

## Advertising and the Republic of Letters

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*Towards the end of the 19th century, in Colombia, men of letters dominated the cultural and political world, so it can be said that this country was the Republic of Letters. However, the economic and social changes that occurred with the turn of the century allowed new groups, such as entrepreneurs, to begin disputing political power, and for this, the use of images rather than words was decisive.*

*This article analyzes what happened to letters and images when they functioned simultaneously in the 1920s, taking the Antioquia case as a reference. There, Humberto Chaves, a master painter who also worked as a graphic designer and advertiser, was responsible for creating images of the modern, which the entrepreneurs sought to use to dominate both the market and the national political sphere.*

*Keywords: Humberto Chaves, Antioquia, Colombia, Republic of Letters, writers, entrepreneurs, censorship, image, text, advertising, brand, twentieth century, modernity, newspapers*

### INTRODUCTION

Graphic advertising in Antioquia quickly acquired a legal age in the twenties, so that it became an alternative way of communicating in a country that can well be called the Republic of Letters, where writing was the action that intellectuals valued as a civilizing action to save the people from their ignorance, but also, the means to position themselves socially and economically, sometimes in an almost strictly mercantilist environment as in the case of Antioquia.

It is no exaggeration to say that grammar as a validating discourse of cultural supremacy was also a weapon in the political struggle, to the point that "grammatical intellectuals" are recognized as the protagonists of Colombian politics in the late nineteenth century. Rafael Núñez for example, qualified in the case of Antioquia by the interest in geography, natural sciences and medicine as demonstrated by the physician Manuel Uribe Ángel. Politics was fought with both sword and pen: José María Vargas Vila, who was exiled for his literary work, pointed out with great acuity:

“In a death sentence, he argues punctuation more fiercely than the offense; during his government (he refers to the writer Miguel Antonio Caro) the liberals had the unfortunate consolation of being shot with all the grammatical laws for lack of other laws”.<sup>1</sup>

With more humble origins, painters and draftsmen were undoubtedly the protagonists of the creation of advertising images which, unlike the illustration of literary text, was about merging image and text with

other more pragmatic purposes. Without being part of these enlightened groups committed to politics, artists occupied a place in the intellectual life of Medellín in the 1920s.

The writer and his work are an inseparable duo; in the same way, in the case of Antioquia, there was an author advertising and the question is whether these protagonists, who came from the world of plastic arts, overcame the restrictions that were still identified for intellectuals in the times of the liberal republic, between 1930 and 1946. An analogy is generated between the writer and his work and the advertiser and his images that leads to a comparison, and it becomes necessary to understand whether the latter was subjected to the same pressures as the word in the Republic of Letters.

### **Colombia or the Republic of Letters**

If it is taken into consideration that the professionalization of the writer in Colombia was a slow process that occurred between 1940 and 1960, it is understood that this profession required either personal wealth and/or sponsorship, which was defined by ideological tendencies, especially partisan, and finally, it was also a search for recognition of the author as a person, from which some advantages were derived to be a writer: the symbolic recognition allowed the author to enter an elite of educated men, especially important if he came from circles outside the elites:

“In the Colombian society of the 1930s and 1940s, educated men, legitimate representatives of literate culture, tended to do well, especially when, in addition to being educated, they were public men, political men: they received honors, praise and better salaries than most of their fellow citizens, they wore suits, traveled to distant countries, drank wine and tea. And they wrote, and published, and promoted cultural diffusion, because they also believed in their civilizing mission: to raise the cultural level of the people, to enhance the name of the homeland, to redeem the masses”.<sup>2</sup>

If literature were considered important as a means of redeeming the people, they had in any case a moralizing intention because: What is civilizing other than changing behaviors?

Apart from preserving and spreading the Christian faith and the orientation of the Catholic Church, which pontificated about the divine, but above all about the human, or, as a way of promoting civic virtues, it did not always coincide with party ideologies. For example, if liberalism changed its position towards the clergy after the Thousand Days War, its position was sometimes more conservative than that of the party itself, or, when the liberal republic arose in 1930, the need for sponsorship limited literary freedom and modernization, even though it was understood what it meant to be an autonomous intellectual critical of institutions.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond the work itself, there is the environment that makes it possible, the author as the recognized main actor and the public as judge; in the Colombian case it is very enlightening to understand what it was that allowed certain authors and their works to achieve recognition, in a world of works and authors that ultimately remained unpublished and unknown, which allows us to affirm that it was not only the literary quality but a set of external factors that defined the literary space that today we recognize with a national scope.

Creating completely unprecedented conditions, the advent of advertising generated a new field of interaction, no longer between the reader and the author, but between the consumer and the product, always with the intermediation of the advertiser. Are there any parallels between the world of letters and the world of images?

### **Advertising and Sponsorship**

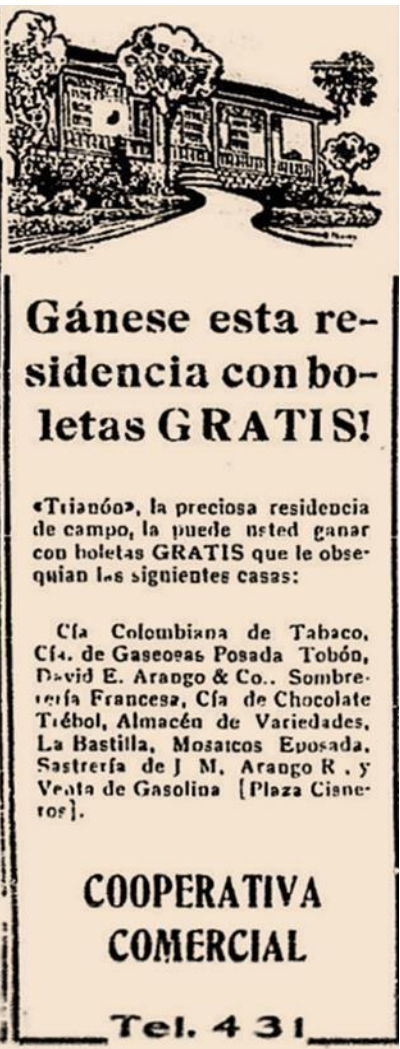
Can we talk about sponsorship in the world of advertising? Currently, the concentration of advertising companies and the oligopoly of a few firms controlling the demand for advertising has allowed the press to be censored, withdrawing advertising from those publications that do not follow economic or political interests, and for this reason it is said that the oligopolistic power limits the autonomy of the press, and that is why the independent press needs patrons. In contrast to this possibility, many entrepreneurs and many

publications would allow the circulation of advertisements according to the needs of each advertiser, and this would be advantageous to the development of advertising as a profession. In the case of Antioquia, a before and after story can be told about the circulation of advertising images.

Undoubtedly, an article by Alejandro Lopez (1910), called attention to the lack of consumption in industry and commerce due to the negligent attitudes of merchants, who did not advertise their products because they believed that the attitude was to wait for buyers, sitting at the door of the store.

While this was the conception regarding commerce, local advertising was limited to text ads telling the novelties of the inventory, while graphic advertising was limited and referred to foreign products with foreign illustrations. On the publications side, the existence of sponsorship made it possible to draw on the support of co-supporters, without having to attend to the existence of a publication through paid advertising. This scenario changed completely in the 1920s.

**TABLE 1**

 <p><b>Gánese esta residencia con boletas GRATIS!</b></p> <p>«Triunfo», la preciosa residencia de campo, la puede usted ganar con boletas GRATIS que le obsequian las siguientes casas:</p> <p>Cía Colombiana de Tabaco, Cía. de Gaseosas Posada Tobón, David E. Arango &amp; Co., Sombretería Francesa, Cía de Chocolate Triébol, Almacén de Variedades, La Bastilla, Mosaicos Eposada, Sastrería de J M. Arango R. y Venta de Gasolina [Plaza Cisneros].</p> <p><b>COOPERATIVA COMERCIAL</b></p> <p>Tel. 4 31</p>	<p><b>Humberto Chaves</b>          Advertisement for the <i>Cooperativa Comercial</i> published in <i>El Colombiano</i> on September 3, 1924.</p> <p>This Cooperative was a union of businessmen to promote their products through raffles. This strategy was new at the time and contrasted with the advertising apathy of companies such as Coltejer, which saw a secure market for its fabrics.</p>
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Advertising emerged as a profession in Antioquia from the hand of the emerging companies founded in the early twenties (Coltabaco, Nacional de Chocolates), and not from the companies that had been founded at the beginning of the century (Coltejer or Cervecería Antioqueña, for example), and as companies that emerged for the mass production of goods they needed advertising to open space for their products and

create their consumers; they were so aware of this that on behalf of each firm or through temporary alliances like the Cooperativa Comercial, they started systematic advertising campaigns, varying the advertisements according to the publication, and for this reason painters like Humberto Chaves or Luis Eduardo Vieco, as well as cartoonists like Miguel Ángel del Río, Ricardo Rendón or Pepe Mexía, found a new space for professional projection. See Table 1.


In line with the needs of the supply and the need to change consumption patterns, publishing companies began to emerge that were totally dependent on the advertising they were able to sell, just in the 1920s when wealth not only increased, but also reached a larger part of the population at the same time.

And if in the literary world poetry played an important role and the style was bombastic, in home-made advertising it was the direct and convincing message that mattered; it was no longer the Parnassus that awarded the laurels, but the simple and plain response of the public that increased profits. Thus, since the 1920s, at least in Antioquia, the beautiful and the sublime occupied the pages next to the image, a product of that other pragmatic vision, which had to be modern and convincing, novel and even irreverent, and which in some way undermined the established order, especially in relation to society and religious values.

For the public of the twenties, it was not a sin to see a woman in a bathing suit if she was in the advertisement or in the cinema, -which together with illustration was the vehicle of modernization-, but the local woman who appeared in this way received the full weight of the accusation. This schizophrenia was what allowed the advance of advertising individualistic values where the consumer was the center of attention, the product and the manufacturer of the signs of progress, and while the view passed under the censorship, the habit of communion was not abandoned.

Several examples can illustrate this duality, since appeals to morality coexisted in newspapers such as *La Defensa*, next to the advertisement that talked about "secret diseases", see Table 2, or the nicely illustrated beer bottles next to the campaign against the consumption of liquor, or in the women's publication *Letras y Encajes* there were long discussions about whether it was right for women to smoke, while the back cover was occupied over the years by the *Pielroja* brand, which showed female models who passed for modern women precisely because they chose the right cigarette to smoke.

TABLE 2

	<p>Humberto Chaves Advertisement to "secretly cure" the "secret diseases" of men.</p> <p>May 15, 1926 - <i>The Defense</i></p>
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This aspect was evident enough that the press understood that its ideological or partisan affiliation did not matter, since in order to survive it was necessary to admit and promote eye-catching, differentiated publicity, with measurable effects, if they did not want to undergo the authority of the censors. In this sense,

the press, thanks to advertising and publicists as interpreters of the situation, moved towards its autonomy long before writers managed to make their art a recognized and well-paid profession.

### Advertisers in the 1920s

Advertising became important to the artist, as it was to the advertiser and the public, even if the identity of the advertiser was not obvious. Although it was customary for advertisements not to be signed by the artist, starting in the 1920s at least two master painters, Humberto Chaves and Luis Eduardo Vieco, broke this silence, and thanks to this it has been possible to reconstruct the time series of advertising in Antioquia for those years.

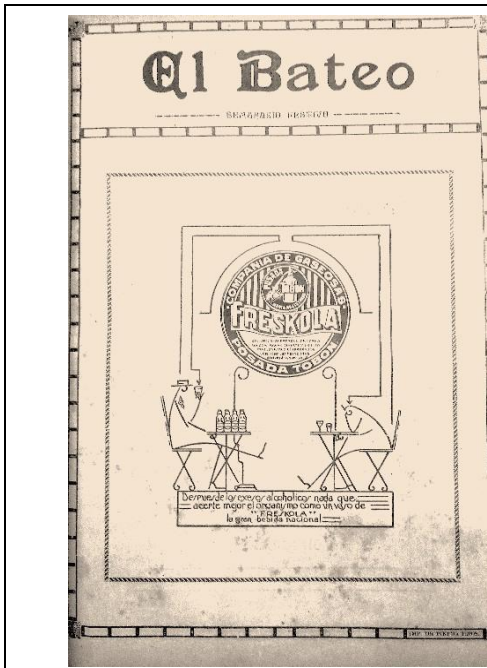
Regarding Humberto Chaves, it was a real privilege for the advertising companies to have the most recognized painter of the moment, portraitist and professor, who assumed advertising as part of his art; it is known that he was part of the group of artists who accompanied the *Panidas* in 1915, and other sources relate him to the intellectual world and to characters such as *León Zafir* who was director of the newspaper *El Herald de Antioquia*, so it can be deduced that he participated in the intellectual life of the city. Meanwhile, Luis Eduardo Vieco, who belonged to a well-known family of writers and musicians, ventured into the advertising business as owner, draftsman and editor of the *Vieco Workshop*.

At the image level, artists as different as Humberto Chaves, Pepe Mexía or Ricardo Rendón, who developed their ideas for a product such as the *Frescola* soda of the advertiser Posada y Tobón, competed; other names such as Miguel Ángel del Río or Alberto Villa and José Posada were cartoonists and caricaturists. The modality was to contract the advertisement, and the intermediary would get several proposals to decide the final one; the artists were not linked to the companies, and worked in other areas such as painting, architecture, or in the case of Rendón as director of his own advertising agency based in Bogota. This is the reason for the multiplicity of approaches for the same product, since the personality of the artist was more important than the product's identity, as can be seen in Chart 3. It was only after 1930 that illustration became functionally tied to the brand identity, and in this construction a recognized case was precisely that of Humberto Chaves for Cruz and other chocolates of the *Compañía Nacional de Chocolates* (National Chocolate Company).

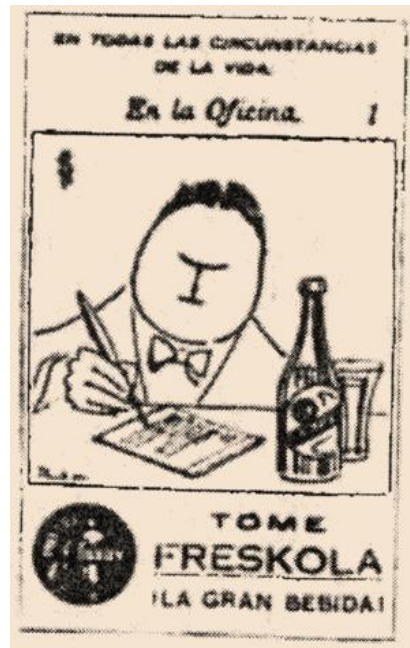
Another aspect to highlight is that whether by choice or necessity, this group of artists who were master painters challenged the prejudice that considered advertising a degrading activity for a true painter, with the understanding that true art was contemplative and not pragmatic. In the case of the master Chaves, who did not belong to the elite, advertising provided him with material resources, but he never considered it his main artistic activity, which did not prevent the excellence of his art from also giving excellent examples of advertising illustration.

The differences in style were obvious, hence the preference for one or the other artist depending on the publication, as in this example of chart three, where the sober and realistic style of Chaves is confronted with the minimalist and caricature style of Rendón or Pepe Mexía, or in the case of chart four, where the ads appeared simultaneously and the same in their text, but well differentiated in the quality of the drawing, this time between Chaves and Alberto Villa. The confrontation was always decided in favor of the aesthetics of Humberto Chaves, who became the exclusive advertiser for important companies such as *Cervecería Libertad* or *Nacional de Chocolates*.

TABLE 3



Pepe Mexía  
 – s.f. – *El Bateo*  
 Archive Chaves Vive!



Ricardo Rendón  
 -February 3, 1925  
*The Colombian* -Archive Chaves Vive!



Humberto Chaves-  
*La Defensa* - April 18, 1924 Archive Chaves Vive!

Advertising in Antioquia in the twenties was nurtured by the talent of renowned artists, painters such as Humberto Chaves and Luis Eduardo Vieco, cartoonists such as Pepe Mexía, Ricardo Rendón or Miguel Ángel del Río.

Along with *El Bateo*, fully illustrated with Caricatures, publications with different graphic concepts circulated, such as *La Defensa* and *El Heraldo de Antioquia*, among others.

TABLE 4



The direct inspection of newspapers and magazines of the time allow us to conclude that the master Humberto Chaves came to develop his own advertising universe like no other publicist, the appearance of his advertisements was a constant in the twenties. This is proof of the efficiency of his way of communicating, which integrated international graphic trends with local communicative needs, and this was understood by the companies when they chose his advertisements where the story of the product was told in the midst of people's daily life, the way of consuming was illustrated and consumers were called to identify themselves unreservedly with the novelty.

### A Special Case

The collaboration of Ricardo Rendón as illustrator of the magazine *Panidas*, of brief appearance in 1915, has been frequently mentioned, but the collaboration between men of letters and painters had already taken place in the magazine *Lectura y Arte* (1903-1906) where Francisco Antonio Cano and Gabriel Montoya illustrated the literary novelties of the moment, the same happened later with the magazine *Sábado* between 1922 and 1923 with other painters such as Humberto Chaves or Luis Eduardo Vieco, who illustrated the first stories of writers such as Adel López Gómez or José Restrepo Jaramillo.

But in the *Republic of Letters* at the time of the consolidation of advertising, there was a synergy between journalists and publicists, according to the report given to us by Francisco Javier Escobar, regarding the portrait of *León Zafir* by Humberto Chaves (1928):

**FIGURE 1**



"Chaves did not do just any portrait of him, he represented León Zafir with an overwhelming personality and security, sitting intimately in his office space, and doing what he liked to do most: smoking, reading and admiring women, for that reason he was also known as "The Poet of Women."

This portrait was taken when the artist Humberto Chaves Cuervo not only began to teach at the recently inaugurated Palace of Fine Arts in Medellín, but also when he was emerging as the most talented and sought after publicist in the city. It was there that he came into contact with the editor-in-chief of the important newspaper *El Heraldo de Antioquia*, Mr. *León Zafir* [Pablo Emilio Restrepo López]. By that time he was not only managing this newspaper at the age of 28, but he was also beginning to write what would become his first books".

Correspondence. Francisco Javier Escobar.

## **CONCLUSION**

Given the weight that literature has historically had over other artistic expressions, our country can be called the *Republic of Letters* and the question arises as to what happened to letters and images when they operated simultaneously in the twenties of the twentieth century.

In the field of graphic image, it can be said that external factors such as the economic situation in Antioquia and the arrival of companies that needed modern advertising to sell their products, added to the talent and capacity of local artists who responded to the challenge of forming consumers for local companies.

Economic autonomy, but above all aesthetic autonomy, allows us to speak of an author's advertising where a parallel can be established with the writer and his work. Compared to the writers, advertising more



quickly acclimated the modern visions carried by products, brands and even the manufacturing facilities themselves, since not only the words but their fusion with the image could present the modern, evading censorship. Undoubtedly, the first Antioquian advertisers circumvented censorship and overcame the environment that would have forced them to create advertisements of His Excellency Monsignor Caicedo recommending the use of a laxative.

Thus, during the *Republic of Letters*, in Antioquia in the 1920s, the image had a development and a growing modernizing influence, to the point of ensuring an autonomy to visual artists well in advance of that which would be achieved by the writers decades later.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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## ENDNOTES

1. Vargas Vila citado por Deas, Malcon (2006) *Del poder y la gramática y otros ensayos sobre historia, política y literatura colombianas*. Bogotá. Taurus. P.131  
Botero Bernal, Andrés (2010) *Saberes y poderes. Los grupos intelectuales en Colombia durante el siglo XIX y la primera mitad del siglo XX*. En: Domínguez Gómez, Eduardo (Dir.) (2010) *Todos somos historia*. Medellín. Canal Universitario Universidad de Antioquia. Tomo 1. p.345.
2. Van der Huck, Felipe (2020). *La literatura como oficio en Colombia 1930-1946*. Cali. Icesi. p.11
3. Van Der Huck (2020), pp.182 - 183

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