THE MASTER FORGER JEAN DE SPERATI AND THE ART OF MAKING STAMPS

by Professor Edmond Locard

(Stamp collecting is a prevalent passion. Every one knows that the world stamp market is in a state of constant activity and that immense fortunes have been made in stamp-dealing. JOURS DE FRANCE have asked the wellknown professor Locard, director of the laboratory of the Ministry of the Interior, to describe the technically inspired enterprise of Jean de Sperati. This man, who had been tricked as a child by a merchant shark who sold him a forgery, sented to expose and did effectively expose the frailty of the experts' judgement. But nothing, not even this frailty, could cool the enthusiasm of the stamp collector.)

Erostratus courted and won immortality by burning the temple of Diana at Ephesus. Doubtless he had mage arrangements for the reporters to arrive before the fire-brigade. Jean de Sperati won glory by forging postage stamps. I hasten to add that he did far less damage than Erostratus and his merit is infinitely greater, for any fool can set fire to a national monument, even the Reichstag, but **in antimize** forge a postage stamp with success a man must have many rare technical abilities.

Who is Jean de Sperati ? Ernest Muller's excellent article in **teh** the philatelic review 'Die Basler Taube' (The Basle Dove) in December 1947 will enlighten us on this subject. His family was from Corsica. He was born on 14th. October 1884 at Pistola in Tuscany. His father was Oberst Enrico de Sperati (1838-1919), his mother, Marie Arnulf, daughter of the Italian general Trofime Arnulfi. In August 1914, he married a Normandy girl, Marie-Louise Corne. Jean de Sperati went to secondary school in Pistola where his father had a small engineering workshop. When he was orphaned he took to editing postcards. He went to France **z** in 1909 where he earned his living as a grocer. However, he took, in 1924, some courses at Guarcino (Italy) and then at Terrasse (Isere) in order to study the manufacture of paper. He retired to Aixles-Bains.

Here he dedicated himself to the 'Art of making stamps' at the risk of being taken for a forger and of having the worst relations with the police, the law-courts and the customs offices. But it is first necessary to **demoximum for the man.** Ernest Muller describes his pathological thinness, his air of "having come from a concentration camp", his excessive nervousness of which one finds symptoms in his hand-writing, his brooding air, his spectacles pushed up onto his brow, his exaggerated gestures, his precipitous way of speaking and indifference to his personalix appearance.

PERFECT IMITATIONS

Let us consider the main point of the offence. What was its aim ? It can be three-fold. One manufactures stamps in order to defraud the post office. An activity which leads more often to prison thanto glory. One can imitate the official vignette substituting a figure one wishes to glorify for whe another one minute loathes. Thus the Nice offices and those of the Saint-Jean must quarter in Lyon used vignettes where the profile of General de Gaulle replaced that of Marshail Petain. An act of boldness which might have been dearly bought. Or again pictures are manufactured for philatelists, a race resigned to being made victime. One could fill several issues of 'Jours de France' with examples of cases where collectors have allowed themselves to be duped. I quote only one example because it is really quite incredible. There is a French vignette which excites an enthusiasm bordering on madness, it is the 1 franc vermillion of 1849. It is not, as might be expected, a rare stamp, but it is much in **demond wheeks** demand, which is not at all the same thing. If one cast into the market several thousand copies of this five-footed sheep, not only would the stock be absorbed, but the price (which at the moment is about 4,000 NF) would not depreciate to any notable extent. Law of supply and demand. A practical joker cuts an illustration of this stamp out of a catalogue, daubs it with red paint and sells it. Not at a very high price, nevertheless he has found a buyer.

The unique case of Sperati represents another phenomenon. This moralist wanted to show that the most reputed experts were easy to dupe: he was eminently successful. His near-perfect imitations were accepted by dealers and big collectors. They have come to form a volume which has an honoured place in the libraries of philatenic societies. And this is just, since it is propable that no one will ever do better or even as well. And yet how many redoubtable difficulties there were to overcome, and which Jean de Sperati overcame. The aim of this article is is to emphasise this achievement.

To succeed in making an unrecognisable imitation, it is necessary to :

1) Manufacture the paper. This is in itself a formidable task. Stamps are not engraved haphasardly on any paper. The first Japonese stamps were printed on sheets made entirely from Broussonetia papyrifera pulp. Some Prussian stamps exist only on gold-beaters! skin; essays of the same origin are on cardboard; there are some fine French pieces on bristol-board. The Spamiards, between 1850 and 1857, changed their suppliers every year because they lived, with good reason, in terror of forgeries; so that every year the kind at of paper completely altered : from smooth to rough and from fine to coarse grain. "Advanced" philatelists use a spherometer to measure the thickness of their vignettes and express themselves in 'mus', that is to say in thousandths of millimetres. Sperati's master-stroke, in my opinion, was his success in the collections of Spain, with different paper for each series, always conforming with the original as regards thickness, grain and, of course, colour. For the final test of the old experts was to geage authenticity by rubbing the stamp between thumb and index. They were able to recognise by this using this primitive but excellent test, the stipple, the irregular fities and the grain, and would not have confused than the printing of an American banknote with a product of a rival firm of the 1870's. It appears that this exquisite art is going into a decline and that our precision instruments do not

adequately replace this finesse and touch.

2) To reproduce the watermark. Here the audacity of the common forger is cut short. To succeed in making watermarks is such a complicated business that most imitators either make no attempt or else fail miserably. Not so Sperati, wha, in order to overcome this aggregate of difficulties, had to construct special **maximum** apparatus. We note here again a surprising inventiveness.

THE PHILATELISTS AVENGED

3) To obtain relief impressions, that is embcased stamps. There are in the world many Sardinian and old Italian stamps which are not worth 1 new xx centime. These are not forgeries. They are "printing waste". When Matraire flooded the market with them, he had at his disposal all the material necessary for the production of the official and authentic stamps. The day came when he misused them; but the temptation to print a few thousand sheets over the order was very strong. This was not Speræti's case: his first Gambia stamps with the embcased effagy of Victoria are small miracles.

(4) To gum the reverse. This appears to be quite simple. But glue has many pitfalls when one knows the different substances used, their various colours and consistencies, I was going to say the variety of their flavours.

5) And then the trickiest job of all: the perforation. The official producers obtain this with the aid of expensive and complicated machinery. The perforation is frequently the stumbling block of the forger, for perforation forged by hand is easily recognisable. Sperati a contribution of the second perforated the Balgian 5 frames, stamps of Hong Kong and Lagos, the Swedish 17 Bre, the Spanish 10 pesetas green. All without a flaw. 6) All the same, let us come to the essential point. For the me paper, the watermark, the embossing, the gum and the perforation are area secondary factors. Redoubted, it is true, and full of pitfalls. But the essential, quite naturally, is the design; the engraving. Jean de Sperati, with whom I had rather hard relations, did not reveal his secrets to me. Nobody would think of denying that he was a wonderful draughtsman and an engraver of rare ability. However he was by no means a pioneer in this field. There were other master forgers before him. From the very beginnings of franking with postage stamps very dangerous vignettes were made. There were forged 25c. in existence in 1849; there were Ceres, allegorical group, Semeuse and Marianne stamps which got by in quantities, sometimes very large. When I was an apprentice with Bertillon I saw some forgeries, which were known to be forgeries, printed as photo-engravings, and in which even the best enlargements did not reveal anything represe reproachable and which could only be identified by a grave error in the perforation. As for the forgeries destined for stamp collectors, one can resume the debate with this melancholy aphorism: there is not a single large collection which does not contain one of them, beginning with the most u illustrious of treasures, that of La Renotiere known as Ferrari. We may quote the 4 grana Trinacrie of doubtful authenticity and the quantities of American post offices opened a long time after the Wars of Succession.

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However Sperati surpasses in merit all these authors of serious frauds. It is said that as an adolescent he was swindled by a shark who, in exchange for his modest savings slipped him a stock of his own manufacturing. Sperati might then have sworn to avenge the stamp collector by proving that the experts do not know anything and that it is always possible to trip them up. Since that time he realised two kinds of operation. He manufactured imitations which he had signed by the most competant celebrities and by the most highly reputed philatelic markerizer societies. And, during the war, he MEXTERS declaring at the customs that they were imitations of no worth and so escaping the duty which is charged on the exportation 4 xfxx capital. True, here he retorted that he only sent stamps to Portugal so that he would be prosecuted and thus be able to demonstrate the error of the experts who were confirming the authenticity of the pictures he had successfully manufactured.

In fact the legal history of Sperati does not begin at Chambery whose tribunal and court are competant, ratione loci, for the indictments of Aix. A long time before this, in 1910, the "Echo de la Timbrologie", a periodical published by Yvert & Tellier, the most widely read among philatelists, devoted a whole page to the reproduction of the Sperati forgeries made and sold in the peninsula. I do not think that his fellow-citizens were soft with him. Perhaps it was following this incident that he came to live in France.

But known the question still remains : was Jean Sperati sincere in insisting that his only aim was to demonstrate the incompetence of philatells experts ? It is only fair to admit that he very likely succeeded in this. And I add with shame, quorum pars fui (I do not say 'magna' as I am too **inside** unimportant a personage). But the doubt remains. Why did he not sign the reverse of his imitations with an indelible signature after they had been signed by the most illustrious experts. He could then have prevented them becoming objects of fraudulant commerce. A Swiss philatelist ended thus an article on Jean de Sperati : "The Art of Making Stamps?" "Imitations?" "Copies?" "Facsimiles?" "Substitutes?" Let us **and** state it quite clearly : "Forgeries".

Edwond Locard.