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Paolo Ciulla the forger artist

EDIZIONI D'ANDREA

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CHAPTER II

HIS FIRST FORGERIES



Testimonies of the time show that Paolo Ciulla, in the early years of the last century, decided to devote himself to his first activity as a 'competitor of the State', starting to forge nickel 25 cent lira coins bearing on the obverse, in the centre, the heraldic eagle spread and crowned with the Savoy shield on the breast, at the bottom the year of minting and, all around, the legend 'VITTORIO EMANUELE III RE D'ITALIA', while on the reverse, the indication of the value '25' between laurel branches and at the top the legend: 'CENTESIMI'.

It was said that Paolo Ciulla produced four or five lire a day, the amount needed to provide only for his daily needs.



Obverse and reverse of a counterfeit 25 cent nickel coin.



Obverse and reverse of a genuine 25 cent nickel coin.

This coin was short-lived, as it was said not to have been too popular, from its first appearance, because it was easily confused with the reverse of the one lira silver coin and therefore minting was discontinued.

This was an activity that lasted only a few months because one day his friend Giovanni, having learned of his work and his artistic aptitude, proposed to him: 'Why not design and colour something that goes into everyone's hands every day and, above all, something that is among the most difficult to execute?'.

His friend's proposal was very clear: Paolo Ciulla had been invited to forge banknotes instead of coins. This, thought Paolo Ciulla, would be an excellent opportunity to prove his true artistic worth.

Like a conspirator, he would lock himself up every night in a country cottage in the hamlet of Viagrande and there he would polish the lithographic stones, on which he would



Obverse and reverse of an original 25 lire state banknote.

The system of printing fake banknotes was undoubtedly a very original one, but, in order to be successful, his 25 lire banknotes had to be perfect. Unfortunately, however, the banknotes were not perfect, because they had approximate colours and, above all, because Ciulla had not succeeded in reproducing on those banknotes the watermark which was present on the originals, that is, the word 'LIRE', at the bottom centre of the banknote and the number '25', surmounted by a star, in the round to the right of the banknote.

The reproduction of the watermark on banknotes has always been the biggest obstacle for counterfeiters to overcome. The methods that counterfeiters used were always the same.

Watermarks were obtained directly during the preparation of the paper. In practice, forgers either subjected the dry paper to strong pressure from wet punches, in which the watermark to be reproduced was imprinted, or they treated the sheets of paper with fatty substances or chemical reagents, imprinting on the already printed paper a punch that was soaked in sulphuric acid, or that was sprinkled with liquid wax.



Obverse and reverse of a forged 25 lire State Note.

At that time, the counterfeiting of paper money required a lot of intelligence, great skill, a certain technical preparation and, moreover, a good forger also had to have chemical knowledge and capital at his disposal.

Paolo Ciulla, being aware that he possessed all those 'skills', contacted Stefano Milazzo again, to whom he proposed his 'new project' and Milazzo introduced him to Antonino Balsamo, a wealthy confectionery wholesaler from Catania, nicknamed 'Cosaduciaro', telling him that he might be interested in taking part in that 'little job'.

Paolo Ciulla and the other two 'cronies', after some preliminary meetings, agreed to set up the new 'business company', in which Milazzo would provide the technical equipment and organise the work activities, Balsamo would provide his money for the purchase of the materials and Paolo Ciulla, using his 'art of deception', would have to transform those vile materials into real wealth.



Obverse and reverse of a fake 50 Argentine pesos banknote forged by Paolo Ciulla.

When they observed them carefully, neither he nor Giovanni were completely satisfied with the results obtained, but they still needed to 'make money' and so they started to deal those banknotes, positioning themselves at the exit gates of the port of Buenos Aires where mainly emigrants arriving from Italy were arriving.

Placing those fake pesos at a more advantageous exchange rate than those in circulation would not have been difficult for them, but they feared that the entry into circulation of those banknotes might have alarmed the Argentine authorities.

Paolo began to take a few extra precautions; to ensure that what he was producing inside his home could not be observed from the outside, he thought of painting the window panes of his studio apartment white.

This detail, however, did not escape the attention of the Argentine Criminal Police during the preliminary investigation phase, who began questioning the duped Italian



Obverse and reverse of a fake 50 lire 'Buoi' banknote.

There was a bit of everything in that banknote and Paolo Ciulla had to be very careful to avoid making the slightest mistake.

His experience in the Argentine newspaper printing works had sharpened his skills and made him realise that it was preferable to use engraved zinc plates instead of the now obsolete lithographic stones to reproduce images that were more faithful than the original ones. Paolo carefully photographed the two sides of an authentic banknote and then made twelve small clichés, as many as there were colours to be reproduced on the banknote, divided to perfection, so that it appeared as if there were only one.



Lithographic stones used by counterfeiters of the time to forge
the 500 lire 'Barbetti with matrix' banknotes.

One of the seized notes said, 'Collodion at 1.5% = 100 gr. contains 1.5 of pyroxitin, I keep 250 at 5%, that is 10 gr. of pyroxitin. With 10 gr. you can make 10:1.5=666.6666 of 1.5% collodion. I want to make 333.3333 iodised and make 325 gr. of it, so in 333.3333 is contained 5 gr. of cotton.'

This formula represented for him the crowning achievement of who knows how many studies.