

CIGARWISE MAGAZINE, JANUARY 2005

In respect to Giovanni Zelko's powerful portfolio of work, we at CigarWise couldn't be more excited about having his soon to be famous Cigar Calendar photos as part of the CigarWise family. A signed and numbered Limited Edition series is already under way for serious collectors, art lovers, and cigar enthusiasts alike. 16x20 and 20x30 photographs on archival paper will also be available.

The overall look of the 2005 cigar calendar is at once eclectic from month to month while maintaining a very specific and continuous style and emotion that evokes the classic years of Hollywood. Over some espresso and cigars, CigarWise CEO Woodrow Pollock, Jr. recently met with Giovanni in New York city at the stunning Davidoff cigar shop and lounge to chat specifically about his approach to and experience of shooting the calendar.

CIGARWISE:

The best place to begin at, is, well, the beginning. What was the genesis of the Cigar Calendar?

GIOVANNI:

"The idea behind the cigar calendar fittingly began over a couple of great cigars at the *Hollywood Smoke*, a cigar shop and lounge in Santa Monica owned by my close friend Greg Shahbazian. It was Greg's idea, after seeing some of my other work, to do a calendar of girls smoking cigars. I liked the premise and the challenge, so we decided to team up and produce a series of photographs unlike any that had been done before. Imagine, twelve completely different photographs depicting elegant, beautiful, and powerful women smoking cigars. It was also important to us to portray a classy and sophisticated style of femininity in how we depicted the women rather than a vulgar one. Every shot had to be amazing, sexy, and cover-page quality. Our ambitious plans slowly evolved week after week during meetings at Greg's shop over countless cigars and countless glasses of port. That phase of the production in particular was especially fun!

CIGARWISE:

I can imagine! There's nothing like fine port to accompany a fine cigar. Well, I agree about the image of a strong, yet feminine woman. There's nothing more invigorating. It's much sexier than the usual wet T-shirt sort of thing that's splashed across magazines and ads today. That only cheapens a woman. What you've done is elevate the women in your photographs to stand atop pedestals. Each woman is portrayed as a true lady. That is somewhat unique these days. So, how did you take the initial concept of 12 women smoking cigars and transform and develop it into the 2005 Cigar Calendar?

GIOVANNI:

Evolution is an appropriate word here. Once we finalized the concept of having each month's girl represent a different decade from the twentieth century, which was really the key, the ball started rolling from there. Each decade of the last century is obviously drastically different and so we were presented with the possibility of creating a variety of different scenes. For example, the decadence of women in the roaring 1920's, the strength and independence of women during and after WWII in the 1940's, and the re-

emergence of glamour in the prosperous and safe 1950's, were all great historical environments in America to create scenes in. Since the months were conceptually separated by decades, I needed to create a sense of continuity in the style and overall presentation. One decision was to pose the women in classic Pin-Up styles and expressions. I have always been a fan of Pin-Up artwork in general, and especially the work of Gil Elvgren, Fritz Willis, and of course Alberto Vargas. There is a certain playful sensuality to the genre that is extremely inviting. Aside from the posing, the film stock, as always, was an important consideration. I immediately knew I wanted to shoot on black and white film and lean towards a grainy print texture in order to lend the images a sense of age, as if they were actually shot fifty or eighty years ago. It definitely worked out beautifully as planned, and someone actually asked me where we found so many vintage photographs of women smoking cigars! That was the greatest compliment anyone could ever give for images like these.

**CIGARWISE:**

You definitely transport the viewer right to a specific place and emotion. The setting of every shot takes your mind right to that time period. How did you get all those amazing props and locations lined up while coordinating the appropriate models and makeup artists?

**GIOVANNI:**

I'll be honest. It wasn't easy! Essentially, we dealt with each month as a completely separate photo-shoot for reasons of organization. We had to. There was just too much going on with any one of these images to try and coordinate two in one day. The view in the very beginning while we were still planning was a bit daunting. The task before us was enormous and almost overwhelming. We were trying to meticulously recreate ten different decades using the appropriate props, locations, models, and makeup, and all, of course, within a reasonable budget.

**CIGARWISE:**

Whew! I'm getting a head-ache just thinking about all that! But you pulled it off wonderfully. What is your *constant* when dealing with such a large project as this?

**GIOVANNI:**

Well, one definite constant in my photography is that I'm insane about making sure every detail is perfect. I kind of drive my assistants crazy during a shoot day, but so long as the model is comfortable and happy, and I get the shots I needed and wanted, then it's all worth while. Every element in the frame has to be exactly how I want it, or I won't shoot. That's why I usually use a storyboard artist to sketch out what I envision. It helps me zero in on my target much easier, and it helps the other people involved in the photo-shoot understand my vision.

**CIGARWISE:**

I find it interesting that you use storyboards for your photography. Obviously something that you developed and carried over from your work in movies.

GIOVANNI:

Yea, definitely. It makes life so much easier on the day of the shoot. It shows me all the possibilities days before I ever take my camera out, and especially helps out in dealing with clients or collaborating with other people. This calendar is a perfect example of that. The storyboards worked out great for Greg and I, giving us a focal point for planning each shot. After outlining all the images or “scenes” we wanted to shoot and storyboarding them, Greg and I hunted down all kinds of locations and props that would work, including a bear rug with head and all, a restored vintage 1940’s Harley Davidson, a phone, typewriter, water-heater, and lamp from the 1920’s, a sailboat from the 1950’s, a convertible Cadillac Deville from the 1960’s, and even a WWII fighter plane! It usually took way more time trying to find and then get permission to use those props than the actual day of shooting. In addition to all those great props, I was also able to shoot in Greg’s walk-in humidor which was a bonus and lots of fun. It’s so big, I was able to fit in a few lights, a makeup person, the model, and myself with plenty of room to move around.

CIGARWISE:

Speaking of models, the women you chose are all unique and all very beautiful. Not only did you find women from all different ethnic backgrounds, but they all seem to fit perfectly for the “role” they are playing. What was your approach in that process?

GIOVANNI:

Finding the right models for a specific job like this one is always fun, as you can imagine. I always say that the best part of my job as a photographer is being able to work with beautiful women all day long! First, it is always important to me to represent women in as many different “faces” as possible. I don’t believe in an ideal beauty. I’ve been all over the world and there is no ideal. Every country and ethnicity offers it’s own form of beauty and I try to remind people of that by not always having the typical “blonde bombshell” or runway model physique as my subject. The calendar was a perfect way for me to show twelve different types of beautiful women from twelve different parts of the world, from Jamaican, Puortorican, and Peruvian, to Chinese, English, and Russian. Of course, I can’t leave out the variety of lovely home-grown Americans I used! Besides incorporating so many ethnicities, the calendar was challenging because period photography has its own set of issues to consider and tackle. It is critical to find the right model for each decade. Makeup artists and hair stylists, as amazing as they are, can only do so much. The models had to have the right hair, lips, body, and facial bone structure indicative for the time they were evoking. For example, a 1920’s flapper girl had an elfish and androgynous quality, with a slender petite face and body, and extremely short hair, while a woman from the 1950’s is more glamorous and voluptuous with fuller, wavier hair.

CIGARWISE:

What about the costumes and the makeup and hair? That aspect alone seems like a challenge in itself.

GIOVANNI:

The costumes were especially fun to research and recreate, as well as the makeup. Over the years, I've collected a small library of fashion history and makeup books which always help me out with researching specific periods, or allow me to expand on a look or style from a certain time or designer. The books were thus obviously invaluable in producing the cigar calendar. For the vintage clothing used, I raided some vintage clothing shops in Hollywood as well as the closets of some of my designer and model friends who have spectacular collections. I was also extremely fortunate to have worked with some exceptionally talented makeup artists and hair stylists here in L.A. who did a fantastic job in bringing out the essence of each decade in using the specific model chosen as their canvas. It was always amazing for me to watch the process of transformation. By the time I began shooting the first roll of film, I felt like I was actually in that period!

CIGARWISE:

Overall, how do you rate the experience of shooting and producing the 2005 Cigar Calendar?

GIOVANNI:

Absolutely amazing. Perhaps one of the most challenging and rewarding experiences of my photography career thus far. I truly had a wonderful time with Greg, the models, the makeup artists and hair stylists, and the many other people who were involved every step of the way. Of course, like any artistic endeavor, especially one of this magnitude and ambition, you always have to deal with setbacks and frustrations, but that is all part of the process. Overall, the entire experience has been fantastic for both Greg and I, and we are already gearing up to begin production on the 2006 calendar, which we are very excited about. The concept is still a secret, but I *can* tell you we are taking everything to the next level. Upwards and onwards!"

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