When Postage Stamps Promoted Cigarette Smoking

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Cigarette smoking has been historically considered as one of the most important preventable risk factors for the development of lung cancer and responsible for more than 100 million deaths in the USA in the 20th century.¹

Cigarette appears as an harmless object, and its success and fortune are strongly related to an entwined history of good marketing and mass diffusion, through an influential propaganda machine aimed at the banalization of smoking habits, considering it not only as an “adult” or “sexy” thing, but also as a routine activity.

James Buchanan Duke is among people who mostly contributed to the spread of cigarette smoking in the world. Born in 1856 in Durham, North Carolina, Duke took over his father’s industry in 1880 turning it into the first cigarettes “industry”. He cleverly understood that consumers would have appreciated a perfectly rolled, machine-produced object, that can also be defined as “more hygienic”, as hands and saliva were no longer needed for preparation.²

He hired James Bonsack, a smart engineer who designed a machine able to produce 120,000 cigarettes/day, while Duke used all possible communication media to spread his product worldwide and in every field of life, exploiting also the widespread philatelic passion of the “Belle Epoque”.

Here I present (Figures 1, 2, 3) three postcards included in the cigarette packages of Duke Company Ltd. These postcards were “stamped” with contemporary stamps from different countries, some even quite rare. The stamps on this nice designed postcards were some hundreds, and, as said in the back (Figure 4), smoker philatelists were stimulated to buy many packages to fill their collections.

Duke died in 1925, as one of the richest man in the world, and as a renowned philanthropist. Yet he funded, promoted and disseminated by all means (including philately) one of the deadliest artifacts in human history.

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References


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