

The Finnish “Associate Group” and the Prolific Forgeries of Karelia

An ongoing Draft Study to help recognize forgeries

by Ed Fraser

The Finnish “Associate Group” describes the areas within Russia that briefly issued stamps in the 1919 to 1922 period as these areas unsuccessfully sought independence from Russia and the Red Army. These stamps received active support from the philatelic community, and the three places involved are known to collectors as Aunus, North Ingermanland, and Karelia. All three have serious problems with forgeries in the philatelic marketplace.

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Aunus

The Aunus stamps were simply overprinted stamps of the then current Finnish postage stamps, the Republic or Saarinen type first issued in Finland in 1917. Aunus used seven values from 5 penni through 10 marks overprinted “Aunus” and they were valid for several months in 1919 – from 7 July through 15 October. These stamps became a target for forgers very shortly after they came out, because all that was required was the type to print “Aunus” on the available regular Finnish stamps, and apparently the type was of a kind available at many printing shops of the day. Identifying the various forgeries made is the task of an expert. Detecting overprint forgery can be hard, and added to that is the situation that forgeries apparently are still being made today, and have been offered on eBay, and they often are not described as forgeries. Some show lettering styles that are not correct, some show lettering flaws that are wrong, and some create varieties, such as inverted overprints, that didn’t occur. See Figure 1.



Figure 1

A fantasy forgery. Genuine Aunus overprints are not known inverted.

To complicate the picture, stamps were canceled to order to satisfy demand for used stamps, and some stamps were canceled to order in Finland itself with Finnish cancels. Forgers also liked to work with already canceled Finnish stamps – they were cheaper to get. Hence, while it is probable that a stamp with a non-Aunus cancel has a forged overprint, that is not always true. Again, I will mention about forger Sperati’s very important observation: always remember that “ink travels”, so that cancel ink applied

before an overprint is applied can look and definitely appear to be ON TOP OF overprint ink applied at a later time over the cancel already there - even under the best magnification! Lastly, there is an important aid that expertizers use for these Aunus overprints - the full sheets of the genuine overprints, which exist in a constant layout of 100 and allow detailed identification.

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North Ingermanland

The North Ingermanland stamps were valid for several months in 1920, from 21 March through 5 December 1920. Their first issue resembled the Finnish postage stamp style, with eight values from 5 penni through 10 marks. I have not heard of forgeries of these stamps. The forgeries are of the second set - the series of 7 pictorials, values from 10 penni to 10 marks, Scott #8-14, that were in use from 2 August through 5 December 1920. These plentiful forgeries are everywhere, perforate and imperforate, in full sheets, as partial printings, and even in fanciful souvenir sheets. Sadly, they are very often offered as genuine. They are also often described as reprints. They are not "reprints," nor are they "proofs," or "printer's waste". Most of these forgeries offered are mint, but I have seen some offered with fantasy cancels to appear used. . The excellent Internet forgery reference site created by Bill Claghorn does a super job with thousands of forgeries worldwide, and includes excellent genuine versus forgery comparisons for each of the 7 values of this North Ingermanland set. The Claghorn site is at: <http://www.geocities.com/claghorn1p/>)

Attached is a photo for a fantasy souvenir sheet apparently created by the forger of these North Ingermanland issues. However, this supposed special sheet shows only the forgeries. Conveniently, the example here includes the 10 penni forgery, which is the one value where the forgery has a very visible and easily identified "constant" plate flaw – and this flaw only exists on forgeries. It is the color spot in the upper right corner of the shield. See Figure 2.



Figure 2

A Souvenir Sheet Fantasy Forgery - these sheets are only made for the forgeries. Note the forgery's tell-tail "color spot" on the corner of the shield of the 10 penni value.

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Karelia

The Karelia independence attempt occurred nearly two years after the North Ingermanland independence attempt failed. The Karelia stamps were valid for almost 2 months in 1922 – from 31 January through 16 March 1922. This set of fifteen stamps from 1922, 5 penni through 25 marks, Scott 1-15, seems to have its forged copies most regularly offered as genuine outside Finland. I have seen even well known dealers and auction houses sell these forgeries mis-described as genuine. Philatelists have been warned for years to be afraid of overprint forgeries, so Anus forgeries should be no special surprise. However, the widespread nature of these Karelia forgeries seems to catch many people by surprise, even with cautionary notes in the catalogs. However, such cautionary notes without some description of the differences between genuine and forgery doesn't help much.

Another frustration is that the Karelia forgery descriptions in most references refer generally to design features that only have meaning if one has genuine comparison material, and even then it is not always clear. Here in the U.S. some years back I had been offered photo certificates of genuineness on the set of examples of the forgeries I have scanned to show here. That should serve as an additional warning of how bad this problem is with Karelia. But time has not fully changed things. Just yesterday (July 6,

2010), a set of forgeries was offered as genuine with a genuine expertizer's note that from the scan, they appeared genuine. Fortunately, though, these forgeries are not as dangerous as all this sounds, if you know just a little bit more about the genuine ones.

There are many ways to identify the forgeries. These include especially size and perf measurements, and design detail differences. I would prefer the design detail choice, because that can work quite well with just a clear picture of the stamp in unknown magnification. There is a slight color difference between genuine and forgery, but this seems lost in the failure to get good color match on a number of the scans I made. The gum, too, is different on the forgeries. Then again, the gum color may not have stayed the same, depending on storage conditions, etc., and, again, one should have comparison material.

- Design Detail -



Figure 3
The Central Design

For “design detail,” my suggestion is to focus on what is sometimes called the “lightning” or “zigzag lines” in the design. It really is meant to represent the Northern Lights in the sky. Basically, they are the zigzag lines, one set on each side over the Karelia bear. I am reminded of the Egyptian hieroglyph for “water” which is also translated as the consonant letter “N” in ancient Egyptian writings. I am not a student of hieroglyph texts, but I do enjoy examining well done texts in stone or on tablets in museum displays. It is interesting to see how these ancient stone carvers varied in perfectionist skills, and even the wiggly line for water or “N” varies from carver to carver. Usually it looks like a series of inverted small “w” letters all connected, with typically perhaps 7 tops and 8 bottoms. See Figures 4 and 5.



Figure 4
At the Brooklyn Museum - “Before 2000 B.C.”



Figure 5
Egyptian Hieroglyph of the letter “N”

This digression is to hopefully insure you will remember it, and that you will not only look at these two pairs of zigzag lines on these Karelia stamps, but you will also always compare them pretty carefully with the genuine ones of the same value to be certain of your conclusion. It is really important to compare them with the same value, as you will note there is significant variety in the zigzags within the set of the forgeries. I think to date it is a pretty foolproof way of finding if these stamps are genuine or not – although we are only looking to confirm “forgery” here, not to assume expertization of genuineness. The additional caution is that a genuine set can have a few forgeries mixed in – they have had many years to get mixed together, unfortunately, so each value has to be examined. Note, too, that the values 5 penni through 1 mark each had 20,000 printed – a relatively small number. However, the values 2 marks through 25 marks had an even smaller number printed - only 15,000 of each value. Considering that the demand is usually for full sets, this suggests why I have seen a set offered where only the 2 mark through 25 mark ones were forgeries. On the plus side, the forgeries typically are always mint or at least unused and not on cover. Of course, there is no guarantee what the future will bring forth, but one does need to especially focus on the mint material out there.

There is another well known design difference for the genuine values below 1 mark. There is a chain that runs along the bottom of the central design, below the bear’s hind legs. At about the “8 o’clock” position, just below two complete circular chain links on the left side, the third link is more like a “c” than an “o.” One side of that link is open. This distinctive feature does not occur on the 1 mark and higher values, nor on any of the forgeries. See Figure 6.



Figure 6

The Genuine values below the 1 mark value have this one chain link open

Once identified, the forgeries actually do have many small design differences, and one could make a lot of notes about them, but the zigzag lines alone should work.

Perforations

There is another way, but it is not so foolproof. If you only have a small picture to work with, and there is a whole set or part set being offered, a careful comparison of the perfs can show if some of the material is not genuine. For this test it is really important to understand exactly what a full set consists of. These 15 different values actually represent 20 different stamps, as 5 of them exist in two different perf gages. It's an interesting balance. Five only have "perf A", five only have "perf B", and five can be either. These are line perforated, and "perf A" gage is described as $11 \frac{1}{4}$, and "perf B" gage is described as $11 \frac{3}{4}$ in a specialized catalog such as Finland's Norma Catalog.

The five "A" are the 10 p., 40 p., 75 p., 3 mk., and 20 mk.

The five "B" are the 20p., 50p., 1 mk., 5 mk., and 15 mk.

The five remaining exist in both "A" and "B" perfs, and make a total of ten more stamps,

That adds two 5 p., two 25 p., two 2 mk., two 10 mk., and two 25 mk. values.

This “full set” would total 20 stamps to have an example of each known perf variety.

Attached are two pictures to show the perf differences of Perf A and Perf B genuine 25 penni stamps and similarly for Perf A & B genuine 2 mark stamps. See Figures 7 and 8.



Figure 7

Genuine 25 Penni Perf A on Left and Perf B on Right. NOTE perf holes do not line up the length of the distance from top-to-bottom of the stamp.



Figure 8

Genuine 2 Mark Perf A on Left and Perf B on Right. NOTE perf holes do not line up the length of the distance from top-to-bottom of the stamp.

Since all of the 15 values of the forgeries seem to always be perforated with the same gage, with only the slightest differences if any at all, we have a simple test. If the perfs of one of the “A – only” values lines up exactly with the perfs of one of the “B - only” values, one is definitely fake – and chances are they are both fake. See picture of two fakes – a 10 penni and a 20 penni lined up to show they do not have the required perf gage difference. See Figure 9.



Figure 9

An Impossible Perf Match.

A Genuine 20 Penni is always perf B, and a Genuine 10 Penni is always perf A, so a match here means at least one is a forgery . Actually, here both are forgeries.

In photos available on the Internet, one can use the basic standard Microsoft Accessories “Paint” program that is in all PC’s. Use it to move around pieces of a picture to see if the perfs will line up or not. More computer involved people could do a better job via the Photoshop program – but I just use “Copy” (The “Print Screen” key) and then go into “Paint”, and then I can “paste” the screen picture into the “Paint” screen to work on. Very often it can tell me from minimal pictures if at least some of the material may be genuine – because the “right” values’ perfs don’t line up.

Here are the scans of the 15 denominations – a genuine unused examples followed by a forged example – a total of 30 scans. The even numbers are Genuine, as noted. The odd numbers are the Forgeries, as noted. See Figures 10 to 39.



Figure 10
Genuine 5 Penni



Figure 11
Forgery



Figure 12
Genuine 10 Penni



Figure 13
Forgery



Figure 14
Genuine 20 Penni



Figure 15
Forgery



Figure 16
Genuine 25 Penni



Figure 17

Forgery



Figure 18
Genuine 40 Penni



Figure 19

Forgery



Figure 20
Genuine 50 Penni



Figure 21

Forgery



Figure 22
Genuine 75 Penni



Figure 23

Forgery



Figure 24
Genuine 1 Mk



Figure 25

Forgery



Figure 26
Genuine 2 Mk



Figure 27
Forgery



Figure 28

Genuine 3 Mk



Figure 29
Forgery



Figure 30
Genuine 5 Mk



Figure 31

Forgery



Figure 32

Genuine 10 Mk



Figure 33

Forgery



Figure 34
Genuine 15 Mk



Figure 35

Forgery



Figure 36
Genuine 20 Mk



Figure 37
Forgery



Figure 38
Genuine 25 Mk



Figure 39

Forgery

There is a definitive article about these Karelia issues in *The Finnish Philatelist*, pages 4 through 14, of June 1997. It is titled *Karelia – Karajala 1922*, originally written by Kalle Varnas for the Finnish Handbook Volume V, and edited by Roger Quinby. It is available on the Scandinavian Collectors Club website at:

http://posthorn.scc-online.org/03_TPF_6_1997.pdf

This PDF file is an approximate 8 MEG download. In addition to the history and background of these stamps and their use, this reference also gives specific detail about small plate flaws to be found in the genuine stamps.

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And a note about collecting these forgeries? Forgeries to defraud the post are special. Forgeries that are dangerously good, and perhaps made by a historically notorious forger in very limited numbers are sometimes sought after. These forgeries here, in my view, are really not very good and are unfortunately not rare, and have no notorious provenance aimed to cheat the post or some famous collectors. However, I have also seen where prices of examples described as forgeries are bid up by both collectors and dealers, who afterwards explained how sure they were that the description was wrong, and they were in fact buying the genuine stamps at a good price. Beyond that caution, I have no good valuation figures to offer.

Important note: Please realize that this draft study is not about expertizing genuine material, but helping to identify the items that are known to be forged and can be recognized as the forgeries. Hence, a goal is to be able to have moderately clear pictures of the items be completely sufficient for this task. Items that are acquired may be identified as not matching the discussed forgeries, but still must be critically examined, and submitted for expertization if appropriate.

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