

Business and Artistic Legitimacy in Antioqueña Advertising 1920–1930

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In the Colombian case, in the twenties of the 20th century, businessmen made their way into a coffee agriculture economy and mining, and for this reason, in addition to ensuring the sociopolitical and economic conditions that allowed their activities, they also had to work on their legitimation before society, and to do so they turned to already recognized painters and draftsmen to carry out the advertising of their companies, adding ideological content related to modernity and progress to their products, as the brands gained their visual distinctiveness. Thanks to this contribution, the artists also legitimized their profession as publicists and designers.

Keywords: Humberto Chaves, Antioquia, Colombia, industrialization, companies, advertising, brand distinctives, legitimacy, businessmen, painters, modernity, civilization, progress

INTRODUCTION

The industrialization drive occurred in Colombia in the first decades of the 20th century, and was notably concentrated in the Antioquia territory. The lateness of this process allowed entrepreneurs to assimilate the marketing strategies that had already proven to be successful for foreign products, and, therefore, they recognized the importance of brands and their visual identifiers and their adoption and registration, which became the first step to achieving the legitimacy of business activity and its public recognition.¹

In contrast, artists trained as painters and draftsmen ventured into advertising, gaining recognition in a field different from that of their original profession, and were the architects of the visuality of local brands, to the extent that their aesthetic conceptions predominated over corporate babbling about what the brand should represent. As a publicist for the main companies in Antioquia in the 1920s, the master painter Humberto Chaves Cuervo (Medellín, 1891 – 1971) is the reference for this analysis because he is precisely the one who integrates the aesthetic criteria of classical painting into advertising, telling the regional economic history through advertising illustration.²

This article presents how the visual indicators of the brands of local products were created at a time when the search for legitimacy by businessmen found a correlate in the search for legitimacy of artists in the field of design, before the emergence and consolidation of advertising as a profession organized around advertising agencies and their particular division of labor, which emerged after 1930.

Advertising and Business Legitimacy

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, Colombia was an economy that exported primary goods, especially gold and coffee, and, therefore, industrialization required economic and political conditions that

encouraged it and discourses that legitimized it. At the end of the Thousand Days War (1900 – 1903) and the loss of Panama, the country had to rebuild itself, and that is when the discourse in favor of measures to promote industrialization arose. The first two decades of the 20th century were characterized by the adoption of some protectionist measures, which coincided with macroeconomic conditions that made imports of consumer goods more difficult, generating a local market for these goods.

Antioquia developed a consumer goods industry long before other regions of Colombia, which has been explained by the fact that the opening of the agricultural frontier was done by small farmers who lived off their plots, but monetized their income thanks to coffee, for which they received part of the surpluses of the product bonanzas; on the other hand, women and children worked to harvest coffee and the first textile factories, which allowed women, thanks to their income, to also demand products of industrial origin. Unlike other areas of the country that carried the weight of relationships of servitude and slavery, in Antioquia, thanks to the prominence of small farmers and businessmen, it was possible to have a disciplined workforce and technicians with knowledge that allowed production, adaptation, and repair of imported machinery.

Added to the internal conditions was the payment from the United States to Colombia of 25 million dollars as compensation for the loss of Panama, money that began to arrive in 1922, which generated what has been called due prosperity, which, among other effects, allowed the construction of infrastructure, especially railways, and the founding of the Bank of the Republic, which linked the currency to the gold standard, and established clear rules for the financial sector. This situation was very favorable to the interests of businessmen, who, thanks to the centralization of dispersed and small factories, founded modern companies such as the Colombian Tobacco Company, the National Chocolate Company or the Libertad Brewery, the same ones that were designed for mass production required having publicists where there were none, and now, some established artists in the field of painting and drawing have filled this void.

In parallel to their greatest contribution to the regional economy, businessmen demanded social recognition that would differentiate them from landowners, merchants and miners, and from the values that they represented, where religious and patriotic values were held in high esteem.

Therefore, they had to resort to differentiating formulas that they found when looking at industrialized economies, where civilization and progress were the references for their businesses, and advertising was already a concomitant fact with urban growth and disruptive artistic currents that proposed other approaches to the visual.

On a visual level, this tension between the traditional and the modern was resolved through creative assimilation or graphic miscegenation,³ since thanks to the artists, the past was represented by images from the vast collection of mythology and nature,⁴ and the present and the future by more modern images originating in industrialization and its expansion, represented in modern architecture, new means of transportation, and expressly representatives of the modern became factory facilities, production processes, cinema and artifacts such as the gramophone or the electric light bulb, and this explains the great variety of concepts that fed the graphic representation of the brands, and the liberality with which international design trends were combined with the definition of the artists themselves.

FIGURE 1
THE LOCAL, THE GLOBAL AND THE MODERN IN THE ADVERTISEMENT



In Figure 1, you can see the influence of Art Nouveau to announce the subscription to Arte magazine, by representing a nymph on the globe, which corresponds to a graphic resource of this style that had nothing to do with the same ; the local and modern is incorporated when drawing for the first time the profile of Medellín traced by the domes of its temples, and not the skyscrapers or tall buildings, while in Figure 1-B the advertisement for a local product that aspired to a more extensive market, the cosmopolitan is visualized by the indistinct profile of a modern city with skyscrapers, the female figure is related to a real woman of modern appearance, and the distinctive features of the brand and the advertiser are visible but not so clear.

In Figure 1-C, a traditional representation of the goddess Tyche is at the service of the modern when companies are distinguished by medals, plaques, and diplomas:

“Thus, the iconography of these awards is used by companies as an instrument of persuasion to highlight their performance and the quality of their products and services, to the extent that the meaning that these awards have is transferred to said pieces.”⁵

It is understood then that, although the intention was to represent the brand with a modern image, it was also imperative to endorse the local and unknown product, widely informing the public about the award received in the international competition. Barely 6 months apart, the same artist had to interpret the needs of the brand in two non-coherent ways, one traditional and one modern, and although the launch image was published repeatedly in the following years (modern representation) with some subtle modifications, alternating with that of the awards (traditional representation), the product that is still sold today, never had a visual characteristic that distinguished it and became famous by its name.

Another common thread of the brand’s visual identity was the total understanding of Antioquia society with the ideals of civilization and progress: the first locomotive arrived in Medellín in February 1914. Since 1921, regular flights were already made between Medellín and Puerto Berrío regular, but the lack of roads considerably delayed transportation by trucks and automobiles that could not displace the transport of cargo by mules. The series of advertisements by Humberto Chaves for Cervecería Libertad reflect the novelty and meaning that the means of transportation represent for everyone. (Figure 2) It can be noted that it reiterates

the term progress in a general sense: “This world is progressing” and as a call to the consumer: “As a sign of progress, Today, drink Espiga!”

FIGURE 2
“THIS WORLD PROGRESSES” CAMPAIGN



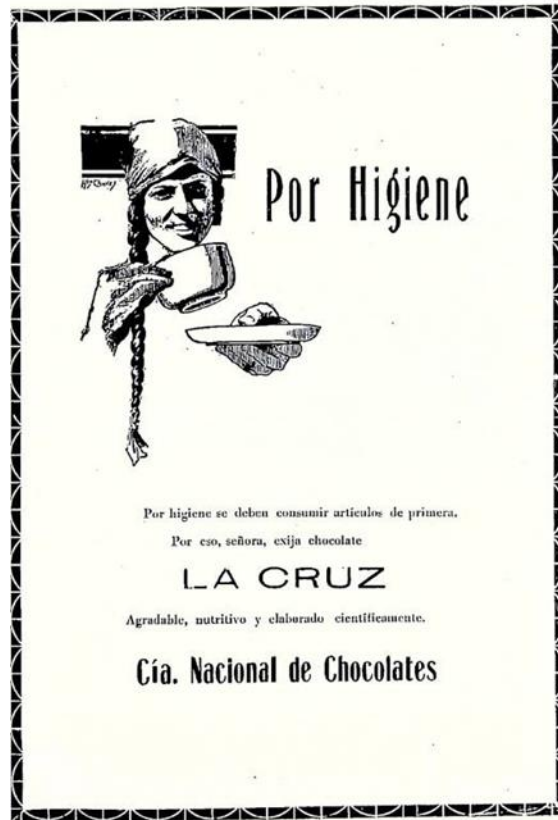
Author: Humberto Chaves

Airplane
 6 de febrero 1926
 La Defensa

Train and car
 16 de dic. 1926
 La Defensa

Local advertising had to capture the attention of consumers by reflecting the humanity of a community of citizens and immigrants that populated Medellín in the 1920s, when urban and rural were not so differentiated. The advertisement for La Cruz chocolate is completely original, with the image of a peasant woman from Antioquia, who was mentioned earlier as an agricultural and salaried worker, or domestic employee, whose clothing, which was basic, invariably included a scarf, and as a group, was differentiated by the origin and social rank of city women dressed in Parisian dresses and hats. The paradox results when proposing as consumers of industrially produced chocolate, precisely those women who had the experience and tradition of preparing chocolate by hand. (Figure 3).

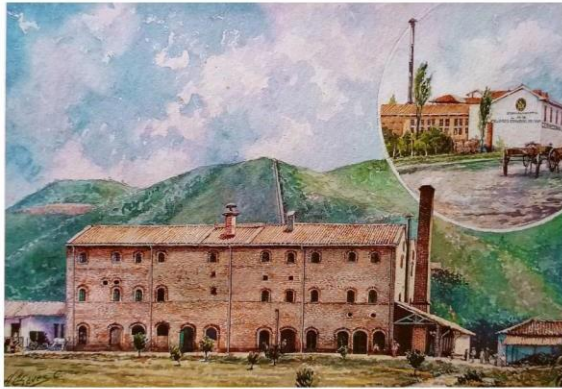
FIGURE 3
IMAGE OF A NATIVE PEASANT WOMAN IN THE ADVERTISEMENT



Humberto Chaves.
Septiembre 1927- Letras y Encajes

Broadly speaking, what Humberto Chaves achieved was to incorporate new elements in the advertising story, where nature stopped being a backdrop to present the product, gaining prominence; the factories became prominent parts of the landscape; and the crops became the representation of a nature tamed by businessmen, who had to ensure the quality of their product in all its phases, hence the need to teach the public the complex procedures they faced. the industry to achieve a quality product. Humberto Chaves stood out in this aspect; he illustrated this point for several companies and also incorporated it into his pictorial work. (Figure 4)

FIGURE 4
THE FACTORY AS A SUBJECT FOR PAINTING AND ADVERTISING



Izquierda: Humberto Chaves Cuervo – Acuarela s.f.

La Cervecería Unión resultó de una fusión empresarial entre la Cervecería Antioqueña (1905) y la Cervecería Libertad (1924), en el año 1930. Esta acuarela sintetiza visualmente esta fusión empresarial mostrando la fábrica de Itagüí, y en el recuadro superior la sede de la Cervecería Libertad en Medellín.

Tomado de: Cerani, Elio (Ed) (1995) Humberto Chaves Pintor de la Raza. Medellín: Antex

Derecha: Humberto Chaves anuncio para cerveza Pilsen – 21 junio de 1942 – La Defensa
Archivo Humberto Chaves Cuervo – Pintor



Although art nouveau generalized the use of plant elements in posters and advertisements, these had a decorative and not didactic purpose. The realistic and detailed drawing of Humberto Chaves related the brands to the products of origin, as was the case of the Cruz chocolate brand image, designed at the end of 1929, which has been in force for more than 100 years, where he incorporated the branch of chocolate a significant part of its packaging and advertising for this brand. (Figure 5)

FIGURE 5
NATURE IN THE BRAND IMAGE OF CHOCOLATE CRUZ



Imagen No.5 A
20 de diciembre 1929 – El Bateo



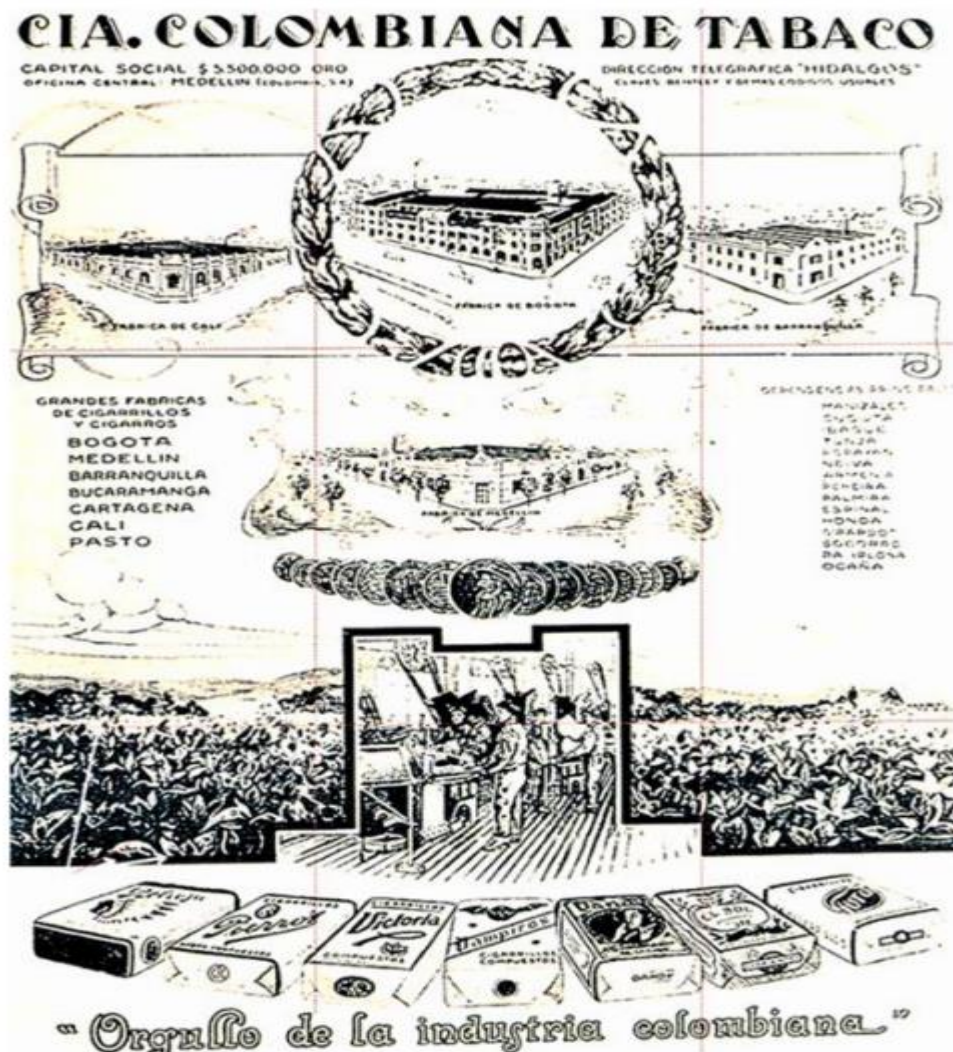
Imagen No.5 B
1931 Antioquia industrial

For historians, it is conclusive that, despite the limitations they faced, it was artists and not businessmen who made the most progress in defining the graphic identifiers of brands:

“There is not much data on the authorship of the label designs or visual identifiers, the information found is reduced to some artists, woodcutters, or caricaturists with their names such as Alfredo Greñas, Humberto Chaves, or Ricardo Rendón, which shows that in these cases, the visual identity was considered more as a result of the style of a particular author than based on the needs of the institution.”⁶

The advertising reflected the aspirations of civility and progress that the businessmen wanted to make seen as modern, and to this end they were emphatic in demeaning artisanal products for being unhygienic, rustic, non-homogeneous, or difficult to prepare, to propose instead products and forms of consumption that had to be presented through visual and textual didactics, which in addition to the use of the product had to teach the ways of being modern and civilized. And thus, artists became both interpreters and interested parties in the development of the market economy, legitimizing the spaces and tasks of industrialists. Figure 6 reflects the concertation of the business point of view with the artistic one, where the desideratum of maintaining the traditional alongside the modern is happily illustrated by the artist Humberto Chaves.

FIGURE 6
INDUSTRIAL PROCESS AS LEGITIMIZER OF COLTABACO BRANDS



Fuente: Toro, Constanza; Gaviria, Jesús (1994) Compañía Colombiana de Tabaco, setenta y cinco años de progreso y servicio. Medellín. FAES

Advertising and Artistic Legitimacy

Without a previous tradition in the field of design and advertising, the European and North American trends implicit in advertising were decisive for the generation of graphic identifiers for local brands. The artists trained themselves,⁷ but they had to gain legitimacy in this new professional field:

“Chaves fulfilled the role of creative director of one of the most important companies in the country: The National Chocolate Company. The position of power and the recognition of the value of design and communications that the role of artistic director embodies make a relevant difference in the existing relationships between the client, the designer, and graphic production, since they legitimize their exercise and the position it occupies within the organizations. That this practice was present in the industrial panorama of the time in Colombia is a symptom of a maturation of the graphic industry as well as the recognition of design as a fundamental element for modern industrial development, just as happened in France and England at the end of the 19th century and in Germany into the 20th century.”⁸

From another perspective, Chaves was not linked to the companies he advertised, since he was always an independent artist, but in addition to his professional solvency, he was recognized in the city as a professor and director of the Institute of Fine Arts of Medellín (IBA), as a portraitist and painter, so that an advertisement signed by him gave importance to the product also from the artistic perspective, proof of this were the exclusivity contracts with the David E. Arango Jewelry, the Libertad Brewery, the Nacional de Chocolates, Coltabaco, among others:

“Art Nouveau circles, where graphistes not only collected commissions for their services, but also used their work as advertising for themselves.”

“Humberto Chaves is a representative case of this practice, proving that the absorption of industrial dynamics went beyond the merely aesthetic and had an impact on the way business relationships were carried out. The number of works signed by the artist is important, either with his full name or his acronym; Put in context and following the systematicity of its application, the signature suggests being more a continuation of the practices of the French avant-garde than a whim of the artist.”⁹

After analyzing the different sources that served to appropriate and adapt the images, the researchers Plata et al. They conclude:

“Now, if in general, Chaves seems to have adapted to the communicative needs of his clients, his works privileged the description of typical landscapes and the representation of daily activities with a classic drawing technique. This mixture, a product of his artistic interest, made him one of the most prominent exponents of graphic design in Colombia, largely shaping the companies where he played the role of art director. It is important to highlight that several of his labels and graphic brands are still valid, particularly his work for the National Chocolate Company. The validity of his work not only attests to the quality of his work, but also serves as a reference to demonstrate the evolution of graphics in Colombia, from the direct reproduction of foreign codes to adaptations and mixtures; in other words, the establishment and normalization of graphic miscegenation in the course of the 20th century.”¹⁰

CONCLUSION

The history of local brands demonstrates the fundamental role played by recognized artists, who were directly responsible for creating the graphic image that entrepreneurs wanted to convey about their products, contributing to not only their talent but also their prestige as recognized artists. This is evident in the fact that the advertisements are mostly signed by Humberto Chaves, who was the most recognized master

painter of the time in Medellín and professor and director of the School of Painting and Sculpture at the Institute of Fine Arts.

Hired by emerging businessmen, the artists had to advance in creating a concept that equated the industrial with the modern while helping to consolidate the image of the businessman as the new social hero, and his companies as patriotic campaigns against foreign, modernizing products regarding the previous state of affairs, in an equation that related business legitimacy, the modernization of society, and the aesthetic currents of the moment with the image of the product, a symbol of progress, all amalgamated in a brand.

ENDNOTES

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