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Sign Making: A Brotherhood of an Art?

It is always the little things that we as people do not think twice about. It could be things we see, hear, or anything of the sort. What if we took a moment to slow down and really look at what is around us? Do we really take the time to look if we are looking for a specific place, or do we rely on the internet to get us to where we need to go? Many people do not even notice the thousands of signs surrounding them every day. It could be a McDonald's sign that no one thinks twice about. How did it get there? How was it made? Why is it electric instead of hand painted? Who made it? Not many people actually stop to think about things like this.

For thousands of years signs have been helping individuals find places they are looking for. They go back as far as when early civilizations began to venture beyond their immediate environment. (Nystrom 1978) Signs were not only used for advertising. Back in the days when segregation was a major issue, signs were everywhere. The majority of these signs said WHITE ONLY or made it very clear which restroom was for whites and which restroom was for colored people. (Abel, 2008)



It is believed that signs used for advertising by retailers began early in the eighteenth century. Those early signs were typically small and made out of whatever material could be found to make them out of. They made signs out of wood, stone, or metal. It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that electric signs started to show their bright, glowing faces. (Nystrom, 1978)

Since the nineteen twenties, the neon glow and shapes of electric signs have not changed much. In their heyday they were “very much a symbol of modernism.” The neon signs were a symbol of the new age, the Jazz Age, the new era that was sweeping the country. They were said to have inspired passion. However, by the nineteen seventies, neon signs were almost dead. The people who were capable and skilled to wire signs and bend glass were beginning to retire without anyone to follow after them that knew the trade. These signs were almost completely died out by 1982 when Holiday Inn got rid of the signature “Great Sign” and replaced it with a plastic green box. Later on in the nineteen eighties the neon signs were back with a vengeance. (Postrel, 2006)

Whether we stop to think about it or not, we all have an opinion or a thought about signs that we see on a daily basis. Signs like McDonalds, as I mentioned early are “universal. Everyone knows the sign and to me it symbolizes damn good food.” This is the response I got from a gentleman named Walker Norvell when I asked him if he had a favorite sign. He had to really stop and think for a moment about that. He said that he “normally does not pay attention to signs around him unless he is not driving.”



I also asked this man if he thought that electric signs were more appealing than hand painted signs. He responded with, “Electric signs are more appealing because they can be seen from farther away.” However, the other three people that I spoke to and asked this same question to had a different opinion. All three people told me that hand painted signs are more “unique” (Tiffany), “unique because the artist took the time and effort to create it” (Daniel), and “appealing because they show the artist’s creativity more than an electric sign that just has the name of a business on it.” (Mallory) When I asked Tiffany and Mallory the same question “Are signs important to you?” I was surprised to find that they both use signs as landmarks. They both informed me that they “would get lost without them.” Out of the four people I spoke to, only Daniel said that he pays attention to signs if they grab his attention.

Individuals may pay attention to signs, but how many of them consider what goes on behind the scenes? Who stops to think about the people who make the signs and what kind of people they might be? David Kellems is a man that has been a sign painter for the majority of his life. From the time he was in his late teens until this present time he has been a professional sign maker. He is also part of an online forum of sign makers called Signs101. This forum shows how much of a “Brotherhood of an Art” sign making really is. They are a tight knit community all sharing a common interest, but they live in places all over the world. The front page of this sign forum says “Welcome to Signs101! We are a community of professional sign makers and others interested in our craft.” Sign makers have a culture all their own. David posted some questions on this sign forum to get more insight into the culture of these people who call themselves sign makers. From the answers posted, it was made clear that the majority of sign makers started out as hand painters and have adapted to the changing industry and demands for different kinds of

signs in today's society. It is not very often that you see a hand painted sign anymore. The people on this forum who are very active members in keeping up with the sign community have been sign makers for upwards of twenty years. When asked which they preferred, hand painted/vinyl or electric signs, many of them preferred hand painted. This is understandable because the majority of them began their sign making careers as hand painters of signs. They feel as though they can express their creative side more through hand painting a sign than they can by designing an electric sign that shows no real talent at all. A man who refers to himself as "Nelson Newbie" said that asking whether one prefers hand painted/vinyl signs over electric signs is "like asking if one rides the bus to school or takes their lunch." He says that "they are each an excellent medium in their own right but have nothing in common except that they are both sign types. In all possible combinations, I prefer a well done, effective sign over one that isn't.."

Every sign maker that responded to the question of "What can you tell me about the culture of sign makers?" had a very intriguing answer. Every answer was thrown out, from sign makers being skilled craftsman to sign makers being "bohemian counter culture types, fellow musicians, fringe members of society, bikers, road dogs, and long hair pacifists...as well as survivalists, gun enthusiasts, and motor heads.." This answer came from a man who refers to himself as iSign. A member named Gino believes that the sign culture is rapidly changing for the worst. He says, "The culture of days past was a thriving work force of dedicated skilled craftsman for the most part that were constantly learning new avenues of the trade. There was a goal and everyone aimed towards that goal of becoming successful and happy. Today's goal seems much different as it has become more of a numbers game and less about the talent involved. This has nothing to do with hand-painting capabilities vs. computer generated things. Not about old vs. new. It's all about outdoing the other guy, with next to no background other

than in computers. The camaraderie doesn't seem to be there unless you have some old-timers around. This seems to be an observation of any trade....where the young don't seem to comprehend the need for sticking together through thick and thin and still be friends, competitors and yet function. The sign trade has definitely changed..." Over the years, the sign trade has gone from being based on skill to being based on who believes they can out-do the "other guy". The younger generation of sign makers has no respect for the talent and skill of the older generation of sign makers.



"Nelson Newbie's" take on the culture of the sign makers is that "If you crossed a paint artist with a song writer, the hybrid offspring would be a sign maker. Add a business person to the woodpile and you will have a successful sign maker." A woman on the forum named Marlene said, "Since I have started, more women have been getting into this type of work. Sign people are generally a friendly bunch and at one time, would welcome you into their shops if you

were visiting the area. Not so sure now. A lot of sign makers did business with a hand shake but in recent years are more businesslike.”

This further shows that the “brotherhood” of the art of sign making is not as much of a brotherhood as it used to be. The older generation that makes up the majority of the members on the sign forum keeps the brotherhood close and together like in the early days of sign making. The younger generation seems to be rapidly changing the culture of the sign community. A member named “petrosgraphics” said, “The culture of sign makers has changed over the years, but what has not.” He said that when he first started out you had to learn everything related to making signs, and the older guys working in the shops were full of knowledge. If you needed anything there was no hesitation on anyone’s part to help out or share a few ideas. These days most of the people working in the sign shops will wave (if you’re lucky) or they will not even stop to say hello.

Signs are very important in our society today. Things around us are constantly changing. New buildings are popping up everywhere. These buildings are becoming businesses that need signs in order to advertise what they are. I believe signs are needed simply because we need to know what building is what. If there were no signs, someone could walk into a McDonald’s looking for a hammer because they did not know that it was a restaurant and not a hardware store. Just from driving around and looking, it is obvious that hand painted signs are dying out. The majority of the signs these days are electric. They are plastic boxes with lettering on the front and back and a light on the inside. There are still a few sign painters out there who will continue to only make hand painted signs, and those are the ones keeping the old culture of sign makers alive.

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