

HIDDEN IMAGES

Lester Smith



1. Raphael's *Madonna della seggiola* in watermark (from Museo della Carta e della Filigrana, Italy).



2. Da Vinci's *La Gioconda* as a watermark (Museo della Carta e della Filigrana).

OVER THE YEARS of being a collector of images, especially those which can be projected and those that can be brought to life by other mechanical means, I have also developed a passion for images that can change into something else, or those that are hidden until the right medium is brought to bear upon them. Such an image is the 'watermark'.

We are all aware of the watermarks found in writing paper, or in the paper used in books of antiquity and still in high-quality publications. Postage stamps and bank notes are other obvious examples of the use of watermarks, for security purposes to prevent counterfeiting. The first watermarked postage stamps appeared in Britain in 1840, and the first watermarked bank note was issued in the United States in 1843. Watermarks have also been generally used by the many different paper manufacturers as a means of identifying their products.

Over the years I have occasionally found an odd sheet of paper, sometimes in a frame, that appears quite blank – until it is held to the light. Then a picture appears. It may be a portrait of royalty or a famous person, but is more likely to be of a religious nature. These images are usually very beautiful and full of detail, and in many ways are similar to the 'lithophanes' made of ceramic or plastic material.

Until recently, I had found none of these paper pictures with any marks to give me a clue as to who might have produced them. Then I found some sheets with the initials 'CMF', and one with the name 'PIETRO MILIANI FABRIANO' as part of the watermark. These

sheets were of stout paper, some 40 centimeters square, with very beautiful pictures when held to the light. One was of St Peter's in Rome, another of Moses, one showed a portrait of a pope, and the nicest one, in my opinion, was a reproduction of the 'Madonna of the Chair' after Raphael (Fig. 1).

Now that I had a name to follow up, it was easy to find out more on the internet. Pietro Miliani (1744–1817) was employed by Count Vallemani of Fabriano in the 18th century as a paper manufacturer. By 1785 he had become the owner of the paper mill and took over other mills in the area. Later on his sons followed him into the business, and later still a nephew took over. After the Second World War, the Miliani group became a corporation, and it survives today known as Cartiere Miliani Fabriano SpA., one of the largest paper manufacturers in Europe.

Fabriano is located about 210 kilometres (130 miles) north-east of Rome, and claims to be the oldest active papermaking town in Europe. Its watermarks go back to 1283 and were originally introduced to identify the paper being made at the many different mills. Fabriano has long been renowned for its elaborate and beautiful watermarks, whether of famous paintings and portraits or just coats-of-arms or trademarks.

Simple linear watermarks like coats-of-arms and signatures are made from thin stainless steel wire attached to the mesh of the paper mould. At the places where the wires are in the mould, the paper is formed very slightly thinner after being pressed and dried,



3. Portrait of King Edward VII (Lester Smith Collection).



4. Portrait of Queen Elizabeth II at her Coronation in 1953 (Lester Smith Collection).

and hence made more transparent so that the image is revealed when illuminated from behind.

The making of a picture watermark is a lot more complex. Actually, the complicated light and shade watermark was conceived by the Englishman William Henry Smith (W.H. Smith) in 1848. Initially the expense of manufacturing the moulds was considerable, so the process was used mainly for high-value purposes such as making it more difficult to counterfeit money.

Eraldo Librari has been the master engraver at Cartiere Miliani Fabriano for over 34 years. He engraves an image into a wax plate illuminated from underneath, working the surface at different depths (a bit like sculpture in reverse, i.e. intaglio). From this wax relief a bronze casting is made, first the negative and from this a positive. A fine copper wire filter is placed between these two plates, which are then firmly pressed together. This filter is attached to the paper-making frame so that the paper pulp cast on this type of mould is thinner in the raised areas of the image and thicker in the recessed areas, which creates the light and shade design. The variations in thickness of the paper constitute only one hundredth of a millimetre!

The Mona Lisa (Fig. 2), for example, took Signor Librari about two months to execute. There are many more beautiful art papers available from Fabriano, showing works by the likes of Michelangelo, Raphael and Fra Angelico. One of their most important clients is the Vatican, which orders paper with the watermark of the pope.

I contacted the company and asked them when they had

produced the Madonna of the Chair and some other examples in my collection. The Madonna was made in 1915 by Serafino Cilotti, a master engraver, and my other religious examples were made before 1939. The company's website shows 39 'Artistic Watermarks' of various subjects.

There is a thriving interest in watermarks (some interested people style themselves as 'filigranophiles') and the history of paper in general, with lots of references on the internet for anyone wanting to investigate further. Two of the best starting points are the British Association of Paper Historians (www.baph.org.uk) and the Robert C. Williams American Museum of Papermaking, at the Georgia Institute of Technology (www.ipst.gatech.edu/amp/education/watermark), whose website shows a range of examples including American presidents and Japanese watermarks. The Museo della Carta e della Filigrana (Paper and Watermark Museum), in Fabriano, Italy, also has an informative website at www.museodellacarta.com.

Finally here are two more watermarks in my collection that I particularly like: King Edward VII (Fig. 3) after his death in 1910 (also by Serafino Cilotti) and Queen Elizabeth II (Fig. 4) at the time of her Coronation in 1953.

Lester SMITH was a founding member of the MLS in 1977, and is currently the Society's Programme Secretary, responsible for organising its quarterly meetings.