

JEAN DE SPERATI: MASTER FORGER



Jean de Sperati relaxing in his study.

The name "Jean de Sperati" is one of the most famous and infamous in the history of philately. Few legitimate philatelists have gained such notoriety as this master forger. But even his name, like his famous creations, was a forgery, at least partially so.

Sperati was born Giovanni Sperati in Pistoia, Italy in 1884. His father was a retired army officer who went into business. The collapse of this venture threw the family into poverty. One of his brothers joined the army, the second took up photography and the third became a stamp dealer. The young Giovanni learned stamps from his brother Mariano as well as about chemistry from the experiments his brother Massimo conducted in photographic and developing techniques. Their mother had taken up printing and forgery, and the major formative influences on his future were almost complete. To make matters even more convenient for his future profession of postage stamp forger, his cousins owned

a nearby paper mill. His interest in his studies in Accounting at the Institute Technique de Bologna waned as his fascination with chemistry and printing techniques increased.

As a young man Giovanni Sperati started collecting postage stamps. With his family now financially struggling, filling the blank spaces in his album became more and more difficult. The lad determined to save up his *lire* in order to purchase a better item, and finally obtained a valuable French Colonial stamp which became the pride of his collection. Unfortunately, some time later he discovered that his "rare item" was actually a forgery and a crude one at that.

This is the incident that Sperati claimed would galvanize his energies and eventually lead to his vocation of stamp forger. The desire for revenge on stamp dealers became first a vendetta and then an obsession. The young Sperati dreamt of "getting even with the dealers." He vowed that he would someday create his own "philatelic works of art" that would deceive and make fools of every dealer and expert in Europe.

As Giovanni grew out of his teens, his interest in stamps seemed to infect the whole family. In the April 8th, 1909 issue of the *Berliner Briefmarken-Zeitung*, a lengthy article appeared about a family of forgers operating out of Italy. The head of this ring was identified as as Mariano Sperati (the stamp dealer), age 27. Also identified were Madame Sperati as well as Massimo (the former photographer), aged 31, and the future master forger, Giovanni Sperati, aged 24. The article exposed the *modus operandi* of this "family business." Mariano sent out letters like the following to known stamp collectors:

Dear Sir,

I hear that you are a stamp collector and I have a proposition to make to you. I intend selling my collection . . . and if you wish I can send to you on approval a collection of rare stamps at an enormous discount from the catalogue price.



The infamous approval card that defied the experts. The 18 stamps, if genuine, would have a Scott catalogue value well in excess of \$50,000.

If the collector responded with interest, an approval selection of choice rare stamps at 35% of the current Yvert & Tellier Catalogue followed. Occasionally, a collector found one or more items a little suspicious. The unabashed Mariano would respond to such charges with an indignant letter:

Your expert is not quite right about the 80c Tuscany. I can guarantee its genuineness. . . . The 80c Tuscany exists in various shades which are printed from different plates.

Not only the stamps, but even the approval sheets themselves were forgeries — the stamps were mounted on what appeared to be the official approval sheets of “Le Timbre,” a stamp Society centered in Liege.

The original *exposé* of the Sperati operation considered only one group of stamps to be of extreme danger to the advanced collector — a group of imitations of the stamps of San Marino. These stamps were the first actual work of the youngest member of the forgery ring, Giovanni (i.e. Jean de Sperati). As the *Carabinieri* closed in on the operation, the family fled and dispersed. Authorities made no arrests, but they seized printing presses, chemicals and inks, large sheets of paper and hundreds of printing dies.

The young Giovanni sought refuge in Paris, changed his name to Jean, married in 1914 and worked as a laborer at various factories in different parts of France. At night he continued his study of chemistry and printing while pursuing his new “hobby” — the production of what he termed “philatelic works of art.” By 1930 this “hobby” was producing enough income for him to become a full-time professional stamp forger. He had a most original way of filling want lists, producing choice examples of any stamp requested. He sold large numbers of stamps to many dealers in Europe and started another personal stamp collection, which he called the “*livre d’or*” (Gold Book). These were his own forgeries that were guaranteed genuine by dealers or experts. Some stamps in his famous album contained as many as six different signatures or guarantees of authenticity. The *livre d’or* would eventually contain 125 different expertized stamps — quite an impressive collection indeed!

The most interesting thing about Sperati is perhaps the care with which he took towards his forgery. He loved his work and approached it with a dedication that few philatelists will ever be able to match. He usually worked 16 hours a day, 7 days a week. His knowledge of paper, chemistry and photography

helped him to avoid the mistakes of earlier philatelic forgers. Some of his techniques were so advanced that even the experts who knew a stamp to be fake were baffled. As he became the center of international publicity in the 1940's, he became an almost mythical figure with reputed superhuman abilities that seemed almost incomprehensible. For example, even into the early 1950's, experts believed that he had somehow devised a way to produce fake watermarks undistinguishable from the real ones. We now know that Sperati faked no watermarks — instead he always started with a genuine watermarked stamp when he wished to “imitate” a stamp with a watermark.

In 1942 Sperati sent an approval selection to a dealer in Lisbon. Custom agents opened the package and discovering what appeared to be valuable rare postage stamps, Sperati was charged and brought to trial for violation of a law forbidding export of substantial sums of capital from France. It was at this time that Sperati would reach the height of his notoriety and also get his greatest revenge on the stamp dealers and philatelic authorities of his age.

The court turned the stamps over to the local Philatelic Society for an estimation of their worth, and they were assessed to be worth between 60,500 and 78,000 francs. Sperati appealed these findings as inaccurate, claiming that the items were not stamps but “artistic works.” In 1943 the Court of Appeal submitted the stamps to a recognized authority, Dr. Edmond Locard, for expertization. He meticulously studied each stamp and submitted an official report to the Court which included a complete inventory of the stamps, along with catalogue number, catalogue value and actual retail value. The current Yvert Catalogue value of the 18 stamps was 274,500 francs. However, Dr. Locard felt that the stamps had an actual retail value of 303,200 francs because “a classic stamp in first-class condition [is] rare and . . . worth considerably more than catalogue value.” His report to the Court scoffed at Sperati's claim that the stamps were “artistic copies” and he closed with the insistence that:

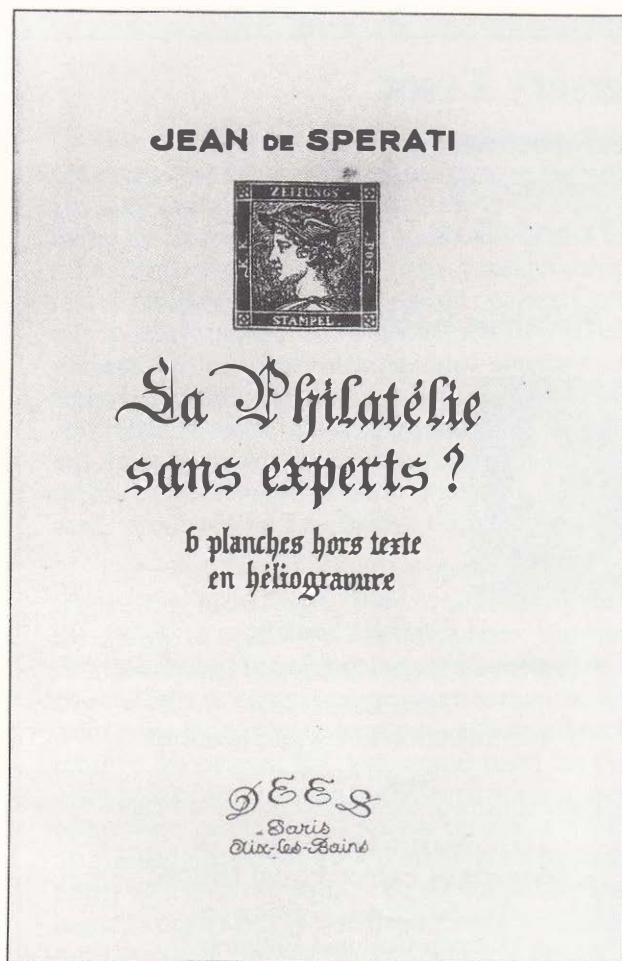
“With all certainty and evidence, all stamps mentioned above are NOT imitations.

*(signed) Edmond Locard
Lyons, 4th January, 1944.”*

Perhaps even Sperati himself was astounded with these developments as he found himself in a Court of Law insisting that his stamps were *not real* and trying to prove that they were forgeries. Sperati kept appealing the convictions with the assertion that he did not sell real stamps, and the litigation dragged on for a decade. At one of the trials he produced three identical sets of the supposed rare stamps from the approval card. Finally, the famous French philatelist M. Leon Dubus, heading a Court-appointed Expert Committee declared that:

these stamps are all reproductions of valuable stamps and that these reproductions are such as would deceive even an advanced collector who has not available the material means to compare such pieces and, if he has not a profound knowledge and the necessary tests for the examination, then he may believe these imitations to be genuine stamps.

Since neither the creation of tiny works of art nor the artistic imitation of postage stamps was against the law, Sperati was convicted of a very minor charge and given a token fine. The international fame caused by the much-publicized trial meant that business was better than ever. His work became so famous that he was swamped with orders for reprints of his forgeries. By the



The title page of the first edition of Sperati's “Philately Without Experts.”

early 1950's, with failing eyesight, his new output slowed even further. In 1952-53, he was contacted by representatives of the British Philatelic Association who offered to buy outright all his stamps, dies and records. The B.P.A. had first become aware of Sperati's work in 1932, but did not publish their findings due to fears of causing a crisis in the philatelic world. They now bought Sperati's entire stock and collection in 1954 for a large sum. They mounted an exhibit of his forgeries and published a detailed series of catalogues and books detailing the forgeries. In his last years Sperati made his "artistic philatelic works" only to please himself. At the time of his death in 1957 he was producing a new counterfeit of the Basel Dove of Switzerland.

Sperati wrote two philatelic works, *La Philatelie sans experts* and *La Technique complete de la "Philatelie d'Art"*, parts of which have been translated and published by the B.P.A. His autobiography ("Mon Autobiographie Technique") was also translated and published by the B.P.A.

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