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CIGAR LABEL ART: A PHOTO ESSAY

by L. Glenn Westfall

The history of Ybor City and Tampa is reflected in seemingly endless numbers of cigar labels produced as advertisements for the once thriving “clear Havana” industry. Thousands of unused labels stacked on warehouse shelves, stored in attics or filed in cases and forgotten in the basements of lithographic companies represent a wealth of encyclopedic information on personages, cultural scenes and historic events.

Since cigar labels both attracted new customers and maintained old ones, no expense was considered too great in order to advertise properly and promote sales. The chromolithographic application of several colors to labels opened new vistas in appealing advertisements. The chromolithographic printing process which had originated in Germany was transformed into a full-scale process for American advertisement art by the mid-1870s. From six to as many as twenty-two colors were placed on one label. Embossment added an even more refined touch with a three dimensional effect. This involved placing the label on a mold of the desired design, then applying thirty to forty tons of pressure to the paper with huge presses. Another exquisite touch was produced on finely detailed illustrations of coins, medals or titles by sprinkling silver, gold or bronze dust over carefully applied shellac on the areas where a metallic look was desired. The entire process to produce a cigar label was extremely expensive, ranging from $2,000 to $6,000 for a new label.

Lithographic companies received specific descriptions of labels they were to produce, and often sent the artist to the factory owner to discuss the details. Although numerous pre-1900 labels were printed in Germany or Cuba, after the turn of the century, several firms based in New York, such as Consolidated Lithographic Company, American Lithographic Company and the popular firm of George Schlegel, hired German craftsmen and produced a majority of the labels used by Tampa’s clear Havana manufacturers. Factory owners often contracted production of several labels in a constant attempt to lure the general smoking public to their brand. Poor sales resulted from either poor quality tobacco or unappealing labels. The trial and error process to find a popular label led to thousands of different designs and topics. Successful labels were used for decades. Sometimes manufacturers sold popular brands with a legal title similar to that of a real estate document; the more popular the label, the higher the price.

The domestic clear Havana industry used popular Spanish themes or topics in cigar label advertisements. Indeed, smokers came to associate any subject even vaguely Spanish with famous clear Havana cigars. Some companies took advantage of this and used Spanish-sounding names even though their cigars were produced entirely from domestic tobacco. The dozens of cigar factories in Ybor City produced hundreds of different brands, each with its own label. Many of these reflected Tampa themes and scenes since the city was widely known as the biggest producer of clear Havana cigars.

With the advent of the depression of the 1930s, the artistic talents of both cigarmakers and lithographers suddenly became too expensive to compete profitably with cigarettes or
machine-made cigars. Tampa was still known as a cigar city, but its output was made mostly by machines, not by hand. Moreover, label titles, such as “Think,” “Call Again,” “Tampa Elite,” and “The City of Tampa,” were increasingly printed by a less expensive photolithographic process. In March, 1933, at the depth of the depression, Fortune magazine noted the demise of the hand-rolled cigar industry and its elaborate use of romantic and noble Spanish topics. “A maker no longer wants the loveliest bosom in Old Castle,” Fortune observed. “He wants a snappy emblem and a name no hick can forget. And it’s a different business.”

It was, as the article stated, “a different business.” Above all, it displaced hand craftsmen. Tampa cigarmakers either found employment in other Tampa businesses or moved to the North, where some were hired by cigar companies using machines, if employment was available. By the mid-1930s, Tampa could no longer claim the title as the clear Havana capital of the world. However, a record of the city’s achievement remains in the cigar label art which illustrates the significance of Spanish culture in Tampa, the State of Florida, and the entire cigar industry of the United States.
Cigar labels first began with an artist’s sketch of the label which was then used to determine the colors. This is an extremely rare item since it was often discarded. Once the colors were determined, the artist prepared separate lithographic stones which were etched for each color.

The final product of the artist’s rendering of the label for Tampa Fancy portrays two fighting cocks, representing a favorite pastime of Cubans. The brand was owned by Fernando Hermanos & Company which originated in New Orleans and moved to Tampa at the turn of the century.
When Vicente Martínez Ybor departed Spain for Cuba in 1832, the enterprising fourteen-year-old quickly became involved in the emerging cigar industry. By 1853, he had consolidated small workshop production of cigars into a large Havana factory. His early brand *El Príncipe de Gales*, remained his most popular brand of cigars throughout his manufacturing career which extended to Key West, New York City and Ybor City.

As a tribute to the namesake of Ybor City, the V. Martínez Ybor’s Sons Company produced a brand of cigars in honor of their father in 1902, six years after his death.
Ignacio Haya, a cigar manufacturer from New York City and close friend of Martínez Ybor, was co-founder of the cigar city. He won a close race with Ybor to produce the first cigar in Ybor City and won the prestigious title of Factory No. 1. His first factory was a wooden structure, later replaced by this brick building at the corner of Fourteenth Avenue and Seventeenth Street in Ybor City.
The Shakespeare brand of cigars, produced in the early 1870s, was purchased by the Sanchez & Haya Company and used as one of its leading brands in the very early 1900s. It was not uncommon for manufacturers to purchase popular brand names which were frequently bought and sold to the highest bidder.
The romantic scenery of a Cuban tobacco plantation was the subject of this label, illustrating to the consumer that the best Tampa cigars were made with tobacco from Cuba.

TACUSCO was the label of the Tampa Segar Company which was owned by members of the Wholesale Druggists’ Association of the United States. The organization, formed in 1912, hoped to enter the lucrative cigar industry and sell its cigars in drug stores throughout the nation. The label portrays an unknown individual in the center, with a scene of Tampa on the left and Cuba to the right.
The use of a Spanish theme to connote quality cigars was illustrated in this romantic setting of a cigar smoker and his lady. The label was produced by the B.C. & Ca. Company of Tampa. It was a label from the late teens or very early 1920s.

The name of a popular Cuban revolutionary was used in naming this Tampa cigar factory which was established in 1910 but which was in business for only a few years. It also produced the cigar label brands *Our Commander* and *Fastido*. 
A former superintendent of Martínez Ybor’s El Principe de Gales factory, A. Ramirez, formed his own cigar factory in the early 1900s. He used the name of the famous author Jules Verne as his leading brand of cigars. It was appropriate to honor the writer who had immortalized the town of Tampa as the launching site for a rocket to the moon in his 1865 book, *From the Earth to the Moon*.

Argüelloz Lopez & Brothers produced *El Tipo* at their Ybor City factory on the corner of Twenty-first Street and Fifteenth Avenue. According to a 1902 article in *Tobacco Leaf*, this label “depicts the form of a beautiful woman who is said to be a representative type of Spanish beauty. The embellishments are artistically drawn and delightfully colored, the name standing out in gold letters above the whole.” The firm was founded in New York in 1888 and opened a factory in Tampa in 1895.
The Palma del Mundo Cigar Company which originated in the early 1920s used snob appeal to lure smokers by producing a brand of cigars which appealed to elitism. The Prince of Tampa portrayed an unknown aristocratic-looking individual with the “Mascot” as a symbol of the famous Tampa name associated with good smokes.
Another Palma del Mundo brand shows “the Prince of Tampa” holding the city’s banner, surrounded by scenes of Cuba.
The Palmo del Mundo Company produced a brand designed to appeal to elite smokers. The label featured the seal of the City of Tampa.
The brand *El Puerto de Tampa* used a stock label common to the industry. Stock labels allowed space for manufacturers to place their names while using the same background design. These were frequently employed by firms which did not wish to pay the high price for designing their own distinctive label.
Donna Tampa is an example of a popular stock label. Numerous Donna Tampa labels have been discovered with various factory names on them.

The Ybor City Cigar Company was one of the few manufacturers to use the name of Tampa’s immigrant community for a cigar brand. This is a more recent label produced in the post-1950 era. Its more simplistic design is typical of the photolithographic labels which were cheaper to produce and less detailed than the pre-1930 labels.
The term “clear Havanas” refers to cigars produced specifically from Cuban tobacco. Although the tobacco was grown in the western part of the island, the name “Havana” was associated with all Cuban cigars since it was in the city that the first Cuban cigar factories emerged. “Domestic clear Havanas” refers to those cigars equal to those made in Cuba, the location of their production (the United States) being the only difference.

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3 Oral interview with George Schlegel III of Stamford, Connecticut, June 28, 1980. Mr. Schlegel is a third generation printer whose family began their business in 1841. They were one of the most popular printers of Tampa’s cigar labels.