

# Postage stamp design in the Republic of Cyprus through the eyes of citizens: a contemporary take on traditional culture

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*The present study is part of a larger research into the connoted messages transmitted via postage stamp design as part of a country's official image repertoire, the ideologies behind them, and how they are perceived by the citizens of the state. We concentrated on the Republic of Cyprus, a relatively newly-founded, post-colonial state, which gained its independence in 1960. We followed a mixed methods approach which allowed the deeper comprehension of the messages promoted by the authorities through postage stamp designs, while simultaneously studying the views of Cypriot citizens. During the first phase we categorized the corpus of stamps (998) with the aid of quantitative content analysis, a tool that enabled us to map the messages that the issuing authorities aimed to transfer. The second phase involved the exploration of how citizens perceive the official image repertoire through stamp design using a survey research (384 adult participants), followed by focus group interviews and photo elicitation. Furthermore, we employed semiotics to study a variety of stamp imagery taking into consideration parameters such as colour and shape, point of view and frame, as well as verbal elements. According to our findings the official image repertoire favoured topics that underline Cyprus' ancient heritage and the role of religion. The citizens nevertheless sought a renewed way for the official representation of their country. Their need for a more inclusive repertoire was expressed through stamp design depicting local folklore culture, ideologically linking it with an almost 'rebellious' way of expression not imposed by any hierarchy. This newfound interest in folklore forms of expression intensified in recent years due to the difficulties arising from the financial crisis of 2012, as well as the current discussions for resolving the Cyprus dispute. The aim of this study is to examine how design becomes embedded in the everyday and cultivates a shared sense of belonging to the citizens of the state.*

**KEYWORDS** postage stamps, Cyprus, folk culture, visual communication, ideology

## **Introduction**

The research presented here concerns postage stamps, a peculiar and relatively under-studied category of official visual texts, and aims to better comprehend their potential and function as a means of constructing a country's image. Our interest focuses not only on the ever-changing visual language employed by stamps, but also on the views and perceptions of the citizens that use them. Stamp imagery has been studied in the past mainly as a vehicle for geo-political promotion and propaganda. Our literature review, however, detected a gap in the field arising from a failure to discuss stamp design as an artefact, as a carrier of cultural meanings which are negotiated daily by its actual users, the citizens.

In previous studies (Andreou, Stylianou & Zantides 2016) we explained how postage stamps can be seen as media of public visual communication, which relay powerful collective representations. At the same time, though, we have demonstrated how citizens do not necessarily accept and adopt these messages, since their views on the kind of images that best represent their collective cultural identity do not always match those of the official culture (Andreou 2017). The consideration of the citizens' viewpoint adds a crucial new dimension to the study of official visual media, which is traditionally an exclusively text-centred enterprise. This was managed via a mixed methods research approach, combining quantitative content analysis, survey research and focus group interviews, inspired by a theoretical framework that, next to the postulate of official culture as oriented to the cultivation of the collective feelings of national belonging and pride, admits, in addition, the heterogeneity of citizens' views regarding their collective identity and representation. The inclusion of the citizens' perspective was also vital in investigating from up close how the meaning-making role of everyday objects, such as postage stamps, contributes to the shaping of collectiveness within a state, as Edensor (2002) suggested. The article focuses on a specific thematic category of postage stamps that, throughout the research, citizens singled out as the most significant concerning their country's official representation.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Theoretical Framework***

Postage stamps simultaneously address two different audiences and serve different needs. On one hand, they address the citizens of a state, serving a practical function embedded in their ordinary, everyday routines; on the other hand, they are official documents conveying symbolic representations of a country to both home and foreign audiences. Our research adopted a framework that deals explicitly with the importance of ordinary, mundane objects and imagery in the construction of national identity and sense of belonging.

We approached postage stamps on the basis of Anderson's (1991) idea of 'print nationalism', Billig's (1995) 'banal nationalism' and Edensor's (2002) emphasis on how official, state representations are integrated in the mundane, everyday aspects of a culture. Eventhough receiving only cursory mention by Anderson and Billig, the symbolic significance of stamps is fully acknowledged by Edensor (2002) who underscores the ability of these commonplace, unassuming objects to relay meaning through repetition, all the while drawing little attention to themselves.

In order to better frame the dual nature of postage stamps, we adopted the term 'official culture' as understood by both Debord (1957) and Lewis (1992). Official culture can be defined as the form of culture that has been socially accepted and most importantly politically legitimized (Lewis 1992). In order to create a consistent official culture, the state uses various sources including the mainstream, popular and everyday forms of culture. The process also involves the existence of institutional support, which guarantees consistency, hierarchy and focus on the national imagined community's values and cultural norms (Edensor 2002). The latter, informing the deeper layers of stamps' social and cultural meaning form what Barthes (1973) assigns to the 'ideological order'.

## **Other Research**

Postage stamps' depiction of traditional culture as part of official culture has been noted (e.g. Kent 2006; Raento and Brunn 2005) but not really explored in any depth. Raento and Brunn (2005) suggest that modern Finnish stamp imagery reflects the official policy of Finnish governments to promote the image of a peaceful and progressive country. The representation of 'Finnishness', through folk aspects of culture, was quite popular during the early part of the twentieth century, when a romanticized version of Finnish traditional tales, mythology and language was instrumental to the creation of the country's national image. In the aftermath of World War II, however, under the national elite's influence, the images that appeared on postage stamps were exclusively derived from 'high culture'. As a result, till today, depictions of folk and traditional forms of culture on stamps became almost non-existent, or at least of secondary importance (Raento & Brunn 2005).

In relation to the stamps of the Republic of Cyprus, Kent (2006) discusses a series of stamps depicting traditional dances that was jointly issued by Cyprus and India. Kent speculates that this topic was chosen as folk dances and music are widely thought to be a cross-cultural institution, understood and appreciated by virtually every society in the world. Albeit interesting, the thoughts on the particular stamps and traditional culture depiction on stamp design were not further explored by Kent, leaving a lot of questions open to investigation. An especially promising line of investigation pursued here, is the exploration of the citizens'

views on this particular category of stamp design. An equally fruitful prospect for future research is the cross-cultural comparison of stamp designs depicting traditional culture, in order to better comprehend the variety of meaning construction involved in different cases.

## **Purpose and Research Questions**

This study aims to discuss the representation of Cyprus' official culture through stamps, and most specifically, stamps depicting themes concerning the country's traditional culture. We have found that this thematic group has been quite popular among the Cypriot citizens who took part in relevant research (Andreou 2017) concerning official culture representation through stamps. Thus, we aim to discuss and semiotically analyse the representations, as well as the views of Cypriot citizens regarding the particular theme and its presence in official culture representation. The present paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How is the theme of traditional culture represented through the postage stamps issued by the Republic of Cyprus? Could these findings be linked with Cyprus' socio-political background?
2. How do Cypriot citizens view the particular theme on their country's stamp designs, and could their perceptions be attributed to their socio-cultural background and even their country's socio-political situation?

The significance of the present study is based on its attempt to study official visual documents, by putting them in direct conversation with their actual users. Our goal was furthermore to prove through a mixed methods research, that the role of the citizen in this exchange is not a passive one and how their views on certain aspects of official culture can be empirically studied.

## **Method and Definitions**

The present article is part of a larger study that employed the following methodological tools: quantitative content analysis, survey research and focus groups. Quantitative content analysis was used in order to determine the thematic categories of the corpus of stamps (Table 1) and significant findings emerged regarding the kind of topics and messages that the state attempts to send towards the citizens (Andreou & Zantides 2018) through this process. A sample of 998 postage stamps (out of the collected corpus of 1121) has been studied as the researcher did not consider stamp designs that simply reproduced earlier postage stamp depictions, for the coding to be valid. In other words, the remaining 123 postage stamps have been excluded from the corpus, since the image they displayed has been used on previously

issued stamps and remained unchanged. The entire corpus was studied without sampling, since the aim was to have a comprehensive corpus consisting of all the postage stamps issued by the Republic of Cyprus, from its independence till the present day (1960-2013).

CATEGORY	QUANTITY	%
1. Archaeological findings/sites	147	14.729
2. Religion	145	14.529
3. Flora and fauna	132	13.226
4. Social themes	82	8.216
5. Sports	78	7.815
6. Other	69	6.913
7. Notables	59	5.911
8. Architecture	57	5.711
9. Folklore/traditional culture	49	4.909
10. Transport and communications	36	3.607
11. Education and research	25	2.505
12. Fine arts	16	1.603
13. Landscapes	16	1.603
14. Maps	16	1.603
15. References to the Republic of Cyprus	14	1.402
16. Technology/technological achievements	12	1.202
17. References to other countries/states	11	1.102
18. Tourism	10	1.002
19. Flags	8	0.801
20. Heritage and its preservation	8	0.801
21. Professions	8	0.801
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>998</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 1.** Numbers and percentages for all postage stamp categories

Based on this content analysis, a survey was designed in order to detect the citizens' views regarding the topics and messages reflected on stamps and the significance of this practice (Andreou 2017). The survey included a sample of 384 adult (above 18 years old) Cypriot participants. The required information has been collected via administering door-to-door, printed questionnaires. The participants were briefed on the purpose of the survey and assured that the questionnaires would remain anonymous and processed solely for research purposes. The results indicated certain variations in the way the citizens regarded the themes that should be depicted on postage stamps (Table 2) and therefore further exploration was needed.

The next step involved the setting-up of a focus group, as the final stage of triangulation. This allowed us to actively interact with the participants, focusing on the ideas and patterns

which emerged from the questionnaires and needed further exploration. For this reason, the design of the focus groups' protocol was based on the questions of the survey which have shown potential for further interpretation. This design gave us a variety of data with both quantitative and qualitative characteristics resulting in a more comprehensive interpretation of the findings. The 20 participants, consisting of people of both sexes, of different age and level of education, belonged to the sample that has already been used for the administration of the survey and had volunteered to take part in the focus group. We designed a protocol based on a number of modified questions of the survey research that showed potential for qualitative analysis. The participants were only shown postage stamps at the end of the interview sessions, in order to ensure that their replies would not be biased. Photo elicitation as a methodological tool is based on the notion of inserting images in an interview. It is considered that participants will respond in a different way when presented with imagery, in comparison to a traditional interview, as verbal and visual information are affecting them in different ways (Collier 1957; Harper 2002). The imagery selected for this study was drawn from the thematic groups that proved the most popular during the previous stage of the research (i.e. Archaeological findings, Religion, Flora and fauna, Folklore/Traditional culture). A summarized version of the most important themes that emerged from this stage, can be seen on the table below (Table 3).

Categories	Observed Frequency	Percentage	Expected Frequency	Residual
Folklore/Traditional culture	84	21.9%	27.4	56.6
Archaeological findings	60	15.6%	27.4	32.6
Flora and Fauna	45	11.7%	27.4	17.6
Religion	35	9.1%	27.4	7.6
Landscape	32	8.3%	27.4	4.6
Maps	21	5.5%	27.4	-6.4
Flags	20	5.2%	27.4	-7.4
Sports	17	4.4%	27.4	-10.4
Social Themes	15	3.9%	27.4	-12.4
Heritage and its Preservation	14	3.6%	27.4	-13.4
Notables	12	3.1%	27.4	-15.4
Tourism	11	2.9%	27.4	-16.4
Architecture, Professions and Education	10	2.6%	27.4	-17.4
Fine Arts	8	2.1%	27.4	-19.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>384</b>	<b>100.0%</b>		

**Table 2.** Numbers and percentages for the postage stamp categories selected by the participants.

Attitude towards stamps/ philately	Memorable stamp designs	Proposed topics and images for stamp design	Perceptions of largest stamp categories (Archaeological sites)	Perceptions of largest stamp categories (Religion)	Perceptions of largest stamp categories (Endemic species)	Perceptions of largest stamp categories (Traditional culture)
Disinterest	Repetition	Nature	Connection to Greece	Strong presence in society	Familiarity / Everyday life	Familiarity / Everyday life
Curiosity	Historical importance	Greek Orthodoxy	National pride	Strategically / Politically important	Cyprus' unique identity	Not shameful
Collector	Imagery evoking emotions	Archaeological findings	Tourism	Cyprus' unique identity	Neutrality	Cyprus' unique identity
	Personal interests/ taste	Contemporary Cyprus	Detachment	Respect	Positivity	National pride
		Traditional culture	Respect	Majority's religion	Not a strong symbol	Tourism
		Turkish occupation	Connection to the EU	Detachment		Nostalgia
			Strategically / Politically important			

**Table 3.** Summary of the themes resulting from the focus group interviews

## Results

The content analysis of our corpus revealed that the state has favoured topics concerned the country's ancient heritage and religion (Table 1). Images of archaeological findings and Greek Orthodox-related themes underscored the Greek Cypriot identity of the newly-formed and soon after divided country. Nonetheless, there are strong indications that there has been a shift in the representation of official culture after the country became a member of the European Union. During this period the emphasis shifts towards more culture-neutral topics, as well as themes that relate to the more general issues of education and progress (Andreou & Zantides 2018). These findings seemed quite unexpected, as other, perhaps more suitable thematic categories – e.g. those concerning the promotion of tourism, or the representation of traditional culture – were avoided in favour of the depiction of endemic species (Andreou & Zantides 2018). An explanation of this choice was sought in the past, where once more flora and fauna presented a plausible rationale as the Republic of Cyprus had turned to representations of nature when it was about to design its flag (1960). In that case, the brief underlined the need for promoting peacefulness and prosperity, avoiding any symbol that would encourage conflict between the

two communities residing on the island. As negotiations for uniting Cyprus have restarted in 2003 and the country became a member of the EU in 2004, the need for an official repertoire that avoided divisive ideological messages emerged once more (Andreou & Zantides 2018).

The survey research and focus group interviews aimed to explore the citizens' views, how they interact, agree or actively disagree with the topics that appear on Cyprus' stamps, as part of their country's official culture. There were certainly instances where the citizens' perspective matched and reflected that of the official culture. On both occasions, for example, they agreed with the need for religious imagery on Cyprus' stamps (see Table 2 and 3). The most favoured topics of Cyprus' official culture, such as depictions concerned with religion and archaeological findings, were certainly accepted by the citizens as sources of crucial political and ideological messages. Additionally, some of these images were linked by the participants with the traumatic events of 1974. It is obvious from our findings and the subsequent analysis, that while respect for the past and for institutions such as the Church is embedded in the citizens, they tend to choose other forms of representation for themselves and their country in present day.

Most importantly however, we noted instances where citizens' opinions contrasted with the results of content analysis. The shift of Cyprus' official culture, for example, towards representing neutrality and peacefulness through flora and fauna, was not necessarily approved by some of the respondents who did not regard this theme as a suitable form of national representation. Additionally, we investigated cases where the two sides had a completely different idea regarding the most suitable way of representation. The disagreement concerned folklore, a topic overlooked by the existing official culture on stamps (Table 3). The respondents gravitated towards traditional culture as a means of showcasing locality and a form of uniqueness that is not imposed by any authority, expressed through every day practices, manifestations and objects.

## Discussion

The theme of preference for both the survey's and the focus group's participants was the traditional/folklore culture of the island (Table 2 and 3). The participants claimed that the particular thematic category was the most suitable for the representation of Cyprus through its postage stamp designs. This was in direct contrast with the content analysis finding that this particular thematic category was relatively small in comparison to other categories (Table 1). In this section, we will be discussing the reasons behind the citizens' fondness for this thematic category, juxtaposing it with the way in which the category was designed and presented through Cyprus' stamps.

Firstly, the participants were asked to suggest specific images they would place under this particular category. Their selection included several aspects of folklore: traditional customs and

forms of dance, music and cuisine. Throughout the focus group discussions, we had the opportunity to ask the participants why their preference for this category was so strong, especially if we consider official culture's lack of favour for this category. All of the participants agreed that these aspects of folklore showcase a more *'fun and light side of Cyprus'*, one that can be enjoyed or even understood by tourists and locals alike. Some of the participants claimed that tradition is a distinctive feature of a country, but, at the same time, an aspect that can be appreciated and understood even by non-locals. As 48-year-old Yiannis explained: *'We should not look down at our tradition at all. It is a form of expression... [] Something that we understand and something we can relate to. Everyday life, that is.'*

The examples offered by the participants reflected aspects of ordinary, everyday life with a distinctively multisensorial character. They described various tastes from traditional cuisine, as well as the sounds of traditional instruments, songs, festivals and events, both old and contemporary, which according to them show a side of Cyprus, that is not only tied to its heritage, but remains relevant and embedded in their contemporary way of life. Morrison (2003) argues that traditional culture serves as a symbolic identity not imposed by the social elite within a community. It is transmitted from one generation to another, rejuvenating itself in the process and adapting to the environment. According to Dundes and Bronner (2007), folklore can be used as a constructive power of internationalism as many aspects of it rely on universal or quasi-universal human experiences. For this reason, many aspects of folklore belonging to a specific nation, may bear similarities with another nation's without losing its distinctive nature. A female participant claimed that *'we all know these objects and things more or less. They are about having a good time and enjoying yourself. On the other hand, I believe that traditional culture is something that can be understood by people all over the world more or less. We might not share the same customs, but we all share the need for having a good time, or being close to our family, enjoy ourselves during a gathering, enjoying our food, etc... In this sense I believe that this is a good way to represent us'*. A 65 year-old woman added, *'this is the spirit of Cyprus! And these images you are showing us have a sense of happiness about them. Despite all of the hardships, we Cypriots are quite happy people'*.

A younger male participant similarly asserted that *'I have seen lots of those objects in my life. This is Cyprus, you know... I can recognize this flask you are showing us. I have seen it many times. In traditional restaurants, in my grandparents' house, I even think we had one at school. Hm... Well, I sort of feel I know these objects and representations well enough, they are hm... well known to me. Here you have this couple dancing. Again, it's something familiar. This is how I feel about them. I feel I know these objects and stuff well. You get invited to a wedding in certain places of Cyprus and you can see people dancing the same dances. In this sense, judging by the familiarity of these images, I can say that they represent the country'*. The majority of the participants shared this view of connecting with topics related to tradition, not as something to be respected and regarded from a distance, but as something shared and experienced in

their everyday lives. Some of the participants referred to folklore as an '*inside joke*' that can be understood and appreciated by the Cypriot society, tying its members together through a '*fun and familiar way*'.

According to Demetriou (2015), the idea that Cypriot folklore should be preserved and 'mutated' in order to become a part of contemporary Cyprus has been an emergent narrative in recent public discourse. Events such as the current financial crisis made people 'look inwards' for forms of expression and reinvent them to fit their everyday and contemporary needs. In her study on Cyprus' folklore, Demetriou (2015), interviewed Monsieur Doumani, a Cypriot band formed in 2011, whose goal is to rearrange Cypriot traditional songs adding modern sounds and feelings to them. As the members of the band described '*we cannot keep turning our back to folklore music. There is something to it that we call root, when you hear it*'.

The participants of our focus groups seem to echo Monsieur Doumanis' opinion. 50-year-old Marios, explained that traditional aspects of culture have lately made their way to national TV channels and this is a positive step towards abolishing the idea of folklore as being somehow inferior to other forms of expression and thus unsuitable for representing the country and its citizens as official parts of culture, like stamps. A 65-year-old female participant highlighted this by adding: '*Maybe this promotion both on TV and through stamps can help our youngsters get close to their traditional culture once more*'. Another account coming from 65-year-old Lukas addressed the issue of being ashamed when represented by forms of folklore by stating '*well I guess that forms of folklore wouldn't be posh enough for them [referring to the part of the population who might not accept it as a suitable form of representation]. They wouldn't be very modern or foreign-like enough for them. Having said that, I've noticed more and more of our folklore being shown on TV nowadays, not only by RIK [Cyprus' public broadcasting service], but other channels too. Perhaps we have decided that our folklore is not shameful*'.

Despite these claims the younger generation amongst our participants seem to have found ways of bonding with traditional culture through contemporary forms of expression. An example of this would be 25-year-old Georgia's attitude towards local festivals organized in Cyprus such as the Fengaros music festival: '*We can combine our local tradition and the images from our picturesque villages with contemporary ideas, music, workshops, and performances. This type of events attracts us as locals but could interest a tourist as well. It's a good idea to bring our tradition closer to the contemporary aspects of art and expression*'. These accounts reflected both the findings of our survey (Table 2) as well as Demetriou's (2015), concerning folkloric forms of expression in Cyprus. It became obvious how even the younger generations have negotiated the 'reading' of traditional forms of expression whether they encounter them in music, TV or even official documents, such as stamps. They have mostly exonerated the notion that they present something '*peasant*' and now they perceive it as part of '*ours*' with the

connotations of authenticity firmly attached on them. The arrival of these views seem to have coincided with a generalized turn towards ‘all things traditional’ and a rediscovery of what we might call ‘Cypriotness’.

Let us now explore how the existing official culture of the Republic of Cyprus presented the particular thematic category through its stamp designs. It is a fact that Cyprus’ stamp designs have concentrated on themes depicting neutrality this past decade, as relevant studies revealed, possibly due to the country’s EU membership, as well as the recommencement of discussions for the reunification of the island, in 2004 (Andreou and Zantides 2018). The notion of neutrality was expressed mainly through themes derived from nature, endemic species of plants and animals. In fact, this particular thematic category was accompanied with very bright coloring, the introduction of the first triangular-shaped stamp of Cyprus, as well as award-winning designs (Andreou 2017). The design of stamps depicting traditional forms of culture, on the other hand, has not been given the same consideration, at least until recent years. This particular category ranked quite low in the content analysis of the corpus of Cyprus’ stamps, as it contained only 49 postage stamps (Table 1). Additionally, as we can see below, the images on these stamps were not exceptionally creative or meticulously designed, especially during the previous decades (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Violin, lute, flute, May 6, 1985, designed by A. Koutas

The stamp was designed in 1985 and depicts a violin, a lute and a flute topic, three musical instruments which are closely tied to the folk music culture in Cyprus. They are a staple of social events and customs like weddings, christenings and religious festivals, and considered part of the country’s Byzantine heritage. However, the way they are depicted lacks the vivacity and energy that was evoked by the participants’ explanations. The three musical instruments are placed against a neutral light blue surface, as if mounted on a wall, or in a display case. The placement of objects is a quite important aspect of their ‘reading’, as Jewitt and Oyama (2004) commented, and in this case the viewer is not granted access, or a sense of familiarity with these objects. Their almost clinical placement makes them appear like old and unused objects, belonging in a museum collection, rather than instruments which are being frequently

used in contemporary celebrations, and even in Cyprus' musical TV shows. In fact, the only reference to the music world, are the two bar lines placed on the upper side of the image. However, the typography used for the notes does not hint at the origin of the musical piece they represent, nor adds any sense of character to the entire composition. The song or musical piece they represent is not explained, leaving the viewer wondering what the depicted notes actually refer to other than reiterating the obvious.

The specific stamp design is characteristic of an era when folklore was not considered important for the representation of official culture, a finding corroborated also by Pieridou-Skoutela's (2007) study on folklore music as part of the public school curriculum. Consequently, however, as folklore rose in prominence and importance in Cypriot mainstream culture, the perspective of country's official culture also shifted. The notions of inclusivity and locality, considered as characteristic of folklore culture by our focus group participants, seem to reflect the attempt of the authorities to redesign folklore-related stamps in a more involving and expressive manner (Figure 2 and Figure 3).

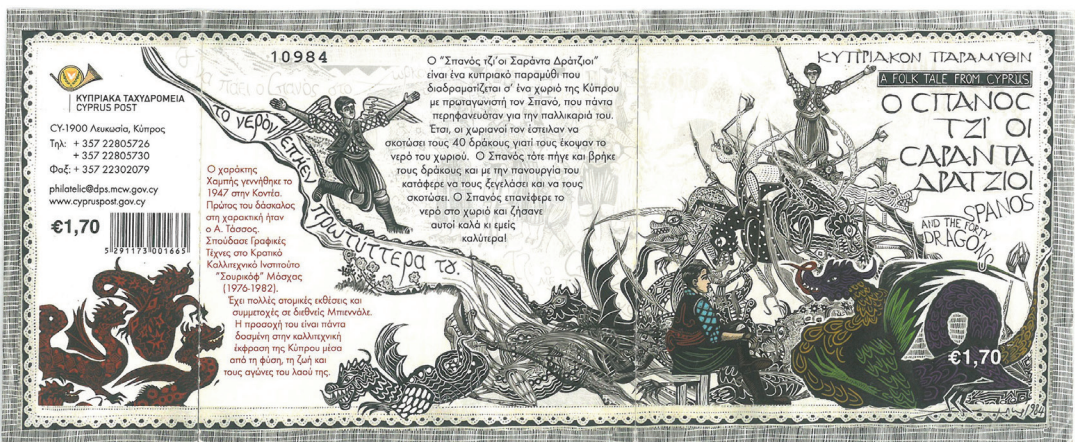


Figure 2. A fairy tale from Cyprus: Spanos and the 40 dragons, November 13, 2013, designed by C. Vasiliadou-Mezavorian, based on an engraving by H. Tsangaris

This attempt is especially evident in a set of stamps issued in 2013 and based on an engraving by Cypriot artist Hampis Tsangaris. The choice of artist is quite significant. Tsangaris is well-known in Cyprus, not only for his iconic engravings, but also for his passion for the country's folklore culture. The topics he chooses for his works, as well as his persistence in using Cypriot dialect on his artworks, express his enthusiasm for traditional culture and local traditions. This particular set of stamps (Figure 2 and 3) is entitled Ο Σπανός τζι' οι Σαράντα Δράτζιοι [Spanos and the forty dragons] and is inspired by a local folk tale, about a young man and his quest to rid his village of a pack of hostile dragons that terrorize the locals.

The design of the set is quite different from the older stamps depicting themes of tra-



**Figure 3.** A fairy tale from Cyprus: Spanos and the 40 dragons, November 13, 2013, designed by C. Vasiliadou-Mezavorian, based on an engraving by H. Tsangaris

ditional culture in many ways. It is the first time in Cyprus' stamp design history, where the frame becomes an integral part of the artwork. His choice represents a deliberate attempt to establish a link with the island's folklore culture, as it is a direct reference to Cyprus' traditional art of embroidery. In fact, the entire scene takes place on what appears to be a piece of embroidered fabric. In addition, his attempt to make the scene lively and energetic is aided by the occasional reversal of the frame's role, that is to bound the scene. As we can see (Image 3), certain elements and characters of the story escape the confines of the illustration, making the scene more interesting and, in line with Jewitt and Oyama's problematic (2004), more accessible, open and familiar to the viewer.

The scene and the characters supply us with a wide range of connotations, linked with Cyprus' rural way of life, as well as the aesthetic naivety of folk tales and artworks. An example is provided by the last part of the tale, situated on the far right corner (Figure 3 and 5), depicting Spanos returning to his village after defeating the dragons. We see the villagers and the hero dressed in folk costumes, expressing their happiness for their newfound safety, surrounded by easily comprehensible symbols of peace. The hero is depicted with angelic wings, while white pigeons fly overhead and a young woman lifts up an olive wreath. The olive wreath is considered to be one of the most popular and recognizable symbols of peace and prosperity for over two millennia (Rosenthal 1994). Furthermore, in Ancient Greece olive wreaths were given as a symbolic award to the winners of Olympic Games, and thus establish a direct link of the local fictional hero Spanos with the legendary champions.

Another noteworthy aspect of this design is the quite intricate usage of the Cypriot dialect. In fact, this is the first time that we see such an extensive usage of the island's dialect on a Cypriot stamp. The typography here is quite interesting in its expressiveness, as it supports the retelling of the story of *Spanos and the Forty Dragons*, all the while respecting the local di-

alect, but also highlighting certain important facets of the fairy tale. As Zantides (2016) asserted, typography contains a unique semiotic power that can trigger assumptions about cultural and social values and meaning. Taking into consideration this perspective, we can explore the stamp's typography by tending to the semiotic parameters of graphic design, as suggested by Bertin (1967) and used in relevant works on Cypriot dialect (Papadima 2017), namely: shape, size, value, texture, colour, orientation and placement.

According to Tsangaris (2016) the original font he created for the design of the folk tale is perhaps one of the most significant parts of the entire composition. As Tsangaris asserted, the goal was to approach this unique story through the lens of 'Cypriotness' and, at the same time, showcase the artistic and expressive strengths of the traditional art of engraving through image and font design. Accordingly, Tsangaris proceeded to engrave the entire scene, both image and texts, on a single linoleum block, mimicking the practice and aesthetic of traditional woodcuts. In order to achieve this, the artist studied methods of typography and font creation associated with Cyprus' folklore culture, traced back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Through the aesthetic of the font he created for this engraving, Tsangaris explicitly celebrates folklore culture and arts as manifestations of a unique identity that existed on the island for centuries and needs to be revived in contemporary Cyprus.

Upon close examination of the stamp we observe that, throughout the design, the text appears interweaved with the illustration, becoming part of the storytelling. The curvy, carved font exudes a sense of intimacy with the fairy tale, and contributes to the sense of wonder and magic suffusing the story. Three instances of the story-telling merit special attention. The first concerns the hero's venture into the dark forest where the dragons reside (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Figure 3 - Detail

The phrase reads, **ΜΕΣ' ΣΤΟ ΔΑΪΟΣ** [Into the forest], and we observe that the text is placed on top of the black forest-like illustration, in order to give the viewer a foreboding feeling. An equally interesting instance is the segment of the image where the hero returns to his village,

bringing fresh water from the nearby river, which was now cleaned due to the extermination of the dragons (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Figure 3 - Detail

The text reads, *το νερό επύεν πρωτύττερα του* [the water arrived before him], and once more we see the typography placed on top of the object it refers to. However, in this case in order to add energy and rhetorical force the orientation and placement of the text follow the flowing shape of the river's waters. Perhaps the most intriguing instance is found in the final scene of the fairy tale (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Figure 3 - Detail

The text, *Πράβο!* [Bravo! Well done!], accompanies the celebrations of the villagers as they greet their hero. The interesting part is contained within the first letter of the word, as its size is quite larger than any other around it, but also its texture has been altered in order to mimic the olive wreaths that the villagers are offering to their saviour. As in a calligram, text and image are interweaved in order to enhance the meaning and make the storytelling a vivid, multisensorial experience, the way it is typically performed in the folk story-telling tradition.

It is obvious that in the case of Tsangaris' stamps, the official culture has embraced a design

approach that represents folklore culture without museumifying it, without shying away from its actual, lived nature and context. Our findings are corroborated by the explanatory note appearing in the webpage of the Cyprus Post (2018) devoted to the presentation of the particular stamp set. The note suggests that this set was meant to highlight through the island's folklore culture, the notions of justice, the battle of good and evil, as well as the prosperity that comes in the end, to the younger generations. Tsangaris himself (2016) argues that the style and the meaning of the particular engraving can also be understood as a Cyprus-specific tale, a story that can be allegorically interpreted as the struggle to reunite the island and live in harmony.

In this sense our analysis in combination with the findings of the focus groups, have proven how both the official culture and citizens of the Republic of Cyprus, seek renewed ways to express their unique locality. In both cases they seem to approach traditional culture as a means to express themselves and also communicate universal meanings, such as the sense of belonging and their need for a peaceful and promising future on the island.

## Conclusion

In the light of our research findings and our analysis we can safely argue that the imagery of postage stamps is not simply the mirror of a static and monolithic official culture but always context-bound, dependent on specific socio-historical experiences and circumstances, as well as part of the broader, ongoing conversation between the official culture and the citizens. In this sense, the issue of a country's self-representation in stamp design should not be thought of in terms of official culture monologue, but as a process during which the latter is constantly challenged to negotiate with these circumstances as well as with society's changing values, ideas and attitudes. The success of official culture's response to these two basic challenges opens up new horizons of research strategy for the social semiotics of stamp design, which, by going beyond purely descriptive-analytical objectives, engage researchers in the *in situ* study of design as a social process, with all the openness and uncertainty that this implies.

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