



Cigar Box Lithographs Vol. 3

Charles J. Humber

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In its multifarious coverage of particular ephemera, the collectors' history Cigar Box Lithographs Vol. 3 shows that commercial art reflects and perpetuates its culture.

Cigar Box Lithographs Vol. 3 is fascinating as it covers the history behind vintage cigar box designs; its perspective on popular culture is unique.

Charles J. Humber's book concerns cigar box illustrations from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as well as the figures, events, and occurrences they depicted. Indeed, each covered box is encapsulated as its own tale, told in the limited dimensions of the medium; these brief explanations often provoke curiosity about the lithographs' subjects, only some of which can be sated in the allotted space.

The images of the box covers are followed by explanations of their subjects, many of whom are presidents, literary figures, and folk heroes, including Davy Crockett, John Adams, Black Hawk, and Price Hamlet, who were each chosen to be featured. But knowledge about trains, bowl games, and Canadian immigration processes also play in to this eclectic and stimulating gathering; and buffaloes, infantryman, and Forbes Field were all immortalized in cigar box form by commercial artists.

Humber delivers cogent explanations about the trends that directed such art, including about why a number of Quakers were depicted between 1880 and 1920. The inclusion of secondary photographs and maps further illuminates the book, which might otherwise seem dense with facts, figures, and dates.

Created by professionals of the era, the cigar box art is striking in most instances. Rococo period prints, rich in detail and even more lavish in their craftsmanship, result in a high degree of visual appeal throughout the book, whose details complement these visuals with their sense of authority. Background information about the cigar manufacturers fleshes out this historical work, as does that about lithograph companies and the antique market—though some of the companies mentioned are treated through thumbnail overviews that are shared without broader context.

Humber indulges in storytelling flourishes that enliven his historical material, including intriguing anecdotes about how King Edward VII was an avid smoker who lifted Queen Victoria's tobacco ban as soon as he assumed the crown. Such stories are the book's narrative through line, while a touching tribute to a late antique dealer known for his cigar box collection rounds the book out.

In its multifarious coverage of particular ephemera, *Cigar Box Lithographs Vol. 3* is a nostalgic collectors' text that shows how commercial art reflects and perpetuates its culture.

JOSEPH S. PETE (December 16, 2021)

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