

The Euro

Slovenia than I am. This is an odd feeling for a foreigner to have; I've spent more time on the street than the money has.

Being an American, I'm no stranger to idle slander from European mouths. So, it was with great pleasure that I saw Slovenians welcome their new currency with bashful bitterness. This was no surprise; I, myself, wrote how I would rue the tolar's absence in these same pages. Here, now, I would like to interject my singular complaint of the Euro.

On top of its unnecessary coin-heaviness (thanks, Deutschemark; thanks guilder!) and abysmal relationship to the dollar (thanks, 43!), it has a pointed agenda of making the smaller notes feel less significant than the larger ones. This is a design redundancy, because for anyone holding either large or small notes, the discrepancy speaks for itself through value.

Clearly size is the easiest signifier, but that is not part of my complaint. In fact, different sizes make the bills easier to manipulate inside my wallet. And, bigger sizes for larger notes is a logical extension of buying power.

No, my complaint has to do with the images on the currency.

I fully understand the artistic motif of the bridge and arch theme, especially on a continent whose extensive and sophisticated warring is the stuff of all history books everywhere. These images state uniformly through proofs in the physical world that units united will rise and connect. As bold a symbol with such an easy message has rarely been seen in equally vast and noteworthy circulation. Yet, as with many modern European developments, I find here a perfect ideation that fails in execution.

Recently, I stared down at a 5 Euro note—the last one in my wallet—and I wondered what Abraham Lincoln would think of his sister-valued currency. What in Europe depicts a generic Roman bridge, in the States holds the Great Emancipator. Go one step lower and we have the General of the Continental Army, the first President, the unpartisan father of the US. Go one step lower in Europe and you have a mish-mash of cultural and political greats from all different nations—a lame attempt at national equalization made lamer by the fact that Slovenians can now buy goods with Marija Teresija coins just like it's the Hapsburg Empire all over again.

Which brings me back to the notes. The Euro starts with the Roman bridge and arch and ascends through value to the modern grace of the EUR 500. I've never held such a note, but I have held an active role in the modern world. And, I do believe the modern world is quantifiably more valuable than the Roman one. This contemporary money does a fantastic job of holding that mirror up; it also reflects a distorted impression that the wealthy earn at a 21st century level, whereas the poor, at best, earn in the Gothic Era.

As a simple conduit for transferring goods and services, money is ideally a convenience. The Euro is a contrivance, a widespread artificiality rife with mixed messages and subcutaneous conflicts. The organic identity of the European nations stands toe-to-toe against a purposefully imaginary architectural unity. Calendar progress is marked as the dominion of the wealthy.

Mine is an argument that over-intellectualizes currency. But, the problem with the Euro is it is already over-intellectualized. It's an American saw that the average man can imagine himself richer than he is, yet he will never imagine himself smarter than he is.

Intelligence, like money, is a tool, but the two are not the same tool, though they are frequently applied to the same end. Because they are so different, no poorer European should be made to feel primitive when he whips out his sole fiver for some hard-earned groceries.

Like so much, ostentation the West has produced lately—from luxury condominiums to bazillionaire footballers and supermodels, the Euro is both pretty and annoying.

Don't misread my finger-wagging as chest-beating. Ax-grinding can only be a limited affair, lest the whetstone wear itself away. So, perhaps, it's just a matter of time before my irritation erodes like some Roman bridge. And all that's left is an idealized, useless artifact—be it a stylized blueprint of bygone bridges and arches. Or these words. ■

