

Category: **Research**

Project: **FACE-lifting the Euro Banknotes**

What was the challenge?

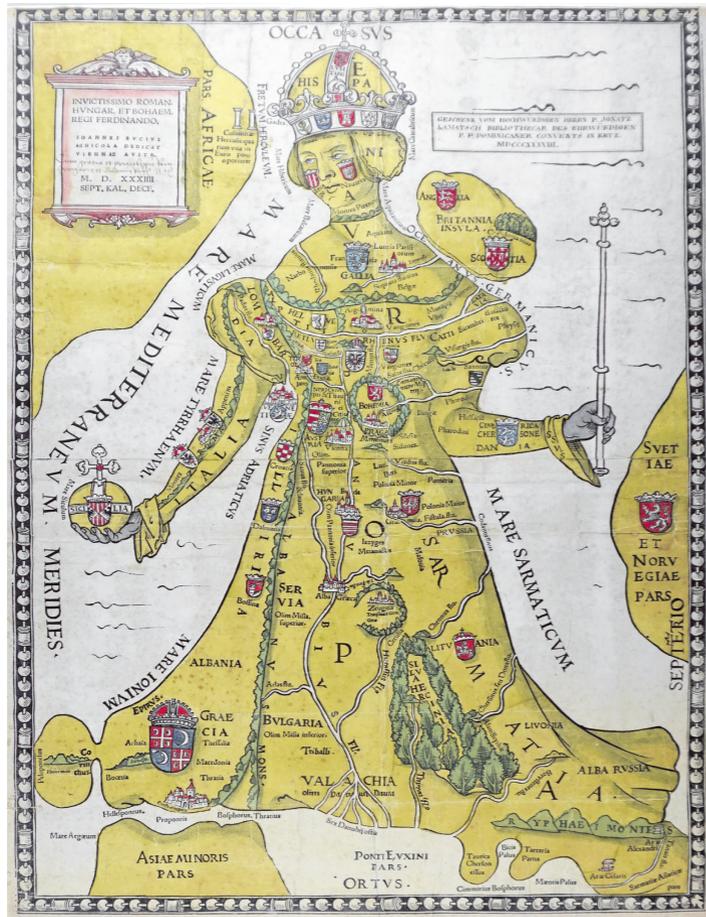
When the Euro was introduced in 2002, it was considered the European Union's most chilling political and financial experiment. Around the world many experts were in doubt about the future acceptance and stability of the EU's single currency. These uncertainties are clearly visible in the original design of the Euro banknotes by Robert Kalina: their visual style needed to be humble and unobtrusive. Unlike traditional paper money, the Euro banknotes were devoid of any references to important people, institutions, works of art etc. It was critical to the Euro's success that the banknotes would not stir up emotions: Within the European Union no country should feel favored or left out by the Euro's design, on a global scale no-one wanted to risk the young EU currency being ridiculed or disrespected by other nations. Roughly a decade later the Euro had proven itself a hard currency with billions of banknotes circulating globally. Due to the Euro's success it was adopted by 5 more EU member states (2020 totaling 19 Euro countries) and had become the world's strongest competitor of the US-Dollar. Hence it was time for the EU to express its improved self-confidence by a bolder banknote design. With the advancements in technology, it was certainly necessary to add new security features like semi-transparent materials, holographic threads or shiny emerald print. However, the primary reason behind a revamped Euro banknote design, was declaring the EU the leading power of Europe. But how to do it subtly, without intimidating other stakeholders on the European continent like the Council of Europe, OECD, NATO, etc.?

What was the solution?

The solution was creating an honest and trustworthy face for the Euro—the so-called "Europa series" by Reinhold Gerstetter.

ter shows the delicate portrait of a woman, when the bills are held against the light. The political strategy of using the Europa persona for declaring The EU's (moral) entitlement to the continent was developed 500 years earlier by the Habsburg emperor Charles V. He once ruled the renowned "empire on which the sun never sets". Just like the EU, Charles' considered himself the legitimate leader of Europe, even though his empire never included all parts of it. For expressing his predominance towards

other aspiring sovereigns, in 1534 Charles commissioned the Tyrolean cartographer Johannes Putsch with the creation of a new map of Europe—the "Europa regina". It portrayed the geographical territory of Europe in the allegorical shape of a noble lady. Effectively Putsch's map shows many visual references to the current Euro banknote re-design by Reinhold Gerstetter: **1)** Both depictions present a seemingly "complete map" of Europe—suggesting the issuer's entitlement to the whole conti-



Europa Regina: the first allegorical map of Europe by Johannes Putsch (1534), Museum Retz. „The map is a glorification of the House of Habsburg, with the expression of a general hope for peace” (Meurer, 2008). This notion was picked up in the revised Euro banknote design (Gerstetter 2013), when a portrait of Europa was introduced as a „security feature”.

ment and not just parts of it. **2)** Both maps envision Europe as an island surrounded by oceans—suggesting a paradisaical idyll within fortified borders.

3) In both cases, Lady Europa is presented in a royal and Christian manner, adorned with jewelry and insignia of power, her head tilted like a Madonna immaculata or Madonna of Mercy—suggesting protection, as she gathers her people like children under her extensive cloak.

The results of the research project build on the visual methodology of Documentary Picture Interpretation developed by Ralf Bohnsack (2009), myself and others. The focus of analysis is the reconstruction of formal design as a decisive carrier of implicit cultural knowledge. By comparative interpretation and logical reasoning this scientific approach allows for systematically reconstructing the cultural and practical meaning of visual design.

What was the effect?

The new "Europa series" of Euro banknotes is still a cautious, but much more articulate expression of the European Union's claim for the European continent. At the introduction of the Euro, the original banknote design by Robert Kalina was explicitly open and vague, in order not to stir up opposition at the



Iconographic comparison: closeups from left to right: Habsburg Europa Regina map (Putsch 1534), Euro portrait window (Gerstetter 2015), Euro water mark (Gerstetter 2013). note the iconographic similarities: the facial expression, the tilted head, the pearl necklace etc. nota bene: Europa simultaneously provides and demands protection: her portrait serves as a security feature by protecting Europe and the value of the Euro banknote. But as a fragile lady, Europa also needs to be protected by a faithful ruler—500 years ago by the Habsburgs, now by the EU.

time. Ten years later the facelifted banknote design by Reinhold Gerstetter includes marked references to the "Europa Regina map" of the Habsburgs. Apart from suggesting a certain historical continuity of imperial power in Europe, the imagery of Europa also portrays the continent as a Christian paradisaical empire (a Garden Eden?) that needs to shield itself towards adverse external influences (enemies, migrants, etc.).

Oddly, apart from the word "Euro" and the abbreviation of the European Central Bank (ECB) there is no mention of "Europa", "Europe" or "European Union" on the EU's official currency. The absence of names is just as revealing as the absence of gaps in

the EU and Habsburg maps of Europe. The visual analysis exposes the EU's political information design—that one day the distinction between the "European Union" and the "European continent" shall be obsolete. Propaganda is most effective, when it seeps in unnoticed. Thus, the translucent portrait of Europa in the watermark of the new Euro banknotes carries the promise, that "Europe" and the "European Union" are really just two sides of the same face.

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10-Euro banknote, original series (Kalina 2002)—nota bene: this map already depicted all of Europe instead of just the EU member states; however, Europe is still attached to Asia on the right.



10-Euro banknote, "Europa series" (Gerstetter 2013): revised Euro banknote design. nota bene: the map of Europe was moved to the left and now appears as a detached island protected by a border of stars—just like the paradisaical continent in the frame of the allegorical Habsburg map (Putsch 1534).