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# PRESENTING THE EURO TO THE MUSEUM PUBLIC

By Marianne Danneel

Museum of the National Bank of Belgium

## **Introduction**

Museums are part of a changing society. In order to remain relevant, it's generally felt that they should bear witness to these changes and that they should try to meet the public's need for understanding and interpretation. Of course, this applies also to money and banking museums. In Europe, the main monetary and financial issue today is the monetary union and introduction of the single currency or Euro. This paper deals with the opportunities and risks involved in presenting this very contemporary issue to the museum visitor and the way in which the euro can be put on display.

## **Opportunities and risks**

In May 1998, the European Council made public the names of the eleven member states of the European Union going ahead with the single currency: Belgium, Germany, Spain, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Austria, Portugal and Finland. In doing so, a halt was called to speculation by believers and non-believers as to whether the introduction of the euro by the Economic and Monetary Union or EMU would start on schedule or be postponed. Since then, the counting-off has begun. On the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1999, the rates of conversion between the euro and the participating national currencies have been irrevocably fixed. The euro has been operating since as a recognised currency on the world markets and has been used, especially by commercial banks and other companies, in non-cash payment transactions. It will, however, remain immaterial until

the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2002, the date set for the launch of the euro banknotes and coins. From a numismatic point of view, this is the crucial date.

There is one strong argument for the European money and banking museums not to wait until 2002 to insert the topic into their museum context: for some time already there has been an overwhelming demand for information from museum visitors. Museum staff in general, and the guides in particular, have to cope with a growing number of questions and enquiries from their audience about the single currency. This is very understandable: looking at the national banknotes and coins of past and present times, provokes quite naturally questions about the future. Of course, museum staff can respond to this call by referring the public to the existing information and documentation centres, set up by both the European and national authorities or by private initiatives, such as the media, consumer organisations or commercial banks. These information centres issue leaflets, brochures, videos and gadgets. Although these can be very useful, there are two major reasons why this way of responding is unsatisfying for the museum.

First, in simply referring to other instances, the museum is missing an opportunity to communicate with its public. Furthermore, it is striking that these very same information suppliers are turning themselves more and more to the museum. They are searching for objects illustrating the European unification process, but more importantly, they are searching for its historical context. This can be the very history of EMU

itself or the monetary history of Europe in general. Two examples illustrate this very well. In January 1996, the European Commission in Brussels set up the exhibition "Time journey through monetary Europe" in collaboration with several European members of ICOMON, the International Committee of Monetary and Banking Museums. A whole series of European mint museums, central bank museums and national coin cabinets took part in this exhibition by lending sometimes very precious items out of their collections and by sharing their numismatic as well as practical know how with the exhibition organisers.

Another example is the demand received in 1998 by the Museum of the National Bank of Belgium from the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In order to put a travelling exhibition on the history of EMU at the disposal of the Belgian diplomats abroad, the Ministry asked for the help of the museum of the Belgian central bank.

These two examples show a clear interest by European and national policy makers for the museum. Although this interest is in itself gratifying, the underlying message of these initiatives should not be forgotten. As the Daily Telegraph wrote the day after the opening of the Brussels exhibition, "Yesterday's exhibition on the history of money tried to 'sell' the euro by showing that common currencies were far from new." As for the exhibition, planned by the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, one of its aims is to provide Belgian diplomats with an instrument to explain EMU to their contacts abroad, but also to stress the important role Belgium has played in the unifying process. So, while others often want to pass a

message - and from their point of view this is a legitimate message - the Code of Professional Ethics of ICOM, the International Council of Museums, stipulates that the museum should seek above all to ensure that information in displays and exhibitions is objective. In other words, the museum has to make sure that it keeps its integrity, however obvious it is that it can never present a perfectly objective view of contemporary history, nor indeed of the past.

### ***On display***

The specific functions of a museum are traditionally defined as collecting, preserving, investigating and of course, also transmitting. In contrast to e.g. archives or libraries, museums concentrate primarily on objects which, regardless of the context they are put in, often generate a narrative of their own.

As already mentioned above, the euro banknotes and coins will not be available before January 2002. But, of course a lot of preparations have been made since 1992, since the Treaty of Maastricht, in order to decide about the name of the currency, the denominations, the technical aspects and the iconography. These preparations are well worth looking into. From the numismatic as well as the historical point of view, the whole appraisal and selection process is interesting to deal with. From the museological point of view, this can be illustrated by showing the final selected designs for the coins and banknotes as they already have been made public by the European and national authorities. For around 56 billion euro coins to be ready for circulation on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2002, production had to begin in May 1998. As for the banknotes, the origination phase - this is the process of converting the

designs into proof-prints - and the so-called zero-production run have now been concluded so mass production by the eleven banknote printing works can begin. After choosing the name 'euro' for the single currency instead of 'ECU' (European Currency Unit) as a lot of people expected, it was decided that one euro will be divided into one hundred cents. The European Council adopted a regulation that provides for eight coins in the range from 1 cent to 2 euros. The three smallest coins, the coins of 1, 2 and 5 cents will be in copper-covered steel and therefore will be red. The three following denominations, the coins of 10, 20 and 50 cents, will have a yellow appearance, due to the so-called nordic gold they will be made of, this is an alloy of several metals (copper, aluminium, zinc and tin). Finally, the two largest denominations, the coins of 1 and 2 euros, will consist of a different internal and external part. The external part of the coin of 2 euros will be white, due to an alloy of copper and nickel, while the middle of the coin will be yellow due to a nickel-brass alloy. For the coin of 1 euro, it is the reverse: a yellow border and a white center.

As for the banknotes, there will be seven banknote denominations ranging from 5 to 500 euros. The notes will be different in colour and in size. It was decided that the banknotes will not have any national differentiation and that therefore a completely uniform series of notes will be put in circulation in the eleven participating countries. Not so for the coins, however. All coins will have a common, European side showing the value and the same engraving. But at the same time, they will keep a national side. Some countries opted for one national side for all coins. This is the case for

Belgium where the portrait of the king was chosen to be shown on all euro coins. Other countries like France or Germany have chosen three different designs to figure on each coin group. And finally there are countries such as Austria and Italy where eight different designs were made.

For the coins, as well as for the notes, the European authorities have organised a competition. First, two advisory groups of experts have selected a number of themes. For the coins, three themes were chosen: architectural styles in Europe, European personalities and an abstract theme. For the banknotes only two themes were kept: a theme called "Ages and Styles of Europe" and an abstract, modern design. For the Ages and Styles theme, the features to be depicted on each of the seven notes had to represent a specific period of European cultural history: classical, romanesque, gothic, renaissance, baroque and rococo, the age of iron and glass and 20th-century architecture. The abstract theme had to be represented by a modern design depicting abstract or figurative elements.

International juries consisting of experts in marketing, design and art history made a pre-selection, followed by a public consultation exercise in order to gauge public opinion. Finally, the coin design by the Belgian artist Luc Luyckx and the banknote designs, made by the Austrian artist Robert Kalina won the first prizes. The winning designs are inspired by the abstract theme for the coins and by the Ages and Styles theme for the banknotes. Each group of coins, the copper coins, the nordic gold coins, and the bipartite coins bears a geographical image of Europe. On the copper

coins, Europe is just a spot on the world globe. On the nordic gold coins, Europe is a group of distinct nations, but on the coins of 1 and 2 euros a united Europe without national borders is depicted. The winning banknote designs emphasise three main architectural elements: windows, gateways and bridges. Windows and gateways form the principal element of the front side of each banknote and should symbolise the spirit of openness and co-operation in the EU. The reverse side of each banknote features a bridge typical of the respective age of European development. Bridges are used as a metaphor for communication both among the people of Europe, and between Europe and the rest of the world.

Next to the display of the winning designs, the museum can consider showing the work of other competitors, inspired by the same or by one of the other themes. In this way the whole preparatory selection process can be visualised. The display is informative and at the same time aesthetic.

Another possible display can be made by comparing the original, winning design for the European side of the coins or for the banknotes and the final, revised result. The revision of the designs is meant to facilitate the production and to ensure that all the requirements are met, for example the incorporation of security features and the avoidance of any national bias.

A fourth possible display consists of the complete series of designs for the national sides of the euro coins. What do the eleven participating member states consider sufficiently representative of their country to figure on the European currency?

Finally, the above mentioned displays should be put into the broader context of the European unification process, a still ongoing, unfinished process. Although museums are quite capable of exhibiting subjects in which contemporary society is interested, the lack of time remains a major handicap. To make the distinction between immediate and long term causes, to assess motives, let alone predict temporary and permanent consequences of current events, is a very hard task. On the one hand, a contemporary historian or museum professional has the advantage that he witnesses and therefore is able to check the facts with his own eyes and ears. On the other hand, he faces the disadvantage that for reasons of security or confidentiality access to quite a number of records are still denied to him, and last but not least that, as a citizen, he has his own opinion about current events. All these characteristics should be kept in mind when handling the unification process and the role of the single currency in this respect.

### **Conclusion**

In spite of the difficulties that European money or banking museums have to face in presenting the single currency before the launch of the banknotes and coins, they should seize the opportunity to meet their public's needs for understanding and interpretation, and should already put the euro on display in an attractive and the most objective way possible.