

THE ECHENBERG COLLECTION

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The Echenberg Collection of business ephemera is remarkable on many levels. A single collector, Mr. Eddy Echenberg, a retired Sherbrooke businessman, has gathered thousands of meticulously catalogued artifacts relating to the packaging, advertising or promotion of various industrial-retailing sectors over many years. Spanning from the 1840s to the 1950s, this is indeed a collection of rare three-dimensional objects, since most were meant to be “throw-away” things. What have generally survived are wrappers, flat box tops, labels (cigar, beer, cheese) and trade cards, because these were easier to collect and store.¹ To have preserved such perishable and rare artifacts, before they completely disappear, is a praiseworthy achievement. Most of the items selected for the exhibition are comprised of materials such as glass, metal or printed-paper and show an Eastern Townships provenance of either region, town or both. The collection is particularly rich in goods manufactured before 1930.

After World War I and especially after World War II, major changes appeared in the marketing of products and services. Emphasis on the promotion of brand names of goods distributed worldwide corresponded to a decrease in clients' loyalty toward local manufacturing establishments, owned and supervised by the founding families. The Eastern Townships did not differ from other North American regions in this respect.

As Professor Robert MacGregor discusses in his contextual article (p. 19), material objects raise many questions: Who made them? To whom were they destined? What are their nature and function? Were they used according to their original purpose? If not, why not? Answers to these questions can sometimes be found in the artifacts themselves, when the manufacturer's name, address and perhaps a lithograph of the factory itself are featured on them. The buildings, often shown with an exaggerated perspective and a diminutive scale

of humans and carts, were clearly meant to impress. The illustration of the Queen Cigar Factory (*Plate I*) owned by W.R. Webster & Co. Ltd., is a very good example of this kind of distortion. The building is the present location of the Restaurant La Falaise St-Michel, at 100 Webster St., Sherbrooke.

Although the collection reflects the history of everyday things in relation to everyday people—shopkeepers, pharmacists and country grocers, package manufacturers and artists who put the first pictures on labels and packages—there is a need to include this data within a broader social and historical context. The

Histoire des Cantons de l'Est, published by Jean-Pierre Kesteman, Peter Southam and Diane Saint-Pierre in 1998, is a recent study which covers exhaustively the development of the Townships. The authors argue for the region's distinctness as a result of American influence. The American settlers of the Eastern Townships brought with them their faith in hard work, self-reliance, a high degree of literacy, and an acquaintance with the fast burgeoning production of consumer goods. There are, in fact, historical and cultural values attached to the collection's material objects, since much of the iconography found in the collection closely follows that favored in the United States. Such evidence simply confirms how strongly the American presence has been felt in the Townships.

A Social History of Packaging

The history of packaging begins with natural containers and wrappers, such as leaves, animal bladders and gourds, that were used as vessels or wrapping materials for the protection of valued possessions, and are still used today in some African and Eastern markets.

There are certain fundamental prerequisite conditions for the existence of identified packaging as we know it. There must be a trading community with specific abilities to make containers, to mark them with traders' names and to be able to identify these names and read the labels.² The latter is an interesting point as the high degree of literacy observed in the American settlers of the

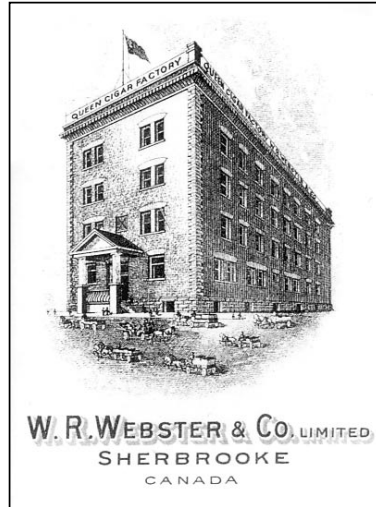


Plate I
Queen Cigar Factory

Eastern Townships can account for the great variety of artifacts in the Echenberg Collection.

Other conditions include technological advances in support materials (cardboard, paper, metals), printing (lithography, chromolithography, register), mechanized weighing and filling and last but not least, the capacity for a sizeable number of customers to purchase the products. All these conditions were present in the United States and also in the Eastern Townships. This can help explain why, in spite of the fact that most of these technical processes had been invented in Europe (German lithographs, for example, were renowned for their excellent workmanship), it was in America that packaging and the commercial arts flourished.

The Art of Persuasion

Shopping habits were also a factor in the flourishing of identifiable packaging. In America, as well as in the Townships, households often bought goods in bulk, to be stored in sturdy containers. These containers were prized, as they were often reusable and offered ideal surfaces for advertising. This is most obvious in the case of tea or coffee tins, where the grocer or agent invested effort and money to secure the clients' loyalty to his product and establishment.

Chromolithography heralded the birth of modern "commercial art" by making available large quantities of prints in color on tin containers, paper labels, posters, trade cards, giveaways and more. As technical expertise increased, allowing for many runs of colors on flat or embossed surfaces, so did the complexity of images.

Plates II, III and IV are two examples of such tins and show the progress in decorative techniques.

Another trend in packaging is that of luxury items such as cigars. The packaging required considerable effort in the presentation, in its use of dovetailed wooden boxes and in its use of superb chromolithographs.



Plate II

A coffee tin from W. Murray's store in Sherbrooke; a simple stenciling process of red over bare tin. Circa 1896.



Plates III (front) and IV (back) — F.G. Roy Scotstown, Que. “Delicious Teas”
 Chromolithograph in black and red on golden ground, elaborate script and oriental motifs
 on top and all four sides, Davidson Manufacturing Co. Ltd. Montreal, after 1894.

“Entrepreneurial instincts judged rightly that although the added costs of complex printing processes sometimes exceeded the 13% increase in product attention, the use of color was essential to the establishment and survival of a cigar brand.”³

An army of competent commercial artists employed by lithographic printing houses conceived millions of labels. As studies like Quintner’s have shown, such labels “represent one of the largest bodies of anonymous art ever created...It has been estimated that from the last century to the time of the Depression, more than 2 million different cigar brand labels were printed in North America alone...But for every design accepted by a company, dozens, perhaps hundreds, were conceived, rough-drawn, colored, perfected—and rejected.”⁴

The following anecdote, taken from a late 19th century trade book, illustrates the level of sophistication and competition in advertising:

A GOOD name for a cigar is at any time worth one hundred dollars per letter. There is no other trade that uses or possibly can use so many titles for its wares...A glance at the registrations of cigar names will verify the above at any time. There is scarcely a name of history, romance, and song, which could be used, in good taste but what is used on the cover of a cigar box. A young man who thought he had a “good thing” recently submitted one hundred names to the Tobacco Leaf. He found all but four of them had been used, and he went sadly away, leaving the names behind.⁵

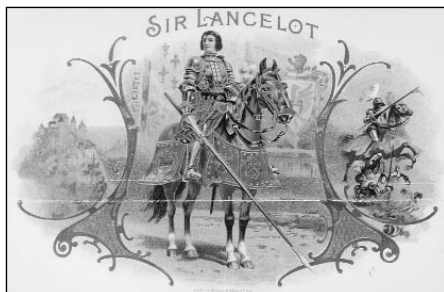


Plate V

W.R. Webster was an astute local businessman who was quick to register appealing names such as “Sir Lancelot” for his cigars. Dreaming about a legendary hero was the effect the product claimed to induce as one puffed away. The label and registration of the trademark—Sir Lancelot—along with a detailed description of the illustration, are two items selected from the Echenberg Collection. (Plates V and VI)

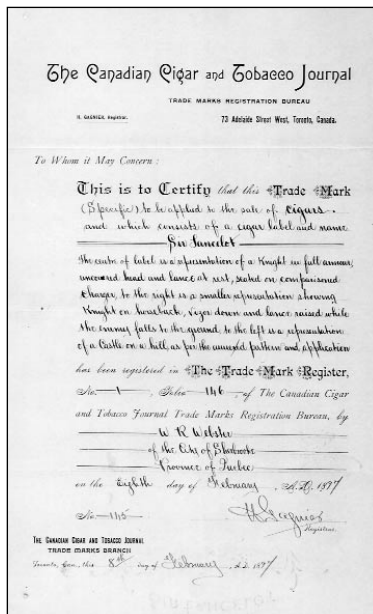


Plate VI

“The label is often better than the cigar” —*New York Sun*, 1888

Quintner provides compelling evidence for the advertising truism.

...Artists would be told, use Spanish names where possible, keep the subjects exotic...and in the case of specific regional scenes, keep the subject vague...In the USA, immigrant artists (mostly from Germany) had some influence on the choice of European-type themes such as castles; maidens in distress being rescued or borne away by dandified troubadours; faded nobility; savants and philosophers of Continental persuasion;...Encyclopedias of all the nations must have been picked clean of every notable, and when the slightly famous were all gone, then came the barely known, the infamous, politicians, economists, cherubs, and comic or cartoon characters; when they had been exploited, too, legends and ballads were scoured, and old and new gods found...Into the great maw of labeldom went the erotic and the exotic, the candid, the corny, the connubial; the frantic, the anti, and the fun.⁶

Comparisons with similar chromolithographs used on cigar boxes like Webster's show how this packaging rivaled any used in North America. The same stereotypes appear as well with boxes adorned



Plate VII

with beautiful young maidens and the reputed cleanliness of the Dutch people. The chromolithograph "Mic Mac" represented a stereotypical American Indian rather than an individual wearing the traditional dress of the Mi'kmaq. (Plate VII)

Other sales incentives were giveaways such as fans, calendars, novelty porcelains and mementos (Plate VIII), and trade cards. Some of these were kept because of their usefulness, others because of their pretty images. At the turn of the twentieth century, an infatuation



Plate VIII

with trade cards reflected the efficacy of this advertising medium. Small in size and affordable (even the colour-printed ones), these images were meant to surprise, impress, amuse and even educate the public. Social standards were being upheld by the portrayal of elegantly dressed toddlers, demure young maidens or well-appointed parlours displaying a piano and/or a sewing machine. The virtues of patent medicines were extolled and so were all manners of contraptions invented to provide comfort to their owners or act as labor-saving devices. Much effort went into producing elaborate images used either to promote magical cures (e.g., in cosmetics or medicines), or to develop recognition of brand names as well as loyalty to products. Whimsical illustrations, imagery catering to children's interests, were used for baking goods and breakfast foods. This advertising technique is, of course, still used today.

The case of blotters distributed by Cie J.L. Matthieu, (a series of six was acquired upon presentation of one of their labels), is a little out of the ordinary as this company was known to publicize unilingual material, either all in French or all in English. Another particularity is that unlike most of the advertising produced anonymously, one of the illustrated blotters in the Echenberg Collection bears the signature of Jean-Onésime Legault, titled *L.-J. Papineau 1837, Discours des Six Comté[s]*. This artist was little known, though he was the subject of an exhibition entitled *Peindre À Montréal 1915–1930*, which was presented at the Bishop's University Art Gallery from 6 June to 12 July 1996.

This brief introduction can only begin to address some of the aspects of the Echenberg Collection. Stationery, patents, ledgers or other printed materials that allow a better definition, accompany many of the items catalogued. The exhibition does not claim to draw immediate conclusions, but provides an opportunity for close scrutiny of these everyday articles and allows them to yield more information about our collective past in the Eastern Townships.

NOTES

- 1 Alex Davis, *Package and Print: The Development of Container and Label Design*. London: Faber and Faber Publishers, 1967. Introduction p. 19.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- 3 Windsor, *A selection of painted designs for cigar box labels (1895–1920) from the collection of The Art Gallery of Windsor, Ontario, Canada*. Catalogue from The Art Gallery of Windsor,

David Richard Quintner curator, 1982. p. 16, and on the process of chromolithography: "After passing through a solely black-ink phase at the end of the civil war when cigar smoking reached new peaks of popularity, cigar box labels began to reflect all the new techniques of modern printing. Polychrome displays were routine; six-color runs on the lithographic stones or on zinc sheets and presses were normal. Sometimes, for little apparent reason beyond a hideous need for excess, as many as 18 or more runs were used.

Paper improved in quality and specialization, lacquering of labels' surface followed, and then came embossing to highlight certain areas of a design. Lastly, bronzing was employed frequently in association with embossing, whereby bronze powder suspended in a transparent ink solution was used to imitate goldleaf. Polishers at the end of the process buffed areas thus treated. ...Color sold products, manufacturers had no doubt about it." p. 16.

- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 5 John Jr. Bain, *Tobacco: in Song and Story*. New York & Boston. 1896. p. 78-79.
- 6 Windsor, Catalogue p. 8-9-10.