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ON THE SURCHARGES AND OVERPRINTS ON THE GENERAL

FRENCH COLONIAL ISSUES (1881-1893)

By Robert G. Stone (61)

Of all the many features of French colonial issues which cause collectors to shun them or collect them with dismay and misgiving, the complex series of overprintings and surcharges that converted the general into definitive issues between 1881 and 1892 certainly take the lead. The general collector has many rare major varieties to get in this group; the stamps are not especially attractive and are poorly centered; there are many minor varieties and "errors"; there is evidence of deliberateness in the repetition of types of errors and of speculation in the distribution of the stamps; dangerous forgeries abound. Finally there has always been doubt as to the necessity and authority for most of these issues. For the specialist they are a troublesome group because there is too little material and information available to properly catalogue and identify all the types. Many of them cannot be expertized in this country, and by very few people elsewhere. The varieties which are not so rare nor expensive enjoy some popularity among that limited class of collectors which fancy overprintings in general. The student is intrigued by innumerable problems concerning the printing and circumstances of these issues; however, the commoner varieties are known in sheets or have already been plated, while many of the rarer printings have never been studied in sheets and do not provide enough extant material to work with, so the opportunities for new discoveries would seem to be small. Baron de Vinck de Winnezele devoted a vast amount of study to the French Colonial overprints and his book is quite indispensable for a serious collector of French Colonies' stamps. ("Colonies Françaises et Bureaux à l'Etranger --- Etude des Timbres Surchargés et des Emissions d'Impression Locale de 1852 à 1919". Bruxelles, 1928) He disagrees at many points with Yvert and Tellier's Catalogue (specialized France and Colonies), otherwise the only reasonably complete and correct source of information. The Baron drew his conclusions mainly from material in his own and other collections, and from official and contemporary sources. In case of certain colonies, St. Pierre-Miquelon for example, the material is so rare that he could not add anything beyond what is already found in Yvert and Tellier. (The present writer hopes to throw a little light on the St. Pierre problem in a later article.)

In 1936 an interesting article appeared in L'Echo de Timbrologie of May 31, by Dr. Bouvet, dealing with the surcharges in question. He admits the issues have been under a black cloud of suspicion ever since they appeared, but feels he has convinced at least himself that they were issued for legitimate postal reasons and by proper authority. He divides the surcharges and overprints into two types: (1) those made to fill a lack of certain denominations and (2) those made because of change in policy from general colonial to specific colonial issues (1891).

There were general causes affecting all or most colonies and also particu-

lar local causes, that required both types of overprinting. In the case of the first type, the general causes were: underestimates of the demand for stamps by the colonies, and delays in making requests for more stamps. Bouvet cites examples of particular causes in the case of the first surcharge of New Caledonia and of the 1888 Martinique issue. The authority for all the surcharges would seem to rest in a ministerial circular of April 1862, which made franking with stamps obligatory in the Colonies. The entrance into UPU in 1876 made this even more definite. Therefore the colonial authorities had to meet lack of stamps by provisionals of some sort. The authorities abused this mandate in most of the colonies (only Mayotte and India did not issue overprints-), because the interest of philatelists in the stamps stimulated the speculative instincts of officials, printers, and others who prevailed on them. But the circumstances with each issue were different, and it is now really a very difficult task to separate those stamps which were relatively free from manipulation from those primarily speculative in origin. So far as the postal authorities are involved, the very first issues of the overprints in each colony seem to have been made with only postal needs in view. But in a few months the stamp dealers had "tasted blood" because the prices went up sharply in face of the limited supply of such genuine provisionals. The next overprintings were made in much larger quantities as a rule, in anticipation of philatelic demand, and the errors and minor varieties which were probably accidental at first were now put in deliberately in many cases. It is hard to prove that the later surcharges were not in some degree necessary for postal needs, as they were used more or less in regular correspondence, and as the "causes" that Bouvet mentions did tend to continue or recur.

In any case it is not until the 1903-04 and 1911-12 surcharges that the speculative element is flagrantly and obviously predominant. But things were already getting rather "smelly" by 1891 when a great flood of typographed overprints appeared in some colonies with a systematic character that suggests the Paris officials were abetting the racket in a big way. Bouvet mentions that he was unable to get permission to search the government archives for official actions on these surcharges - a fact which tends to confirm our suspicions of official guilt, as French philatelists had criticized the government strongly on this matter ever since the stamps appeared.

The Groupe Type stamps for each colony came out in 1891-93, ending the excuse for surcharging due to lack of values. This practice did nearly cease for the next decade. But there were a few issues made in 1891-93 in which the name of the colony was overprinted on the general issues remaining in stock. These stamps may have been needed until the new definitive Groupe Type stamps arrived, but the overprinting was not required by Paris. Some governors used the anticipated change of policy as an excuse. Not all the colonies issued them and the ones that did were using them concurrently with the Groupe Type for several years after. Curiously, Nossi Bé and Tahiti did not surcharge the general issues with their names until after the Groupe Types were supposed to have been issued to them! (Note: New colonies (Madagascar) and some of the consular offices abroad continued the questionable overprinting habits during the 1890's, but those issues are

beyond the scope of this article.)

Our general conclusion about the 1881-1893 surcharges is that most of them had an origin or excuse in some legitimate needs and authorizations, but that the opportunity was taken in many cases (especially in the later issues) to make errors deliberately (or to fail to correct them), to make large printings in order to meet philatelic demands, and even to make whole issues on technical interpretations of general policy.

Most of the big rarities of major varieties were not deliberate, but reflected the small stocks, the small needs for postage and the emergency character of the issues. It is precisely of these stamps that the most dangerous forgeries exist, wherefore the catalogue and market prices of them are low compared to the British colonials of equal rarity. Never buy them without a certificate from a dealer of good repute or an Expert committee, which have indubitably genuine copies available for comparison - the only method for expertizing them.

Ex-Dwight and ex-Ferrary copies are genuine with few exceptions. For certain minor varieties it is not possible to absolutely prove genuineness. The scarcer minor varieties of the commoner major varieties are often forged, but they are also more easily expertized, especially in blocks, tête-bêche pieces, etc. The suspicion of speculation hangs over so many of these that a collector should not regard them as too important. Mint sheets or panes are interesting as they show how deliberately the settings must have been varied.

It is most desirable to have them on commercial covers of the right period (beware of cleverly faked covers!) Until 1896 much of the regular correspondence still bore the unsurcharged general issues of the colonies, either alone or in combination with the surcharged stamps; in some of the colonies, however, at times nearly the entire stocks of general issues were overprinted and thus made temporarily scarce until new supplies were obtained from France.

Regarding the catalogue prices, we can only say that they are neither very helpful as a guide to rarity nor as any kind of an index of market value. Though the market is generally weak for these items, scarce major varieties, when in very fine condition, have a steady sale to general collectors. Nor is the size of the printings, known in most cases (see Yvert and Tellier, or Baron de Vinck de Winnezele) to be recommended as a basis for estimating what to pay for these stamps --- the relation is very erratic, judging from a study of Yvert and Tellier and of the sales and supplies on the market in this country and England. Used copies are generally somewhat scarcer than mint, but a very large proportion of the cancelled copies come from philatelic covers or cancelled to order sheets. The imperforate general issues were frequently sold ungummed, so o.g. or mint copies of these when overprinted need not be insisted upon. Of certain of the rarer major varieties, unused copies are even rarer than used ones, (note in Yvert and Tellier). Some stamps have forged cancels on forged overprints, and even the stamps may be forged as well. A knowledge of the proper cancels and dates often helps to identify some of the forgeries.

In closing, we would like to call attention to the fact that in Scott's catalogue the dates and chronological order of the first issues are radically incorrect in the case of many of the

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KNOW YOUR FORGERIES

(Continued from Vol.III,p.8)

GRANDE COMORE

1897-1907-12 - Groupe type. - The whole set has been forged by Fournier (see General Issues). The forged cancellation is: double circle, 21mm, MORONI (?) GDE COMORE.

GABON

1886-89 - Surcharges - The stamps of the first three issues are all very rare and very expensive and should absolutely be expertized. The forgeries are very numerous on the original stamps and exist also on the forgeries of the Dubois type and of the Postage dues (see General Issues). A few points will, however, help to suspect a forgery. In the originals the ink of the surcharge is always of an intense, shiny black; many forgeries are in plain black or dull black ink. In the originals of the first issue the A of GAB is shorter than the other letters and slants to the left. In the so-called reprints of the second issue, which are only outright forgeries, the numeral "5" is on line with the "1" or "2" while in the originals it is always higher.

1889 - Typographed locally -- ten types of each stamp. The originals are on very thick paper or bristol board. The hyphen between GABON-CONGO is 1 mm long. The two dots under the "A" of the GAB overprint are of an even thickness with the others and the left arm of the "A" is usually very weak or broken. In the Fournier forgeries the paper averages only about half the thickness of the originals; the hyphen is only 1/2 mm long. The two dots under the "A" are always much weaker and smaller and that letter shows no weakness. There are many other differences and to be sure comparison and expertization are necessary. The forged cancellations are: double circle, 22mm, LIBREVILLE 13 NOV 92 GABON-CONGO; 21mm, LIBREVILLE 20 MAI 89 GABON, also the same cancellations with date of 6 AOUT 86 on forgery of the first issue.

1904-07-12 - Groupe type - The whole set has been forged by Fournier (see General Issues).

1910 - Native woman type - Originals are typographed; the forgeries, being photolithographed, are therefore flatter looking and in paler shades. In the inscription L.COLMET the forgeries show the second "L" too low and the horizontal branch of both "L's" too short.

1916 - Red Cross - Forgeries exist, especially of the varieties. Expertize.

FRENCH OFFICES IN TURKEY

Levant - Cavalle - Dédéagh - Port-Lagos - Vathy. -- Overprints on the Sage type. Originals have always very sharp printing, edges of letters and serifs have regular sharp outlines ...the forgeries show blurred edges or smeared edges and rounded serifs.

Merson type - see characteristics of forgeries under General Issues.

FRENCH OFFICES IN CRETE

Merson type - dangerous forgeries of all the values (see General Issues).

FRENCH OFFICES IN CHINA

Practically all the surcharges and overprints have been forged, on originals as well as on forged stamps of Merson, Groupe and Dues types (see General Issues). Compare and have the

expensive stamps expertized - particularly the overprints of the Postage Dues, the "25" surcharge of 1900, the Pekin provisionals (1901), and the "5" surcharge of 1903. The Postage Dues of 1903 were only in use from Sept. 15 to Oct. 15, 1903 in the offices of TIEN-TSIN and PEKIN.

A.E.F.- FRENCH EQUATORIAL AFRICA

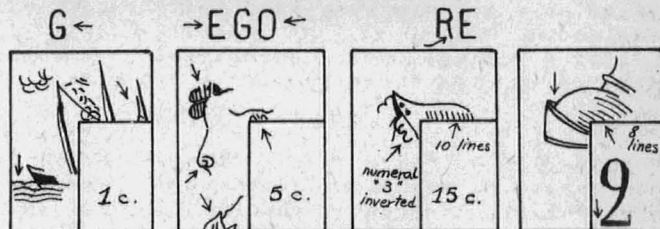
I don't know of any forgeries, so far - however, I would be very suspicious of the highly expensive values and varieties of the "Free French" overprints. They may not have been forged as yet, but they will be some day.

DIEGO-SUAREZ

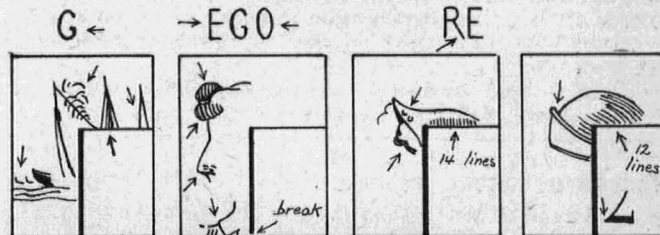
1890 - Surcharge made with a rubber stamp - many forgeries - The ink used for the originals was very fluid and very often shows through on the back; the edges of the numerals "run" somewhat. In the forgeries or unofficial reprints made at a later date, the ink is different, is darker, and doesn't show through, also the edges of the numerals are sharp.

1890 - lithographed locally - the color of the ink is more gray than black. In the originals the frame lines around the numeral are of

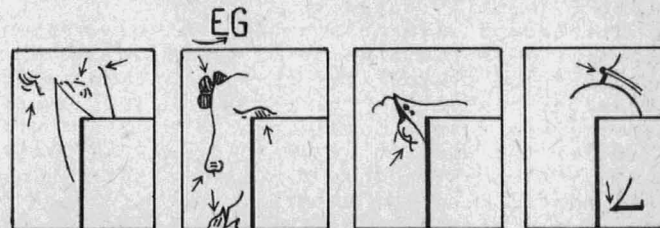
ORIGINALS



FOURNIER'S FORGERIES



PHOTOLITHOGRAPHED FORGERIES



even thickness. (See illustrations for characteristic signs of the originals and some of the common forgeries). The paper of some forgeries is yellowish. The Fournier cancellations are: double circle, 24 mm, DIEGO-SUAREZ 1 SEPT 92 MADAGASCAR; idem 23 mm; idem, 15 MARS 90, 28 SEPT 91, 27 SEPT 90 - all in black or blue. The photolithographed forgeries are much better done than the Fournier and the frame line to the left of the numerals is sometimes of deceptive thickness though generally too thick. Some of these have received genuine cancellations!

1891 - 5 centimes lithographed locally -- There exist several forgeries; some are crude, but some photolithographed ones are very good;

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KNOW YOUR FORGERIES ...

in these one of the signs is to check the figures 8 and 9 of the date; in the originals the 8 never touches the line above it and the 9 often touches, in the forgeries both figures touch. Also the printing is done with too black an ink.

1891 - Surcharges 5c on 10c, and 5c on 20c. Forgeries exist and comparison and expertization are essential.

1892 - Surcharges - numerous forgeries of both normal and varieties - they can't be described and must be expertized. There exists a complete Fournier set on Fournier's forgeries, (see General Issues), the cancellation being: DIEGO-SUAREZ 28 SEPT 91 (or 1 SEPT 92) MADAGASCAR, either in black or blue.

1892-94 - Groupe type - The whole set has been forged by Fournier (see General Issues).

1891 - Postage Dues - In the originals the dimensions are $17\frac{1}{2} \times 21 \frac{1}{3}$ or $\frac{1}{2}$ mm, the "A" of SUAREZ is higher than the other letters, there is a cedilla under the "C" of FRANÇAISE, the bar under "Percevoir" is wavy. In the Fournier forgeries the dimensions are $17\frac{1}{2} \times 20\frac{1}{2}$ for the 5c, and $17\frac{1}{2} \times 20\frac{1}{2}$ for the 50c, the "A" is on the same level, there is no cedilla, the bar is straight. There are also some photolithographed forgeries which are very good and should be expertized.

1892 - Postage Dues - surcharges - same remarks as for the corresponding postage set.

DAHOMÉY

1899-1912 - Groupe type -- The whole set has been forged by Fournier (see General Issues). - Be especially careful of the 10c on 50c, name in red, of the 1912 set - have it expertized. Forged cancellation: double circle, $21\frac{1}{2}$ mm., PORTO NOVO - interchangeable dates - DAHOMÉY.

1906 - Balay type - for forgeries see General Issues.

1915 - Red Cross - dangerous forgeries of the variety triple surcharge.

FRENCH COLONIAL ISSUES ...

colonies; Gibbon's catalogue is better, but even Yvert and Tellier does not always number the stamps in the order of the dates which they quote (- usually correct).

The issues under discussion, and other French Colonial overprints up to 1906, are unfortunately not "good stamps" for any collectors except those who are willing to study their stamps carefully and take some financial risk with them. For the student of printing and of postal history they offer some fascinating diversions -- if he can find the material and afford it! One of the most interesting angles that has not yet been followed up very much, is the use of the same type or font in successive settings and issues even over periods of years: The same local printer often did the various overprintings and the same type was used for the printer's other work, newspapers, decrees, books, etc. A comparative study of local type fonts and inks on genuine stamps, fakes, and local non-postal imprints would probably lead to useful knowledge for expertizations. Likewise, careful studies of the cancellations of the period would help the expert. The decrees authorizing each issue are not all known to collectors - more could be found and published in philatelic magazines. A search of contemporary stamp magazines and local newspapers, official gazettes, etc., often turns up buried and long forgotten information on the circumstances of the early stamp issues.

SOCIETY NOTES

AND ACTIVITIES

Address communications to Miss Helen V. Anthony
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Starting in the fall of 1943, all incoming members received in addition to the current number of the "Philatelist" the preceding volume (Vol. II) free of charge - and an extra charge of one dollar was made to those who also wished Vol. I. This policy is fair to all and will remain in force. We can still supply a few complete sets of Vol. I but better hurry, as the supply is dwindling fast. -

NEW MEMBERS Welcome to our new members:

- 153-DWORKOWSKI, Z.-5203 Mitchell Ave., Detroit, 11, Michigan.
- 154-HOLBERG, Dr. E. A.-3215 W. North Ave., Chicago 47, Illinois.
- 155-SHERIFFS, Leigh-328 Sheridan Rd. Winnetka, Ill.
- 156-HOEFLER, Otto - Santa Susanna, Calif. (F. & C.)
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- 158-SCHENK, L.-4264 W. 21 St., Cleveland 9, Ohio (early issues F. used)
- 159-BOERNER, S.-119 E. Walters St., Port Washington, Wisconsin (Col.)
- 160-CHATTERSON, C. M.-4127 John Road, Detroit 1, Michigan (F. & Col.)
- 161-WENGELEWSKI, C.-5921 So. Peoria St., Chicago, Illinois (used F.)
- 162-UNSEETEG, J. Jr.-3240 Hirsch St., Chicago 51, Illinois (cancellations)
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- 165-MCKAY, H. K.-93 Randlett Park, West Newton 65, Mass. (F. & Col.)
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- 167-PANTELL, L. J.-831 So. Indianapolis St., Tulsa 4, Oklahoma (Madagascar)
- 168-WALLACE, A. B.-1 Mississauga St. E., Orillia, Ontario, Canada
- 169-KATZ, Dr. O.-7508 Burthe St., New Orleans, La. (F. & forgeries)
- 170-DONOHUGH, Major C. L.-1841 Columbia Road, N.W. Washington 9, D. C.
- 171-BONADE DE LA CHARME, D.-La Charmette, New Hope, Pa. (F. to 1914)

- CHANGE OF ADDRESS -

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- LIDMAN, D. (97) to 50 W. Schiller St. Chicago 10, Ill.
- URTON, R. N. (121) to 424 No. Nevada Ave., Colorado Springs, Colorado
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- DELPUECH, A. O. (75) to 609 12th St., Knoxville 16, Tennessee

SOI-DISANT "FREE FRENCH PHILATELIC AGENCY"

Mr. Raoul de Thuin, a Belgian citizen, is still using the above name without authorization for his private stamp business at Merida, Mexico. A promise of change of name of this concern was secured, but in Feb. 1944 the old name was again used on envelopes and circulars sent to the U.S. Further efforts to stop this abuse are underway.