

Euro Banknotes: Gateways, Windows, and Bridges

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ABSTRACT

Since they began circulating on January 1, 2002, euro banknotes have been illustrated by gateways, windows, and bridges—all of them imaginary—whereas the iconography of banknotes has traditionally featured historical, popular, and legendary figures, or culturally remarkable monuments or landscapes. This disruptive choice was the result of a four-year process of reflection between 1995 and 1999, which sought to erase any element that was national in character, however negligible. The illustrations ultimately chosen can be interpreted as a symbol of the cooperation between European Union member states, as well as its openness to the world, or conversely as the expression of finance's dominance over humans and the real economy. Beyond their monetary value, banknotes are also political signs of the state of a society.



Reverse side of the first 5 € banknote.

Source : Wikimedia Commons.

On January 1, 2002, euro banknotes were put into circulation in the 12 countries that were members of the Eurozone. The banknotes featured gateways, windows, and bridges—all imaginary—rather than humans or other living beings. However, since the nineteenth century, the illustration of banknotes in both Europe and elsewhere largely relied on local flora and fauna, anonymous persons (whose dress or occupation was deemed to be culturally representative), and historical figures (writers, painters, musicians, scientists, major inventors, statesmen), very often set against a background featuring an emblematic monument or a distinctive landscape. Where did this choice of iconographic departure come from? What does it say about the history of European integration?

A Four-Year Gestation Period

The euro banknotes grew out of a four-year gestation period, from 1995 to 1998, whose guiding principle was an absolute desire to avoid any national bias. It was decided from the outset that at least one of the sides of the denominations would be the same. However, there was discussion for a time that the other side would be specific to each country, as was the case with euro coins. This solution was quickly rejected for reasons of security.

In 1995, the banknote working party of the European Monetary Union (EMU, which prepared the way for the European Central Bank, ECB) listed thirty very broad themes, including "flora and fauna," "myths and legends," "European artists and authors" (such as Goethe, Purcell, Dante, Voltaire, and Cervantes), or "the great figures of European integration" (Jean Monnet and Konrad Adenauer among others). The central difficulty arose from the coexistence of 7 denominations and 14 countries potentially interested by the euro (the 15 EU member states of the time minus the United Kingdom). For fear of polemics on the part of non-represented countries, it was decided to forego the use of any figures, even anonymous ones, whose national identity could show through their dress or physical characteristics.

As a result, only two registers remained in the running in early 1996 "European time periods and styles" and "abstract/modern art" which resulted in a competition open to a very tight circle of banknote designers. In September 1996, 44 projects were submitted to the EMU, which then submitted them to a jury of 14 experts (one per country) made up of sociologists, art historians, and specialists in communication, perception, marketing, and industrial design. This jury made a pre-selection of five series of models for each of the two themes. A qualitative examination was then conducted with a sample group of 1,896 individuals to determine the choice of professionals (who regularly handle banknotes in their profession, such as merchants, bank employees, taxi drivers) and the general public. On December 3, 1996, central bank governors chose the banknotes drawn by the Austrian Robert Kalina, which depicted bridges, gateways, and windows. A period of corrections and revisions ensued, seeking to erase any element that could bring to mind, either up close or from afar, an existing monument. This led to the approval of the design in late 1998 by the ECB's Governing Council, its presentation to heads of state at the Vienna summit, and the subsequent launch of production in July 1999.

Antagonistic Interpretations

Passing from hand to hand among the 345 million inhabitants of the Eurozone's 19 member states, the 24 billion banknotes in circulation are a choice medium of communication. In 1997, the EMU saw the iconography of euro banknotes as expressing a powerful message: "These banknotes epitomise the dawn of the new common Europe with its common cultural heritage, and the vision of a common future in the new century, indeed, the new millennium." "Windows and gateways form the principal element of the front side of each banknote and symbolise the spirit of openness and co-operation in the European Union," which was reinforced by a map of Europe from which political borders have disappeared. On the reverse side "bridges are used as a metaphor for communication both among the people of Europe, and also between Europe and the rest of the world."

However, for Michel Aglietta and Andr   Orli  an the iconography of euro banknotes reflects an uncertain Europe that is still being built, in which economic and monetary matters precede political and cultural matters: "The way in which the effigy on the banknotes was handled by the European Council bears witness to the confusion arising from the indeterminate hierarchy of values."

From a monetary point of view, the promoters of a European System of Central Banks

(ESCB) saw banknote iconography as an opportunity to win the trust of users in the context of implementing a new monetary system, and doing so by visibly affirming independence from political authorities. The emphasis placed on monumental structures and works of art grew out of a desire to construct something solid and enduring, of stone and iron, something that was subject neither to the contingencies of passing events, nor to economic and political matters.

For detractors of the ESCB, the absence of "popular" figures—whether historical, legendary, or anonymous representations of the people—reveals the primacy that finance and "large-scale commerce" were accorded over the real, human, and everyday economy. The power and source of wealth do not derive from nature or work (the absence of human figures also means the absence of workers), but from real estate and financial capital.

Monetary Signs, Symbolic Signs

Currency is both a sign of economic value as well as a political sign of the social contract that binds contemporaries; it also connects the past to the present and the future. As such, the iconography of banknotes has always aspired to make effective use of symbols, with the term symbolic etymologically meaning that which brings together, which connects. Banknotes consequently express the political state of the society in which they circulate. Today's euro banknotes are no exception to this tradition. Their iconography is an expression of a globalized capitalism cut off from humans and territory, as well as the ideological grip of a single economic and monetary form of thought. However, it can be hoped that today's banknotes express one stage on the road to a more united European Union, one that can establish a common pantheon of great women and men, the "breeding ground" for future series of banknotes.

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