

The Fabulous Faker

by Paula Hammond, for *Stamp & Coin Mart*, London

Jean de Sperati was a rarity in the world of philately - an honest forger! Or at least that's the way he presented himself to the world when the long arm of the law finally caught up with him in 1942. It was then that the world learnt the incredible tale of one of philately's most colourful characters ...

Although he spent most of his life in France and eventually adopted the name Jean, Giovanni de Sperati was born in Italy. The Speratis had been well-to-do but the failure of the family business threw them into poverty. Forced to take on a trade, Giovanni's brother, Massimo, became a photographer. Another brother, Mariano, became a stamp dealer and the young Giovanni consequently developed a passion for both philately and photographic inks, processes and techniques.

With money tight, Giovanni - who was a fledgling stamp collector - saved his money in order to build his own collection. However, when he was finally able to fill a nagging gap in his album to his horror, he discovered that the stamp he'd saved so hard for was a fake. He would later claim that a desire to get even with the dealer, gave him the impetus to create his own philatelic "works of art" which would fool every stamp expert in Europe.

First Fakes

The first clues that Giovanni had begun to forge his own stamps came in 1909, in the German philatelic journal "Berliner Briefmarken-Zeitung". The publication featured an article about a family of forgers based in Italy. Operating under the cover of Mariano's legitimate stamp business, the Speratis offered 'approval sheets' containing rare stamps at huge discounts. The most dangerous forgeries, identified in the feature as a set of San Marino rarities, are now known to be Giovanni's first works.

With their cover blown, the family fled, managing to escape both prosecution and scandal.

Giovanni - now calling himself Jean - resurfaced in France in 1914 where he was building a reputation as a man able to source rare, sought-after stamps. At the same time he started his own personal collection nicknamed 'the Gold Book'. In it, he stored 125 of his best forgeries - each one was guaranteed genuine by at least one (sometimes up to six) experts.

What made Sperati's forgeries so difficult to distinguish from the real thing was not just the work and artistry he put into them but the unusual process he used to achieve his results.

The basis for each fake was a genuine common stamp of the correct period. Using chemicals, he would remove the original design. However because postmarks are designed to be tamper proof, while the bleach solution removed the image, the postmark remained. Then Sperati created a new image of a rare stamp. Meaning that his fakes were printed on genuine paper, with genuine watermarks and genuine cancellations.

Fabulous Forgeries

Sperati's forgeries were so convincing that when customs discovered a cache of stamps in 1942, the forger was brought to trial for violating a law forbidding the export of capital (in the form of rare stamps) from then occupied France. Sperati defended himself by explaining that the stamps were actually 'reproductions' that he sold at a fraction of the cost to collectors who wanted to fill spaces in their albums. It was, he said, his practice to sign these reproductions although he'd forgotten to do so in this instance.

Experts were brought in and, incredibly, they certified the stamps as genuine. So it was that a stamp forger found himself in the quite unique position of having to prove that his own work was fraudulent. He was eventually believed when he produced three approval sheets, containing the same rare stamps. The court case dragged on for almost a decade and when Sperati walked away from court with a token fine, he had become a household name.

He continued selling his signed reproductions until 1955 when the British Philatelic Association bought his remaining stock and his printing materials. They later issued a booklet entitled "The Work of Jean de Sperati" to prevent further deception.

Dangerous & Fascinating

No one knows for sure how many Sperati forgeries exist but a number of dealers and collectors have made an extensive study of his work. One of those is Richard Frajola who ran his own auction house from 1980 till 1995. Since then he has served as a consultant to several leading auction houses in the United States and to private clients from his office in Taos, New Mexico. Richard was friend of the leading student on Sperati, the late Carl Walske, and has consequently seen "far more Sperati forgeries than most dealers or collectors".

Richard first encountered the forgeries as a buyer for an auction firm. "As a young professional", he explained, "I learned how to tell genuine from forgeries the old fashion way. I physically handled and studied a lot of material." However due to Sperati's method of working, all the usual

'tells' used to distinguish a forgery are useless. "This", Richard continues, "is exactly what makes Sperati products so dangerous and fascinating. I remember purchasing a small collection of Lagos stamps at what I considered to be a strong price. Well, when I returned to the office to prepare the material for auction, I was shocked to discover that the best three stamps were all Sperati forgeries. We lost money on the collection but I learned a valuable lesson!"

Knowledge - as always in philately - is the key to avoiding expensive mistakes. The printing method Sperati used varies enough from the genuine article for the forgery to be spotted in a side-by-side comparison. The British Philatelic Association's book also shows the distinguishing features of all of the known Sperati fakes up to 1955. "As a dealer", Richard says, "I have familiarized myself with all of the different stamps that Sperati is known to have forged such as the Confederate States 10c rose. So when I see a 10c rose stamp I pause and remember the possibility that it might be a Sperati. Having said that, almost all the Speratis found in private collections and on the market (excepting eBay I suppose) are now correctly identified and pose little real danger to the careful observer."

In fact, some collectors actively seek out Sperati's work, and the result is a buoyant market for his artistic 'reproductions'.

"Very few try to collect the full Sperati repertoire", Richard says. "But a Lagos collector might want to purchase his forgeries as an adjunct to their collection of genuine stamps, for example." The prices they fetch, though, vary considerably. "As a base price, I usually value his signed single stamps and the so-called signed "die proofs" (those that were sold by him as reproductions) at between \$150 and \$250 each. For United States and British Colonial items, I usually double that valuation. For France and German States, I usually value for one-half of the base. All of this depends somewhat on the specific item. The covers that he manufactured are extremely rare. I have seen fewer than ten and would value over \$1,000 each."

Many thanks to Richard Frajola for his invaluable assistance in preparing this article. Richard can be contacted at P.O. Box 2679, Ranchos de Taos, NM. Web site: www.rfrajola.com

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