

Drum machines have no soul¹: The enduring appeal of hand-painted signs

“If you have a good-looking storefront and you take pride in it, you’ll attract more customers... Business owners see them and want them. They can feel the power of a hand-painted sign.” – Sean Barton in *Sign Painters*

Painting in the Past

100,000 years ago, people in South Africa were painting with red and yellow ochre pigments mixed in abalone shells, using slender pieces of dog or wolf bone. What they were painting on is unknown as none of their creations have survived, but they may have been decorating their bodies, or perhaps animal hides. What have survived are their primitive painting kits, which were recently found inside the Blombos Caves on the Southern Cape.

The Blombos painting kits provide the earliest record of our species’ desire to make marks and communicate through them; these being defining aspects of humanity itself. The practice then appears to have followed the migration of humans out of Africa, with cave paintings found in all four corners of the world, including examples from 30,000 years ago in the Ardèche, France, and almost 40,000 years in Indonesia.

This evidence of prehistoric paintwork challenges the common quip that sign painting is the *second* oldest profession in the world. However, with some of the earliest known commercial work advertising brothels in Pompeii, there is probably something of the chicken and the egg in this chronology of professions.

Coming of Age

Painting in all its guises has experienced significant change since the Roman era, and the painting of signs is no different. The history of the craft varies across geographies but relatively recent influences in the West have been industrialisation and increased public literacy.

The urbanisation that the industrial revolution brought led to increased demand for signage. This was driven by the need to differentiate competing shops on busy high streets², while the advent of packaged and branded goods brought a new category of client to the sign painter, or sign firm.

The 19th Century then saw huge changes to public education policy on both sides of the Atlantic, with the result that far more people could read. This led to a shift from pictorial or symbolic signage, towards the increased prominence of text and lettering. A result of this in the UK was the adoption of sign *writer* as opposed to sign *painter* which endures to this day.

The scale of this booming industry was exemplified by Brilliant Signs, a British company founded in 1888. By the early 20th Century they were operating around the world and from a

¹ Credit: Nick Barber in *Sign Painters* (the movie)

² Main streets outside of UK

purpose-built three-acre factory at home in London. While their work encompassed myriad types of signage, they would have employed numerous sign painters.

Bust & Boom

The last 100 years have seen the industry in various stages of decline, and resurgence. First, printed billboards and neon spectaculars eclipsed the widespread use of large-format painted signs for brand advertising. Then, on the high street, new technologies and materials, including moulded plastics and illuminated signs, all but did for the sign painter's livelihood, before the introduction of vinyl plotters in the 1980s took away some of the last crumbs.

After a period in the doldrums, the first part of the 21st Century has seen an increasing demand for hand-painted signs. Independent retailers and multi-national corporations alike are once again commissioning large volumes of work. Those that never hung up their brushes are busier than ever, while a new generation are hungry to learn the skills in the absence of access to education and apprenticeships. Even painted billboards are back, with company's such as New York's Colossal Media commanding client lists that would be the envy of any Maddison Avenue advertising agency.

Beauty & Humanity

It is tempting to say that this recent resurgence is simply the cyclical nature of fashion in operation. However, this fails to appreciate something fundamental about hand-painted signs; something that appears to have been overlooked in the rush towards modernism and cost-cutting in the second half of the 20th Century. In the words of Kevin Corrigan Kearns, "Handwritten signs evoke life, humanity, spontaneity." Glenn Adamson (in *Sign Painters*) describes them as "joyful, expressive, and utterly unique."

These descriptions point to the character that comes from being hand-painted and the direct, human connection formed with the viewer through the medium of the sign. It is akin to the difference between receiving a soulless windowed envelope containing a bank statement and a hand-addressed letter. It's obvious which one you want to open first, and the same applies to the shops we choose to visit.

These principles also apply at a 'meta' level, where signage taken *en masse* has a huge bearing on the aesthetic of a given street, district or town. Kevin Corrigan Kearns talks of a "honky-tonk mix of gaudy, dehumanised facades" and passers-by being "visually brutalised" by them, while Alan Bartram refers to "ubiquitous, characterless, plastic signs."

In contrast, the prolific work of a single sign painter in an area brings unity, charm, and even calm to that place. The late Dublin sign painter Kevin Freeney believed that he, and his peers, "added to the beauty and character of the city", and it's hard to disagree. Likewise, the *fileteadores* of Buenos Aires have all but branded the city with their distinctive *Fileteado Porteño* style, as have the masters of Amsterdam's fabulous 'curly letter'.

Even in the case of less-than-perfect work, all may not be lost according to Tony Lewery,

"The signwriters' hand-painted letters, however good or bad, are at least infinitely variable to suit any space or any colour scheme. This possible variation does not of

course guarantee a good sign, but it does make it an individual creation. Interesting failures are perhaps preferable to bland acceptability spreading everywhere.”

There is no doubt that the subject of this book, Mississippi (aka Brush Master), has had a profound impact on the visual aesthetic of Indianapolis. The prolific nature of his work, despite much being lost over time, stamps his signature onto the city, and probably others that his travels have taken him to.

Documenting the Craft

Given the significant contribution that sign painters have made to the appearance of towns and cities around the world, they lag behind other crafts in terms of the documentation of their lives. The ephemeral nature of their work also means that this tends to survive by accident, rather than purposeful preservation. At the extreme end of this neglect are the showcard and ticket writers whose work might only be used for a matter of days before being discarded. This contrasts with the preservation of other lettering disciplines such as calligraphy on important documents, and letter carving on headstones.

John Nash relates that it is “the least fashionable of the lettering arts”, and that William Sharpington insisted on being referred to as a ‘lettering artist’ rather than a signwriter. There are aspects of class, and even snobbery, at play here, with sign painting traditionally being affiliated with the building and decorating trades, albeit a highly skilled specialism within these.

As with the resurgence in the craft more generally, there is now a greater effort to understand its history, and to celebrate its practitioners, both past and present. A high-profile contribution to this was made by the book and feature-length movie, *Sign Painters*. Others, such as Oliver Linke’s *Blaschke* profile the work of individual craftspeople, while *The Curly Letter of Amsterdam* focuses on the vernacular style of a particular city. Kyle Long’s recording of the Brush Master’s work in Indianapolis adds to this body of work, as has my own more generic documentation of fading ‘ghost’ signs from around the world, and those of Kratie, Cambodia, in particular.

Life on the Brush

Regardless of how they may have been perceived by the society around them, sign painters tend to agree that theirs is a relatively good lot. William Sutherland in 1860 wrote that, “Any man having a good practical knowledge of Sign Writing may get a good living in almost any part of the civilised world.” This sentiment has been echoed by many since then, including Syl Ehr in 1957 talking of “the fun, the pride and satisfaction of being able to make a living at creative, worthwhile art.”

More recent accounts in *Sign Painters* include similar comments and others relating to the actual practice of the craft: “I’ve got one of the best jobs around – the change of scenery, the autonomy, the appreciation” (Nick Barber); “There is a visceral attachment to working by hand... It seems like a computer deprives you of that basic contemplative groove that you get into when you work.” (Mark Oatis). Sign painters put their heart and soul into their work and, as with other crafts, the process of creation and mastery of a skill bring innate satisfaction.

Roberts, S., 2018, *Drum machines have no soul: The Enduring appeal of hand-painted signs*, In: Hyatt, S. (Ed) [Brush Master](#). Chicago: Half Letter Press. ISBN: 978-1-7320514-0-9.

There is also an inherent pride in one's work with Gary Martin taking pleasure in the visual influence he has had on the streets of Austin TX. Josh Luke concurs, seeing "sign painting as a way to positively affect the visual landscape of my city". The trade can be tough, physical, and obviously subject to the ever-changing weather but, on balance, those that pursue a career in the business derive an over-riding satisfaction from it.

Onto the Next Sign

When asked for his favourite piece of work, Mike Meyer always says "the next sign", signalling both his passion for the craft, and his optimism that the work will keep coming. He is one of those that never dropped the brush entirely, and has embraced the notion that "practicing a skill can be a whole way of life" (Glenn Adamson in *Sign Painters*).

With younger sign painters now entering the anarchic international network of Letterheads, the movement has been reinvigorated. Skills are being passed along to the next generation and, in time, to the one after that. There is renewed optimism in the air, and the craft is definitely having something of a purple patch. And this time, with digital and other documentation, we hopefully won't need to go digging around in caves to find evidence of the work to come in the next 100,000 years.

Further Reading

- Blaschke (Linke, 2013)
- Brushes with Greatness, (Roberts, Enright & Hackett, 2018, in *TypeNotes*, Issue 2)
- Dublin's Vanishing Craftsmen (Kearns, 1986)
- Classifying Signs (Leeson, 2014, in *The Recorder*, Issue 1)
- Fascia Lettering (Bartram, 1978)
- Fileteado Porteño – past and present (Ferrari, 2016, on *Eye* blog)
- Hand-Painted Signs of Kratie (Roberts, 2012)
- Sign Painters (Levine & Macon, 2013)
- Signpainters Don't Read Signs (Ehr, 1957)
- Signwritten Art (Lewery, 1989)
- The Curly Letter of Amsterdam (Espinoza & Becker, 2015)
- The Palace of Signs (Smith, 1991)
- Writing the City (Roberts & Krüper, 2015, in *Eye* No.90 Vol.23)

Video

- Man with a Brush (2015)
- Sign Painters (2013)
- When Better Letters Met Cliff Headford (2016)