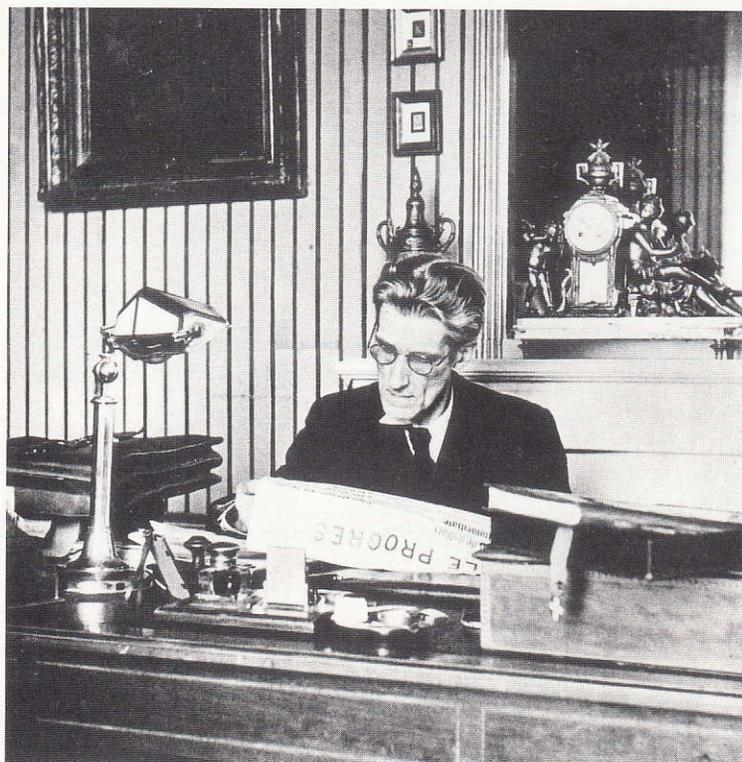


JEAN DE SPERATI: MASTER FORGER



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:

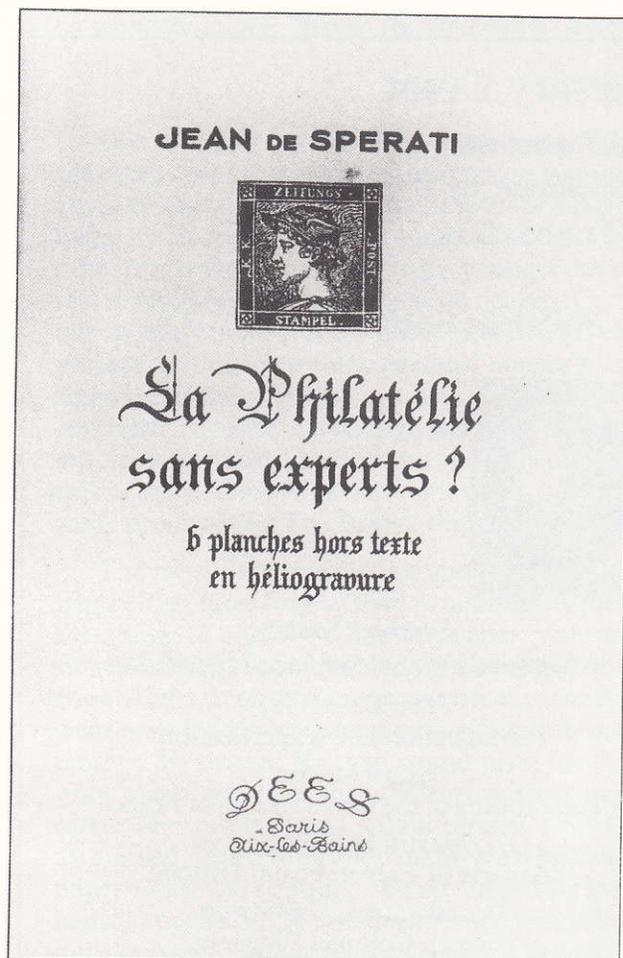
“With all certainty and evidence, all stamps mentioned above are NOT imitations.

*(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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Tyler, Varro E. *Philatelic Forgers: Their Lives and Works*. London: Robson Lowe, 1976.

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“The Sperati Forgeries”

by Peter A. Robertson



[Editor's Note: One of the most exciting albums in The Philatelic Foundation's 250 volume Reference Collection is the blue Elbe binder that houses the PF's collection of Sperati forgeries. Next to the British Philatelic Association, who bought out Sperati's entire stock in the 1950's, The Philatelic Foundation holds one of the larger reference collections of the Sperati forgeries in existence. Of the 566 different items he is known to have produced, the Foundation's Reference Collection contains at least one copy of most of them. The Philatelic Foundation's Reference Library also contains all available information from the B. P.A. on the Sperati forgeries. Some of the Sperati forgeries exist in only one or two copies. For others, as many as 500 may exist. His total output of copies in his almost five decades of activity is estimated at between 50,000 and 70,000 items. Philatelic Foundation Curator Peter Robertson opens the doors of the PF's vault for a look "Inside the Reference Collection."]

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Sperati forgeries is that he imitated not only great rarities but what were in his day very inexpensive stamps. That also made him more dangerous than most forgers. He truly had some sort of genuine love for what he was doing and considered himself an artist. He made a living by his forgeries but he spent more care on his individual "philatelic imitations" than probably any other forger before or since. In his younger days, he was cheated by some stamp dealers, and he spent the rest of his life getting his revenge on dealers. Certainly we are talking about an obsessive personality here, but he really looked upon himself not as a faker but as an artist. In fact, when he was finally caught and prosecuted he successfully defended himself by claiming his fakes were actually works of art which he signed. This may or may not be true as any number of his works exist today in an unsigned state. He continued to insist that his signature was erased by dishonest individuals. This is a matter of speculation but, luckily, due to the printing methods he employed, certain constant flaws exist in his designs aiding specialists in identifying his counterfeits. This was handsomely covered by the monumental two volume work produced by The British Philatelic Association (now Federation).

The most dangerous thing about Sperati was his revolutionary technique in approaching forgery. Before him, most forgers tried to completely forge a stamp starting from scratch. Thus, they had not only the design to deal with, but also paper, watermark, perforations, gum or cancellation. Sperati greatly simplified the process by usually beginning with something genuine. For a long time, his British area counterfeits were very dangerous because the watermarks and paper seemed so real. That's because they were real. He would take a real stamp, a more common value in a set, and bleach out or chemically remove the design. He then would print his stamp on the bleached-out paper. Thus he had a genuine watermark, genuine paper and perforations, and sometimes a genuine cancellation or overprint as these often were in black and would remain after the harsh bleaching agents did their work. These items astounded people for a good many years because they thought he was producing forged watermarks and paper which was so good, it could not be told from the real thing. He was insidious in that he went against logical approaches to stamp expertization. If he were creating an inverted center error, he would bleach out the frame, rather than the central design. For anyone examining this type of stamp, the natural tendency is to closely scan the inverted center area rather than the outer frame area. Most other counterfeiters add a counterfeit or substituted design to the center but Sperati did it backwards, and very effectively, I might add.

One quickly learns to respect the work of a forger like Sperati. Some of his forgeries were “guaranteed” by a half dozen different experts or dealers. But when he started his work he was much more dangerous than he is today. We must remember that at the turn of the century most collectors were still general collectors. There were very few specialists around. The early catalogue illustrations were not always that accurate, and there were no great Reference Collections or Philatelic Libraries available to most collectors. They had to rely on collector friends or the dealers from whom they got their stamps. Dealers would certify stamps by initialing or signing them. As any collector is aware, some dealers are very knowledgeable, some not so. As a matter of fact, these were some of the major reasons behind the establishment of The Philatelic Foundation in 1945.

The technology of Expertization was also virtually nonexistent some 80 years ago. Aviation was in its infancy and television had yet to be dreamed of. Even radio was a thing of the future. The tools available to a stamp expert were the magnifying glass, the human eye, examples for comparison, and a broad general knowledge. Good philatelic literature would only be developed by the trial and error methods of these old-time professionals and the passage of time.

Today, the expertizer has it far easier. He has access to paper micrometers enabling the measurement of paper thickness. The ultraviolet lamp enables today's expertizer to examine stamps under a part of the light spectrum not available to the naked eye. This is very helpful in detecting removed stains and cancellations, and in finding repairs and drawn-in portions of the design or cancellation. Tests can be performed to determine the elemental components of inks and more sophisticated comparison microscopes allow minute detailed examination and comparison against known genuine or faked examples. Much literature now exists which either points out known counterfeits or presents in-depth plate studies which highlight the tiny design differences between stamps printed together from the same plate, allowing the examiners to “plate” a stamp being examined.

Sperati had his own peculiar preferences. He was very knowledgeable about stamps and studied them carefully. When he created a copy of a stamp, he would often forge several different plate positions. He had his own reference collection, and added to it by picking up damaged copies at low prices. Like most collectors of his time, he preferred used stamps to mint, and he was actually rather poor at producing fake gum. For a used stamp, he often started with a used stamp on the right type of paper and chemically removed the ink of the stamp without removing the cancel. When one sees a genuine cancel, he is less likely to suspect the stamp. He didn't care much about perforations, and most of the stamps he reproduced were classic imperforates.

No knowledgeable collector need be afraid of such forgeries today. For some stamps the Sperati forgeries are actually worth more than the original stamps. Sperati forged only a handful of U.S. stamps, and the experienced specialist should be able to tell the real from the fake. Furthermore, since major philatelic institutions like The Philatelic Foundation now exist, expertization is much quicker and more convenient than it ever has been. Needless to say, the safest course is to buy from knowledgeable and reputable dealers and to insist that any better or high priced item has a Certificate of Genuineness from an internationally recognized institution like The Philatelic Foundation's Expert Committee.

UNITED STATES



Also with
penancel
cross

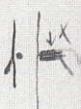
9x1. Pos. 29.



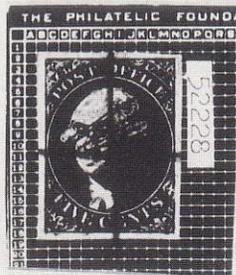
10x1 1/2 on sheet

P. DOT in oval

HAS A
DOT



2



6 LBI

CONFEDERATE STATES

HAWAII



15 Pl VII. Pos. 5

4-A 5



20 Pl. XI. Pos. 6



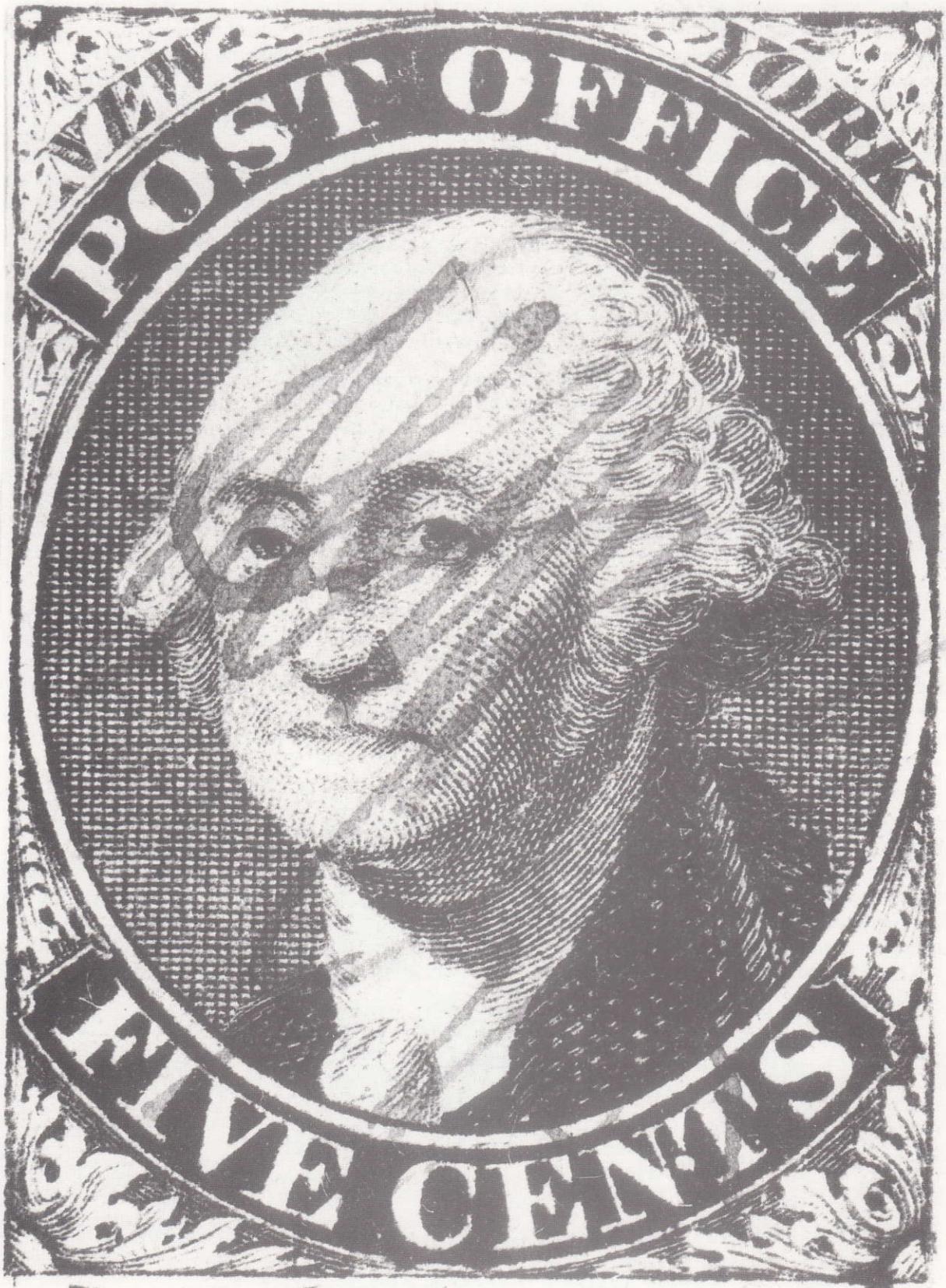
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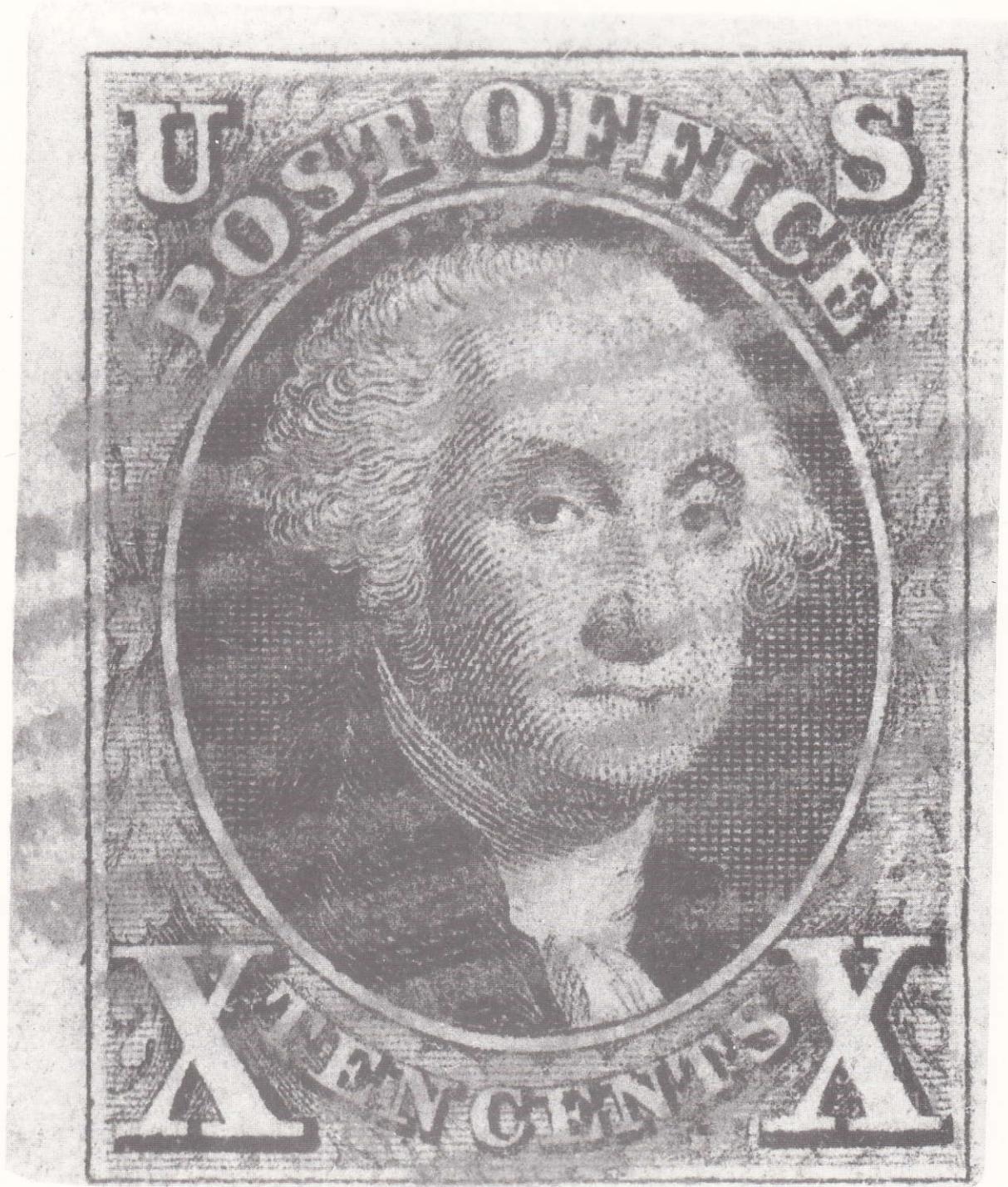
9

A, B, C = REPR SERIES

Sperati's U.S. and Area forgeries.



Sperati forgery of New York Postmaster Provisional (Scott #9X1). Note that the serifs of the "T" in "POST" are detached from the upright; also, notice the large white spot between the "N" and "T" of "CENTS."



Sperati's forgery of U.S. 10c 1847 (Scott #2). The original stamp is engraved, whereas Sperati used a contact photo-lithographic process. Also, note the small curved line outside the left frame level with the top of the left "X."

BRITISH EMPIRE

GREAT BRITAIN

Also "97" in frame & "446" No frame



56

CYPRUS



59

LAGOS



33

MONTserrat



9



12



56

GIBRALTAR



7



35

NEWFOUNDLAND



4



13 Also Black Grid

Also "217" in frame



56



20



37



4



15

AUSTRALIA



15

GOLD COAST



24

MALTA



1



7 Also black grid

SIERRA LEONE



1859 IMPERA 2a

CAPE



38

HONG KONG



28

MAURITIUS



62



9

VANCOUVER IS.



3 Also NUMERAL "35"



4

Some of Sperati's British Commonwealth forgeries. All watermarks and paper are genuine — this baffled the experts for many years.

FRANCE



1 1b TÊTE-BÊCHE



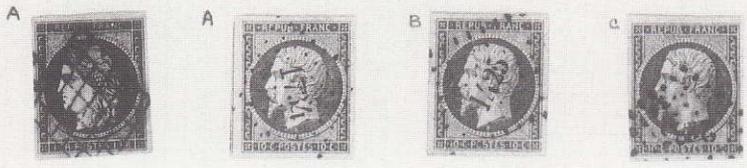
2 3c TÊTE-BÊCHE



7 8 8a



8c "VERVELLE" 9 AISO 3477 9a TÊTE-BÊCHE 9a TÊTE-BÊCHE



9b 10 10 10

A, B, C = REPR. SERIES

Sperati French forgeries; including rare tete-beche varieties.

FRANCE



21 Also Paris Stan Cancel



21



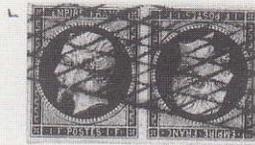
21



21



21



21a TÊTE-BÊCHE
Also with small dot cancel



39 . Pos. 8
2nd Rep.



Pos. 5
L.L.



Pos. 10
L.L.



40



40



46 . Pos. 11



46 . Pos. 5



43 1st. Rep.
Pos. 11



48 . Pos. 11



48 . Pos. ?



J1



J8 blue . Pos. 14.



J8a Ultramarine
Pos. 14.



J8b Prussian
Pos. 14



J9 . Pos. 5.



Unlisted . Pos. 5



Telegraph

A, B, C - REPR. SERIES

More Sperati French forgeries, including back-of-the-book material.

GERMAN STATES

BADEN



Also #19

24

BAVARIA



1



1a



1a

Also cancelled



1b. TETE-BECHE

BREMEN



1 Also "BREMEN" 75.6.7" in black rectangle



2 Also *



3. Pos. #2



4. Pos. 21, 22, 30, 31.



4a Chalky paper Also with boxed "BREMEN" 9x5-6 in black

BRUNSWICK



2. Also with "12" in date



3

A, B, C = REPR. SERIES

Sperati German States forgeries, including the very rare Bavaria #1b, tete-beche pair.

GERMAN STATES

OLDENBURG continued:-



13 Also *



14 Also blue circular "OLDENBURG 9-8 4-RN"



14 Also black boxed "BRE 262"



14. Also blue "L-APEN 3-9"



15

SAXONY



1



1. Also cancel "DRESDEN"



1a.



14 Also with grid cancel

WURTEMBERG



6. Also with circular "HEILBRON"



69 Also with "TETT NEU" (?) 7. AUG. 77

A, B, C = REPR. SERIES

Sperati German States forgeries.

GERMAN STATES

HANNOVER



17. Also "EMDEN"



18a. Also blue straight line - T Z E B U -



24. Also boxed - LEHE -



24. Also blue circular HANNOVER 3-12-12-

LUBECK



3a. "ZWEI EIN HALB"

MECKLENBURG - SCHWERIN



3. Also with blue "Rostock"

OLDENBURG



4. Also *



4



5. Also boxed blue "NBURG" - 2"



5



7



8



9. Also *



10. Also *



12. Also blue rectangular "NBURG" - 9-7"



12

A, B, C = REPR. SERIES

More Sperati German States forgeries.

SWITZERLAND
FEDERAL

WITH FRAME ROUND CROSS



6. Pos. 11



6. Pos. 12



6. Pos. 30

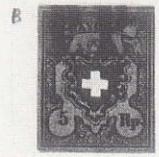


31



32

NO FRAME ROUND CROSS



7. Pos. 6

WITH FRAME ROUND CROSS



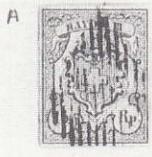
9. Pos. 4



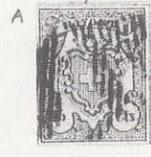
9. Pos. 14



11. Pos. 9



11. Pos. 14



13. Pos. 1



13. Pos. 3

Sperati Switzerland forgeries.