

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 than to glory. One can imitate the official vignette substituting a figure one wishes to glorify for ~~some~~ another one ~~which~~ loathes. Thus the Nice offices and those of the Saint-Jean ~~quartier~~ quarter in Lyon used vignettes where the profile of General de Gaulle replaced that of Marshall Petain. An act of boldness which might have been dearly ~~ought~~ ^{paid for}. Or again pictures are manufactured for philatelists, a race resigned to being made victims. 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 ~~great~~ ^{constant} 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 a honoured place in the libraries of philatelic societies. And this is just, since it is ~~xxx~~ probable 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 haphazardly on any paper. The first Japanese 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 Spaniards, 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 ~~of~~ 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 gauge 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 irregularities and the grain, and would not have confused ~~this~~ 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, who, in order to overcome this aggregate of difficulties, had to construct special ~~machinery~~ apparatus. We note here again a surprising inventiveness.

THE PHILATELISTS AVENGED

3) To obtain relief impressions, that is embossed 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 Sperati's case: his first Gambia stamps with the embossed effigy 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 ~~definitely xxxxxxxxxx~~ was undaunted by this formidable task. He perforated the Belgian 5 francs, 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 ~~xx~~ paper, the watermark, the embossing, the gum and the perforation are ~~xxxx~~ 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 ~~xxxx~~ 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 ~~x~~ 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.

