

# The Art of the Cigar Label



An exhibition by the Ybor City Museum Society  
with assistance from the University of South Florida  
Libraries' Special Collections

Curated by: Emanuel Leto

*“True, our pictures are many of them for the soap manufacturer, the insurance companies, and the patent medicine man; but we try in our way to be educators of the people, and to give them good drawings and harmonious coloring. These business operators of ours who use pictures for advertising purposes know that the public have become fastidious; hence, they will only accept good designs. It is not so very long ago that advertising pictures invariably had hard, glaring backgrounds and crude, contrasting colors...but that type of work would find no sale now except in the back woods.” –*

Anonymous lithographer, New York, 1894<sup>1</sup>

At first glance, the images on cigar labels seem simple; they are beautifully embossed and the illustration- whether an attractive woman or a famous writer- jumps out at the viewer. However, cigar labels of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are also rich in allegory and symbolism, subtly illustrating themes like commerce, trade, or U.S. foreign relations. Label themes “reflect the tobacco industry’s important influence on the economic, social, and political climate of Cuba and Florida cities like Key West and Tampa,”<sup>2</sup> becoming “windows to the past,” depicting contemporary events, political leaders, celebrities, and social life. A look at cigar labels also reveals quite a bit about America in the Gilded Age, from roughly 1870 to 1920. Cigar labels are among the earliest forms of popular advertising, illustrating the country’s shift from industrial economy to consumer economy, from life on the farm to life in the city.

### **Crossroads: Transportation, printing, revolution, and the consumer economy**

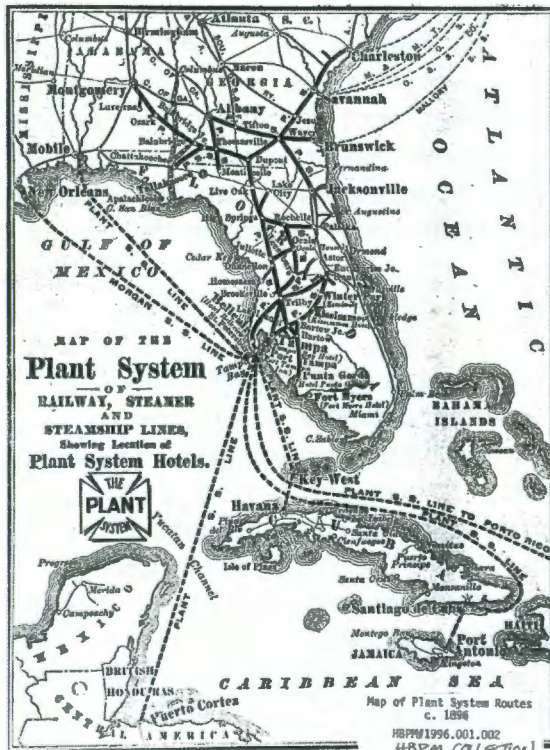
Initially, the selling of hand-rolled cigars was a cottage industry. Prior to the Civil War, cigars were only a small part of overall tobacco consumption, easily outpaced by snuff and hand-rolled cigarettes. Farmers sold their product in small bundles, tied together with a cloth ribbon, to local traders and dry goods stores in and around their local community. There were no standardized bundle sizes, no need to label the cigars individually, and no need for competitive advertising. After the Civil War, several developments aided the rise of the cigar industry and the colorful labels that helped sell them.

In 1865 Congress passed the Tax Revenue Act, requiring standardized packaging and tax identification numbers for all tobacco products. All cigars were now boxed and stamped with a factory number to identify the manufacturer, a “tax district number” identifying the city of origin, and the quantity contained in the box.<sup>3</sup> Standardized packaging and labeling actually aided sales and worked well in the emerging consumer economy.

In 1869 workers completed the transcontinental railroad. By 1889, 161,272 miles of rail lines connected the continent,<sup>4</sup> revolutionizing the flow of people and goods throughout the country. Mileage in the South tripled as Henry Plant completed his rail line in 1884.

Goods could now be shipped thousands of miles away from the factories that produced them to be displayed in shop windows in dozens of American cities. And, as the Twentieth century approached, the population of American cities was growing.





Moving from small farming communities to big cities meant that many of the goods produced on the farm, items such as soap and clothing, were now sold and purchased in city stores. This also included luxury items like whiskey, beer, and tobacco, now taxed and regulated by the government.

**Left: Henry Plant's rail line was completed in 1885, connecting Tampa with cities to the North. The Transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869 and by 1900, 200,000 miles of track were laid throughout the US allowing goods to be shipped faster and farther than ever before. Courtesy: Henry B. Plant Archives**

In addition to the completion of the Transcontinental railroad and the imposition of new regulations on tobacco, other events coincided that gave birth to the modern cigar industry. In 1868,

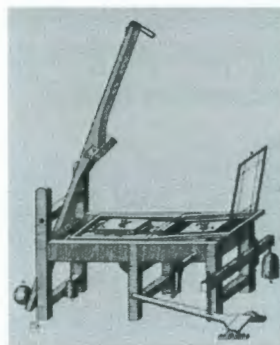
Cubans, fighting for sovereignty, began a revolution against Spain. From 1868 to 1878, revolutionaries waged war against their colonial oppressor. Escaping forced conscription and the eminent destruction of a coming war, Cuban workers and cigar manufacturers escaped the island, many relocating to Key West in 1868. The small island off Florida's southern tip was quickly transformed, becoming a major cigar-manufacturing center and Florida's busiest port. Eventually, cigar manufacturers like Ignacio Haya and Vicente Ybor consolidated their efforts in Tampa, taking advantage of Henry Plant's newly completed rail line connecting Tampa to northern cities and markets. Founded in 1886, the company town eventually became known as Ybor City.

Cubans and Spaniards were not the only people on the move. Germans, in the wake of unification under Otto Von Bismarck, were also fleeing their homeland. Among the many German immigrants were lithographic printers and artists escaping Bismarck's Socialist dissolution of workers' unions.<sup>5</sup> Most settled in the Northeast United States, establishing printing houses in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York. In 1860, there were 60 lithographic firms in the United States employing 80 people. By 1890, there were 700 lithographic printing houses, employing 8,000 people.<sup>6</sup>

### The Evolution of the Stone Lithography

Lithography or "chemical printing" revolutionized the printing industry. With lithography, it was possible to print hundreds of duplicate copies from a single image drawn directly onto a stone without reducing the quality of the image.

Alois Senefelder, a German printer, invented stone lithography in 1796. It is a Planographic process, meaning that images are not carved or cut into the printing stones. Rather, lithography is based on “the natural antipathy between water and grease.”



**Alois Senefelder, inventor of stone lithography**      **Early lithographic hand press**  
Courtesy University of Wisconsin-Madison

There is both an artistic and a technical aspect to lithographic printmaking. Traditionally, Bavarian limestone is cut into large slabs, three to four inches thick. To prepare the stone for printing, it is first sprinkled with an abrasive and rubbed together with another stone in a process called **graining** until the surface of the stone develops a silt-like or velvety texture. The stone is now ready for the artist.

Using a grease pen or crayon composed of wax, tallow, shellac, soap, and lampblack; the artist draws an image directly on the stone. Like all paper printing processes, the artist must draw a reverse image. Once the artwork is complete, the stone is doused with a slightly acidic solution of gum arabic, water and nitric acid, called an **etch**. Next, the stone is rinsed with water; the acid solution sticks to the grease drawing but is washed away from the rest of the stone leaving only the image to be printed.

With the image set into the stone, a roller of black ink is applied to the entire surface. The artwork, created with a grease crayon and set into the stone by the acid solution, retains the black ink while the rest of the dampened stone repels it. The stone is now ready for printing<sup>7</sup>.

Chromolithography follows a similar process except instead of one stone, several different stones comprise a single print. With chromolithography, each section of the image must be dissected by color. The different colors make up the picture itself and complex prints could require as many as twenty different stones. A printer must know how each color will work together, in what order they should be applied, and, finally, the print must remain in perfect registration so that colors do not bleed onto one another.

“Roughly, there are four [questions]: 1, how to divide the image into a particular number of color printings, 2, which inks to use, 3, how to register exact impressions with each successive color and 4, how to decide the order of printing.”<sup>8</sup>



An English immigrant, William Sharp, printed the first American chromolithograph in Boston in 1840. From Boston, chromolithography houses opened in Philadelphia, New York, Buffalo, and Cincinnati. New York became what many consider the center of chromolithography in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. New York was the hub for shipping lithographic supplies like limestone, ink, and presses from Germany and, by 1890, the New York City directory listed 130 lithographic printing houses.

Many of those lithographers were educated or influenced by Germany's Dusseldorf Academy, founded in 1826. The school's influence, known for its attention to line and precise detail, is evident in the meticulous lithographs of streetscapes and nature landscapes popular in the 1880's and 1890's. Today the Academy is little more than a footnote of art history. However, "the style of Dusseldorf art lent itself to the technique of chromolithography: all the artists worked in the Dusseldorf manner, from line to color." The political upheavals of 1848, the unification of Germany in 1870, and the flow of supplies from Germany through New York City ports, furthered the influence of German immigrants in the printing industry.<sup>9</sup>

Lithography and chromolithography became one of the most popular art forms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Companies like Currier and Ives and Louis Prang are synonymous with the industry, chronicling the people and cities of 19th century America. Called the "Democratic Art," lithography made it possible for middle class Americans to buy lithographed reproductions of famous works of art. "Fine Art was reproduced, packaged, and offered to the masses...it was the democratic art of the Post- Civil War."<sup>10</sup>

Chromolithography's ability to inject vibrant color into everyday scenes and images made it ideal for advertising. P.T. Barnum used colorful posters to dramatize his traveling circus and the era saw a boom in poster advertising. Color labels were affixed to everything from peach crates to cigar boxes. According to one historian, "cigar advertising made up 80 percent of all lithographic printing in the U.S." People had gone, in the words of one lithographer, "picture crazy." Without a doubt, chromolithography became "the principle color medium for advertising" in America, coinciding perfectly with the development of mass-produced consumer goods.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Need for Advertising**

The railroad connected America like never before. People and goods traveled quicker and with more frequency to seemingly distant places within the American landscape. More people were living in cities with more products and more choices than were available in rural communities. Productivity was on the rise as well. Goods were made cheaply and more efficiently, pre-packaged, and shipped to new, far-away markets. These rapid and complex changes in the American marketplace required manufacturers develop a new strategy to entice consumers into buying their products. Advertising was the answer.

Manufacturers used packaging as a way to differentiate their product within a crowded marketplace and consumers began to rely on brand names to differentiate between “essentially similar products.” Before advertising, “tobacco was tobacco and soap was soap.” Using copyrights, patents, and brand names, manufacturers could make their product seem unique or different from their competitor’s and advertising reinforced a product’s perceived special qualities.<sup>12</sup>



**Outer labels were pasted onto boxes at the factory. YCMS Collection**

Department stores and chain stores met the demand of growing urban populations. For example, Woolworth operated about 600 outlets by 1913.<sup>13</sup> Window-shopping soon became a popular pastime in the newly emerging consumer economy and window displays were a primary form of advertising, second only to print ads.<sup>14</sup> Instead of being stacked on shelves behind the counter, cigars boxes were now displayed with their lids open. Capturing a customer’s attention became as important as the quality of the cigar itself.



**By the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, cigar boxes were displayed -as they are today with their lid open. Labels became a primary means of attracting customers Robertson and Fresh Photographic Collection Courtesy YCMS Collection**



## Label Themes

Label themes vary widely. Generally speaking, any image that might appeal to men was printed on labels to help promote cigars. Women, sports, trains, fast cars, and military imagery were all used to capture a man's imagination. Dozens of themes with hundreds of variations are found on cigar labels from Tampa's estimated 300 cigar factories. From the construction of Tampa's first cigar factory in 1886 to the industry's decline in the 1930's, no one is certain exactly how many factories were in operation. However, over this fifty year span, thousands of different labels were printed for hundreds of factories in Ybor City, Tampa, and West Tampa depicting everything from pretty girls to Abraham Lincoln.

## Sex Appeal

For obvious reasons, sex appeal is one of the most popular themes found on cigar labels. Perhaps nothing grabs a man's attention like a scantily clad woman and cigar labels are full of them. To entice their mostly male customers manufacturers used sexy celebrities of the day like Julia Marlowe and Fanny Davenport, both popular stage actresses. *Tampa Beauties*, *Tobacco Girl*, and *Miss Tampa* all feature attractive young ladies and hundreds of other labels feature women as goddesses, angels, cowgirls, princesses, temptresses, or housewives. Women of cigar labels range from innocent or demure to sultry or pornographic. Half-dressed women were common and a few early labels feature completely nude women.

The *La Eva* label, produced for A. Amo and Company, is a good example of how labels employed sex appeal to sell cigars. The bare-chested "Eva" holds a wooden box, which she has opened slightly, releasing a trail of ghostly demons and devils. For its time, circa 1900, the label is fairly racy, even erotic and was sure to stand out in a market crowded with competitors.



The sultry "Eva" releases a Pandora's Box of evil spirits. The *La Eva* brand was registered by A. Amo & Co. and designed by American Lithographic Company, the largest lithography house in New York City. Courtesy USF Special Collections.

Often, attractive women are only part of a label's message. Many labels featuring women, while eye-catching, are filled with symbolic imagery. In these allegorical labels, mechanical gears, bales of tobacco, maps, and ships are often pictured in the background or margins and feature women dressed in flowing Roman togas. The use of symbols and symbolic imagery to convey deeper meaning is common in works of art. Traditional symbols such as musical instruments, fruit, trees, and geometric shapes like triangles and circles have been used in Western art since biblical times.<sup>15</sup> Cigar labels are no exception.



The *La Gran Via* label, printed for A. Amo and Company, is filled with several dual-layered images. A woman standing in front of the ocean holds two laurels. She is surrounded by eight symbolic images: a train, a ship, a globe, wheat, tobacco, a camera, a harp, and an artist's pallet. Why did the artist choose these items? What do wheat and a harp have to do with cigars or each other? The answer is that the images are symbolic; they represent larger themes and ideas.

"The metaphors of symbol, image, and icon work by analogy and allusion; they refer to something beyond themselves to something else; they invite comparison between two things which appear to be dissimilar but which, [advertisers] suggest, have a shared meaning. Metaphor is at the very heart of...modern advertising."<sup>16</sup>



The *La Gran Via* is filled with symbolic imagery. The woman, an allegory for the Republic in a dramatic flowing gown, holds victory laurels while surrounded by several classic symbols: a train, wheat, a globe, a harp, an artist's pallet and bales of tobacco. The red hat or "Liberty Cap" is commonly associated with revolutionary movements and has appeared in images of the American and French revolutions. The triangle centered behind her head may be a Masonic reference. YCMS Collection

The woman is shown holding two laurels, commonly associated with victory. When featured in cigar labels, laurels probably suggest the quality of the cigar brand. Wheat, which is on the ground next to the woman, often denotes fertile earth or abundance, while harps are associated with mortality and protection. Trains, ships, and mechanical gears, all of which are depicted in the *La Gran Via* label, can represent trade, industry, or commerce, and the camera is also likely a symbol of technological advance or progress. The most intriguing symbols are the woman's red hat, a symbol of the Revolution, and the triangle centered just behind her head, probably a symbol of the Masonic Order. Symbols like these and others such as anchors, cherubs, children, crowns, angels, wreaths, coins, crosses, and stars, are found in hundreds of cigar labels. The greater meaning associated with these symbols, however, is often overlooked.<sup>17</sup>

## Romantic Imagery

Sex appeal was one way cigar manufacturers could grab the attention of their mostly male clientele but it wasn't the only way. Many labels offer romanticized images of Native Americans, nature, mythology, or nobility. Collectively, these "Romantic" labels depict a fictionalized version of a time, place or person. Pirates, like the one featured on the Captain Alvarez label or the knight in armor featured on the Ivanhoe brand, conjure the romantic or heroic ideals associated with swashbuckling pirates or "knights in shining armor." As one author describes it, "historical reality seldom had anything to do with pictures on cigar labels."<sup>18</sup>



Images of Native Americans were also popular. Romantic labels usually depict partially nude or otherwise attractive Native women or strong, war-like chiefs. The “Noble Savage” is a popular theme in early American advertising. The idea that Native Americans were (or are) noble and courageous yet less evolved or “savage” permeates much of popular American culture and found its way onto cigar labels of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. These images played into “ingrained stereotypes” of the “nobility of the Red Man.” Whether portrayed as objects of seduction or manly toughness, these romanticized stereotypes created a fantasy world designed to appeal to a male consumer.<sup>19</sup>



*Captain Alvarez*, registered in 1916 and the 1928 *Ivanhoe* label provide a touch of manly romanticism. “Romantic” labels featured everything from Roman warriors to heroic world leaders like Charles the Great. YCMS Collection

### Americana

Collectors often place trains, ships, maps, famous buildings, and family scenes into separate sub-categories. However, the use of such images constitutes a more general theme found in cigar label art: the celebration of American culture, or Americana.



Jose Alvarez & Company in Tampa registered the *DO U NO* label in 1913. This extremely rare label featuring two young boys, one working class, the other a white collar aristocrat, offers a playful glimpse of American city life or at least how it might have been perceived in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Courtesy U.S.F. Special Collections

Trains, while usually grouped into a category by themselves, more likely were used to illustrate the success of the intercontinental railroad, recently completed in 1869. The railroad system was revolutionizing America; new tracks and connections were made every year. Between 1869 and 1900, over 200,000 miles of track were laid.<sup>20</sup> It is no wonder that cigar labels celebrated this achievement. Images of sports cars, trains and ships appealed to consumers because they celebrated American ingenuity, American industry, and American culture.



*Tampa Life* features the Tampa Bay Hotel, one of the city's most recognizable landmarks. It was originally registered by the Preston Cigar Company. YCMS Collection

## Celebrity

Cigar labels may be the earliest known use of celebrity endorsement to sell a product, a tactic common throughout modern advertising. Indeed, “a list of all the people whose faces have adorned cigar labels would run into the thousands.”<sup>21</sup> Images of writers, actors, vaudevillian performers, politicians, generals, philosophers, judges, explorers, kings, queens, and literary characters have all been used to sell cigars. Collectors may also choose to subdivide this category into writers, philosophers, or generals. Indeed, there are so many—from Karl Marx to Charles the Great—that the possibilities are nearly endless. Many celebrity labels such as Mark Twain or Samuel Gompers could even fit into the “Americana” category, synonymous as they are with American culture. Both Twain and Gompers were recognizable “celebrities” but they also represent something uniquely American.

**Even William Shakespeare, “The Bard of Avon” was used to market cigars in this Sanchez and Haya Label. Aaron Copeland, Mozart, Mark Twain, and Cervantes all had a label named in their honor. Courtesy U.S.F. Special Collections**





## Patriotism

By 1895, the United States was readying itself for war in Cuba. The Cuban Revolution, led by Jose Marti and others, was sparked in 1895. In fact, the message to begin the insurrection was sent from Tampa, the order secretly rolled inside of a cigar. Cigar manufacturers quickly capitalized on the nationalism and patriotism surrounding the Spanish American War (1898-1902), using patriotic images on their labels to sell cigars.

Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders, Cuban revolutionary leaders, and American and Cuban soldiers all appeared on cigar labels in the years just before and after the war. *The American Heroes* for E. Regensburg and Sons, and *Friend to Friend* for Corral, Wodiska and Company, used images of the Spanish American War to promote their brands and *Little Sammies*, featuring the Statue of Liberty flanked by two twin Uncle Sams, captured the patriotic spirit of war.



Two Proud Uncle Sams guard Lady Liberty in this patriotic *Little Sammies* label registered for the Tampa Cuba Cigar Company. Patriotic images were common, especially during the brief Spanish-American War. Courtesy U.S.F. Special Collections

The *Pinar Del Rio* label is another example of a patriotic theme, though more subtly illustrated than *Little Sammies*, employing previously mentioned allegories and symbols. The label features a statuesque Lady Liberty holding a red, white, and blue coat of arms. She extends a laurel, apparently crowning a young Cuban boy dressed in peasant's tattered overalls. The boy rests his hand on a mechanical gear while seated on a bale of tobacco. An inscription behind them reads, "Pinar Del Rio," the tobacco-producing region of Cuba. Through the use of these symbolic images, this label says quite a bit about the relationship between the United States and Cuba at the turn of the century.

*Treaty Bond*, a label trademarked for the Antonio Cigar Company, demonstrates patriotism of a different kind. The *Treaty Bond* label features portraits of Thomas Jefferson and Napoleon Bonaparte on either side of a scroll on which a map of the Louisiana Purchase, dated April 30, 1803, is illustrated. Although this label could fit into several other categories such as “Americana” or “celebrity” the bigger message is American pride and patriotism.

**The *Treaty Bond* label features Napoleon, Jefferson, and a map of the Louisiana Purchase. YCMS Collection**



### **Gilded**

“Given the free-enterprise climate of the day cigar labels could say or picture most anything.”<sup>22</sup> Many cigar manufacturers opted for gilded textual labels that issued claims and guarantees. As the techniques of gilding and embossing gained prominence, cigar makers adorned their labels with gold coins or medals and awards conferred by expert judges. Printers would brush labels with bronze leaf or, in very rare cases with actual gold leaf, giving the embossed image of a coin or medal a bright finish. Lithographers referred to the process as gilding.



**This 1909 *Tampa Elite* label for Carlos Toro Cigar Company features the official City of Tampa seal surrounded with ornate gilding and embossed crests and shields. Courtesy U.S.F. Special Collections**



Textual labels could be quite simple, stating the manufacturer and price of the cigar or, they could make outlandish claims about the health benefits of smoking their product. Many embossed and gilded labels are strikingly ornate and intricate using coins, crests, official seals and the like. Smaller manufacturers and buckeye shops employing only a few cigar rollers used simpler textual labels rather than the elaborate and expensive labels used by larger firms.

## Collecting

Because they were mass-produced, cigar labels are ignored by much of the art community. "The general stereotype in much of the art world is that this is not a true art form. The consequence being that some of our finest artwork produced by stone lithography has, until recently, been completely overlooked."<sup>23</sup> This attitude is beginning to change. Several exhibits and books have catalogued and studied the use of cigar labels and advertising art in general. Among collectors, cigar labels are bought and sold at conventions and through online auction houses like E-Bay. Some very rare labels could garner several thousand dollars. Original lithographs of street scenes and historic battles like those produced by Currier and Ives or Louis Prang, are now quite collectible and are researched and studied by art historians. So are the vivid chromolithograph circus posters of P.T. Barnum and the vaudeville advertisements of Toulouse Lautrec. Cigar labels are only now beginning to see this kind of serious attention.

### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Art Amature, December, 1894, p.15, quoted in Marzio, Peter C. *The Democratic Art: Chromolithography 1840-1900, Pictures for a 19<sup>th</sup> century America*. Boston: David R. Godine, 1979; 189.

<sup>2</sup> *Etched in Stone: The Golden Age of Cuban Tobacco Art*. 1996. Video. Cinemambi, Inc.

<sup>3</sup> Hyman, Tony. *Handbook of American Cigar Boxes*. New York: Arnot Art Museum, 1979.

<sup>4</sup> Norris, James D. *Advertising and the transformation of American Society, 1865-1920*, Greenwood Press: New York, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Westfal, L. Glenn *Tampa Bay: Cradle of Cuban Liberty*, Cigar City Press, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Marzio, Peter C. *The Democratic Art*

There are many histories and instructional guides for Lithography and Chromolithography. Consulted studies include, Vicary, Richard. *Manual of Lithography*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976., Porzio, Domenico, ed. *Lithography: 200 Years of Art, History, and Technique*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1982., Loche, Rene. *Craft and Art: Lithography*. Paris, 1971., and Chilvers, Ian and Harold Osborne. "Oxford Dictionary of Art: New Edition." New York: Oxford, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Marzio, Peter C. "The Democratic Art"

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. By far, the best study of chromolithography, its history, technique and influence is Marzio's "The Democratic Art."

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> The University of Wisconsin at Madison hosts an excellent website detailing the rise of color lithography and mass-market advertising entitled, *The Emergence of Color in Lithographic Printing* and can be accessed at <http://www.sit.wisc.edu/~schawla/Circus%20Poster%20Web%20Site/Circus%20homepage.html> also see Westfal, L. Glenn "Tampa Bay: Cradle of Cuban Liberty."

<sup>12</sup> Sivulka, Julian. "Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising," Wadsworth Publishing Co.: Belmont, CA: 1998, Ch. 2-3

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> "Advertising and the Transformation of American Society, 1865-1920."

<sup>15</sup> Cooper, J.C. "An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols." London: Thames & Hudson, 1978.

<sup>16</sup> Leiss, William, Stephen Kline and Sut Jhally. "Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products and Images Of Well-Being, Second ed.,"

<sup>17</sup> "An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols."

<sup>18</sup> Hyman, Tony. "Handbook of American Cigar Boxes."

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> "Advertising and the transformation of American Society, 1865-1920."

<sup>21</sup> Hyman, Tony. "Handbook of American Cigar Boxes."

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> *Etched in Stone: The Golden Age of Cuban Tobacco Art*. 1996. Video. Cinemambi, Inc.

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