

A stamp-sized relook at Puducherry's French ties

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The 'PhileExFranceEnIndia 2023' exhibition hosted by the Pudhuvai Museum has on display a comprehensive collection of rare stamps, currency, and maps that throw light on the city's trysts with the imperial powers. | Photo Credit: S.S. Kumar

The tender-toned 'Vos Lettres', a poem-postcard used by soldiers on the frontlines of the two Great Wars, sets the prologue for a philatelic experience that turns the clock back to the 17th century, when the first Frenchman reached these shores.

The 'PhileExFranceEnIndia 2023' philately exhibition hosted by the Pudhuvai Museum has assembled a comprehensive collection of rare stamps, currency, and maps that throw light on the city's trysts with the different imperial powers — British, Dutch, and Danes — before it came under over-a-century of contiguous French rule that would eventually end in 1954 with the de facto transfer of French possessions to the Indian Union.

“The many-sided story of the city's nearly 350-year relationship with France that began with the arrival of Frenchman Bellanger de Lespinay in 1673 is told through memorabilia that includes stamps, coins, and maps”, said Arivan Aruli, founder-director of the Puduvai Museum, a private enterprise that evolved from a Ministry of Culture-approved plan for an Indo-French Museum around 2015.



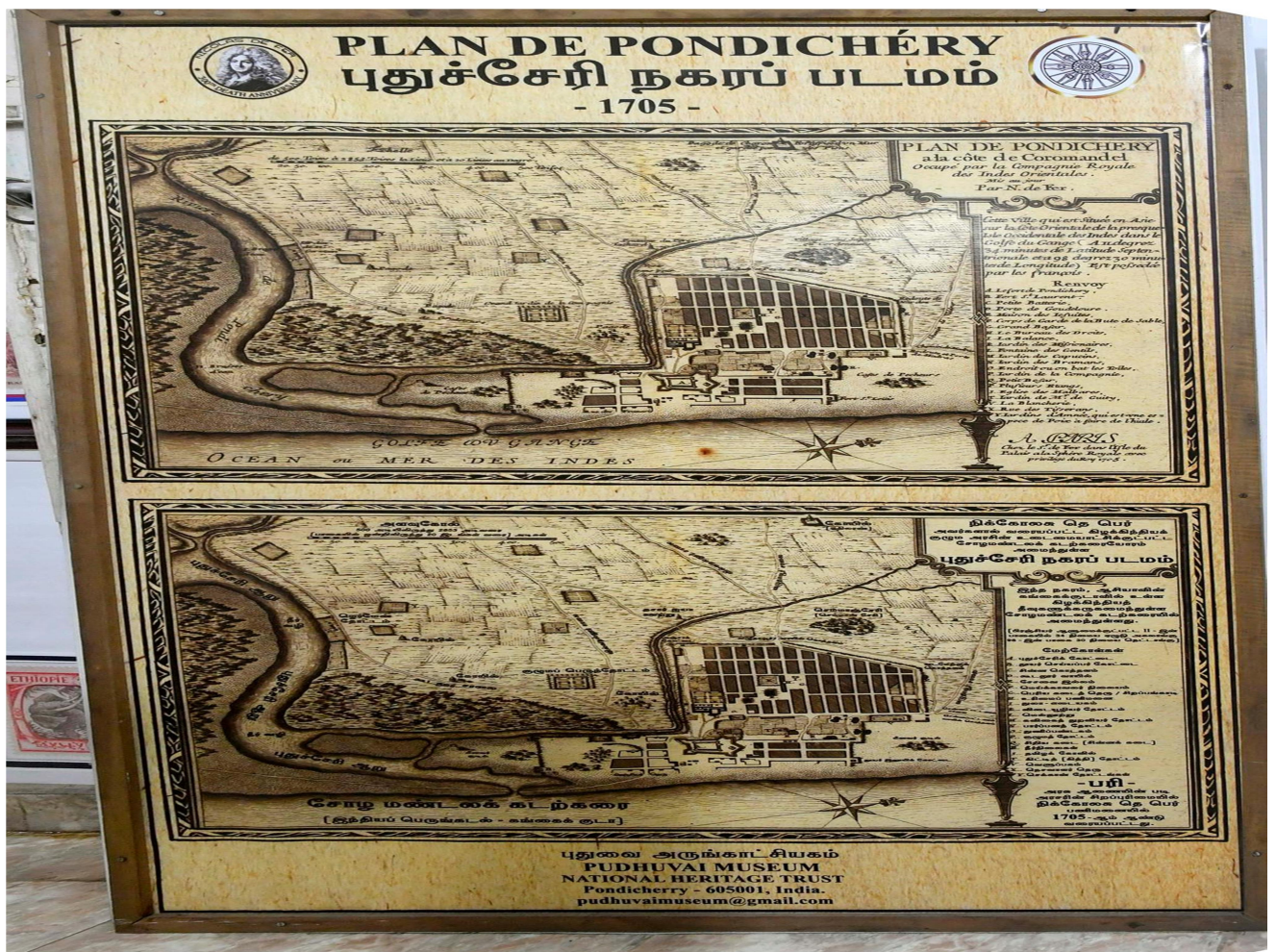
Arivan Aruli, founder-director of the Puduvai Museum at the 'PhileExFranceEnIndia 2023' in Puducherry on Wednesday. | Photo Credit: S.S. Kumar

The original plan was to establish the Indo-French Museum in the Old Court building and a Pioneer Memorial Museum in the Old Light House precincts, but these heritage properties were handed over to the judicial department and the Central Excise Department, respectively. Arivam founded the Puduvai Museum as an amalgam of both projects. In 2018, former Madras High Court Judge David Annoussamy formally opened the museum governed by the National Heritage Trust.

“Though some of these items may be available through institutions or individuals, this is perhaps the single largest collection consolidated around the French historical linkage”, said Mr. Arivan.

First French adhesive postage stamp

The first-ever French adhesive postage stamp came out in 1849, a few years after the British released the Penny Black. If the British opted for a portrait of Queen Victoria, the French would choose to profile Ceres, the Roman Goddess of harvest, to launch a new postal manual mail era. Since then, the symbolism around “Marianne”, associated with the Goddess of Liberty, has become an enduring allegorical embodiment of the core values of the French Republic.



Among the rare exhibits at the expo is one of the earliest maps of erstwhile Pondicherry town by cartographer Nicolas De Fer showing the central precincts of the town, nine ponds, and a handful of pagodas. | Photo Credit: S.S. Kumar

An entire section has been devoted to stamps from the 42 erstwhile French colonies, all but 13 of which gained independence. Among the rare exhibits is one of the earliest maps of erstwhile Pondicherry town by cartographer

Nicolas De Fer showing the central precincts of the town, nine ponds, and a handful of pagodas, and a symbolic commemorative stamp for Onesime Reclus, who is credited with coining the term “Francophonie” as a means of classifying the French-speaking population scattered across the world.

Arivan believes the repository of about 15,000 artefacts, including stamps and coins that span the 17th to 20th centuries, and was assembled over years of painstaking effort puts the museum in a position to share a great deal of historical knowledge with the French.

In fact, Alliance Francaise Director Laurent Jalicous, who was among the visitors, evinced interest in hosting an exhibition at the institution, he says. The expo is on at the Pudhuvai Museum on VOC Street till July 17.