

The European flag: questions and answers (2005)

Caption: In 2005, as part of the celebrations held to mark the 50th anniversary of the European flag, the Council of Europe answers questions about the origins, the designer, the adoption and the symbolism of the blue flag with 12 gold stars.

Source: European flag - questions and answers. 50th anniversary of the European flag. [ON-LINE]. [s.l.]: Council of Europe, [21.02.2006]. Available on http://www.coe.int/T/E/Com/Files/events/2005-12-drapeau/questions_reponses.asp.

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European flag – questions and answers

What is the European Flag?

Twelve golden stars on a blue background is the flag of Europe. It's been the symbol of the Council of Europe since 1955, adopted by the European Union (then the European Community) in 1984, and now flies above parliaments, municipal buildings, parks and monuments all over the continent.

Who had the first idea for the design?

The Council of Europe knew it needed a symbol from its very beginnings in 1949. Ideas for a European flag had been floated since the 1920s: two of the most popular were a large E on a white background from the European movement, and Count Coudenhove-Kalergi's "Pan European Union" flag, a yellow circle with a red cross on a blue background. But it was only when Europe got its first political organisation – the Council of Europe – that serious attempts were made to find a European flag.

In 1950, a committee was assigned to study the question. Groups of experts, boards and committees made a lengthy study of over a hundred suggestions from artists, heraldry experts and enthusiastic amateurs from all over the world. Ideas included 15 green squares on a cream background; a variation of the US stars and stripes; quasi-Olympic circles... even a design using national flags with a tiger motif.

In the end, two were chosen. One was from Arsène Heitz, then working at the Council who proposed "a crown of 12 golden stars with 5 rays, their points not touching" and the second was a constellation of stars – originally proposed by the pro-European founder of the College of Europe, Salvador de Madariaga.

Who agreed the final design? And what does it mean?

The Council of Europe's main decision making body, the Committee of Ministers, opted for the 12 star flag. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council agreed to it in December 1955 and it was officially unveiled at the Château de la Muette in Paris on 13 December 1955.

The design symbolises the peoples of Europe, with the circle representing their union. The number of stars never changes – it is always 12: representing perfection and entirety, like the twelve apostles, twelve months of the year, twelve signs of the zodiac.

Many other stories exist about the flag – one is that the star idea came from a European living in Asia who thought of home each time he looked at the evening star, Venus; another is that stars were chosen to avoid using a religious symbol.

How come the flag is shared between the Council of Europe and the European Union?

The flag caught on following the Universal Exhibition in Brussels in 1958, and when in 1979 a newly elected European Parliament began to look for its own symbol, it became obvious that the 12 star flag was by far the best. The Council of Europe had lobbied for a long time for all other European organisations to adopt it as a gesture of unity: on 28 April 1983 the European Parliament agreed, and the European Council in Milan in June 1985 officially adopted the twelve golden stars as the European Union's flag.