

The currency of the European Union

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As we know, money has always been a powerful means of communication, as it can transmit messages over a virtually unlimited area of reception. Money talks, and its message is federating, as it is the lowest common denominator of the group using it. This makes it a highly effective and important instrument of identity, one that has become so customary, through its continuous use for 2 400 years, that its role has been more or less forgotten. This explains — from the oldest currencies to the most recent banknotes — why images of the sovereign or of republican symbols are portrayed as a sign of political identity or belonging. Such figurative signs, as we will see, are not lacking in the euro. Money is also a strong symbol of social ties. It carries with it faith, solidarity and expectations of guarantees; every currency reflects the trust of citizens in the role of the state as a guarantor of national cohesion, of the protection of citizens and of the improvement of their standard of living.

At the beginning of 2002, the euro became the currency of a union of states and peoples and unequivocally took on an institutional function.

The iconography on the banknotes includes, on the reverse, arches, vaults, pillars and columns, doors and windows. The door and the bridge. These two images take us back to Georg Simmel's famous metaphor. Money is a door and a bridge, Simmel tells us. It is a bridge because it helps trade to be interdependent, and a door because it is completely impersonal and abstract. Every institution is both a door and a bridge, everything created by man, as a social being, tends to become crystallised, to become an institution. The euro is here to stay: it is therefore an institution. It is perhaps the institution closest to citizens, as it is in our pockets and in our thoughts. It is a door and a bridge. It is a door because it opens out to an unknown world, an uncertain future, which causes anxiety. It is a bridge, however, since by fully respecting the typical vocation of monetary circulation, it unites Europeans and helps to make them aware that they belong to the same economic and monetary area and is a clear point of reference for Europe in its quest for an identity. Seen in this way, the euro acts for European citizens as a 'factor of reconciliation of their identity', both by strengthening their sense of belonging and serving as a border between the peoples of Europe and the rest of the world.

The chosen theme of monuments of different architectural styles also pays tribute to the capacity of human labour to create great works and to improve them over time, and is a visual image of the stability of the currency. In order to highlight 'the very potential of design', any direct portrayal of existing works is avoided. It has been rightly deduced from this that the message that these banknotes convey to European citizens is an exhortation to design and achieve, because any object, through technical and creative innovation, may be redesigned

and recreated, so that, according to a semiotic interpretation, further progress with the grand design of the European Union is closely linked to the ability to design and redesign things and events.

It has also been rightly pointed out that the iconography of the banknotes undoubtedly returns to the allegorical motifs of the currency of the 19th century, but interpreted differently. The portrayal of monumental works arising from man's labour expresses the desire to construct a solid and lasting whole of stone and iron, which is not dependent on economic and political contingencies but which mirrors the eternity linked to the motifs of classical culture. Moreover, the absence of people and geographical references is in keeping with monetarist theories whose rules are based on universality and intertemporality.