

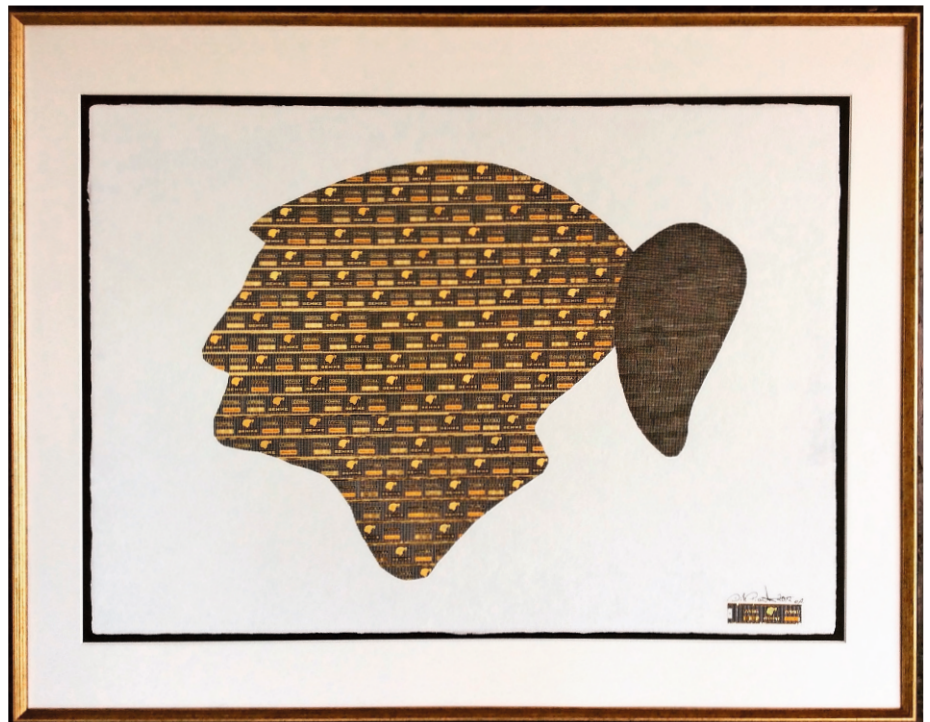
# TURNING CIGARS INTO ART

German-based artist **Dirk Prautzsch** creates large-scale pictures and collages out of cigar bands and images from cigar boxes known as vistas. The works hang on the walls of smoking rooms and lounges the world over.

Some believe that, in life, every individual element merges into one big picture. This is certainly the case for Dirk Prautzsch. As a professional rider, he worked with horses for many years, training them for competitions and taking part in championships. A tough job indeed, and not just for the animals. Prautzsch worked seven days a week, 365 days a year – of course, a horse has no holiday entitlement so neither does its trainer. At 27, he decided he wanted to change his life and took advantage of a period of convalescence to collect his thoughts.

With a knack for dealing with people and contacts in veterinary medicine, he eventually settled on becoming a pharmaceutical rep. 25 years later, he decided once again to change his focus and turned his hand to art. He wanted to create images – not with brush and canvas, but with knives, glue and paper. He had a very special material in mind: cigar bands. The idea had come to him after a colleague began to do the same with wine bottle labels. A few years on and Prautzsch is able to live off the profits from his art.

Historically, the small, colourful pictures that adorn cigars from the Caribbean, served only to protect the white gloves of officers or the hands of female smokers from getting dirty. Today the gloves are passé and the ladies are not as fussy as a hundred years ago. All that remains are the cigar rings. If you were to examine these bands more closely, you would discover that they are covered in tiny artefacts: ornate gold coats of arms, medals, sweeping monograms, small portraits and miniature landscapes, ornaments and indicators of origin. Even the stamps tell stories about Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Honduras and the



An image of the head used in the “Cohiba” logo by Dirk Prautzsch

other nations that export what connoisseurs so rapturously call, the “brown gold”.

Dirk Prautzsch himself is not averse to the occasional cigar. He smoked his first 16 years ago after being introduced to them by a friend. For him, however, the paper wrapping is much more interesting than the tobacco. He collects them by the thousands and, unlike more common collector's items which are proudly displayed in cabinets, Prautzsch converts the bands into large, framed images, which now adorn many a smoking room the world over.

He always has about a hundred such images, both large and small, about him in his studio in Sottrum, near Bremen, Germany.

They serve as inspiration. Among them is the very first he created – a collage which one could think was the work of a primary school child. His current works, with their strictly geometrical design and thoughtful arrangement, have very little in common with this first attempt.

## A PLACE FOR ART

Using only the finest materials, Prautzsch arranges the bands. Sometimes he has the famous T of the famous Cuban brand “Trinidad” in mind, sometimes the fa- ►





In the artist's studio

mous head used in the “Cohiba” logo. Sometimes he lays out all the different band formats used by one brand, and connects them with a tobacco leaf, or using photos of famous cigar scene personalities like Zino Davidoff or Avo Uvezian. Having a clear idea of the image he wants to create is essential. All works by Dirk Prautzsch have more than just careful preparation and deliberate placement in common: each cigar band used actually comes from a smoked cigar.

Prautzsch does not, of course, smoke them all himself – he would never get round to doing any work. He simply has thousands “in stock”. Some of these he has saved himself, others have been sent to him or have been supplied by the commissioner of a work. The cigar art from Sottrum certainly has its followers. Prautzsch charges anything up to mid-range four figure sums for one of his works.

Whoever balks at this price needs to remember the many hours of work put into

one piece – in particular the meticulously precise joining of the bands. Time, effort and a steady hand are absolutely necessary. Unlike with oil painting where mistakes can be easily rectified, a drop of glue or a cut in the wrong place can instantly ruin a work. Moreover, the material used is not endlessly available and is often unique. A client doesn't commission an image made of any old paper scraps, but one created using the bands from his or her own used cigars, which may be linked to particular events or memories. Indeed, Prautzsch's works are highly individual – not only because of the idea behind them, but because of the aesthetic brought by the artist's perfectionism. The artist's thatched house in Sottrum contains cigar bands by the barrel. Most of them are sorted by brand, others are packed in big bags waiting to be put under the microscope. Even without a magnifying glass, there is always something new to discover: small changes in appearance; nuances

in colour; differences between historical bands and those used today. Every now and then, other elements find their way into the pictures: an almost antique Bacardi receipt from 1950 (and thus from pre-revolutionary Cuba), for example, or colourful pictures of cigar boxes. For each of these too, there is a select group of collectors worldwide.

And so Dirk Prautzsch sits at his desk, sorting, arranging, cutting and sticking, until the image that exists only in his mind's eye slowly takes on a real form. The aforementioned “Cohiba” head is a favourite motif of his. Incidentally, it belongs to the Taino chief Hatuey, one of the first resistance fighters against white colonial rule in the 15th and 16th century, and a Cuban national hero. Just for this portrait, Prautzsch needs 200 bands, 300 alone for the ponytail. And so, with this knowledge, he continues to merge all the elements together.

**Jan-Geert Wolff**