

tobacco



VOLUME 20 NUMBER 4

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SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 2016 第4期 9月/10月

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Eric Piras holding cigar made in the tobacco plantation in Cuba



A tobacco plantation in the 18th century

A Glimpse into Cigar History

By Eric Piras

Cigars as we know them now are a fairly recent product but they have actually been around for a very long time and have a fascinating history. As with everything related to periods where documentation was little or not available, myths abound about the early days of tobacco.

Whereas it is not known exactly when the tobacco plant was discovered, it was grown widely in the area that became North and South America, and the Mayas seem to be unanimously credited for the invention of cigars. The cigars they smoked could be considered as the ancestors of the ones we know today, as the Mayas wrapped the tobacco in plantain or palm leaves in order to smoke it.

A 10th century Mayan pot found in Guatemala depicts a Mayan smoking one of these primitive cigars and the Mayan god of pleasure is often represented smoking. The Mayan word for smoking is “sakar” and is believed to be the origin of “cigar”.

Initially tobacco was used to seal diplomatic agreements and as a rite of passage into adulthood; it was also used in medicine as a painkiller and in

smoking mixtures for treating colds. But mostly it was part of the Mayans’ religious ceremonies and a way to converse with the gods, the smoke communicating one’s thoughts and prayers to the spirits. Humo Jaguar, the legendary Mayan Honduran ruler even has a cigar line and a cigar festival named after himself; he led the once great Mayans in the city of Copan, in Honduras.

There seems to be a consensus that Christopher Columbus and his men were the first Westerners to see tobacco in recorded history. In their 1492 journey, on the island of Hispaniola (in what is now Haiti and the Dominican Republic), three of Columbus’s crewmen (Rodrigo de Jerez, Hector Fuentes, and Luis de Torres) are said to have encountered tobacco for the first time when natives presented them with dry leaves that spread a peculiar fragrance. Tobacco was widely present in the islands of the Caribbean and Columbus and his men encountered it again in Cuba where they had settled and where Taínos were smoking tobacco leaves twisted up in palm leaves and corn husks.

Legend has it that de Jerez was the first of them to actually try smoking a cigar, which has been described as being as big around as a man’s arm. He must have enjoyed it, as he was quickly smoking a cigar a day on the long trip back home. However, he made the mistake of lighting up in public in Spain, and the Inquisition threw him in prison for three years.

Columbus is also regularly credited for bringing tobacco back to Europe. European sailors started smoking primitive cigars, as did the Conquistadores. However, Spanish writer and courtier Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdes is thought to have first brought the plant back to Spain in any notable quantities.

Smoking spread and became quite popular in Spain and Portugal, and ships started to carry Cuban tobacco back to Europe from around 1528. Spanish cultivation of tobacco began in 1521 on the island of Santo Domingo while Portuguese began cultivating it around the same time in Brazil, which was then their colony.

French Ambassador to Portugal Jean Nicot (who gave his name to nicotine), sent tobacco samples to Paris in 1528, and smoking spread to France. From there, it extended to Italy and to

Britain after Sir Water Raleigh's travels to the Americas: he is credited with taking the first "Virginia" tobacco to Europe in 1578, referring to it as "tobah". Catherine de Medici in France is said to have been a fan, as was Elizabeth I of England, who was introduced to smoking by Sir Walter Raleigh.

The French and English apparently preferred snuff and clay pipes to cigars at the time, and in the early 1600s, there were about 7,000 tobacconists in London.

Around 1592, the Spanish galleon San Clemente brought 50 kilos of tobacco seed to the Philippines, cultivated by the Spanish missionaries going there from Mexico, and the growing of tobacco assumed the proportions of an industry in 1781, when Governor-General Vasco decreed that the government should have control of the production, manufacture, and sale of this product.

In 1614, the Spanish had already decided to control the trade and ordered that all tobacco entering Europe and coming from their New World colonies must arrive in Seville and be taxed. France and England passed similar laws and in reaction the British began planting their own tobacco in their North American colony Virginia. By 1619, it was Virginia's largest export, and tobacco farming became one of the most important economic pillars in the colonies that would become the United States.

The increasing demand for tobacco in Europe led to an increased slave trade, as tobacco requires lots of land and involves very hard work. In 1518, Charles I of Spain had agreed to ship slaves directly from Africa and the trans-Atlantic slave trade peaked in the late 18th century, when very large number of slaves were captured in West Africa. An estimated 12 million Africans arrived in the Americas from the 16th to the 19th centuries.

So far, the Spanish produced their cigars in Spain, in Seville, where the tobacco was arriving from their colonies. During the 1700s, the Spanish realized that cigars travelled better than tobacco and they began rolling the cigars closer to the production areas; the focus on cigar production shifted to Cuba.

In 1820, cigar production began in Britain and the parliament started regulating the industry. Tax was adopted on foreign-made cigars, which only increased their image as luxury products. By the 1850s, estimates show that the US alone consumed 300 million cigars annually.

Cigars' popularity continued throughout the 20th century and became an icon in the hands of aficionados such as Sigmund Freud (who lived until 84 years old and used to smoke 20 cigars a day), and Mark Twain (who lived until 75 years old and used to smoke 20-40 cigars a day), as well as Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy, and Fidel Castro.

Cigars saw a dip in consumption in 1960's with the publication of the American surgeon general's report on its effects on health but saw an impressive come-back in the 1990s as part of a lifestyle which many famous faces promoted.

We seem to have come a long way from when the Mayas used tobacco to communicate with their gods but actually all the Indian tribes' chamans, from Mexico to Columbia, still use tobacco as a sacred leaf.

Whether we light up a cigar to reward ourselves after a long day at work or just as an established relaxing routine, we hold history in our hands... and a part of us might very well be speaking with the gods as well...

To place below Mark Twain's drawing:

"Eating and sleeping are the only activities that should be allowed to interrupt a man's enjoyment of his cigar." Mark Twain ➡



Indian smoking



Mayan mural



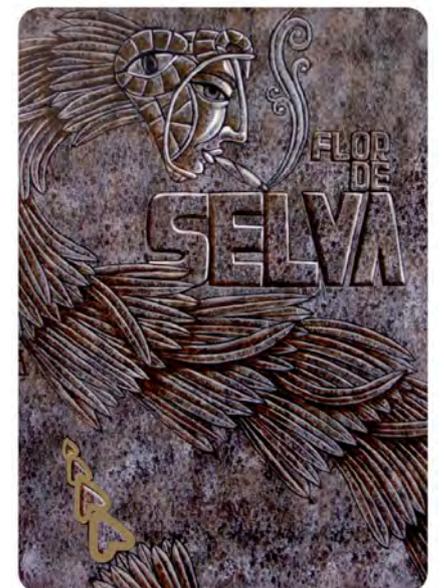
19th century cigar box lid



10th century Mayan cup



Christopher Columbus arriving in the New World



Quetzalcoatl used in some Flor de Selva imagery