

Fakes and Forgeries of 20th Century French Postage Stamps

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The Forbin Forgery of the 1900 5F Merson

Three new series of stamps destined to be the 20th century replacements for the *Type Sage*, Peace and Commerce stamps, were unveiled in good time on 4 December 1900 (5). The top value was the 5F Merson. A second printing of this stamp was made in 1902 but there was little demand for it because of subsequent reductions in postal rates. In used condition it became a scarce item, a problem solved in 1912 by Forbin, a Paris stamp dealer.

This forgery has been the subject of more than thirty articles which appeared between 1912 and 1990 (3), making it the most written about French forgery. It is not known whether Forbin himself produced the forgery. Whoever did so was an excellent and meticulous engraver with access to quality paper and perforation facilities. While at least nineteen different postmarks, all forgeries, have been identified, only one mint copy is known to exist (6).

The main distinguishing features of the forgery are:

1. In the lower right corner the two right-most vertical lines in the column are intact, but are always broken, giving the appearance of a nick, in the genuine.
2. In the lower left corner to the left of the column there are eight vertical lines as opposed to seven in the genuine.
3. The upper left corner of the value shield has five parallel lines of dots whereas the genuine has four lines.
4. In the top left corner there is only one broken line while the genuine has two broken lines.

It is of interest to note that the first three characteristics of the forgery described above are features of the (genuine) 1F and 2F Mersons which may be seen in good quality printings. The neatness of the top left corner described in 4 above is a characteristic restricted to the Forbin forgery.

Genuine 5F Merson



Copy A



Forbin Forgeries

Copy B



Genuine 5F Merson



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A feature of most forged overprints is that they are neither crisp nor have any pressed out areas. **Forgery H** of a Type II overprint, although being at the correct angle, fails on the latter point. **Forgery I**, noted (2,11) as occurring on the 55c/60c violet lined Sower (with a forged 55c overprint), is an exception. While crisp, it can be faulted with the naked eye because the radius of the inner arc decreases towards the left, resulting in this end being too close to the P of *POSTES*. The angle of application varies considerably.

Forgery H

angle correct, no pressed out areas,
 POSTES short, AFFR are low,
 ANCH are to the left, ts are low and to the left



Genuine



Forgery I

(two examples with widely different angles)

AFFRA are low and to the right,
 the radius of the inner arc is too small



Genuine



Forgery



A Forgery of the 1930 *Bureau International du Travail* (BIT) Overprint

The BIT was the permanent secretariat of the International Labour Organisation, an autonomous agency of the League of Nations. At the invitation of the French Government it met in Paris during April 1930. The BIT, based in Geneva, was accustomed like other League of Nations organisations to having Swiss stamps overprinted for use on official mail. This practice probably had some bearing on the decision to commemorate its Paris meeting by the issue of overprinted stamps. The event was commemorated by the issue of overprinted 50c Sower and 1F50 Pasteur stamps.

In this forgery (left):

1. The most obvious feature is the acute accent over the E of *CONGRÈS* rather than the grave as in the genuine.

The main variety of the genuine overprint is the lack of an accent on this E (11, 22, 23, 51). It would have been in the forger's best interest to have left this accent out.

2. The font used is different from the genuine. This is particularly evident in the serifs of the È and S of *CONGRÈS* and the T. The U of *DU* is distinctly different from the genuine.
3. The alignment of the characters differs from the genuine. This is most clearly seen in the relationship of *1930* to *B.I.T.* In the genuine the dot after B lies directly above the 1 and the I directly above the gap between the 9 and the 3. In the forgery the date is displaced to the right.

Forgery



Genuine



The Forgery of the 0,50F *Marianne de Béquet*

The 0,50F *Marianne de Béquet* was issued on 2 January 1971 to meet the change in the domestic letter rate from 0,40F to 0,50F which took place on 4 January 1971. This rate next changed, to 0,80F, on 16 September 1974 (69). The last printing of this stamp took place in July 1977 (51).

From the beginning of 1975 there were rumours that a postal forgery of this stamp existed (1). These were confirmed to the public at the time of the *Exposition Philatélique Internationale, ARPHILA*, 6-16 June 1975 (25). It was first described in the philatelic press by J-F Brun (73) who questioned whether it was in fact a true postal forgery, or a purported postal forgery intended to extract cash from collectors.

The grounds for these doubts about its true nature were its late appearance, well after the letter rate rose to 0,80F, and the practically non-existent postal usage of it. There is conjecture (1) that the producer(s) failed to persuade *bar-tabac* owners to buy them and since there was no possibility

of sales to bulk mailers, who used franking machines, the perpetrator(s) turned to the philatelic market.

There are parallels between the circumstances surrounding the emergence of this forgery and those of the 10c rose lined Sower forgery in 1906. Both appeared after the stamp they were imitating ceased to be the one used for the basic letter rate. Equally they were hardly used to pay postage, but received much publicity in the philatelic press.

The PTT does not seem to have put out any warning about the existence of this forgery. Neither do there seem to be any accounts of arrests and prosecutions of forgers in connection with it. In the forgery:

1. The background shows only a trace of cross-hatching as it was printed by lithography rather than recess, as the genuine was.
2. The lettering and the lines of the effigy are thick.
3. The perforation is coarse, being 11 rather than the 13 of the genuine.

Forgery



Genuine

