

# Common Design: Thoughts on the Euro

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**P**ARIS — The prefix "Euro" having become synonymous with everything that is dull and bureaucratic about the noble concept of Europe, no one is exactly thrilled by the official name of the new common currency unit. And no one knows what the Euro will look like although designers, historians and even psychologists are working on ideas submitted to the European Monetary Institute in Frankfurt this week.

The British are worried that there will not be room for the queen's head on the new Euro, the Dutch may be justly lamenting the imminent disappearance of

MARY BLUME

their delightful play money, the French are convinced that the new banknote will be the size of their current 50-franc bill. Whatever the Euro looks like, it should be in people's pockets on Jan. 1, 2002, and national currencies cease to be legal tender six months later.

A distinguished graphics designer named Henry Steiner has been thinking about the Euro, not because he is submitting a design (he isn't) but because he is a specialist in cross-cultural design — Viennese-born, educated in the United States, including studies at Yale under Josef Albers and Paul Rand, and since 1961 a resident of Hong Kong, where his designs include a series of banknotes for Standard Chartered Bank.

Considering the design for a Euro banknote, Steiner's first solution was to replace folding money with a smart card on the grounds that within five years banknotes will be outdated. On the front, the word EUR, in lettering based on Trajan's Column, gives a sense of tradition while the stars of the member countries surround an embedded chip indicating technological advance. The card's reverse could feature a pan-European such as Charlemagne.

A point of the Euro is to give a sense of "we" to the Union's disparate members and citizens. Can a banknote achieve this? Perhaps not, but a smart card can, Steiner said from Hong Kong. "The front of this card would be mirrored so you could see your own face if you want, and presumably as a European citizen that would be good enough."

A Euro smart card, he says, could be as much fun as an old-fashioned baseball card and as flexible, as it could frequently be changed and updated. "Since everyone would have the same front you could have special commemorative scenes on the back — musicians, painters, Asterix for France, Tintin for Belgium, Andy Capp for Britain — though what a politician or a bureaucrat would pick and what a designer or artist would pick are two different things. It could be fun

but probably they'll follow the traditional route."

Ideally, instead of a wad of notes, each person would carry just one Euro. Steiner says a decision would have to be made between a system like a telephone card which has a stored value and is used up as one goes along, or a card which has the capacity of taking on money and discharging it.

"The virtue of the first system to the government is that you give them money and they earn interest on it while if it's a more flexible system you are earning the interest."

Security problems would be nil: A complex series of codes would be embedded in the chip and the user would have a PIN number. So pickpockets would be joining the ranks of the unemployed? "Absolutely," Steiner said.

If the smart card seems to be the best solution for the Euro (Steiner wishes it were still called the Ecu "because it's a bit sharper, it means escutcheon, and it has a real ring which goes back into history"), Steiner thinks the solution more sensible than attractive: He loves paper.

"I collect Japanese prints and one thing that nobody notices is that they have a certain smell which is very attractive, probably because the paper comes from the mulberry."

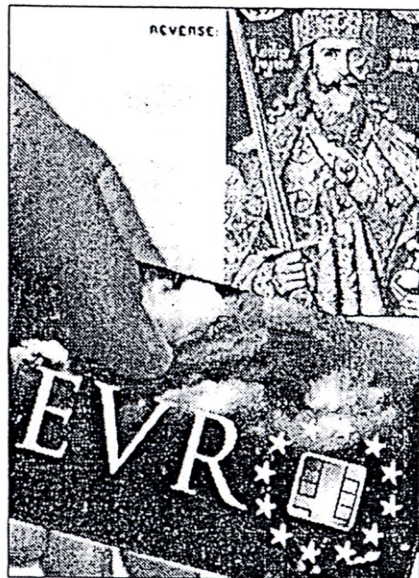
"Designers tend to be magpies or pack rats. We love to collect things, we love differences. We love tarot cards, postage stamps and matchbooks, all that stuff. And in a way it's fun to have all those different banknotes, it would be a pity to lose all that."

It would also be a pity for the Euro's designers to fall into cliché, with reproductions of the Little Mermaid or the Manneken Pis or the Eiffel Tower: what Steiner calls Euro-kitsch. A major aim in cross-cultural design is to focus on, and not try to erase, national differences. "You get this kind of Disney World approach where differences are reduced to ethnic costumes and kids holding hands and saying it's a small world after all. Major differences tend to be papered over until they erupt as in Catalonia or the former Yugoslavia."

If differences are fascinating to a cross-cultural designer, so are what Steiner calls symmetries, for instance those he sees between the western and eastern sides of the Eurasian continent. "Right at the tip, you have in strict correspondence to each other France on the one side and China on the other."

"They have many profound resemblances — an obsession with food, with glory, ethnocentricity, a feeling that they are a light unto other nations, an intense hypochondria."

"And they've got little islands offshore which tend to be very formal and concerned with class and language, which are England and Japan — that's why 'My Fair Lady' was such a success in Tokyo, they understood it immediately. And then a little to the



Henry Steiner's suggestion for a Euro smart card, with Charlemagne on the reverse side.

north of both of these you have a country which has a lot of the traits of England and Japan, but which tends to be wilder, a lot more primitive, a lot more poetic and very heavy when it comes to drinking, and that's Ireland and Korea. So it's a wonderful set of comparisons and you miss all that if you say we're all the same under the skin."

In addition to heading his own company, Steiner is president of the Alliance Graphique Internationale, where he tries to mediate between what he calls the "designosaurs," influenced by the great French *af-fichistes*, and the technology-happy "cyberpunks." The Euro smartcard, he thinks, is a good compromise between the two.

Steiner's book, "Cross-Cultural Design: Communicating in the Global Marketplace" (Thames and Hudson) is an anthology of his and other designers' thoughts on differences and symmetries. It includes the Hong Kong banknotes he designed in which he replaced the British armorial bearings by a flower, the *Bauhinia Blakeana*, a magenta tree orchid named after a former governor.

"It's a vivid, sterile hybrid," Steiner said. "The perfect description of Hong Kong."