

Natasha Ahmetaj: Interesting facts from the Treasury - art in Albanian banknotes

Welcome address by Ms Natasha Ahmetaj, Second Deputy Governor of the Bank of Albania, at the launch of "Interesting facts from the Treasury: Art in Albanian Banknotes", Tirana, 19 May 2017.

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Dear friends, dear guests,

Today, we are together at the premises of the Bank of Albania, not only in the attribute of this place as the house of money, figuratively, but also in the physical sense of the word, as this room is next to the old treasury room.

We have invited you today to enjoy another dimension of the currency, that of an authentic artwork. A work of art always speaks more broadly and deeper than its mere physical dimension.

Today, we are in a Museum of works of art. Museums are more than just expositions. While you move from one display to the other, you are not simply walking some centimetres along the street, but you travel through centuries of history. Those few centimetres take you through eras of social civilisation. This is a unique feeling you can only experience in a museum. A zoo or a botanical garden depicts the real world in miniature. But it shows the actual living world. By contrast, a museum brings together different eras, the past and the present. This is especially true in a museum of banknotes and coins. Modestly, our Museum does that as well. It was only founded a year ago and we believe it will continue to develop and be fully fledged as a legacy of our national memory.

In mid 1800s, announcing the competition on American banknote, the US Secretary of the Treasury, specified two obligatory requirements to participants about the design:

- ♦ it had to be original, and unpublished previously, and
- ♦ have a national character.

Since at the beginning, the banknote is thought as not only a means of exchange, but also as an education tool for the public. As such, it should bear important moments of the history. The banknote performs this function through complicated techniques of subtly fine lines, to prevent reproduction, attributable also to robust security features.

Although we frequently have these valuable papers on our hands, seldom do we concentrate for a few minutes and enjoy the art embedded in them. We very rarely focus on examining how the work of a talented painter is intertwined in a sort of a miniature canvas with that of a talented engraver, turning that piece of paper into an elegant expression of creative art. The image is familiar, but it is hard to believe that 14% of interviewees in advanced countries are able to remember recognise the picture designed on each banknote. Even less people may recognise the portrait depicted on 1000 Leke or 2000 Leke Albanian banknotes.

Museums and various activities organised in light of promoting national values and raising the public awareness help to better transmit the message embedded in banknotes, and educate the public through the art in banknotes, featuring elements of our national identity.

For this particular reason, numismatists take delight in the subtleties of colours and images of the banknotes. In the apparently just pieces of paper, they are able to distinguish and recognise different ages, and the degree of social freedom.

In addition, banknotes may also depict concerns of a society, of course, when the artist was able to properly read this concern. Hence, the green of US dollar was chosen as a symbol to express the need of the stability in the period of civil war. The 2017 series of Norwegian currency reflects the concern on the return to the human basic needs, which are taken away by digitalisation. In reflection to this concern, the portraits of distinguished people of art and science are replaced with the symbols of natural resources, strongly related with the identity of the Norwegian people, such as the Viking ship, fish or the lighthouse.

All these facts show that nothing has threatened the educational and national mission of the banknote. Owing to this reason also, it continues to carry it out by resisting even the virtual forms of the currency. In addition, as a Harvard researcher states, the paper may disappear earlier than the banknote.

Dear guests,

The International Council of Museums was established in 1946. Every year, since 1977, the ICOM organises the International Museum Day, a worldwide event held on and around 18 May. In 1992, ICOM decided to choose a socially relevant theme for International Museum Day, each year.

The theme chosen for 2017 is "Museums and contested histories: Saying the unspeakable in museums".

Joining this worldwide celebrating day, in our museum, we have formulated it as "Interesting facts from the treasury: Art in Albanian Banknotes".

And to say the unspeakable, we have invited today Mr Mark Bundy, a master of designing working for over 40 years at De La Rue, pioneers of banknote printing in the world. De La Rue is frequently heard by everyone visiting our museum, as it relates to the first company printing the Albanian banknote.

Mr Bundy will show the unspeakable on the designing, techniques and art of conceiving the Albanian banknote, illustrated by photos and sketches.

In the end, we invite you to explore our temporary exhibition on this topic and see the unspeakable through your own lens.