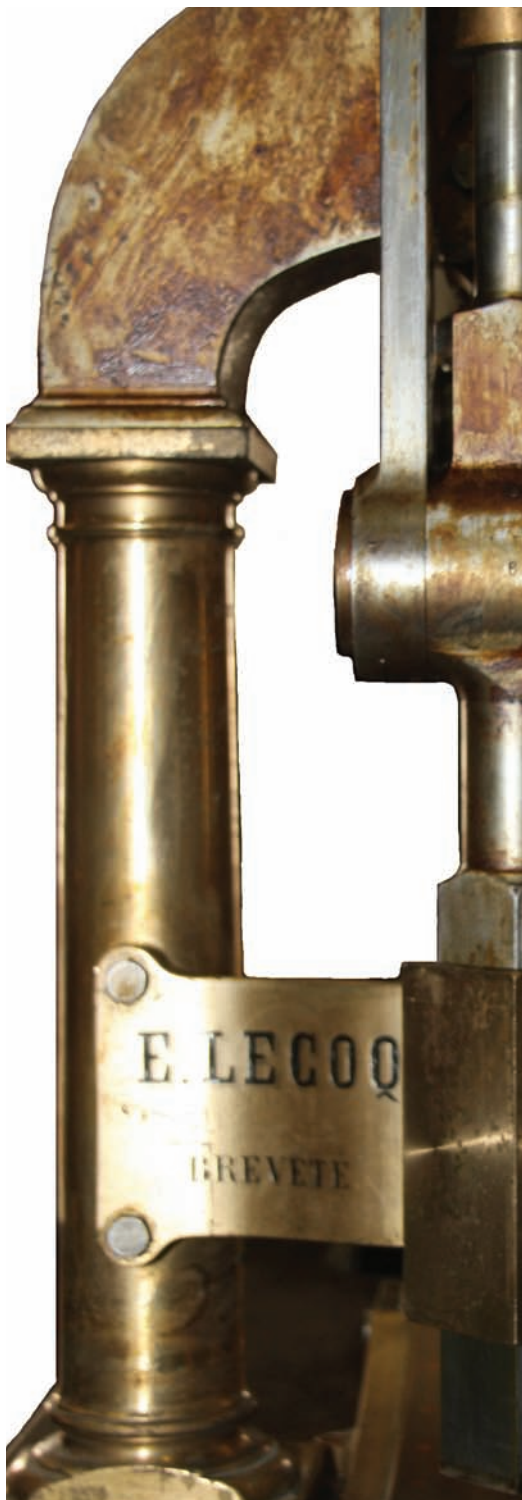


The Lecoq

On the trail of the most unusual stamps printing machine of the world

By Wolfgang Maassen & Karl Louis



When philatelists engage in the search for a printing machine, with such earnest enthusiasm and dedication as in this case, then it must be something special: an unknown machine used to produce stamps in a truly unusual manner – also about which little is known! These factors were reason enough to motivate the authors to open the chase.

Introduction

The name of the printing machine used to produce the classic issues of Peru is known to collectors as the “Lecoq”. Herbert H. Moll wrote about this press:

“For me, the most fascinating of the early Peruvian stamps are those produced using the Lecoq machine. ...The most prominent aspects are as follows:

- *The first stamp in the world produced in rolls.*
- *The only issue produced on a machine which has been lost with the passage of time.*

I have spent many years trying to find this machine. ...Many times we received information that this machine was in the yard of one of the older houses in Lima, but none of these tips ever bore fruit. ...I have gathered from other authors a description of the machine and its workings, but of all these authors, only one claimed ever to have seen it. ...” (1)

This one author may well have been Jean Baptiste Moens, who wrote about this machine in fairly times (2), or perhaps Emilio Diena, who mentioned it several times in his book “Stamps of Sicily” (3). Their literature does not give any definitive indication. After that, quite definitely no one has seen this machine for over a century. Everyone subsequently has based their writings on the spartan descriptions of these two authors, and any trace of the machine has vanished with time.

Further down the trail

The manufacturer of this unusual machine was named Emile Lecoq and his business was located in Paris in what was then called Rue des Vieux Augustins. In 1867, the street name was changed to Rue d'Argout, in 1881 to Rue Herold. When Lecoq's ceased to exist is not known. In 1851, Lecoq obtained a patent for the printing of train tickets which were simultaneously dated and numbered. In 1854, he patented a machine to produce embossed and printed metal signs. In 1855, there

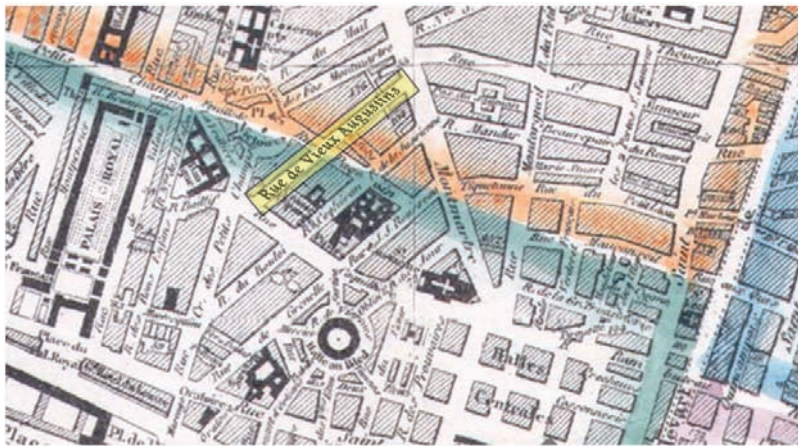
followed a further patent for a new type of machine. What all of these machines had in common was that the “products” made by them came out in rolls, not in sheets. This perhaps explains why research in the official patent archives does not reveal any entry for a machine specifically designed for the production of postage stamps. Lecoq appears to have managed quite well in this area by making small modifications to the machines he already had available. (4)

Modifications of this nature were made for Sicily in mid 1858 by a certain Don Antonio Pampillonia: plans were already being made for the production of Sicily's first postage stamps. On October 12th, 1858, he paid a visit to M. Lecoq in Paris, during which he explained the desired modifications and adjustments to the printing machine. Two days later, he was able to report back to Sicily that all the necessary changes were possible and that a machine of the required accuracy would be ready by the end of October. Daily production of 20,000 stamps, perhaps even 30,000, should be possible as soon as machinists had been fully trained. Of particular interest is one sentence in Pampillonia's letter: “The machine rolls out the paper and at the same time continuously inks the plate. The machine then separates the stamps without cutting them ...” (5)

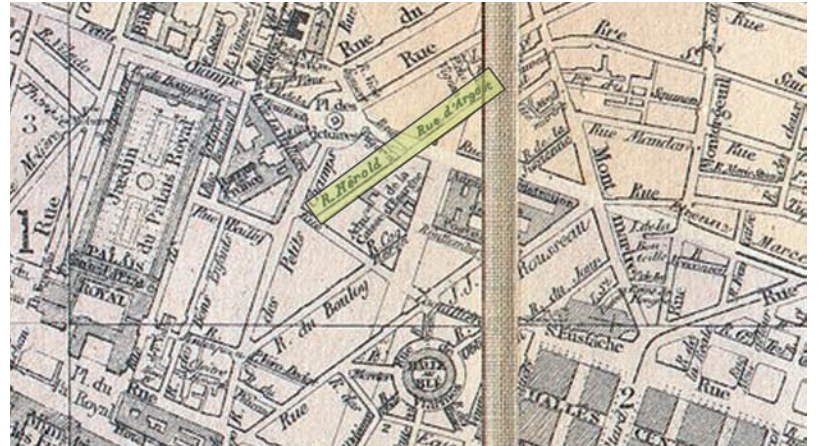
On November 21st, 1858, Pampillonia was less enthusiastic, as technical problems had become evident. The machine, which was run using two pedals, turned out larger than planned, and the added brass and steel parts of the mechanism were proving problematic, e.g. when feeding the thin paper through the machine, especially in the margins. Pampillonia was able to correct the problems and a second Lecoq machine was actually ordered. However, this second machine never produced any of the intended stamps beyond the proof stage. Thus ends for now this chapter of the Lecoq story, insofar as it concerns Philately. Nothing is known to this day of the whereabouts of either of these machines.

The Introduction in Peru

It is known that the Director General of the Peruvian Post Office, Sr. José Davila Condemarin, saw one of Lecoq's machines on a visit to Paris; the date of this visit is unknown. However, in a letter from Condemarin dated December 31st, 1859 (6),



1865, Plan of Paris when the Printing Lecoq was situated in Rue de Vieux Augustins. (by John Anthony Gallignani)



1882, Pocket Map of Paris when the name of the Rue de Vieux Augustines was changed on Rue Hérold - Rue d'Argout (by Andriveau-Goujon).

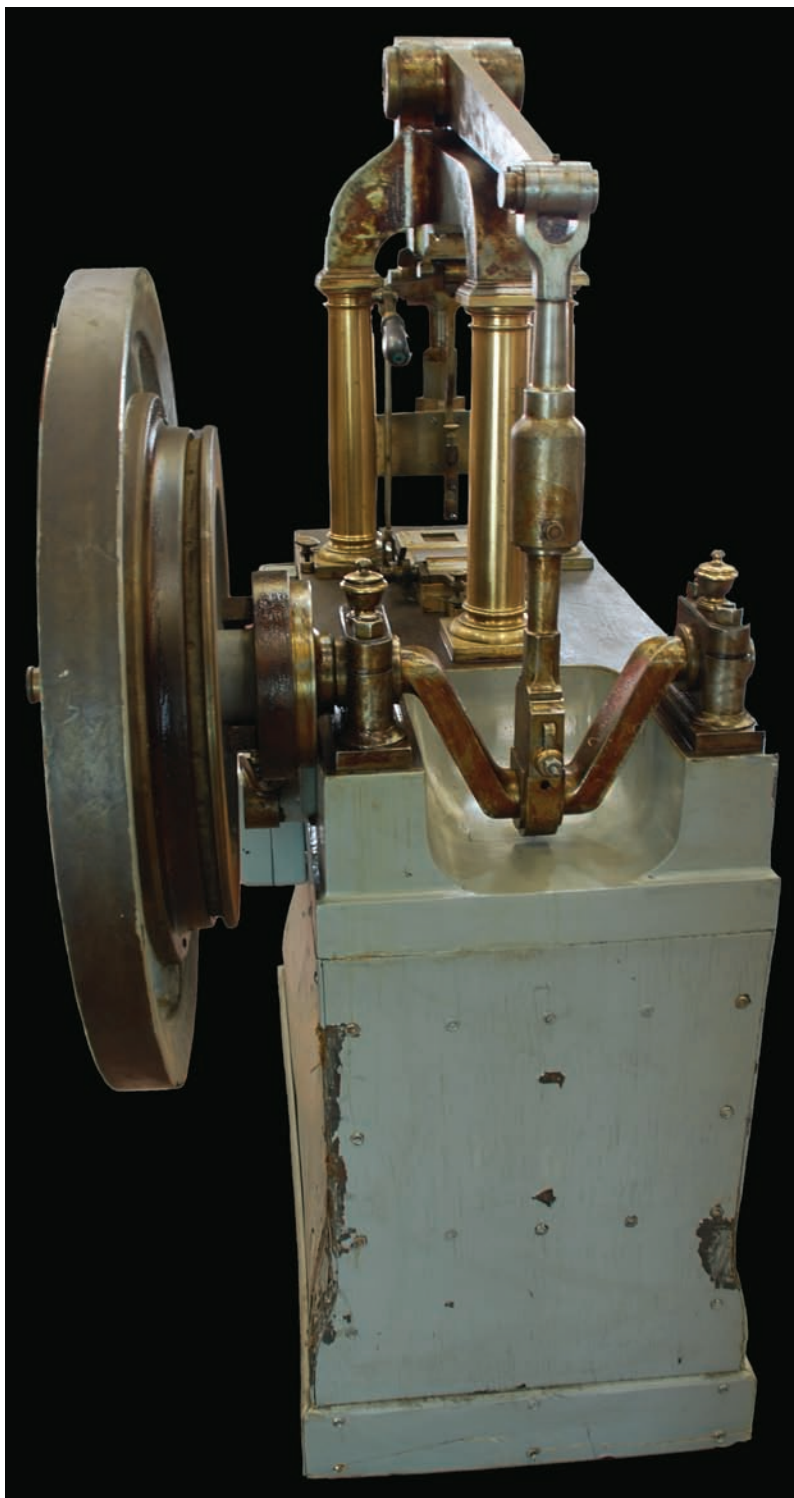
he wrote that he has enquired regarding the uses of this machine. In a letter of June 30th, 1860, to the Foreign Ministry, he described the advantages of the machine and enclosed a French stamp along with two Essays in red and in black. These were Essays of the planned Sicilian issues! Soon thereafter, on August 28th, an import order was issued by Condemarin for a machine which was to enter Peru without Customs formalities. For some unknown reason, this machine was not put into use until September 1862. We don't know if this machine was not one of the two sent to Sicily, as both of these were transferred to the General Postal Department in Turin on May 17th, 1861. (Emilio Diena, pag. 126)

The Peruvian Lecoq printing machine

This machine was used between November 1862 and March 1873 for the production of millions of Peruvian stamps of various issues. How can one begin to describe – to quote Moll – the world's first coil printing machine?

Moll offered the following: *"The print was horizontal on gummed paper 23.5 mm wide. The one exception is the Llamita (Mi.-No. 18), printed sideways on strips of 21.5 mm width. ...As in other Latin American countries, the original machine had been supplied with printing blocks for Dinero and Peseta values. These blocks were of far better quality than those later produced locally in Lima for the Trancito and Llamita issues. For a long time I have tried to find out the length of the paper strips used. As they were printed, they were joined to one another end on end, thus paper joins are common. ...We know nothing of the efficiency of the machine, but its productivity must have been high."* (7)

The information from Moll appears at first glance to be adequate, but some questions remain unanswered. The only solution would be to try to find one of the machines and examine it in detail. On the afternoon of January 16th, 2009, the opportunity came. The authors, together with Dieter Michelson and accompanied by their wives, met with Helena Nunes, a Portuguese national working for the auction house Heinrich Köhler. Together, they went to the "Museu Nacional da Imprensa" in Porto. Would they actually find in this museum of printing, an original Lecoq machine? Peruvian philatelists had searched in vain in their own country for over a century.



The Lecoq

Sr. Luis Humberto Marcos, the director of the museum, along with colleagues, had taken the heavy machine out of storage for the visitors from Germany. Just one glance sufficed: it was an original Lecoq, as confirmed by a brass plate affixed to the machine head. But was the machine still in working order?

A cursory examination proved disappointing. No parts for printing or embossing could be seen. Was some important part missing or was this a completely different type of Lecoq machine than expected? Nevertheless, closer examination began to reveal details showing considerable similarity between the machine here and the Sicilian and Peruvian models used for the production of stamps.

Pedal-Power

In mid-1858, on the authority of the Sicilian Post Office, Don Antonio Pampillonia paid a visit to E. Lecoq in Paris in order to arrange for certain technical alterations to a machine intended for use in the Kingdom of Sicily. In a letter dated November 21st, 1858, Pampillonia describes the machine as being driven using two pedals. (8)

And there they were, under the frame of the machine now in Porto. The museum director nodded permission to Karl Louis, who gingerly placed his feet on the pedals and began to apply pressure. Nothing happened at first. However, as Louis began to apply more pressure, they began to move up and

down. And suddenly the whole machine was in motion, wheels, rollers, cylinders and feeders! All moving simultaneously as if by magic!

The Printing and Embossing cylinders

The energy of the pedals was transmitted to a large flywheel at the side of the machine, slowly at first but then ever faster. Using hydraulics, the flywheel moved a large cylinder at the front of the machine up and down, up and down. Under the cylinder, one could see a small recess. Here, between the cylinder and the steel bed, must have been located the lower part of the plate and embossing die which was used to impress the roll-fed paper.

The paper feed and inking

The flywheel kept many parts of the machine in motion. Exactly in time with the movement of the cylinder, a swinging arm moved about 12 inches between a small trough and the cylinder. Without doubt, this small trough was the ink reservoir. In the bottom of this trough was a small roller which rotated slowly in time with the machine. It would appear that the roller raised the ink onto an appendage to the swinging arm (now missing), which then transferred fresh ink to the cylinder.

As Pampillonia described in a letter to Sicily from October 1858: *"The machines rolls the paper back and forth in continuous strips and simultaneously inks the printing plate."* (9)

With a little fanstasy, the visitors from Germany could imagine the machine at work. But where was the holder for the rolls of unprinted paper, and where were the holders for the printed strips as described by Pampillonia? At the side of the space between the ink reservoir and the printing cylinder, there was another wheel turning slowly: click, click, click. With each stroke of the swinging arm between ink reservoir and printing cylinder, the wheel at the side moved only slightly, precisely moving a small gear with steel hooks. Was this part of the mechanism for controlling the paper feed? Perhaps, but too many other small part were missing to be certain.

The "coil" paper

The paper strips cut from sheets had to be fed into the machine. Paper strips fed by hand would provide neither the speed nor the precision required for accurate printing. This precision was provided by two small "thorns" which, after each stamp was printed, transported the strip 24mm away from the printing cylinder. A chute the width of the paper strip would have been used to keep the paper from wandering out of line with the printing cylinder. Such a device was missing from the machine in Porto. That the chute was not always reliable is proven by the existence of long strips where one impression is raised; also, stamps with double impressions are known, possibly occurring as a result of occasional manual feed.

The machine produced stamps at speed, thus we can exclude the possibility of the gum being applied during or after printing, a process which would have slowed production. It is safe to assume that the paper was already gummed prior to printing.

Moll and all other authors claim that the stamps were printed in strips. This point cannot be dispu-

