

‘A kiss and a promise’: The creation of Scottish printed identity through banknote design, with especial reference to the work of William Home Lizars.

Abstract.

Of all the daily items of material print culture, those that are most familiar but probably most overlooked are banknotes. Quite apart from the extraordinary metonymy that endows a piece of printed paper with real exchange value, a banknote performs several practical and symbolic functions. Firstly by the complexity of its design (and the quality and characteristics of its paper) it has to be proof against forgery. Secondly its denomination and intrinsic value has to be instantly recognisable and acceptable. And thirdly its iconography has to communicate values of trust, probity, nationality and culture that are universally understood and accepted.

It is remarkable that such a complex object of print culture has received so little attention from historians and scholars. Where do the elements that make up banknote design come from, how have they been articulated and why are they implicitly and universally understood. It is appropriate to examine these questions in Scotland, since this was the home of the first paper notes produced for general circulation, in the late seventeenth century and many of the elements of the banknote language were created or developed here. Moreover, Scotland is one of the few countries where commercial banks still issue their own notes whose contemporary designs continue to reflect a complicated and contestable iconography of national identity, especially at a time when two of the three banks of issue came close to collapse and are effectively publicly owned.

This paper examines the origin and use of banknote design in Scotland and comments on the values they enshrine. Particular attention is paid to the work of the nineteenth century Edinburgh engraver William Home Lizars who invented many of the design elements of banknotes and whose influence remains discernible today.