

Banknotes as Business Cards of Switzerland

By Carol Schwyzer, © MoneyMuseum

We handle money every day. We recognise the different denominations by their size, weight, and the indicated face values. In the case of banknotes, we perhaps distinguish by color. What we hardly ever perceive, however, are the designs on our coins and bills. Yet they are much more than merely means of payment: they reflect identity, culture, history, and not least the self-conception of a country. On US notes, for example, we read "In God we trust," Queen Elizabeth smiles from the British pound, and the Indian rupee bills depict the ascetic Mahatma Gandhi. The current Swiss banknotes present famous artists from different regions of the country, together with their works.

The conception of what distinguishes a country, and the approach of representing it to its citizens and to the rest of the world, changes in the course of time. The development of the Swiss banknotes, from 1911 to present, illustrates this.

Bucolic and mythical Switzerland: The logger



50-franc note (rv.) from the second banknote series (1911-1914), designed by Ferdinand Hodler

In April 1908, the Swiss National Bank commissioned Ferdinand Hodler, at that time the most renowned Swiss artist, with the designs for new banknotes of 50 and 100 francs. Thematically, they were to illustrate farm labors.

For the 50-franc bill, Hodler chose the image of a wood feller. He showed the man in the motion of raising his axe to strike the blow, and managed to express the full intensity and force of that moment. The logger appears strong, dynamic, and fully concentrated on his work. The deeper symbolism of the image: by clearing the forests, men made nature useful for their purposes, in this way gaining new croplands.

What might have been considered a cultural achievement in the early 20th century, would be unimaginable as design for a banknote of today, a time of high environmental consciousness.

Incidentally, Holder was somewhat disappointed by the impression his figure made on the banknotes, for the reduction of scale also belittled the expression. This is why in 1910, he exhibited a larger-than-life version of his work, which was very successful indeed.

Hodler's bills, which were part of the second banknote series of the Swiss National Bank, remained in circulation for a very long time: having been introduced from 1911 to 1914, they were replaced only on the years of 1956-57.

Bucolic and mythical Switzerland: Winkelried



40-franc reserve note (ov.) from the second banknote series (1911-1914), designed by S. Balzer

The 40-franc note with the depiction of the mythical Swiss hero Winkelried in a medallion, was a creation of the graphic artist S. Balzer. It belonged to the second banknote series as well, but, being intended as reserve banknote, was never actually circulated. From the beginning, the Swiss National Bank always kept a complete banknote series in reserve, in case a large number of forgeries should appear in the circulation of money. Then the current banknotes would have been immediately withdrawn and replaced by the respective reserve notes.

On this bill, Arnold of Winkelried is holding a bundle of lances in his arm. Tale has it that he helped the Swiss to their victory when, in the Battle of Sempach on July 9, 1386, he grabbed the pikes of the enemies and, throwing them down with his body and thereby spiking himself, broke the ranks of the Hapsburg soldiers so that the confederates could attack through the opening. His last words are disputed, however. They are said to either have been "Protect, dear countrymen, my wife and children," or "A passage for freedom!"

Winkelried stands for an audacious, vigilant Switzerland, a country that is willing to make sacrifices for its independence – a highly topical matter during the time of circulation of the second banknote series.

Modern and visionary Switzerland: The turbine

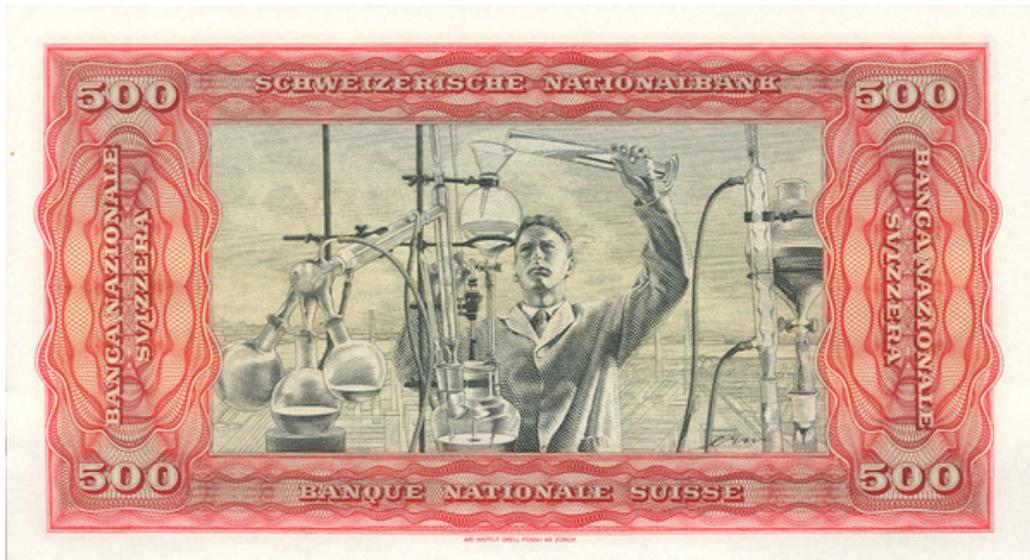


1000-franc reserve note (rv.) from the fourth banknote series (1938), designed by Hans Erni

In 1938 the Swiss National Bank commissioned the famous painter Hans Erni, together with his less known colleague Victor Surbek, to create new banknotes for the fourth series. Erni designed the denominations of 1000, 500, and 50 francs, which altogether never came into circulation, however, but were kept as reserve banknotes.

The 1000-franc note shows a very modern looking turbine in the midst of snowy mountains. Here, the awareness of an origin in a solid, archaic alpine world seems to connect with the vision of a progressive Switzerland, where future technologies are developed and employed for the benefit of the country. It is remarkable that the artist – on the eve of World War II – looked forward into a time, in which machine, electro, and metal industry, would become one of the most important economic sectors of Switzerland.

Modern and visionary Switzerland: Chemistry



Pattern of the 500-franc reserve note (rv.) from the fourth banknote series (1938), designed by Hans Erni

On the bill of 500 francs, Erni showed a man experimenting in a chemical laboratory. Smokestacks jut out of an industrial landscape in the background. The choice of motif represents Switzerland as a manufacturing country, and the Swiss as ingenious chemists keen on experimenting. This vision has become true, as with Novartis and Hoffmann-La Roche, Switzerland is among the biggest producers of pharmaceuticals worldwide. Besides, the fact that several winners of the Nobel prize for chemistry were Swiss, shows that inventive talent and research prosper in Switzerland, too.

Allegoric interlude: The apple harvest



50-franc note (rv.) from the fifth banknote series (1956-1957), designed by Pierre Gauchat

The Swiss National Bank showed great courage for innovation when it chose utterly novel motifs for the fifth banknote series after World War II. The series was designed by the graphic artist Pierre Gauchat, who chose neither heroes nor farmers and landscapes for his notes. Rather, his allegories illustrated universal human values like fertility, compassion, and even death.

On first sight, the apple harvest stands for the fruitfulness of Switzerland and its citizens. On a deeper level, however, it can be seen as a symbol for the different functions of money. Money serves to build social networks; it nourishes like breast milk; it can, through work, bear fruit; and it can be held in reserve – sometimes even in a basket.

A special characteristic of these bold, unique banknotes were their enormous sizes; they were "big as sheets," as people said.

Personalities: The scientist



50-franc note (ov.) from the sixth banknote series (1976-1979), designed by Ernst and Ursula Hiestand

For the sixth banknote series, the Swiss National Bank replaced deep symbolism by masterminds. Significant Swiss citizens, in particular scientists and scholars, now looked from the bills. As individual personalities they dominated the obverses of their respective notes, thus representing their home country. The reverse of the notes depicted motifs closely connected with the person on the front.

On the 50-franc bill appears the polymath Conrad Gessner (*1516, †1565). Born in Zurich, Gessner not only practiced as physician, but also lectured as professor for Greek, Physics and Natural History. His encyclopedias and dictionaries laid the bases for new scientific approaches in the subjects of botanic, zoology, and philology. When he died in 1565 of the plague, he was a scholar of worldwide reputation.

Personalities: The artist



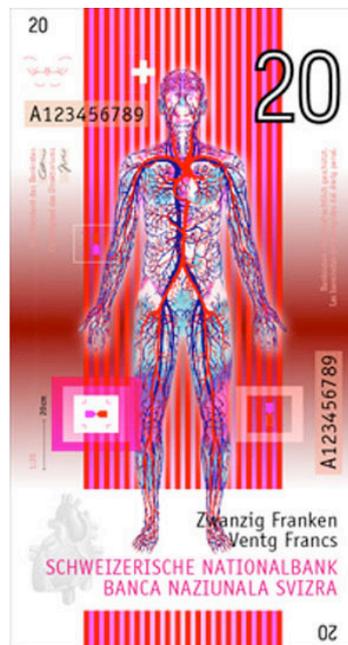
50-franc note (ov.) from the eight banknote series (1995-1998), designed by Jörg Zintzmeyer

Currently, the eighth series of Swiss banknotes is in circulation. It was created by the graphic designer Jörg Zintzmeyer, who defined his country through a further series of renowned fellow citizens. The choice makes it apparent, however, that the focus shifted from scientific accuracy to artistic creativity.

Believe it or not, in this series even a woman has been selected as delegate of her country. It is Sophie Taeuber-Arp (*1889, †1943), a painter, sculptor, textile artist, and dancer, who was involved in the famous Cabaret Voltaire, the place of birth of Dadaism. As a representative of concrete, rhythmic-geometrical art, Arp played an important role in the renewal of painting and sculpting in the early 20th century. International recognition as one of the most exemplary and formative figures of classic-modern art, she only obtained posthumously, however.

Whether the artist would have been happy to embellish a Swiss banknote, and thus to serve as a means of Swiss image cultivation, is doubtful. Sophie Taeuber-Arp suffered from a lifelong lack of money, and besides never identified in the slightest with bourgeois values and ideals. But be that as it may, her features on a Swiss banknote at least document that the status of and esteem for women have increased in a country, where female suffrage has been introduced only in 1971.

Cosmopolitan Switzerland: The bloodstream system



Design of the 20-franc note (rv.) from the contest for the ninth banknote series (from 2010), designed by Manuel Krebs, winner of the 1st price

In 2005, the Swiss National Bank launched a contest for the designs of new banknotes once again. This time, the given subject was "cosmopolitan Switzerland." Each banknote was to express a Swiss idea or attitude, for instance: dialog, humanity, development, creativity, organisation. The results were modern designs – colorful, abstract, and entirely without heads.

The following three examples show how the younger generation of Swiss sees Switzerland, and what it considers of importance:

"For the obverse of the bill of 20 francs I took a work of art called 'Bread' by Peter Fischli. On the reverse, I show a human being with its entire bloodstream system. With this I want to show that man is the center of every artistic creation," says Manuel Krebs.

The designs of this artist complied, according to the jury, best to the five assessment criteria. One of the conditions was that the images suit Switzerland. In this case it did, because the human being is in the center of the image, and the world-famous artist duo Fischli-Weiss carries this message out into the world.

Cosmopolitan Switzerland: The stage



Design of the 20-franc note (ov.) from the contest for the ninth banknote series (from 2010), designed by Martin Woodtli, winner of the 2nd price ex aequo

"The main image is a stage with movable elements like partition walls and spotlights. The whole scene is flooded with light. The atmosphere is one of installation and rehearsal. A representation develops, the spectators can enjoy art," comments Martin Woodtli his draft.

Here, the image for Switzerland is a stage in formation, an experimental theater, something that is just about to come into being. It is a modern and headstrong attempt, leaving observers and users of money room for their own imagination.

Cosmopolitan Switzerland: The skiers



Design of the 10-franc note (ov.) from the contest for the ninth banknote series (from 2010), designed by Manuela Pfrunder, winner of the 2nd price ex aequo and champion of the contest

From 2010, Switzerland will put banknotes into circulation that will, for the first time, have been solely created by a woman. The designer Manuela Pfrunder, placed second in the contest of 2005, got the commission for the creation of the ninth series of Swiss banknotes.

Even though some members of the jury considered her drafts as little innovative and, despite their beauty, as a bit boring, Manuela Pfrunder's concept made it in the end. The reason is that her designs qualify best for realisation, because the implementation of new security features involve certain requirements with which aesthetics and graphics have to conform.

The image of the 10-franc bill shows snow canons swirling white flakes into the air, while skiers speed over snowy slopes. The bill illustrates Switzerland as a nation of skiers in which skiing is important not only as top-class sport, but also as leisure activity and as a tourist magnet.

The designs for the future Swiss banknotes are still in a phase of development. Only at the time of their issue will we finally learn how Switzerland presents itself on its new bills. The 50-franc notes will be the first to come into circulation, presumably in autumn of 2010.