Dioscorides' disciples studied Dioscorides*' (Boorstin 1983).

The High Middle Ages brought new roles to violets, including being a symbol of humility, as in Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) writings, where the Virgin Mary is the "*the violet of humility*" (Ancona 1977) (Figures 1-2). Later, Saint Francis de Sales (1567-1622), in a letter dated from October 15th 1614, used the humbleness of the violets to describe his congregation: '*as I have said to you, our congregation should hold itself among the congregations as the violet is amongst the other flowers—low, small, and subdued in colour; happy, because God has created it for his service, and to diffuse a little fragrance in the Church*' (Sales 1877). This link with humbleness probably arose due to the ecological needs of some violet's species, that grow in the shadows, their closed flower buds commonly pointing downwards, and because some flowers open under the leaves. All signs of humility in the Christian plant's symbolic code.

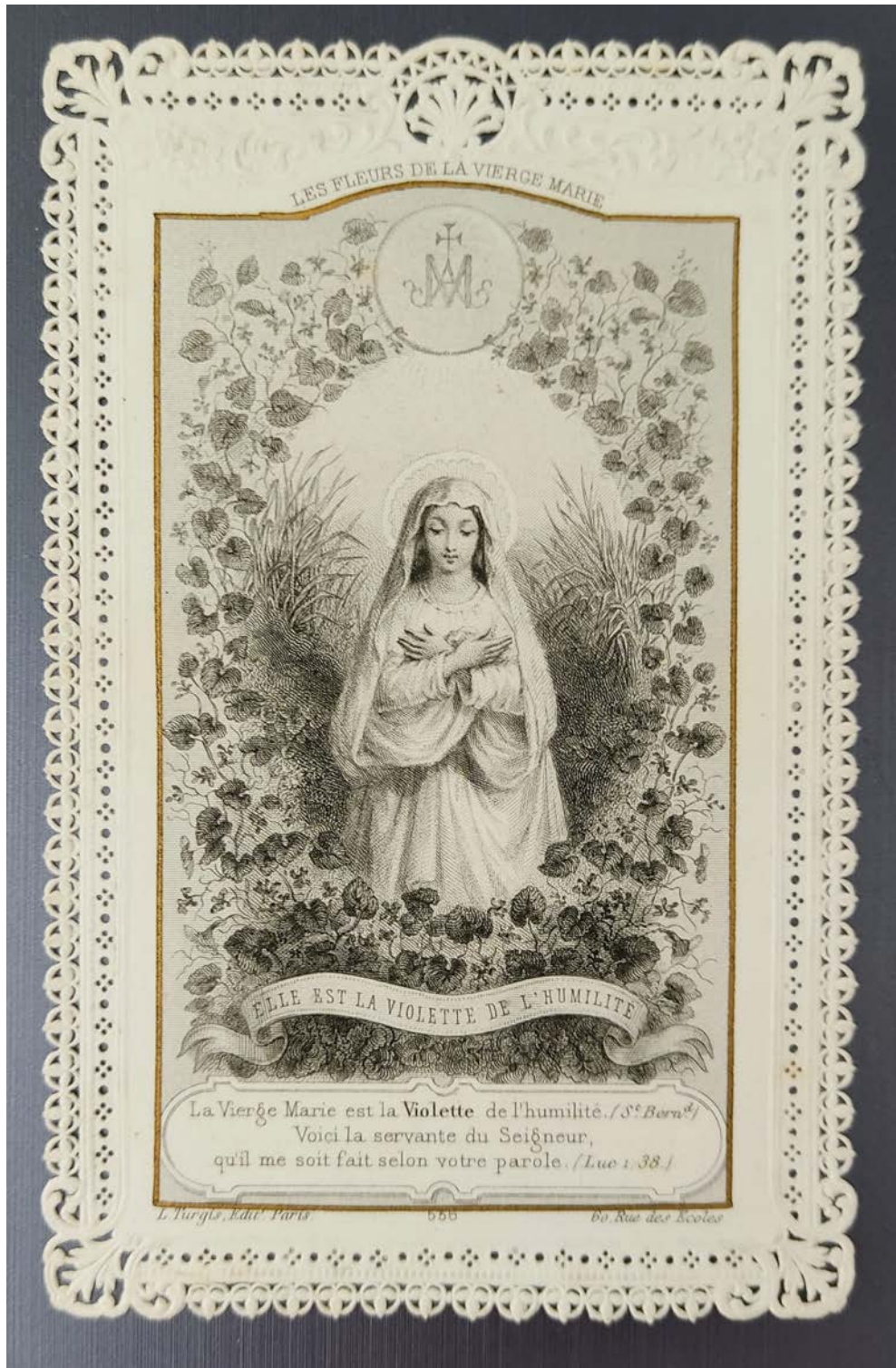


Figure 1. Virgin Mary as the violet of humility. Turgis Lithography, Paris (late XIX/early XX century).



Figure 2. Violets as a symbol of discreet love (1905).

Violets in France

In the first years of the XIX century, violets became strongly associated with Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) and his two wives. They were cultivated in gardens of the *Châteaux de Malmaison* (Figure 3), home of Napoleon and Joséphine de Beauharnais (1763-1814), where a legendary collection of roses and exotic plants were also maintained. When the couple married, Josephine was adorned with violets, and she asked to her newly married husband to always give her violets on their wedding anniversaries (Coats 1977). After the defeat of Napoleon's armies in the Battle of Leipzig (1813), he was forced to abdicate and banished to the island of Elba (1814), but he promised to return when the violets were again in season and so violets became a symbol of Bonapartism (Scurr 2021). A puzzle gravure (Figure 4), that both hides and reveals the profile of Napoleon, Marie Louise and their only son, the King of Rome, was printed to remember his promise and celebrate his return to Paris, on March 20th, 1815, to rule for three months. After his final defeat at Waterloo (June 18th, 1815) and depart to the island of Saint Helena, the French throne was restored under the Bourbon family and violets became a symbol of sedition. The Italian Duchy of Parma was offered to Marie Louise, his second wife and a member of the Austrian Habsburg dynasty, who patronized violet fashion and trade, up to the end of her life (Sandrini 2008). Two of the most widely cultivated varieties of Parma Violets still evoke her: 'Duchess of Parma' and 'Marie Louise'.



Figure 3. The park of the 'Château de Malmaison' (1907).



Figure 4. Violets of March 20th (1815). Hand-painted print. A bunch of violets conceals the profiles of Napoleon, Marie Louise, and the King of Rome. Jean Dominique Étienne Canu. British Museum 1873,0712.906.

Violets, especially Parma violets, regained the favours of the French Royal House under the Second Empire (1852-1870), ruled by Napoleon III (1808-1873) and his Spanish wife, Eugenia de Montijo (1826-1920) (Figure 5). When the imperial couple were forced into exile in England, they took violet passion with them, and so increased the status of these flowers in UK (Coombs 2003). The couple had one son only, Louis-Napoléon (1856-1879), who died in a Zulu ambush, while serving the British Army in South Africa. The prince body was recovered and brought to Europe, but his mother wanted to see the place where her son died and so she made a trip to South Africa. A much-retold story relates how the empress found her son's cairn in a dense brushwood, such as the one described in *The King Islands News* November 23rd, 1921: '(...) After her son, the Prince Imperial, was killed in Zululand, the Empress (...) paid a visit to his grave. This spot had been marked by a cairn of stones, but by the date of the visit the jungle had encroached so that even the Zulu guides, who had been among the Prince's assailants, could not find it. The Prince had a passion for violet scent; it was the only toilet accessory of the kind he used. Suddenly the Empress became aware of a strong smell of violets. "This is the way," she cried, and went off on a line of her own (...) until, with a loud cry, she fell upon her knees, crying, "C'est ici !" [It is here] (...).'



Figure 5. Empress Eugénie kneeling on a prie-dieu, with a bouquet of violets in her gloved hands (c.1880). W. & D. Downey Photographers, London. Bibliothèque Nationale de France Gallica 12148/btv1b530198589

Parma violets produce many pleiomerous flowers but seldom produce seeds. They belong to the genetic pool of *Viola alba* Besser subsp. *dehnhardtii* (Ten.) W.Becker, with parental plants from the Eastern and Western Mediterranean region, probably from Turkey and Italy (Malécot *et al.* 2007).

In France, Parma violets were cultivated in three main areas: Paris, Toulouse, and the French Riviera (Côte d'Azur) and sold as pot plants or cut flowers; the flowers and the leaves were also used by the industry of perfumes, located around the city of Grasse (Figure 6). In the last quarter of the XIX century, this industry also began to use ionone, a molecule responsible for the violet fragrance, that was isolated from the rhizomes of *Iris x germanica* L. var. *florentina* (L.) Dykes (Nanneli 2001, Coombs 2003).

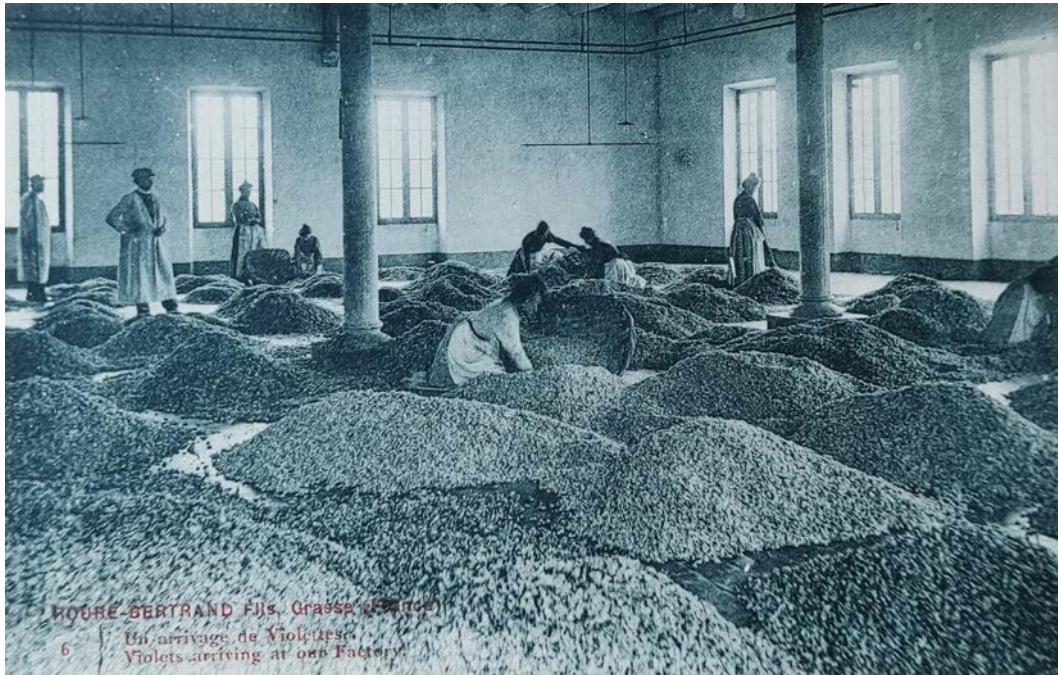


Figure 6. Violets leaves arriving at Roure-Bertrand Factory, in Grasse (c. 1900).

Parma violets were cultivated in the many neighbourhoods of Paris, including Bourg-la-Reine, where was located the then famous nursery of Armand Joseph Millet (1845-1920). In 1898, describing the prominence of Parma violets in Paris, Armand Joseph Millet wrote: “everyone who has lived in Paris, even those who have merely passed through the city in March or April, have seen and admired those beautiful pots of violets which adorn our florist’s shops. All the covered markets and street markets are filled with them, flattering the eyes and filling the air of the metropolis with their sweet perfume. Well, it is the Parma violet again that supplies these quantities of plants.” (Millet 1898). It is estimated that, in Paris, by the end of the century, circa six million violets bunches were sold every year (Figures 7-9) (Perfect 1996, Coombs 2003).



Figure 7. Violets sellers in Paris, ‘Les Petites Métiers de Paris – Marchandes de Fleurs’ (circa 1900).



Figure 8. Selling violets on *Saint-Michel* bridge, Paris (c.1900).



Figure 9. Violet sellers in Paris, '*Scènes Parisiennes – Quartier de l'Étoile: Marchande de Violettes*' (1905).

At the Côte d'Azur, Parma violets were cultivated as a secondary crop, in olive orchards (Figure 10), or as a main crop in open fields with partial shade (Figure 11). These violets fulfilled the demand of bouquets by the growing number of visitors, who followed Queen Victoria when she decided to spend part of the summer at the French Riviera, after visiting Menton in 1882 (Nelson, 2007). By the end of the century, a disease affected Côte d'Azur's Parma violets, and flower growers began to cultivate *Viola odorata* L. cv 'Victoria' instead (Perfect 1996, Nanneli 2001).



Figure 10. Picking violets in olive groves, Côte de d'Azur (c.1910).



Figure 11. Picking violets in Hyères [La Côte de d'Azur] (1910).

The first record of Parma violets in Toulouse dates from 1854 and the centres of production were the villages of Lalande and Aucamville. The flowers were sold locally (Figures 12-13), and by the end of the nineteenth century, they were also sent, by train, to other major French cities, including Paris (Figure 14). Besides bouquets, Parma violets were used in local confectionaries to make the famous *fin de siècle* candied violets, which are still in production (Timbal-Lagrave 1862, Bertrand & Casbas 2001).



Figure 12. Seller of violets (in boxes), 'Types Toulousains – La Bouquetière' (1904).

The collection of Beja Botanical Museum has around 3000 photographs, half of which about violets – probably the world's largest photographic collection on these plants. The photographs selected to this essay represent cultural interaction between violets and women, not only in the harvesting (Figure 15) and selling (Figures 16-17) activities, also as receivers (Figures 18-21) and for personal use (Figures 22-28). In *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* [*Mémoires d'une Jeune Fille Rangée* 1958], a childhood and youth memoir of the French writer Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), the author recalls the daily return home of her father, in the early XX century Paris, and the use of violets in the domestic life: 'When he came back in the evening, he used to bring my mother a bunch of *Parma* violets, and they would laugh and kiss' (Beauvoir 2001).



Figure 13. Selling bouquets and boxes of violets in the train station of Toulouse (c. 1910).



Figure 14. Souvenir postcard describing the main stages of violets' production and selling in Toulouse and their expedition to Paris (1919).



Figure 15. Picking violets in South France (Provence) (c. 1910).



Figure 16. Selling violets (1907).



Figure 17. Selling violets (c.1910).



Figure 18. Couple picking violets [*En cueillant des violettes*] (1908).



Figure 19. Couple of lovers holding hands over a violet bouquet (c. 1905).



Figure 20. Couple of lovers holding bouquets of violets (c. 1910).



Figure 21. Man offering a violet bouquet to a reluctant woman (c.1905).



Figure 22. Violets' corsage (c. 1910).



Figure 23. Woman holding several bouquets of violets (c. 1910).



Figure 24. Woman holding several bouquets of violets (c. 1910).



Figure 25. Woman holding several bouquets of violets (1908).



Figure 26. Woman wearing violets in the hair (c. 1910).



Figure 27. Girl holding violets (1909).



Figure 28. Violets' corsage (1908).

Nowadays, violets and Parma violets are rarely traded and many old cultivars, once very popular, are now lost.

All photos included in this visual essay belong to the Beja Botanical Museum collection, except Figure 4 (British Museum) and Figure 5 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France).

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