

BENEDIKT ZÄCH\*

## Images of the Euro: National representation and European identity

The «birth» of the Euro currency as real coins and banknotes at the beginning of the year 2002 was an enormous economic and logistic task of the twelve countries in the Euro zone. Unlike worried comments had suggested in advance of this operation, the introduction of about 65 billions of coins and a similar quantity of banknotes within a few days was done without any major difficulties.

However, this was not the only challenge. Another one was –and still is– to develop new iconographic topics for the images on coins and banknotes. They seem to have two purposes:

- firstly help to create an «European» identity in order to make visible European unification,
- try to preserve the «national» identity of each country, which is admittedly the necessary background of any European politics. The result of the vote in Sweden on the introduction of the Euro last Sunday has shown dramatically how important this second point is.

Money has two functions as daily means of exchange used by everyone on one side and as official documents of statal representation on the other side. It makes therefore sense to study how money reflects some aspects of the self-understanding of nations. Doing this, images on coins and banknotes can be regarded as part of an iconographic and political rhetoric, which aims to formulate and distribute key elements of national representation; this is a representation of both the official and –in the mass-media society of today– the public view. This approach goes well together with a understanding of cultural history having to include the iconographic languages of daily objects.

I will only be able to elucidate very few aspects of this theme, and I will do it in a restricted way, too. First of all, I will mainly deal with the coins, not with the banknotes. The reason is evident: The coins are by far more interesting than the banknotes because of their two-

sided iconography: they show on the obverse «European» images, whereas the reverse is reserved to «national» topics. As is well known, the images of the Euro banknotes are the same for all twelve countries, they have no variation at all apart from the series numbers.

Their images are dealing with a so-called «European» architectural history along the three themes «bridges», «doors» and «windows». The monuments they are showing aren't real ones, but architectural types developed from monuments in different countries and classified by periods, which definitions are quite arbitrary.

According to the intentions of their creators, the banknotes must not have any reference to either specific countries nor to specific monuments. Therefore the banknotes have a very low iconographic profile. They do not, however, reflect any «national» themes.

Secondly, I will try to do another look than you may expect. As the Organizing Committee of this Congress has chosen a speaker coming from Switzerland, which is a non-Euro country, to speak about the Euro, you will, I'm afraid, be confronted with some kind of an outsider's view. That is not necessarily a disadvantage: Outsiders tend not to be bound by hesitations commenting a phenomenon and also they may well bring in their own background while dealing with images. I hope I'll be able to do so.

A third restriction is not to be explained very much. I will only deal with the coins of the twelve countries, which officially are part of the Euro zone. Therefore the Euro money of the Vatican state, Monaco and Andorra will be excluded. As you know, these three series of coins and banknotes are not circulating money in strict sense, but first of all items produced for collectioners.

---

\* Benedikt Zäch, Münzkabinett und Antikensammlung der Stadt Winterthur, Postfach 2402, 8401 Winterthur (Switzerland)  
Mail: benedikt.zaech@win.ch / benedikt.zaech@bluewin.ch

If we now shall have a closer look to the Euro coins, we may begin with the obverse, which is the common, the «European» side of the coins. It shows three variations of the Europe of the Euro countries:

1. Europe without borders: All twelve countries of the Euro zone are drawn as one mass of land without showing any borderlines. It is the image on the 2 and 1 Euro coin.
2. Europe of the nations: All Euro countries are shown separated by borders. This image is used on the 50, 20 and 10 cent coins. (If you look carefully to the coins, you'll find an empty space between France, Germany, Austria and Italy. This blank is, unfortunately to say, Switzerland).
3. Europe within in the world: The Euro countries are shown as part of the globe. This image is used on the smallest denominations of 5, 2 and 1 cent.

These three seem to be carefully balanced. The greatest denominations show the vision of Europe as a community. The second theme on the coins with values below the Euro show the reality: Europe being an assembly of nations driven by national issues rather than common European ones. And the third theme, interestingly enough being used on the smallest denominations, is putting Europe to its place on the globe –which is to be demonstrated, quite unintentionally, I would guess, a quite small one.

From an iconographic point of view, these images are not really strong metaphors. They are abstract, if not to say rather declarative than effective. One reason certainly is that they offer no direct identification as persons or objects perhaps would do. Virginia Hewitt has shown in a brilliant lecture dealing with banknotes in Eastern Europe how important this need of self-identity, the seek of self-consciousness may be in revolutionized times and how well it can be filled with persons or objects of art being used as signs. I'll come to this point later.

The reverses of the Euro coins are by far more interesting than the obverse, because there «national» images are being developed. Looking through the coins of the twelve Euro countries, there may be several ways of classifying these images. Here three main groups are established:

- culture and history
- statal symbols and signs
- nature

Of course many of the coin series don't belong to just one of these group, but some of them are nevertheless restricting themselves to only one. This different manner will interest us now.

Let's begin with Spain, the country hosting this Congress. Evidently, the Spanish Euro coins are mainly using images of the history and culture. Nevertheless, the 2 and the 1 Euro coin have been reserved to the image of King Juan Carlos I. as head of the State.

The smaller denominations are divided in two groups: the one, with the 50, 20 and 10 cent coin showing the writer Miguel de Cervantes, while the smaller denominations of 5, 2 and 1 cent represent one of main monuments and religious places, the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. These themes don't have any character of demonstrating or declaring something. Their appearance is unexcited and shows no sign of the radical transition the Spanish state and society have been going through the last twenty-five years.

In a quite different way Greece is dealing with the same topics. The two denominations of 2 and 1 Euro are linked directly to ancient Greece. The 2 Euro coin shows the myth of Europe and the bull. It is interesting to see that the model for the coin image was not a Greek artwork, but a Roman one: it is a mosaic in a villa near Sparta.

The 1 Euro coin is a kind of illustration numismatists are of course especially pleased of: a coin depicting the image of a coin, here the Athenian tetradrachm of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. It is not the first appearance of the Athenian owl on modern Greek coins: there was the same theme on Greek drachmai in the 1970s.

The smaller denomination are concentrating to two themes. On one side, they are representing heroes of the fights for independency. Rigas Velestinlis-Fereos was an early head of reformists who prepared intellectually the reawakening of the Greek nation. Ioannis Capodistrias was the first President of the free Greece; he was murdered in 1831 in Nafplio. And Eleftherios Venizelos, of Crete origin, was one of leading politicians during the Balkan and Aegean wars in the 1910s.

This strong reference to the painful modern history of Greece is underlined by the images of the small coins. They show warships; on the 1 Cent it is an ancient Greek galley and on the 2 Cent coin a ship

type used in the independency wars. The 5 Cent coin makes a remarkable exception: it shows a modern oil tanker remembering the outstanding role of Greek reeders in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Yet another approach to history and culture of a nation is provided by the Italian series. On all denominations, with one exception, important art works are represented. Only the 2 Euro coin shows a writer, Dante Aligheri.

It is a real hitlist of famous and popular paintings, sculptures and monuments: The Vitruvian man of Leonardo da Vinci, the statue of Marc Aurel at the Campidoglio in Rome, one of the main sculptures of the futurist artist Umberto Boccioni, to name only the greater denominations.

One do not wonder then, that the Italian coin designs were partly chosen by a TV show. They reflect therefore the taste and interest of a mass media public; the processway of selection is also reflecting quite well the aim of the authorities to base their decision on a broad acceptance. But: it is not a referendum or any instrument of direct democratic vote. No Euro country did submit the design of the Euro money to a general public vote.

A closer look to the images of the small denominations reveals nevertheless a subtle policy of regional balance. The three monuments are chosen carefully to represent the northern, central and southern part of Italy. The brick-made «Torre Antonelliana» stands in Torino, the Castel del Monte in Apulia and the Colosseum in Rom.

Other countries, mainly Austria, are also referencing to their history and art. On the Austrian series we find three monuments representing the Middle Ages, the Age of Maria Theresia and the Vienna architecture around 1900. But all three buildings are to be found in and around Vienna. The regions are taken into consideration in another way in Austria, as we shall see.

A second group of images on Euro coins can be defined as statal symbols and signs. Coat of arms and heraldic figures are the most important of these symbols. Ireland and Portugal are using heraldic signs on all denominations, Finnland and Germany put their coat of arms on some of it. The Portugese coins show three different seals standing for three steps toward the establishment of the Portugese nation in the years 1134, 1142 and 1144.

An important group of statal symbols are images the sovereigns on coins. Four Euro countries are representing their head of states, three of them use the portrait as the only image: The Netherlands, Belgium and Luxemburg. Again, the background of that seems to be interesting.

The Netherlands used the same portrait of king Beatrix as on the last coins of the gulden currency. It is an unsentimental, two-dimensional graphic image without any emphasis at giving the portrait another meaning than to be functional as a sign. This seems to be a pragmatic approach; it corresponds with the citizen-like appearance of the royal house of the Netherlands. In Luxemburg, the new Archduke Henri was installed in 1990 and is not represented on any pre-Euro coin of Luxemburg. The Euro therefore was his first appearance on coins.

For Belgium it is certainly not wrong to point out that the king is one of the very few indisputed national symbols of a country which is shivered by bitter conflicts along linguistic and social borderlines. Here, too, the king is represented as a citizen-like sovereign; he is, to name just a significant detail, wearing glasses which often are omitted on official photographs.

Germany and France are the only Euro countries, which are using constitutional signs on their coins. The 2 and 1 Euro coin of France is showing the republican tree of life, which also stands for the nourishing tree of the state: all branches of this tree are growing within the slogans of the French Revolution. The aspect of nourishing, of sowing liberty and virtues of the Republic is also well represented by the «Semeuse», the sowing women on the 50, 20 and 10 cent coin. And the «Marianne», the revolutionary heroine on the 5, 2 and 1 cent coins, is one of the most popular personal signs of the French Revolution. As we shall see later, the «semeuse» and the «Marianne» are part of an iconographic tradition of French coin images.

The same is true for the two themes on the German Euro coins. The view of the «Brandenburger Tor» in Berlin on the 50, 20 and 10 cent coin is one of the most powerful themes on Euro coins. This monument stood in the period of the Cold War for the painful separation of Germany and for the shame of the divided Berlin. In 1989, with the fall of the wall, the same monument was the most striking sign of this

event, and in 1990 the same Brandenburger Tor was the symbol of the reunification of Germany. On the Euro coin it is therefore represented as a gate with an alley leading through.

With the other symbol on German Euro coins, the republican branch of oak, I will deal afterwards, too.

A third group of images on Euro coins could be summarized as reminiscences of nature. Only two countries, Austria and Finland, are taking the environment into account. Finland indeed is reserving the two great denominations of 2 and 1 Euro to plants and animals. The 2 Euro coin shows the nordic «*Rubus camemorus*», a typical plant of the Finnish fens and lakes. The 1 Euro coin represents a flight of swans, which in summer are taking possession of the many lakes. Again, both images were also used in pre-Euro coinage; the Finnish Markkaa coin of 1995 to commemorate the adoption of the Maastricht treaty shows a flight of swans.

The Austrian small denominations are devoted to the alpine flora; the 1 Cent coin shows the image of a gentian, the 2 Cent that of an Edelweiss and the 5 Cent that of primrose. It is interesting to see that this series is taking into consideration Austrian regions outside Vienna, which the monuments on the greater denominations don't do at all.

Taking all these coins as an iconographic source—and I was of course not able to mention all designs—, a wide range of pictures is presented. Republican symbols figure as well as persons of the national history, artists and of course the sovereigns. Some countries try to show a wide sample of images, some do it, like for example Austria, almost marketing-like. Others restrict them to only one.

However, it may be worthwhile to mention what appears not on the Euro coins. First it is striking that apart from images of churches (Santiago de Compostela, Dome of St. Stephan) no religious themes seem to be evoked. In Western Europe, christian themes doesn't seem to be considered as representative or even necessary to be used for coin design.

Secondly, all themes on coins are referring to Past and rarely to Present; no attempt is made to involve the future. This seems strange in the light of the great political and economic visions of a future Europe.

Thirdly, it becomes clear that the design of the Euro coins does not claim to follow most recent aesthetic trends. The Euro coin designs apparently are strongholds of tradition and do not act as laboratories of fashionable design, unless coins are ubiquitous objects of daily life.

I would like to stress this point a little further. As we already have mentioned, many of the images on Euro coins are part of iconographic traditions. Some of them are resuming pre-Euro designs, others reflect the strength or —on the contrary, the lack— of national symbols; very few are newly developed. The political rhetoric of images is mostly conservative; it reacts slowly on new tendencies.

This said, it would be perhaps worth looking back to the 19th and early 20th century in order to understand the developments of these images. It may be helpful to see that in this period nation-building in Europe made similar use of coin images to define a new rhetoric of iconographical representation.

As it is impossible here to do it in a broader perspective, I would only like to tip this aspect by showing examples of two republican symbols, the «*Marianne*» or «*Liberty*», and the republican oak.

Marianne, the personification of the French Republic, appears first on coins of the French Directorat in the 1790s. In the 19th and 20th century she is quite commonly represented on smaller denominations of the French Third Republic. I only show you two examples here. Marianne is wearing the Phrygian hat and is always meant to be a young woman. Her hair is open, she has normally a single attribute, a branch of olive or laurel.

The sowing women, the famous «*semeuse*» of Oscar Roty, also is a Marianne; she also wears a Phrygian hat. The «*semeuse*» first appears in 1898 on silver coins and has been used more or less unchanged until the introduction of the Euro. It is one of the most beautiful coin images of the late 19th century. The «*semeuse*» of the French Euro coins «*d'après Oscar Roty*» is, if I dare to say, no more a feeble copy.

Next to the Marianne portrait type appears in the Third Republic a personification of Liberty. She is figuring like the Roman Libertas and is wearing a diadem of flowers and branches. This Libertas type is very common in Europe, but it also appears quite often in Latin America, where the young women sometimes have an indian look.

The branch of oak is a Roman Republican dign of honor. The French Revultion discovered it again as Republican symbol. Since the end of the 18th century, the oak has had several transitions and re-interpretations. One of these transformation is the establishment of the oak as a national symbol in Germany. As thus it appears on coins of the Kaiserreich. But it is not, as often interpreted, a specific German symbol and not only a national symbol. This may be clear looking to coins of the Weimar

Republic, where the oak plays a prominent role, and of course it will be clar looking at other coins like Italian or French ones.

To study national representation by coin images and their contribution to create «national» identity is fruitfully to be studied by comparison in time and in space confronting different iconographic patterns on coins and the political rhetoric they reflect. I hope I was able to give you an impression of how this could be done.