



Regarding Design

BY MARK OATIS

Jerry Albright

The inspiration behind the Letterhead movement.

He taught the school for nothing, wanting only to improve the craft. He was different from the old, blowhard journeymen I had met. He was different from the crazy young design carnivores in town. His designs contained neither too much, nor too little. His designs were just. Four years with Jerry changed everything.

—Jon Nelson

SIX YEARS AGO, I encountered an old friend at a gathering of design enthusiasts. He's a seasoned craftsman of the old school and like myself, a graduate of the Union Apprenticeship Program.

We hadn't met for ages, and we talked of many things. As we parted, he said, "I read that column you write, and it's usually pretty good." I started to thank him, but he cut me off and added, "But it won't amount to much unless you tell about Jerry, you know. He's why we're here."

When somebody straightens you out, you ought to try to rectify the situation. And

I intend to do so, herewith, by making sure you know Jerry Albright, and that you know what he means to us.

I hasten to insist that this is no misty-eyed tribute or soft remembrance. Jerry Albright is, among many other things, a blood and guts, crackerjack sign painter, who can letter better (and faster) at the age of 80 than anybody I know. And I know a whole bunch of people.

Jerry Albright, simply put, is the teacher to whom many dozens of Rocky Mountain sign professionals owe our attitude about our work, and by extension, ourselves. He also may be the primary catalyst that sparked the Letterhead movement — I believe that's the truth.

But I knew I couldn't tell the tale without going to the source, and I was thrilled when Jerry agreed, uncharacteristically, to spend a few hours taking about himself. I contacted several of Jerry's former students too, to try and flesh out a story.

I caught up with Jerry at his home in Denver. It's a comfortable house that looks much like the others on the block. Inside, however, Jerry's place is decidedly out of the ordinary.

On the walls hang paintings, etchings, carvings and specimens of every variety; each one intriguing and all produced by him. But it's the walls themselves that capture your attention first. Subtle, sinuous embellishments appear at every glance.

Deadly perfect pinstripes trim the kitchen cabinets. Switch plates are framed

by delicate florals; a symmetrical mandala adorns the bathroom ceiling. The library shelves are stuffed with volumes on botany, birds, travel, and of course, art.

He was relaxing at the tail end of this year's grueling two-month stint at Denver's National Western Stock Show where, with colleague Mike Author, he paints cattle pen signs, banners, vehicles, show cards and a ton of 4x8 panels, most dispatched in an hour or two.

The conversation revved up gradually, an analogy to the easy, focused manner that typifies Jerry's personality.

"I could've done twice as much," he says, matter-of-factly. "You look back and you realize what you did by yourself, this and that, and you think, 'that's good,' but really, you know you could've done twice that much."

Jerry gently squelches my attempt to protest this surprising statement, then begins talking about his professional beginnings in Pennsylvania.

"I went to work in a commercial shop for this hard-nosed German in Norristown, about 30 miles from Schwensville, where I grew up. He wouldn't teach you anything. It was up to you to get it, and if you couldn't, you know, it was your own problem. But I'll tell you the truth: it seems like the way I got started in a number of things I eventually got pretty good at, was by having nobody tell me. Take pinstripping, for example.

"In 1941, when I started, there was still a lot of fancy vehicle work to do. They'd say, 'Here's an order, go over to Hahn Fire Pump Company and stripe this fire engine.' You know, gold leaf, outlines, everything. And that was it. Nobody asked if I could do it or not. When you're 20, you think you can do it, I guess. I looked it up. I figured it out.



Jerry at the National Western Stock Show (in Denver). He and Mike Author produce hundreds of handmade signs for this annual show.



This Conoco board (painted during Jerry's tenure at Artcraft Sign Co.) was near my house when I was a kid. Real smoke billowed from the cigarette.

A development sign, circa 1955. "Sometimes there was no rendering of the house. They'd just want you to put something nice up there."



Larimer Square gold work. We novices toured every downtown window... "How does he make the gold stick to the glass?"

Historic wagons and cars, mostly in 23-karat gold, comprise much of Jerry's pinstripe clientele.



Appropriate work, perfectly done. Jerry's emphasis is on elegant simplicity.



The free hand showcard style that "left-handers can't master." They forgot to tell Jerry.

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Eager apprentices, shoulder-to-shoulder. Artwork adorned every surface of the old 11th Avenue shop, and the atmosphere was electric. "It was a wonderful time of my life," Jerry says.

Knockin' 'em out.
Jerry's confident,
relaxed manner at
the bench makes you
want to try.



Watercolor:
"Fresh Air and
Blue Sky".

Silver Plume,
Colo. Black and
white etching.



Nose art, World War II.

"It was that way with gold leaf work and even pictorial work. I'd had some art classes, those help you loosen up, but I learned most of everything on the job."

And here, Jerry reveals some of his later motivation for helping others:

"But if you have somebody show you how to do it right, you can save so much time. You don't have to suffer through the elimination of so many bad habits."

Following his solitary start, Jerry entered the Army Airforce at Lowry Field in Denver, and became captivated with the climate. He painted pin-up girls on planes bound for Saipan, many of which he's since run across in books on WWII nose art.

He moved to Portland, Ore. for a few years, but painting giant walls in the rain and damp weather left him longing for Mile High sunshine.

He mentions an important revelation that he had during his Portland years: the importance of lifelong practice.

"I was working with a guy on all those big walls — no patterns, everything scaled out right on the wall, lettering with lamp black and white lead. I wanted to do better than that, but I had a handicap because I was left-handed. I wanted to learn to write show cards in the traditional, artistic way — written with a sable brush. It's not natural for a left-hander; you're pushing and pulling. So I worked my butt off at home. I made a rule that I had to fill up the Sunday classified section of the paper, turned sideways, you know, to form horizontal lines, with just practice strokes. Every week, for months. And I did it. That's how I learned to letter gracefully."

"You have to practice until you're not afraid anymore. If you dread doing something, you'll just stay in a rut, doing the few things you're good at."

Sound familiar anybody?

Once back in Denver, Jerry pursued his signmaking career, and his love of art, with equal enthusiasm. He worked by turns, for grind-'em-out and creative shops receiving the deluxe assignments whenever they were available, which was often.

"If they think you can do something, the boss will take the business." Denver was growing fast and there was a lot of nice development work — shopping center and real estate construction signs.

"I painted pictures on everything. Sometimes there wasn't even a rendering to go by. They'd want you to invent something! And if there was one, you'd scale it on to the board anyway, nobody had a projector. It was great training." Once the kids were in bed, he spent his evenings downstairs pulling impressions on his homemade etching press. He spent his Saturdays painting outdoors with Waldo Love, an expert painter of museum dioramas.

It was then, he says that, "I opened up my eyes and truly began to see. Waldo would tell you to stare for five minutes, then paint for five minutes. He'd show you how your landscape greens were all wrong — he'd make you see all the other colors in there too. I worked with him in his studio, worked and worked until I got it right."

At this point, Jerry delivers the clue that allows you to understand everything, if you seize upon it.

"Anyway, sign painting was always the main thing. I was raising my family, and it gave me more enjoyment."

He expands, discussing how the precision training of lettering sometimes is a liability in art, and then, "It's all the same anyway. I've always enjoyed it all; no regrets."

That's the sentient moment, when you know you're in the presence of a rare, self-actualized individual. For Jerry Albright, the pursuit and the process are truly the goal.

He carries his calm, open demeanor because he's right there, not wishing he were somewhere else. And for an eager crop of young students, these were infectious traits indeed. In 1971, we began to see.

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Roadside rest, bound for points north. Jerry hits the highway each summer in search of new subjects to sketch—and new things to learn.

"You've got to try to describe the magic of the place, the ambience: Remember? The smell of enamel and turps wafting out the door. The radiator clanking. The walls covered with all that amazing work and some freshly made masterpiece on the bench. And Jerry catching a quick nap before class. Don't leave that out."

— Larry Polzin

The apprenticeship classes for Sign and Pictorial Painters Local #1045 were held, through his good graces, at Jerry Albright Lettering.

Jerry had gone entrepreneurial without looking back, and the late 1960s found him ensconced in a cozy storefront studio near 11th and Broadway. It's a history too convoluted to reconstruct.

Suffice it to say that several teachers and scores of eager beginners worked in his tiny basement under the umbrella of the

union program, and at least as many received instruction during the years that Jerry himself ran the school. But no matter the chronology, all who entered felt the power.

"It was a great period of my life, maybe one of the best. I couldn't wait to knock off and get ready for the students. It was the highlight of my day," Jerry muses. "There were so many of you who were anxious to learn."

The learning began on the sidewalk outside. A few smokers were grabbing a last puff, and you'd stop and chat and crunch around in the leaves and try to find out what was new.

"Wow, there's an *Art Nouveau* valance all the way across the windows — was that here last week?" "Where did he get those antique litho stones? Jeez, they must be a hundred years old." "Oh man, he carved the whole front door. I don't think I'll ever be able to do that."

But that's why you came, to study with a man who said, "Sure you can do it, just be patient."

The fertile atmosphere around Jerry's shop flourished in the innocent last days before the computer's arrival. The appreciation for (and the need to master) a perfectly rendered line of Egyptian lettering became suddenly lessened; amateurs produced in minutes the "For Sale by Owner" signs we'd struggled with for hours. And it was a bitter reality that we newly-minted journeymen would see many hard-won skills devalued, while new and foreign ones had to be learned.

For Jerry, who closed his shop on the cusp of this new era, the pain was initially acute.

"I thought it was the end of everything, and I felt glad to be retiring but bad for all my students. I didn't want to know anything about the computer. My daughters were into it, but that was enough. I had no interest in it. But once I woke up in the middle of the night, and I saw it all differently. I realized that if I still had a shop it would be small, but I'd have a computer. I'd learn how to use it to do all kinds of unusual things, really exciting stuff. It's kind of comical, isn't it, how you just change your mind like that?"

"Albright feels that a sign artist has to stay current with styles, materials and advertising trends. He always has. He says it's because the business is not static and is constantly evolving. He taught us that."

— Mike Reilly

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Things progressed from our armchair conversation into the library, there to look at the intricately crafted handmade books he assembles after each year's road trip. These amazing pieces are treasures of field drawings, paintings, maps and photos, each filled with exhaustive (and of course), masterfully executed text.

"This year I'm riding my motorcycle up to Oregon and the Cascades, then I'll ride the length of Victoria Island, all the way to Prince Rupert."

Jerry is a motorcycle enthusiast. "From there, I'll hop the ferry to the mainland, then there's a great ride, all the way through British Columbia; lots of side trips — glaciers and the like. I'm always telling Mike he'd never get me out to the stock show if it weren't in the dead of winter. July I'm in Canada. I tell myself I'm going to do sketches, but I guess it's mainly just to go out. I'm

doing good if I'm riding or walking somewhere."

"Jerry is always focused, and he's never bothered by distractions. He's like a Zen Master: One day in the shop he yells 'Mike!' and makes a big commotion. I ran around the bench — I thought something terrible had happened. He's up against the window pointing to a pair of White Crowned Sparrows, these two little birds, on the feeder outside. I was dumbfounded. I've known him for years and it's the only time I've ever seen him lose his composure."

— Mike Author

Our evening came to its conclusion. We spent the last half-hour going through old portfolios and scrapbooks, where amid the pictures of glorious signs, lay the labeled photographs of all his students. The care with which the names were lettered spoke

eloquently of the sentiment contained there. And what a handsome young lot they were!

"If Jerry had chosen a career other than show card artist and sign painter, he could've been a master musician. Balance here, harmony there. Just a little off-tempo... then viola! The grand crescendo. To live life with a flourish, this is what I've learned from Jerry Albright."

— Bob Mulcahy

Well said Bob. And with that, we'll close.
Til next time,
Mark

Mark Oatis is the art director at Studio Arts & Letters, a design and production firm in Denver. He has been in the sign trade since 1972 and is one of the founders of the Letterheads movement.



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