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Decoding Cigar Bands

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Table of Contents

Artist Statement	iii
Introduction	1
Artistic and Historic Influences	2
Artistic Influences	5
Symbolism	7
Use of Design	11
Conclusion	12
Bibliography	14
Appendix	15
List of Images	15
Images	16
Resume	26

Artist Statement

I have always admired the aesthetics found in cigar labels – the intricate details, gentle curves, and bright colors seem to have a special story to tell. However, most of the time this story goes untold as labels are given a quick glance, then thrown away with the ashes. As a cigar smoker myself, my artistic pursuit has been to bring to life the stories of my cigar labels. I aim to reach out to those who readily identify with the subject matter, and provide them with a new perspective from which to view the labels most now simply toss aside. For those who have never taken an interest in cigars, I hope to inspire an appreciation for the history and aesthetic beauty of cigar labels through my interpretive work.

Decoding Cigar Labels

Introduction

Ever since I graduated from college, I have had a strong desire to pursue a master's degree. When I started working, I began to miss the various studio classes I had taken in college that had served as an outlet for my creative energy and allowed me to grow as an artist. I first heard about the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (M.I.S.) program offered by Virginia Commonwealth University at an Arlington Art Teachers' meeting and it sounded like a perfect opportunity. Colleagues spoke highly of the program, the quality of the instructors and the flexibility of class schedules that allowed them to fit the program into their busy lives. After doing additional research on my own, I decided to give the program a try and I loved it.

The M.I.S. program has given me the opportunity to explore my passions and allowed me to combine two of my favorite activities, collecting cigars and making art, in a way I never dreamed possible. Through the guidance of many patient professors and supportive peers, I was able to draw out the artistic beauty I saw in cigar bands, and transform it in a way that was uniquely my own. The following chronicles that journey and my attempt to artistically decode the beauty and symbolism of cigar bands.

Artistic and Historic Influences

When I first started collecting cigar labels, I had no idea where it would lead me. Something about seeing the labels carelessly discarded in an ashtray did not sit well and the collector in me decided it would be better to save them instead. However, when I looked closely at the labels I started to see something more than just insignificant pieces of paper. It dawned upon me that the labels themselves were small works of art with their own stories, and that I could share these stories with others through my artwork.

My work is inspired primarily by cigar bands. There is a difference between cigar labels and cigar bands. Technically, labels are the small square artwork on the inside lid of a cigar box, while cigar bands are the individual pieces of paper wrapped around each cigar that denote the brand name of the cigar.

Cigar label art has a rich history. The labels first became mainstream shortly after the American Civil War when the government was looking for ways to raise revenue to cover the costs it had incurred during the war. Politicians quickly noticed a huge untaxed industry as a potential source of much needed revenue. As a result of this new tax, cigar manufacturers were required to place a stamp on their products and soon began to use this stamp as a way to distinguish and brand their products. The stamps were made of thin strips of paper attached to the cigars and cigar boxes.

This great boom in branding and marketing was heightened by the invention of stone lithography. This process, created in 1798 by Aloys Senfelder, was the main medium for early cigar label art. This unique state-of-the-art printing process allowed for the highest level of detail, and also allowed for relatively easy mass production while maintaining the artistic integrity of the design. Another distinguishing point of stone lithography was the flat printing surface. Usually printing blocks had a relief that allowed the ink to rest on a raised surface. However, with lithography there was no such relief, and printing was achieved on a flat surface by using grease to create a barrier. This method allowed for greater detail to show through in the finished product. Once the grease was applied to create the desired design, ink was then placed onto the negative space. When the paper was pressed, the ink was absorbed by the paper and the design was transferred to the cigar label. The paper was then cut into squares and placed inside the lid of the cigar box.

Chromolithography (color printing) was soon developed and was used by cigar manufacturers to enhance branding and marketing efforts. Some prints produced by these manufacturers used as many as forty separate stones to achieve various color combinations. During and after the printing process, artists incorporated techniques such as embossing, imitation brush strokes, lacquering, hand stippling, and hand applied 24 karat gold leaf to enhance the print. A finished cigar label design could take thirty days to create and involve a dozen highly skilled specialists, resulting in a production cost of over \$6000 in the early

1900's.

Once the printing process was complete, the stones were ground down and reused. This has made the labels still in existence one-of-a-kind limited editions. The labels produced by stone lithography range in size from 4"x4" to 8"x8", and depending on the quality and rarity, could cost over \$1000 each in today's market. The subjects of these intricate works of art have varied over the years and are like visual history books chronicling important events, popular cultural icons, and political figures. Regardless of the subject matter one thing is certain, as Wayne Dunn, contemporary cigar label enthusiast said, "the magnificent depth and luminescence of these Victorian ephemera will not pass our way again. The quality of stone lithography has never been duplicated and never will be" (Dunn, 9).

Understanding the rich history of cigar label art has allowed me to better appreciate the work, details, and beauty that exist in each label. When I first began on this path, my interest in labels was similar to a popular hobby from the early 1900s, collecting the cigar bands that are often thrown to the ground or left in the ashtray. However, as my collection grew, I became more aware of the artistic qualities present in the bands such as detailed scrolling, the use of gold leaf, attention to symmetry, and the strategic use of symbolism. As I studied the bands in more detail, I began thinking of ways in which I could incorporate their artistic qualities into my work.

One major goal of my M.I.S. work was to create a composition using actual cigar bands. Once my collection of bands rose to over 500, I separated all the colors and had a goal to meticulously glue down the bands in fields of color, placing them so close that they overlapped, with one color field meshing in to another. At a distance, a viewer sees an abstract color field but is then drawn in to investigate the details that make up this art work. *Color Field of Labels I and II* (Appendix, 1 and 2) two collages with varying color schemes, made up of bands from my collection. These works were some of the most satisfying to complete because I felt I was able to craft pieces of art from objects that are usually discarded.

Artistic Influences

There have been many artistic inspirations that have affected my work. One of the most important is contained in The Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. I came across the gallery's Peacock Room when I was first toying with the idea of using cigar labels as subjects for my art work. It was in this room that I was taken aback by the beauty and royal grandeur of the gold leaf present in James A.M. Whistler's *Harmony in Blue and Gold* (1876-1877). After viewing this work I realized that gold leafing could be applied in very detailed compositions. In this particular work, it was successfully used and I had also seen it used in the commercial labeling of cigars. Because of this, gold leaf has become an element that I incorporated into my work.

Another well-known work that provided great inspiration was *Figure 5 in Gold* (1928) by Charles Demuth. His use of letters and numbers, has inspired my own style. For example in *Cinco Vegas* (Appendix, 3) I use numbers and letters as the focal point of the piece. In his work, Demuth often incorporated codes that he used to discreetly express his homosexuality. Only those who were aware of the multiple meanings of his symbols would be able to decode his hidden messages. The numbers, letters, and other symbols I utilize all have multiple meanings. Those who are familiar with cigars and cigar art will be able to see the meaning in my work, such as the letter “A” representing the size of this cigar. However, those who are not familiar with these elements may only see a text-laden compositional design. Demuth’s work led me to create greater symbolic depth in my own work. I was inspired to overlap numbers, letters, and designs to develop a more complex and interesting composition. In addition to Demuth’s influence I incorporated gold leaf as inspired by Whistler.

After studying Demuth’s painting, I endeavored to understand the use of words and symbols and the stylized abstraction of everyday objects in compositions. I looked to Gerald Murphy’s oil painting *Razor* (1924), and an oil painting by Stuart Davis, entitled *Odol* (1924). These two works show the graphic abstraction of common objects, such as a razor, a pen, and a bottle. This type of stylization was often seen in advertising but here the artists do more by imparting a sense of personality on behalf of ordinary objects. Murphy and Davis’ works showed me that there is great beauty and power in artistic

stylization of everyday objects. I strived to capture a similar personality by amplifying aspects of the cigar bands to draw attention to the story each cigar band was telling.

Symbolism

When I first started to consider cigar bands as my subject matter, I was unsure what symbolism I would uncover. As I began to research and look deeper into cigar art, I noticed that several symbols like the tobacco leaf, particular colors, women, crowns, and text appeared consistently and were utilized by many different cigar manufacturers. I decided to use these elements freely to create my own symbolic visual culture based on disposable cigar bands.

The first, possibly the most widely used symbol, was the tobacco leaf. It was extremely significant and dates back to indigenous Native Americans, who were the first culture to use this plant. The tobacco leaf has myriad associations that range from the cause of illness to the look of sophistication to a symbol of rebellion (Airey and O'Connell, 173). I first used this symbol in *Perdomo Sun* (Appendix, 4). The sun is traditionally viewed in many cultures as a form of power, life, radiance, and beauty. In this work, the leaves are arranged in a circular form and are composed of gold leaf, creating a sun-like image. I intended for the tobacco leaf and the sun to merge together and represent strength.

While the tobacco leaf is an important symbol in my artwork, color is perhaps one of the strongest sources of symbolism in my paintings. In *Four*

Bands (Appendix, 5) each of the four main colors (red, brown, yellow, and blue) present has a purpose and a meaning. Red is one of the most prevalent colors found in cigar bands and I utilize it heavily in my work. Red is used differently in each of the bands depicted in the work. In the Oliva band, I used red to denote strength, while in the Don Pepin band, the color is used in the stylized flags to represent the passion for cigars shared by both Americans and Cubans. The Gloria Cubana band shows a woman with a crown in a red cape symbolizing life and regality, and in the CAO band I use red as an accent to represent vitality and revolution. I chose to represent CAO in this way because it is a new brand that is youthful in its presentation and consumer following. Each subject was chosen for this work to display how differently a single color could be utilized.

Another color of importance used in *Four Bands* is brown. Traditionally, brown symbolizes earth and fall. In cigar art, brown is used to remind the audience that cigars are grown from the earth, rolled by hand, and closely tied to nature. Formally, I use brown to contrast the rich primary colors and gold accents. In my work, I occasionally use brown in conjunction with the tobacco leaf to represent traditional roots and cigar makers that capture a strong earthy flavor in their blends of tobacco.

Yellow is a unique color, not to be confused with the gold leaf. Yellow is used as a visual focal point, while the gold leaf is used as an accent to create a more regal appearance. In my work, yellow represents the power of the sun and wisdom. In *Four Bands*, it surrounds the woman in the Gloria Cubana band,

rising up behind her like a radiant sun. In *G-X Cohiba* (Appendix, 6), I use the color as a focal point, drawing the eye towards the Roman numeral “X” that stands out against a fiery, sun-like image. This image is meant to show the relationship between the sun and the tobacco leaf, in particular, the sun giving life to the tobacco plant.

Blue is another color used but sparingly in cigar bands. I used the color to represent calm, reflection, and intellect. I also found that blue provided a much needed contrast to the warm, high-saturated colors.

Women are another symbol utilized in my work. Unlike the objectification of women present in modern advertising, cigar band art depicts women in a more romantic manner showing voluptuous curves, fair skin, and powerful stances. Most are shown with white clothing with an accent of red or purple, as well as gold wreaths and accessories. In *Four Bands*, I used the figure of a woman to represent royalty, wealth, and power by placing her in the center of the label and surrounding her image in yellow.

While the tobacco leaf, symbolic color, and women are all important symbols in cigar bands and logos, the most ubiquitous symbol is the crown. I created two paintings that focus on this: *Four Crowns in Gold and Red* and *Four Crowns in Silver and Blue* (Appendix, 7 and 8). When crafting these works, I drew upon four different brands for each painting for a total of eight brands with eight different styles of crowns. Instead of the traditional meanings of sovereignty and honor, I used the crown to symbolize masculinity, strength, skill,

and rarity. I relayed these ideas through my choices of accent colors as well as through the styles of crowns depicted in each work. For example, I purposely chose to use dark backgrounds and colors to emphasize masculinity. The silver, blue, and contemporary accents in *Four Crowns in Silver and Blue* were used to contrast the traditional crowns in *Four Crowns in Red and Gold*. The gold accents in *Four Crowns in Red and Gold* demonstrate the opulence and rarity of the crowns. In addition, the crowns with rounder more traditional gold designs depicted in this work closely tie into the idea of wealth and privilege.

The final form of symbolism in my work is the use of letters and numbers. In *Cinco Vegas* (Appendix, 3) numbers are used literally and symbolically. First, numbers are used in a literal sense to distinguish a particular style, type, or size of cigar. In Native American symbolism, the number five was often used to denote the sanctity of life and a unifying principle. In Native American culture that number symbolized the coming together of various opposing elements such as the gap between earth and sky, past and future, and the material and spiritual worlds (Airey and O'Connell, 105). In *Cinco Vegas*, I use the number five literally in reference to the brand "Five Vegas." I also used it to symbolically represent the merging of the traditional cigar market (associated with aristocracy, wealth, and age) with the modern cigar market (geared toward a younger audience by incorporating infused tobacco and contemporary cigar band designs).

Roman numerals also have distinct symbolic meanings. In *G-X Cohiba* (Appendix, 6), I use the Roman numeral "X" which represents divine power and

intellect (Airey and O'Connell 105). This Roman numeral works in conjunction with the brand name Fuente Fuente, a father-son team that has all but dominated the cigar market and is represented here by the meaning of the Roman numeral "X". The "G" in *G-X Cohiba* was an allusion to "Graycliff," a brand of cigars. Accompanying, these symbols are a line of stars and branches of leaves. These images are rounded out by a two-toned gold scheme using gold paint and gold leaf to generate a subtle contrast.

Use of Design

Blue Fusion (Appendix, 9) possesses a design simplicity that closely follows the cigar band it imitates. In this piece, I used a limited palette of colors. The blue is meant to set a calm background for precise lettering, and linear designs. The simplistic composition of *Blue Fusion* creates a more prominent focal point and is visually more vibrant because of concentration on a few select colors. It is this simplicity that has served as the foundation of my work, and has remained constant as my work has become more abstract.

The structured way in which *Blue Fusion* was composed eventually opened up into a new style of composition. This new approach is demonstrated in *Latin American Medley* (Appendix, 10). This work had a more open format, and was tied together by floating orbs, dots, and a two-toned abstracted background. This work opened up my design parameters and allowed me to break free from reproducing the traditional cigar band designs. In this work, the composition incorporates a rhythmic flow between one element to another. I

found that the horizontal composition allowed me to more effectively saturate the painting with imagery and symbols from multiple cigar bands.

In my paintings I have struggled to let go of the representational nature of the cigar band. However, through my artistic evolution I discovered that the essence of the image was the abstract designs that were hidden in the traditional cigar band layout. By focusing on abstract design and symbolic imagery instead of the traditional cigar band layout, I believe I was able to increase the interest of my work to non-smokers. Now, all viewers can see cigar art presented in a more abstract manner that allows them to appreciate the history and beauty of cigar bands. Those viewers who are cigar smokers can still readily identify the origin of these images. It was my desire to bring these two parties together and demonstrate that a simple cigar band can be more than just a label. It can be an aesthetic image imbued with symbolism.

Conclusion

As a full-time teacher, I would not have been able to complete the body of work to date without the M.I.S. program. This program has allowed me to grow and develop more than I ever thought possible. With each painting that I complete, I find new ideas for future ones, and as a result of the M.I.S. program, it has become my personal goal to display my work more prominently. Due to the expertise of the instructors, and invaluable mentoring from classmates, I was able to continue to ask the right questions about my work. I was enlightened to the realities of a professional working artist and how issues may be resolved.

Most of all, this program has improved and brought to life talents I never knew I possessed.

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Appendix

List of Images

- Figure 1. *Color Field of Labels I*, Paper Collage, 32"x24", 2008.
- Figure 2. *Color Field of Labels II*, Paper Collage, 32"x24", 2008.
- Figure 3. *Cinco Vegas*, Oil on Canvas, 36"x18", 2007.
- Figure 4. *Perdomo Sun*, Acrylic on Canvas, 16"x26", 2009.
- Figure 5. *Four Bands*, Acrylic on Canvas, 24"x30", 2008.
- Figure 6. *G-X Cohiba*, Acrylic on Canvas, 18"x36", 2009.
- Figure 7. *Four Crowns in Gold and Red*, Acrylic on Canvas Board, 24"x18", 2009.
- Figure 8. *Four Crowns in Silver and Blue*, Acrylic on Canvas Board, 24"x18", 2009.
- Figure 9. *Blue Fusion*, Oil on Canvas, 36"x18, 2007.
- Figure 10. *Latin American Medley*, Acrylic on Canvas, 18"x36", 2009.



Figure 1. *Color Field of Labels I*, Paper Collage, 32"x24", 2008.



Figure 2. *Color Field of Labels II*, Paper Collage, 32"x24", 2008.



Figure 3. *Cinco Vegas*, Oil on Canvas, 36"x18", 2007.



Figure 4. Perdomo Sun, Acrylic on Canvas, 16"x26", 2009.



Figure 5. *Four Bands*, Acrylic on Canvas, 24"x30", 2008.



Figure 6. G-X Cohiba, Acrylic on Canvas, 18"x36", 2009



Figure 7. *Four Crowns in Gold and Red*, Acrylic on Canvas Board, 24"x18", 2009.



Figure 8. *Four Crowns in Silver and Blue*, Acrylic on Canvas Board, 24"x18", 2009.

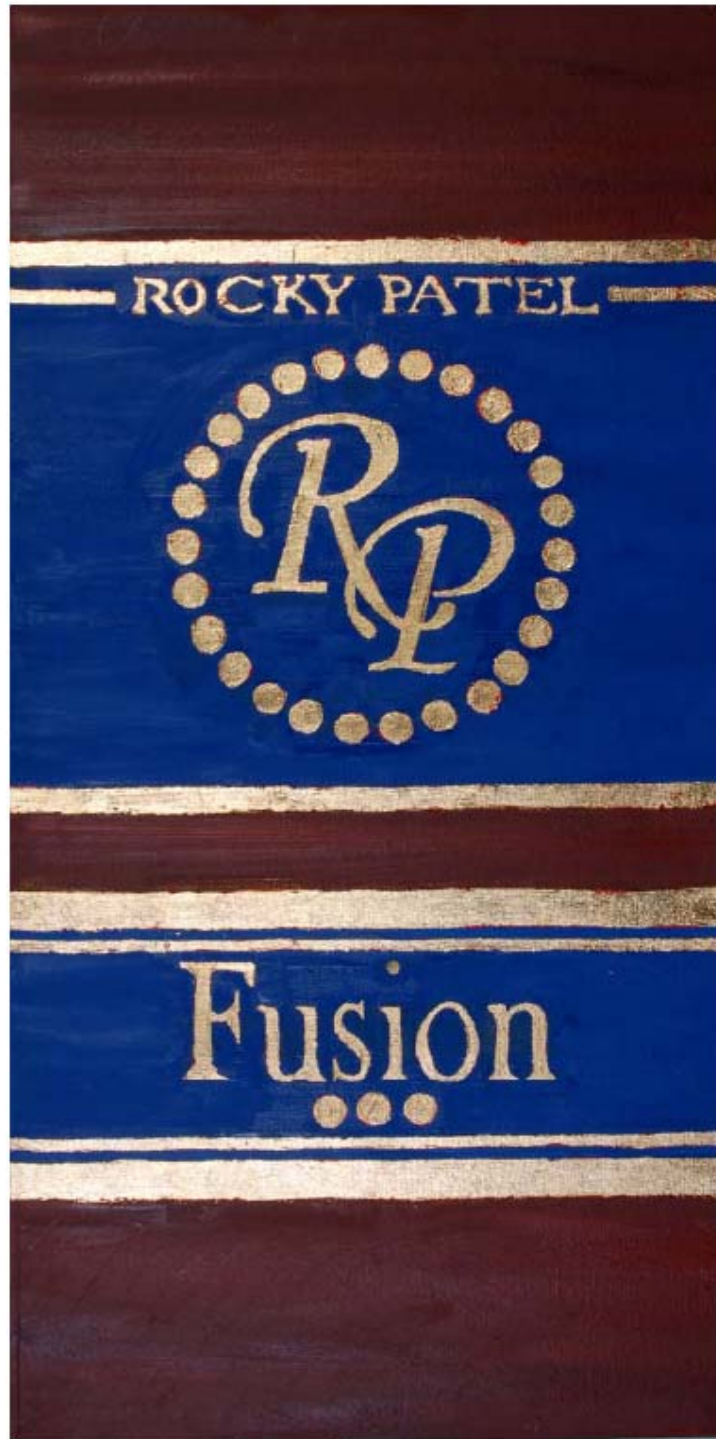


Figure 9. *Blue Fusion*, Oil on Canvas, 36"x18, 2007.



Figure 10. Latin American Medley, Acrylic on Canvas, 18"x36", 2009.

Resume
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EDUCATION:

- 2009 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Art
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