

March of the Euro

With its diverse designs and continental flair, the euro offers collectors the opportunity to expand their numismatic world.

IF YOU'RE looking for a new collecting area, I'd like to offer an appealing and interesting possibility. These coins circulate widely and feature a multiplicity of designs representing a variety of areas. They portray a number of subjects, from art and culture to politics and history. Best of all, they are inexpensive and fun to collect. If you're thinking this describes the 50 State Quarters®, you're right, but that's not what I have in mind. Instead, I want to introduce you to Europe's newest money—the euro.

Throughout most of European history, each nation used its own currency. The European Union (EU) was founded in the 1950s to promote trade, but it wasn't until the late 1990s that its plans for a true monetary union were implemented. This dramatic transition was eased by educational initiatives in advance of the switch, including the distribution of sample coins and pricing in both old and new currencies. On January 1, 2002, the single currency became a reality as euro coins and bank notes replaced national currencies in 12 countries. Although some EU members initially declined to adopt the new monetary unit, others recently joined the Union, so the euro's reach likely will continue to expand in years to come.

Euro coins, like the continent where they originate, are a mixture of unity and diversity. One side of each denomination has a design that is the same regardless of the issuing country. Three geographic motifs are shared, all featuring maps of the nations of the European Union. The copper-plated-steel 1-, 2- and 5-eurocent coins show

the EU, without borders, highlighted on a globe. The yellowish, aluminum-bronze 10-, 20- and 50-eurocent pieces present a map of EU countries physically separated from one another. The bimetallic euro and 2 euros show the nations of the EU joined, but with their borders marked. The symbolism is clear: the European Union is composed of separate nations that form a single entity in a global context.

The reverse of each coin is designed by the issuing country. Whatever its origin, every circulating euro coin is accepted in every participating country. This diversity of designs contrasts with euro notes, which have uniform, architecturally themed, designs.

Images on euros illustrate Europe's history, achievements and numismatic art. Irish coins feature a traditional harp. Portuguese coins portray royal coats of arms nearly 1,000 years old, while those of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg present current royal portraits. Austria's coins primarily display cultural images, and Finland's show mostly heraldic images; both also feature designs drawn from nature. Spanish pieces present milestones in architecture and literature, while those from France and Germany tend toward political symbolism. Italy's issues highlight artistic achievements, and Greek coins portray ancient and modern images.

This whirlwind tour of European coin design leaves many areas unexplored. Visit the European Central Bank's websites (www.euro.ecb.int/en and www.ecb.int/bc/html/index.en.html) for photos of euro designs and interesting background material.

Fortunately for collectors, euros are quite accessible. One euro is worth about \$1.20, and issues made for circu-



▲ The euro's many faces make it an interesting collecting subject.

lation generally can be purchased inexpensively, or perhaps friends will bring back numismatic souvenirs from their trips to Europe. Even a small cache of coins likely will have an eclectic mix, as I recently learned after receiving a few dozen pieces from Italy. About half the coins were Italian; the rest were issued by seven other EU members. Another possibility is to travel to Europe yourself and collect memorable coins from historic places.

For globetrotters and armchair travelers alike, collecting euro coins provides the opportunity to explore Europe through its money. As a coin collector, you'll find a lot to appreciate in the euro's numismatic connection to Europe's people, places and culture.

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