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CHALLENGES OF GLOBALIZATION

McKINNELL/28

FAHRHOLZ/18

ANDREAS/12

O'HARE/24

FINANCIAL SERVICES/38
EDS/60

ENERGY SOLUTIONS/76

CONGO AT THE
CROSSROADS/170

FOR MATURE
AUDIENCES ONLY/193

NORTH DAKOTA/103
KENTUCKY/138
SOUTH CAROLINA/163

LEADERS STYLE/193

THINGS NO ONE
EVER TELLS YOU/225

The Humidor as a Work of Art

An Interview with Yankel Ginzburg,
Artist, Chevy Chase, Maryland

EDITORS' NOTE

As Yankel Ginzburg points out, painters and sculptors frequently turn their talents to creating *objets d'art*, perhaps out of the desire to "do functional things for humanity in our own artistic way." Some design chairs, others construct tables, but Ginzburg's latest, much-acclaimed contributions are nothing less than cigar humidors made from brightly colored acrylic, rather than the "dull" wood traditionally used. Employing acrylic in place of wood serves a number of purposes: For one, the material "does not compete for moisture with anything," the artist explains. Then, "more importantly, acrylic absorbs room temperature." Most significant, though, is the artistic potential the medium affords, such that all of Ginzburg's humidors are "individual works of art." Each one is "so beautiful that you will want to touch it with your hands," he unabashedly enthuses, "so elegant and rich looking that you will open and close it, even without retrieving a cigar." Smokers should act fast, however: These "executive toys" are in limited supply, their creator warns. "I don't want to be known in the future as just a fine humidor craftsman," he insists. Instead, he wants to be remembered "as a great artist," with the humidors consigned to "just a short period in my life when I took a slight detour."

Born in the Soviet Union, educated in Israel (he was the youngest student ever admitted to that country's Academy of Art), and now residing just outside Washington, DC, Ginzburg has been a prominent force in the contemporary art world for decades. Among his most-noted solo exhibitions have been those at the Washington Gallery of Art (1968), Cairo Museum of Art (1979), and Moscow Art Academy (1992), but he has been showing regularly at

leading museums and galleries in Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and North America since the early '60s. Also acclaimed for his worldwide humanitarian efforts, he is the subject of four books – *The Art of Yankel Ginzburg* (1985), *Ginzburg: The Russian Collection* (1992), *The Art and Life of Yankel Ginzburg* (1994), and *Ginzburg Multigraph Book* (1995) – as well as Eli Nisan's film *The Art of Yankel Ginzburg* (1979).

You've become affluent by showing and selling your paintings and sculptures at galleries from Hong Kong through the United States to Europe. What made you branch out into *objets d'art*?

First of all, there is always a nagging desire in every artist to one day try something he has never attempted before. The greatest envy of all artists is those who are able to make fabulous, functional things, such as Fabergé and his eggs. When Brancusi designed his wonderful furniture, many artists said to themselves: "Maybe I

have a talent for this too. One day I must attempt this."

In the back of our minds, we all have the desire to do some functional work of art. Maybe we feel that, in this way, we will be contributing to society in a manner that everyone understands. Sometimes every artist, whether he is a writer, performer, or painter, feels like a fraud because only he comprehends his endeavor. Artists are not confident that they benefit anyone, so we long to do functional things for humanity in our own artistic way. It may be a chair or, in my case, a cigar humidor.

I have tried quite a few different things. The humidor is my latest endeavor, having already designed a chair, a table, and many other functional, Judaica works of art. The former shah of Iran saw my *objets d'art* and remarked: "You do such fabulous functional things. Why don't you design a humidor? I'm an avid collector of fine tobacco, but I have never found a humidor that is functional and beautiful enough for me to display in my living room when I entertain." His commission was very generous, but at first I rejected it because I did not know exactly what a cigar humidor ought to do.

I occasionally smoke cigars, but I never studied their care. So I decided to read about fine tobacco in every book and article I was able to find. I learned from all of my reading that the best environment for a fine cigar or tobacco is room temperature and relative humidity of 70 to 75 percent. This puzzled me because I remembered that every humidor I had seen in the past was made of wood. I could not understand why. If cigars require a relative humidity of 70 to 75 percent, they are competing for moisture with a wood humidor. Wood is very dry by nature; it will absorb all the humidity. In addition, with any wooden box the temperature inside the cavity is always warmer



Ginzburg (right), with the Shah humidor, describes his artistic process.

than outside, so the interior cannot be room temperature without some mechanical apparatus.

I pursued my inquiry further by calling a manufacturer of humidors in North Carolina, and to my astonishment its engineering department informed me that they didn't really know for sure why humidors are made of wood; it's just a tradition. The manufacturers of cigars ship in wooden boxes, so the humidor makers assume that is the best way to store them. So I then called a distributor of cigars in the Dominican Republic. They said they ship cigars in wooden boxes only because they are cheap and light. However, they send their premium products in laminated boxes with coated paper inside so that the wood never comes in contact with the tobacco. They assume that, once the consumer receives them, they put the cigars in a proper humidor.

With all of this information, I started scratching my head, and then I thought, "Acrylic." One of the materials I have been using for 20 years for my sculptures is unbelievably dense and therefore adaptable for a humidor. First of all, it is nonabsorbent; it does not compete for moisture with anything. More importantly, acrylic absorbs room temperature, so if I created a box, the temperature in its cavity would be exactly the same as its exterior. At this point I decided to build a prototype. I built it as a conventional humidor with a humidifier inside. I put water in it, and for four and a half months, opening it up and closing it, I did not need to replenish the water. With a wooden humidor I had to replace the water inside every two to three weeks.

At this point I decided I would take the shah's commission. When I made my first *Shab* humidor for him, it was shown publicly, and needless to say, quite a few people of wealth approached me, asking me for one of the same. In other words, the humidors took on a life of their own.

You use the same bright colors in your humidors as you do in your paintings and sculptures. What prompted this, being that humidors have traditionally been very conservative in appearance?

That is precisely one of the reasons. Most of the humidors I have seen have been very conventional in appearance; in my opinion they all look dull. I think tobacco is a very exotic substance. The smoking of it brings pleasure, as well as a

feeling of superiority, successfulness, and so forth. Therefore, I thought the humidor itself needed to be that way too. It has to be a lot more vivacious than you, the smoker. It has to be so beautiful that you will want to touch it with your hands, so elegant and rich looking that you will open and close it, even without retrieving

friend who is a member of the Young Presidents Organization, for which I held a function in my home. One day he said, "You have to make a humidor that will be available exclusively to presidents of countries, corporations, and so forth." So we made 250, and we sold 170 in Hong Kong alone over the Christmas holiday. I miscalculated how many damn presidents there are around the world! If I had known how popular that design would be, I would have made 500.

They must appreciate in value quite a bit.

They do. *El Presidente* came out on the market at around \$4,500. Now, if you can find one, they sell for \$16,000.

Are the other four designs produced in limited editions as well?

They are all limited editions. The *Pyramid* and the *Shab* are limited to 97 copies each, and we have sold at least half of them already. When these basic designs are sold out, you will see different designs, and eventually no more humidors at all. I don't want to be known in the future as just a fine humidor craftsman. I want people to remember me as a great artist and that this was just a short period in my life when I took a slight detour.



Michael Jordan and the artist with the Pyramid humidor

a cigar. My humidors are executive toys. They seem to always want to be the center of attention. You can put one of my humidors in a room with many other collectibles, and it will stand out.

You have four basic designs: the Aurora, the Ambassador, the Shab, and the Pyramid. Do you ever stray from these designs or take special commissions?

Yes, I do make commission pieces. In any event, no two humidors are alike because they are individual works of art. If two of the same titled humidors were placed next to each other, the only common denominator would be the exterior shape. Each one has a different design and color scheme. The humidor is also adapted to the particular collector. Some people smoke cigars that are nine inches long; some smoke shorter ones. We adapt according to size and the environment in which the humidor is going to be displayed. Some smokers do not like to keep more than 40 cigars in their daily box; they prefer to keep the rest in long-term storage.

You had a fifth design, *El Presidente*, of which only 250 were made. What happened to them?

That concept was given to me by a

My love and my livelihood come from fine arts. However, I think that one or two new designs plus the remaining humidor inventory will keep me active in this area for at least another few years.

These humidors are very complicated and take a long time to make. If someone places an order, he can expect to wait at least six to eight weeks before delivery.

Some of your humidors are on display as works of art, such as in the lobby of the Conrad Hotel in Hong Kong and the Beverly Hills branch of Davidoff.

Yes, my humidors are also on display in the Hiltons in Alexandria, Virginia, and Destin, Florida. They are all under glass, sometimes alongside a photograph of myself with a celebrity who also owns one.

What do you plan to create next?

I do not know what the day will bring. What is exciting about being an artist is that you do not have a nine-to-five job. You can work all the time or only a bit: It is your prerogative.

Many years ago Salvador Dalí created an exterior finish for a Volkswagen that was actually growing grass. I am tempted to top him. In my case maybe it will be an acrylic wine cellar. ●