SignCraft

The guide to profitable and creative sign production



Joe McKernan, Chester, New York

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EDITORIAL
Sharon Linsenbach
Sherri Linsenbach

DESIGN & PRODUCTION
Devin Linsenbach

SPECIAL THANKS
Tom McIltrot
Dennis McIltrot
Bill McIltrot
John McIltrot

SignCraft Publishing Co., Inc.
P.O. Box 60031, Fort Myers, FL 33906
Phone: 800-204-0204

E-mail: signcraft@signcraft.com
Website: www.signcraft.com

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At SignCraft

Welcome to the first issue of the new *SignCraft* e-magazine! Earlier this year, *SignCraft* was purchased from the McIltrot brothers: Bill, Tom, Dennis, and John. Since 1980, *SignCraft* has been a trusted resource for sign makers, and while the last print issue rolled off the press in 2020, the articles and community behind them never stopped mattering. Our goal, as the new owners, is to keep that tradition alive and growing.

Each quarter, we'll bring together the past three months of articles from the website along with the original departments into one easy-to-read digital issue. We know how much the magazine meant to so many of you, and are proud to be able to have put this together for you.

Before we dive in, let's introduce ourselves and share a little about what *SignCraft* means to each of us.

From Devin Linsenbach

My history with SignCraft goes back to 1988, when I was just a kid. On days off from school, my mom, Sherri, brought me to work with her. While she meticulously proofed every issue, I set up camp in the break room and mostly passed the time by drawing.

That love of art eventually drew me to the art department, where the staff patiently let me tag along. The art director, Paul Henry, taught me everything that went into making a magazine, from developing photos in the darkroom to building pages on a layout board and shooting them with an overhead camera for the printer.

By my mid-teens I was officially on the payroll, helping with layout, working in the mail room, sending faxes, and other odds and ends. In my later teens I got hooked on a new concept called "web design" and built SignCraft's very first website, which I've managed ever since, more recently with a great deal of help from my wife, Sharon.

Through all of it, the McIltrots have been like family to me. In the nearly 40 years I've known them, they've been some of the kindest, most caring people I've ever met, and their generosity has shaped both this magazine and the sign industry.

Taking the reins of what they built is something I don't take lightly. I'm honored to carry SignCraft forward and look forward to what the future holds.

From Sharon Linsenbach

I've been working with SignCraft for over a decade, and in that time I've learned a lot about the industry, and about you. The McIltrots were patient when teaching, gentle when mistakes were made, and impossibly kind. Working for them wasn't just easy; it was an honor. So when they asked earlier this year if we'd like to take over the business, we didn't hesitate.

Devin and I have been running things since June. If you haven't noticed many changes, that's intentional. We don't want to move too fast, and every decision gets the time and attention it deserves. Our goal is to bring honest engagement and help inspire the community. We have a lot planned, but it will take time. If you don't like something we change, let us know. We're here, and we're listening.

Keep an eye on the e-letter and our socials. As we build new tools and bring back old forums, we'll keep you posted every step of the way. And don't forget our Reader Submission Portal; where we're posting questions for you and looking for shop trucks, signs you've seen, article ideas, and more.



Sharon and Devin Linsenbach live in Cape Coral, Florida with their daughter, Abigail

Letters

The Spelunker Door

Ralph Toews's friend has a hobby of exploring caves and old mine entrances all over the world. He had always wanted a mine entrance painted on the door of his man cave.

Ralph found a picture online and offered to print it, or if his friend wanted, Ralph could paint it. His friend jumped at the idea of a painted door, and Ralph got to work.

Many sign painters keep a foot in the fine arts, and this is a great example of how versatile the skills you learn in the shop are. Ralph says, "It's not a sign but something you can do with one 3/4-in. brush."

Ralph Toews, RT Signs
Steinbach, MB, Canada







We love to hear from our readers

Have something to share? Whether it's a recent project, a question, or just a hello, we'd love to hear from you.

https://go.signcraft.com/letters

Blade Bonaduce

Fine hardwoods, fine signage



Blade Bonaduce

Wood has been a material of choice for sign making for centuries, but you don't often see fine hardwoods and clear finishes used for a sign. That's the look that appeals to Blade Bonaduce, though, and he's building a sign business devoted to that very unique type of sign production. His shop, Blade & Burnish, is in Salt Lake City, Utah, but his clients—and his signs—are scattered across the country.

Now 27, Blade was a cabinet maker when he got the notion of making signs from fine hardwoods and natural finishes. Going on the positive reactions to those early sign projects, he shifted his focus from woodworking to sign making, opening his business in 2024.

He works out of a 1200-sq.-ft. well-equipped wood shop with two laser cutters/engravers: an xTool S1, 40-watt and an ACMER S2 Pro. Most of his work days are divided in two, with about half the day spent at the computer, creating layouts, communicating with customers, setting up the job for the router, and doing all the "back end" work that goes with being in business—emails, invoices, ordering materials. The other half of the day is spent in the shop, making furniture-grade signs.

Here's what he told SignCraft recently about his work and his business:





His roots I was into woodworking and art ever since I was young. Eventually I served an apprenticeship as a cabinet maker and worked at that. Making wood signs seemed like a natural way to go down from there so I made a few, then a few more. Next thing you know, I'm doing them every day. I'm just applying what I had learned about working with hardwoods to sign making.

His niche One of the things that led me into making signs out of fine hardwoods is the fact that there aren't many doing it. That creates a niche for me. For the most part, the sign industry has gone to HDU board for 3D signs because wood can be pretty unpredictable. Wood can warp and it doesn't last as long as HDU board. It requires more maintenance, too.

But my business model is built around the unique beauty and qualities of wood. It's real hardwood and it will behave differently than HDU board. You have to be prepared for that, and it's something I explain to every client. They will have to do maintenance and it does have a "shelf life." But in return, many people do appreciate the natural beauty of real wood, and there does seem to be market with those who want the real thing.

Interior/exterior My work is about a 50/50 split of interior and exterior work. For interior signs, I work with 20-some different wood species. I use the natural color of the species—no paint or stain unless the customer insists on it. I prefer to let the natural color of the wood provide the contrasts.

For outdoor signs, I limit it to three species—cedar, white oak and mahogany. They are naturally more weather resistant. I also use quarter sawn wood for outdoors. Because of the way it is milled, it's more stable than flat cut wood, which is more common.

This type of work is a natural for lobby signs and other work where viewers can appreciate the graphics up close. I've always enjoyed making indoor signs a little more than outdoor ones. You can get a little more creative with the choice of wood and the amount to detail in the sign.

The lifespan is at least double that of an outdoor sign, too. I tell clients that an outdoor sign can last 10 to 15 years with proper maintenance. Indoors they can last 25 or 30 years or even more.





Working with lasers I use two types of lasers. With the xTool S1 40 watt unit, I can put the wood inside of the machine for cutting. ACMER S2 Pro is an open-bed unit where I can put the laser over the wood panel for engraving. With careful alignment, I can engrave a section of the sign, move the machine a couple feet, then continue the engraving and have it all line up.

The 40-watt laser can cut wood up to about 3/8-in., depending on the species. If I am doing something thicker than that, I cut multiple pieces at 3/8-in., laminate them together, then sand the edges.

The laser leaves a charred black edge, which for some pieces I leave as is, since it adds depth and shadow to the letters. This usually fits rustic looking signs quite well. For other pieces, I'll hand sand or use a Dremel hand grinder to clean off the char from the letter edges and expose the natural wood grain.

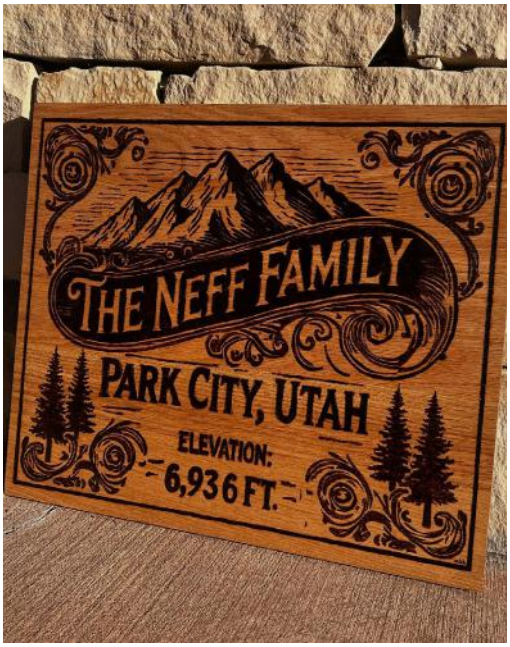
Sometimes I use the laser to cut out a stencil of the letter or shape, then tape that stencil to the wood panel and use a flush bit router to carve out the exact shape. This works best for large bulky letters, like the Bowie letters.

Choice of finishes One factor that influences the finishing is how much maintenance the customer is willing to provide. If they can do it once or twice a year, we go real simple. We use teak oil then they can just reapply it periodically to rehydrate the wood. It's just wipe-on and wipe-off. If they do that, the wood won't bleach out to gray.

How much weather the sign gets is also a factor. I always ask which direction the sign faces and if there is any protection over it. A southerly facing sign may need maintenance twice as often as one facing north. Most folks think it's the rain and snow that will age the wood, but it's really the UV damage from the sun.







Marketing his work Early on, I thought social media would be the way to reach customers whom my type of high-end work would appeal to. I realized, though, I wasn't going to sell a sign to someone who was just scrolling through their feed and somehow convince them to spend several thousand dollars on a wood sign. It's more a matter of getting people to search for me.

So I shifted my approach and spent a lot of time making myself as searchable as possible—the SEO stuff, the backlinks and all that. Now I only do Google Ads rather than on Instagram or Facebook. It gives me control over the workload, too.

When you work alone, you can only do so much each week. If I've got plenty of work coming in, I can just turn off the ads for a while so that I can catch up. When I need more work, I turn the ads back on. It's working pretty well. Word of mouth and returning customers helps, too, and that is picking up as time goes on and I get more work out there.

Sourcing materials I buy some of the wood locally here and there, but most of the time, the quality doesn't match what I can get from a company in Michigan that specializes in quality hardwoods. Of course, there's a lot of shipping costs because wood is heavy, and there is a time delay because it can take two or three weeks to get materials for a project.

That's something I explain to customers up front. This type of sign work takes time. If they're on a tight schedule, I'm probably not the person for the job. I take my time doing things, and the signs take as long as they are going to take.

I finish the sign panel carefully, front and back. When it comes time, I choose the better side for the front, but I also add the information about the sign on the back—who made it, what materials were used, and even a print of the design drawing. Few may ever see that, but it adds to the impression of the quality of the product.

Burning for effect I often use wood burning in my work. I first did it while growing up, and I find it's a great effect to use on my signs. I can add contrast and detail with it. On rustic signs, I use a blowtorch to blacken letters or sections for the background. I use metal rulers or paint scrapers to protect areas then use the torch to burn a border or a section. I can occasionally get the customer to lean into a sign that has a completely burnt background. I like that look of charred wood a lot. Maple, cedar and basswood all char very well. Charred wood is also more weather- and water-resistant, so that's a bonus.

I'm not making signs for every purpose for every customer. I realize I have a small audience. But this is the work that I love doing, and I think that my customers pick up on that. These are signs with a very unique look that speaks of quality and permanence. They rely on the beauty of fine hardwood for that, and they'll last for years. SC

There's even more to see on the web

Additional photos on SignCraft:
https://go.signcraft.com/2qkf

Blade's website:
www.bladeandburnish.com



Signs of Santa Fe

How handcrafted signs harmonize with Santa Fe's adobe architecture and art

By Chloe Nostrant

Santa Fe, New Mexico, is the oldest state capital in the United States, as well as the oldest European community west of the Mississippi River. Long before Europeans brought their culture to the area, though, the native peoples of the area were already defining and mastering their own crafts and arts. The long and storied history of Santa Fe is a fascinating rabbit hole to wander down should you find yourself wanting to learn about "The City Different."

The influences of all of these cultures are extremely preserved, alive and well in Santa Fe. There is a reason it is known as such a mecca for artists of all mediums. Georgia O'Keefe famously called Santa Fe and nearby Abiquiu home. One of my favorite artists and musicians, Terry Allen, now calls Santa Fe home.

As a professional photographer and connoisseur of art myself, I was drawn to Santa Fe for the history and art culture. The whole town, especially the historic downtown and Plaza, were brimming with thoughtful design. The soft earth tones with pops of color and the organic shapes of the adobe buildings were a visual palate cleanser for my Montana eyes.

When it came to the signs in Santa Fe, I found that especially around the Plaza there was great care taken to be sure the design of the signs was complementary to the architecture and culture. I am a fan of the thoughtful and understated when it comes to design. I am interested in the mise-en-scène of a place, the visual harmony. I think a sign should be bold enough to notice but not so bold as to distract. In an area with the beauty and culture of Santa Fe, it would be a shame to be visually scanning and taking in your surroundings and get so hung up on one element that it draws you out of whatever appreciative trance you were in.

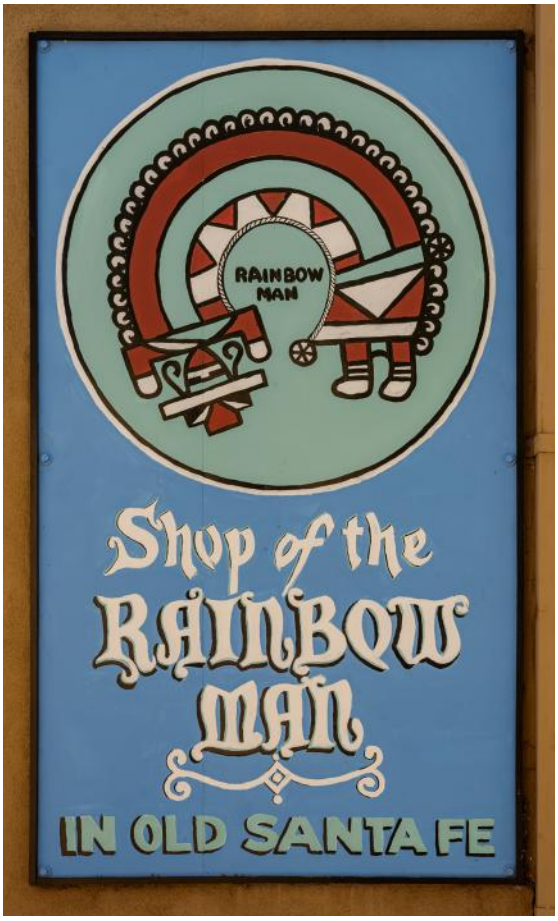
I really appreciate a well-done handmade look. Whether it is hand painted, hand carved or inspired by that style, the quality of something expertly hand crafted is much more interesting and keeps my attention longer than something that looks to be off of Canva or, worse, AI generated. There is a warmth in the character of something handmade you just can't get with digital mediums.

That being said, some of these signs are very contemporary. They work for me because they are not so harsh and rigid looking to clash with the architecture. They are well laid out, not too gaudy and complement the general aesthetic of the place. For the more contemporary signs of art galleries, I found it showed me the type of work I was going to find inside. The more contemporary the signs, the more varied and contemporary the work inside. The more traditional the sign, the more traditional the art work inside.

My top three signs from Santa Fe:

#3: The Rainbow Man (painted sign) This store has been in the family for a few generations and when you enter you are led through a maze of rooms containing Native American and Southwestern art, silver and turquoise jewelry, and ending in the photographer Edward Curtis's gallery! What a surprise that was for us to find Edward Curtis here. It was amazing to see his work up close. We came home with just one print but it would have been easy to fill our luggage with them.

I feel the sign's design helped convey the "old school Santa Fe" nature of the gallery. The painted sign caught my eye first and drew me in from across the street—I am a sucker for a sign painted directly on the building. I loved the mixed lettering and bright turquoise blue background against their adobe building.



#2: Worrell Gallery All of the elements worked here for me. The cutout on the metal was easy to read and simple. I liked the mixed script and think the block type lettering complemented it well. The color of the weathered sheet metal is nicely paired to the colors of the environment around it. This is a good example of the mise-en-scène that I like. The ristra hung next to the sign brings a pop of red and ties in the orange of the rust and the light pinkish tan of the building. Even the shadows on the building and the old windows seem to fit together nicely. It's a prime example of the peaceful vignettes you find on a side street in Santa Fe.

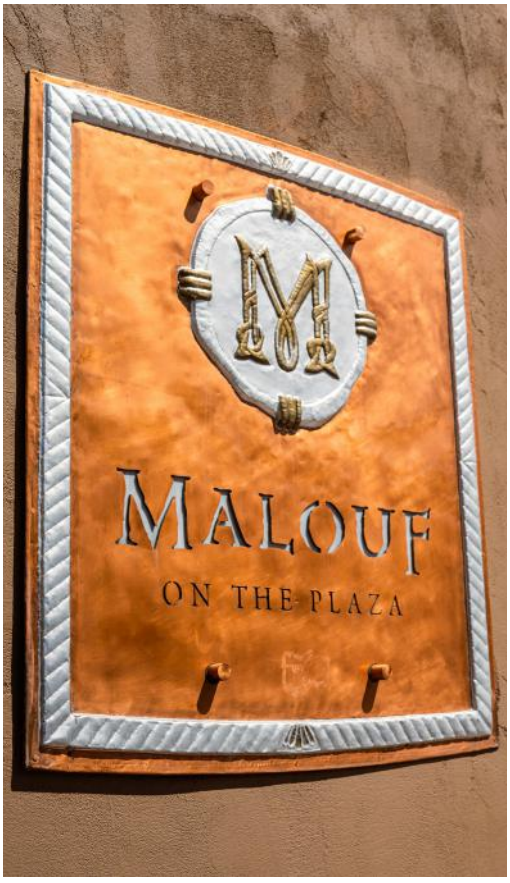


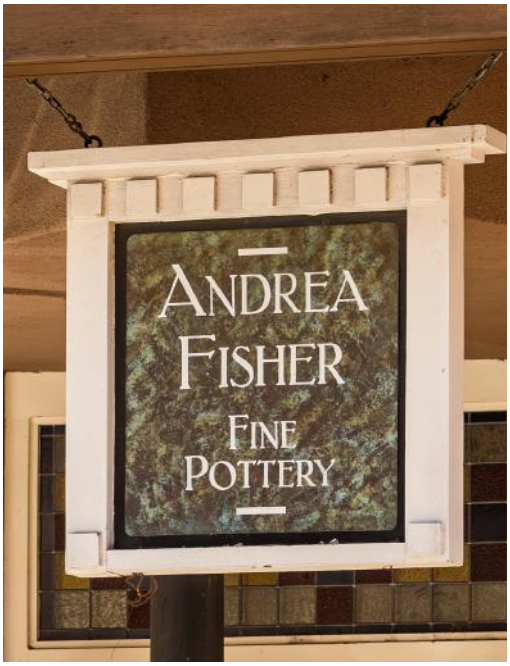


#1: The French Pastry Shop Maybe this one ranks number one for me in part because of the pastries and coffee… but I truly do love their sign. It is perfectly worn, has the handmade element I love, and the font is to die for (like their crepes!). To me, the style reads as a perfect and effortless mix of French and Southwestern— two of my favorites.

It is well designed enough that if we took it down and placed it on a street in Paris, it would be just as at home as in Santa Fe. It really captures the soul of the place—once you make it past the display cases of fresh French pastries, you're seated at hefty southwestern style tables next to a large hearth with copper cookware hanging from the mantel. It's lovely and so so delicious.

Though my time in Santa Fe was short, only a few days, we covered a lot of ground and saw more fine art and jewelry than we could ever hope to recount. The signs of the town were an homage to the art culture of the place. As an artist myself, I appreciate the effort put in by the designers, sign makers, and shop owners to hang signs that added the Santa Fe experience rather than distract from it. It's a beautiful area buzzing with creative energy. It's easy to get lost or overwhelmed in the array of galleries and restaurants, but the signs always lead us to the right places. SC







There's even more to see on the web

Additional photos on SignCraft:
https://go.signcraft.com/awop







Upsizing a monument sign

Modular construction let Dayna Reed add 18 inches to a museum's monument sign

Sometimes a discussion about doing a little maintenance on a sign leads to doing a whole new sign, or in this case, making the sign larger. Dayna Reed, Hood River, Oregon, did the original sign for this museum in 2011, and when he approached them about refinishing it, the director had a different idea.

"She knew the paint was fading a bit," says Dayna, "but she also felt that the sign needed to be larger and a little more imposing. She asked me if there was a practical way to do that and asked me to come up with a design."

Using modular construction for monuments as Dayna had done on this one makes the sign easier to fabricate and install. It also makes it easier to modify or in this case, enlarge. Dayna put together a design that added 18 inches to the height of the sign face and added a screen below the face for additional dimension. The original sign faces were 24-by-72-in. and the new faces would be 42-by-72-in.

"That 18 inches provided a lot of opportunity for structure," he says, "and to make the sign stronger. It was already supported across the bottom, two sides and top but I had to support the additional height.

"The text got larger and bolder, and we changed the color of the lettering and paddlewheel graphic. The arch across the bottom represents the bridge over the Hood River, which is right beside the museum. It's a section of a galvanized steel ramp that I cut to shape and added a molding of aluminum channel across the bottom."

On the original sign, the ACM sign faces slid into grooves in the post covers. Dayna slid the faces out of the posts to replace them with the new,



Dayna Reed with the sign he built for the museum in 2011. Fifteen years on, it was due for more than fresh paint.



Dayna's new design adds 18 inches of height

larger faces. The post covers were brought back to the shop for modification. The new faces were made from ACM, then sprayed with a gradient from yellow to white behind the paddlewheel graphics.

Dayna built two supports from HDU board to accommodate the additional height of the sign faces, which would rise above the original post covers. The post covers are 1-in. HDU board capped with PVC edging and HDU board tops.

A piece of aluminum channel was fastened to the plywood, and an L-bracket was pop-riveted to the channel. The L-bracket was later bolted through the top of the post caps to an aluminum plate underneath for additional support. The post covers fit over 6×6 pressure-treated posts set in the ground. The posts fit against the inside of the post covers, providing a sturdy mounting that Dayna could lag into.

The museum had requested adding a bridge design element so Dayna decided to add a panel under the sign face to provide extra support. To create the bridge element, he cut a panel with an arched bottom from a galvanized steel ramp and added molding made from aluminum channel across the bottom. The panel was fitted to the post covers to be lagged into the posts during installation.

The “Museum” letters were cut from ACM and mounted to a piece of white





There's even more to see on the web

Additional photos on SignCraft: https://go.signcraft.com/efvs

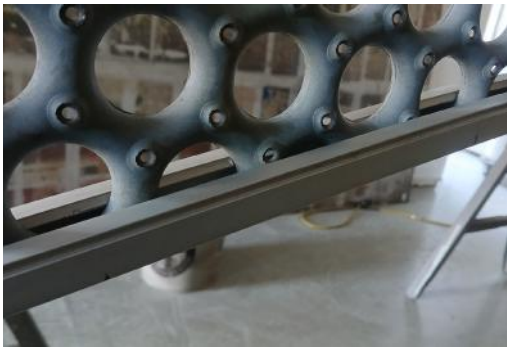
PVC board to serve as an "outline." The letters are mounted on stud-mount standoffs.

Dayna used LocTite PL adhesive to secure the mounts to the back of the ACM letters. Once dry, he positioned the letters on the PVC panel then pressed them down to make a slight mark for drilling. The holes were drilled larger than the studs, then he filled the holes with the adhesive and placed the letters, gently pushing the studs into the holes. The protective film stayed on the ACM letters throughout the process.

Once dry, the PVC panel was bonded to the yellow ACM face with silicone adhesive caulk. The next day, Dayna ran screws through the back of the ACM into the PVC panel to further hold the PVC panel.

Next the PVC letters for "History" were bonded to the ACM face. To make this easier, Dayna added a 1/16-in. outline to the lettering, then cut that from paint mask and weeded it. He applied that to the background, which gave him an exact guide for placing the letters. The extra 1/16-in. of space around the letters makes removing the paint mask easier.









He predrilled holes in the ACM background where screws would be added later from behind. He removed the transfer tape and applied the letters, using silicone adhesive caulk, then removed the transfer tape. The next day, he added the screws through the back of the ACM panel.

The water graphics from the bottom of the original sign face had been cut from ACM and mounted on blocks of HDU board for added dimension. These were removed from the original sign, repainted and used again on the new face.

The paddlewheel graphic was cut from paint mask and painted on the background, using Ronan AquaCote.

"Whenever I apply paint over paint like this," says Dayna, "I apply the paint mask and scuff the background with a ScotchBrite sanding pad. I think it improves the bond between the layers of paint."

Once all the components were complete, it was ready to install. On site, Dayna attached the new upper supports to the 6×6 posts and lag bolted the steel grid panel at the bottom to the posts. He slid the faces back into position, then screwed the top caps in position. The new, larger sign was ready to do its job. SC



Dayna Reed lives in Hood River, Oregon. He is author of two DVDs, 3D Signs Made Easy and More Super Cool 3D Signs.







Ian Langfield's shop truck

26 paint jobs in 35 years

Another year, another color scheme

Shop Trucks, Jan/Feb 2003 #128

Profile in July/Aug 2012 #185

Shop Trucks, May/Jun 2014 #196

Shop Trucks, Mar/Apr 2015 #201

Shop Trucks, Sep/Oct 2016 #210

Shop Trucks, Jul/Aug 2020 #233

23 years ago, Ian Langfield, Canberra, Australia, sent us photos of his cool little shop truck—a 1966 Holden Ute. He has the habit of repainting it every year or two and had just repainted it again. We featured that truck and the previous version in "Shop Trucks" in the Jan/Feb 2003 issue.

Over the years, he kept sending photos of each repaint. We featured them in the profile on him and his work in the July/August 2012 issue of *SignCraft*, then again in Shop Trucks in the issues that you see listed on the side.

Each repaint is done the same basic layout but in a different color scheme. It's sprayed using automotive paints and often, candy colors. The secondary copy has changed a few times over the years.

"It's my daily driver and work vehicle," says Ian. "I've owned it for 35 years and repainted it 26 times. Each one has been spray painted—no wraps or digital prints or AI here." SC



Ian Langfield

Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, Australia



2018: Painted with a black basecoat interference, glass, flake, blue green, gold and with clear coat.



2019: "This one was painted using 1-Shot Fluorescent Pink enamel paint mixed with 1-Shot Fluorescent Blue enamel paint and white gloss enamel paint, which resulted in a satin finish."



2020: Ian mixed up a burgundy color and added fire red metal flake mixed with clear.



2023: This version was a custom mix of dark gray gloss enamel.



2024: This one is a gloss black enamel respray.



2025: Here it has a black basecoat, interference glass flake, red, violet, gold, and clear.



2026: Finally, for the most recent version, Ian began with some white gloss enamel paint then added gray enamel and green until he got a fresh mint color. It's hard to see, but there is some raised lettering on the tailgate that has been given a pearl ghost effect that you can see well in certain lighting.

THE SHOP TRUCKS SECTION IS BACK

WE WANT TO SEE YOUR SHOP TRUCK!



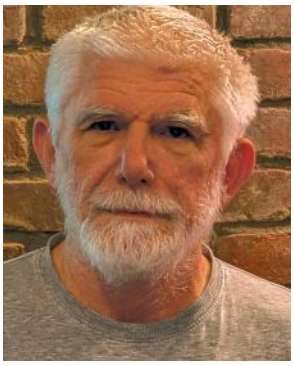
Your truck could be in an upcoming issue!

1. **Snap a few photos** of your shop truck
2. **Tell us about it** a little about your truck
3. **Get featured** in an upcoming issue

SUBMIT YOUR PHOTOS: **go.signcraft.com/trucks**

Preserving a Living Tradition

Traditional Handcrafted Sign Making in the Hudson Valley



Joe McKernan

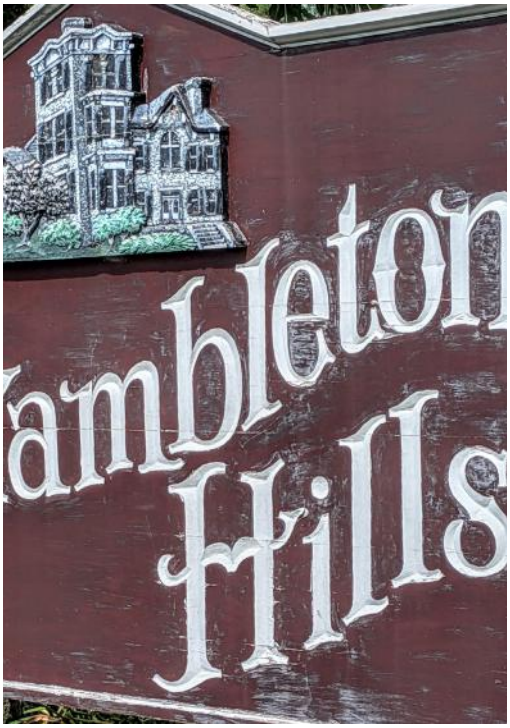
For more than three decades, Joe McKernan has practiced, taught, and advocated for the traditional craft of hand-painted and hand-crafted sign making. A graduate of the Hartford Art School, McKernan is a traditional sign maker whose professional career included the co-founding of Danthonia Designs in 2001, an Australian sign company that received national and international awards for its dimensional sign work.

Today, at age 74, McKernan represents a generation of craftspeople whose specialized knowledge is at risk of disappearing.

After returning to upstate New York in 2023 with his wife, Nancy, also a sign artist, McKernan began noticing a troubling local pattern. Across rural towns, and villages of the Hudson Valley, traditionally crafted wooden signs are deteriorating as the sign makers who created them retire or pass away. Many of these signs had been local







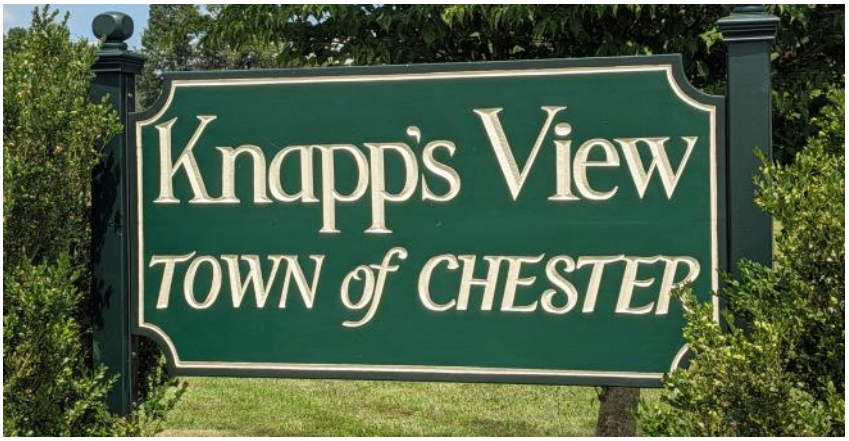
landmarks that contributed to the distinctive visual identity of rural New York.

As these signs weather and deteriorate, communities lose more than functional signage. Areas begin to look "run down," losing expressions of local history, craftsmanship, and regional character.

During the past year, McKernan has begun addressing this problem. Working with his wife and a teen-age apprentice, he has refurbished, replicated, and replaced more than two dozen weather damaged signs in the surrounding area and documented the projects through before-and-after photography.

Many of the signs you see here were hand carved a decade or more ago and have been fully restored to original. You can see Joe's process, step-by-step, in "Refurbishing handcrafted signs: A second life for weathered work." SC





Knapp's View before and after





Wildflower before and after

There's even more to see on the web

Additional photos on SignCraft:
https://go.signcraft.com/jwcz





Scott's Meadow before and after





Sugarloaf, N.Y. Art & Craft Village before and after









"I've also refurbished a few signs from further away," says Joe, "like the ones for Spring Valley and Wharton Township Park."

Signs We've Seen

More creative sign work from SignCraft's readers



Jessi Lynn Brothers from Jessi Lynn Photography sent us these three signs that she spotted on a recent trip to Italy. Strangers Bar, Florence, Italy.

We'd like to see your work!

...or photos of signs you've seen.

Submit them here:
https://go.signcraft.com/sws



Bar San Calisto, Rome, Italy



Hotel Potenza, Naples, Italy



Michael Quill from Affinity Strategic Marketing and Sign Effectz sent us this one from Berlin, Germany. Michael says "It may not be the prettiest sign in Berlin, but it caught my eye nonetheless. And that's what separates the mediocre from the effective.



Mick Pett from Hertford Signs sent us this "Simple but attention-catching" one from Fakenham Norfolk, England.





Joe Paffoon from Boardwalk Designs sent us these two signs from Mexico Beach, Florida. Joe says "Being older I love the retro look. It reminds me of much simpler times."

Our unforgettable Evel Knievel museum experience in Las Vegas

Nine days, 100-degree heat and a lot of gold leaf for a childhood hero's museum

By Perry Eales



Perry Eales

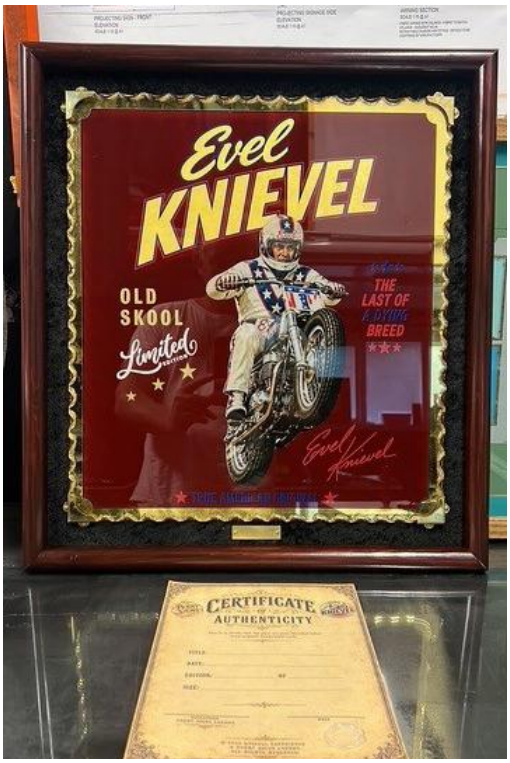
Earlier this July, we had the incredible privilege of being commissioned to create and hand paint all the interior and exterior signage for the Evel Knievel Museum. For us, this was much more than just another signwriting job — it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience and one that brought back a lot of childhood memories.

The project involved a huge amount of traditional hand-painted work, including hand lettering on glass, as well as painting the Stars and Stripes at a high level around the main entrance. We also had the opportunity to refurbish a life-size statue of Evel Knievel, which is proudly displayed inside the museum near the main entrance. On top of that, we gilded the front panel of the iconic big red truck, which is another fantastic centerpiece within the collection.

From the outside, it probably all sounds rather glamorous, but behind the scenes it was nine days of hard graft, working 10-hour days in temperatures reaching around 100 degrees. It certainly tested us physically, but even with the heat, long days, and tired feet, we honestly loved every minute of it.

For me personally, there was an extra-special part to the whole experience. Evel Knievel was a childhood hero of mine, so to actually be





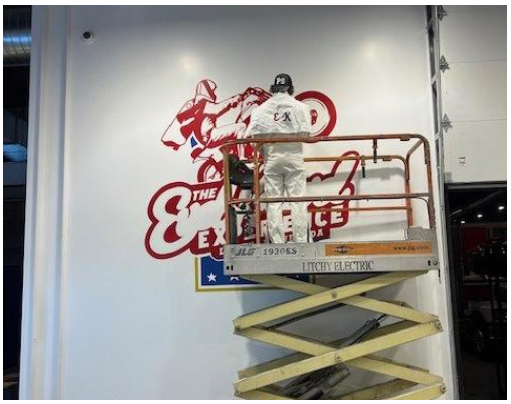
standing inside a museum dedicated to his life and career, working on the artwork and signage, was something I could never have imagined as a kid. I was even allowed to wear my full leather Evel Knievel suit while working, which was great fun and certainly brought out the big kid in me!

We were also incredibly fortunate to meet members of the Evel Knievel family. From the moment we arrived, they were so friendly and welcoming, and they really made us feel at home. They gave us what felt like a completely open canvas to create and hand paint what we thought worked best, as long as we stayed true to the traditional red, white, and blue colors associated with Evel.

That trust meant a great deal to us as traditional signwriters. We were able to put our own craftsmanship and ideas into the work while still respecting the history, character, and spirit of Evel Knievel. We also hand made a completely bespoke glass-gilded sign, which is now on display in the museum.

And if you are a fan of Evel Knievel, motorcycles, American history, or traditional signwriting, the museum is absolutely worth a visit. The collection of photographs, props, and memorabilia from Evel's extraordinary life is incredible, and seeing the motorcycles he actually used for some of his most famous jumps is something else.

One of the things that amazed me most was seeing that so much of the original signwriting on the motorcycles was still intact. The beautiful artwork on the bike tanks, some of it dating all the way back to the 1970s, is a real reminder of the skill and craftsmanship that went into these machines. As someone passionate about







traditional signwriting, I honestly felt like I was walking through an art museum celebrating signwriting, gilding, and hand-painted artwork at its very best.

After nine days of working in that 100-degree heat, we finally headed home — tired, happy, and incredibly proud of what we had achieved. But there was one more amazing surprise waiting for us: we left with an order for 212 limited-edition gold-leaf glass pieces, representing every Evel Knievel jump, whether he made it, crashed, or otherwise!

Hopefully, in the not-too-distant future, we'll be returning to the museum. We are already looking forward to seeing everyone again and continuing what has been an unforgettable journey.

A massive thank you to Mike Patterson and Lathan for giving us this incredible opportunity and for making us feel so welcome. It is an experience that will stay with me for the rest of my life.

I hope you enjoy the pictures and that they bring back some wonderful childhood memories of the one and only Evel Knievel. SC

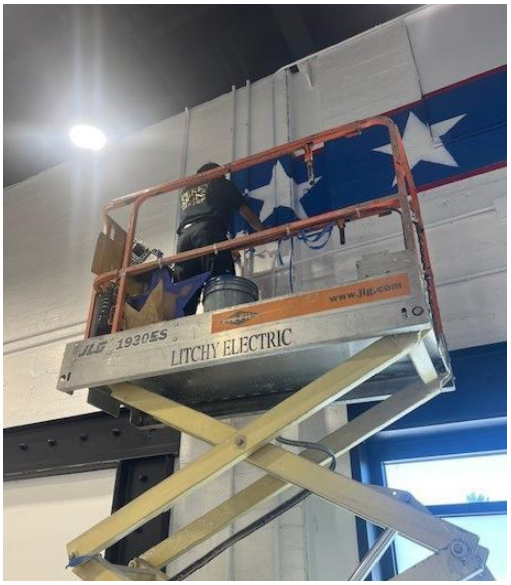
There's even more to see on the web

Additional photos on SignCraft:
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TECHNICIAN:

Even more faux vintage lettering from Pierre Tardif

Weathered hand lettering on old trucks, both genuine and skillfully faked

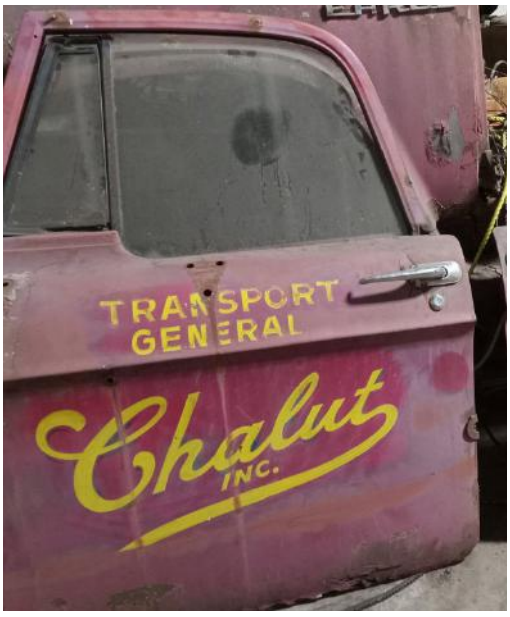
There's something very cool about the look of worn, weather-beaten hand lettering—especially on a worn, weather-beaten old truck. It was lettered by hand, and time has aged it perfectly. It shows the brush strokes of letter styles that were laid out and painted by a sign painter, not generated by a computer.

If you've enjoyed seeing Pierre Tardif's [Grondines, Quebec, Canada] outstanding lettering on restored vintage trucks and his faux antique lettering on "survivor" or "patina" cars on SignCraft.com, you'll enjoy this collection of his work.

Some are trucks that were left in the condition they were in when they were rediscovered. Others were faked—the look of years of wear and tear have been skillfully added to fool the viewer (at least for a few minutes!). Either way, the lettering and layouts are authentic reminders of a time when almost every truck was lettered by hand.

To create lettering that looks like it has been out in the weather for years, it helps to study the real thing—like these truck doors before the truck was restored. When this truck was brought back to its original condition, Pierre lettered the doors just the way they had been done when the truck was new. The photo he worked from, though, is a great example of how timeworn truck lettering looks. This truck is also a great example of what Pierre means when he says vintage truck lettering "is all about the layout—not the faux effects." SC






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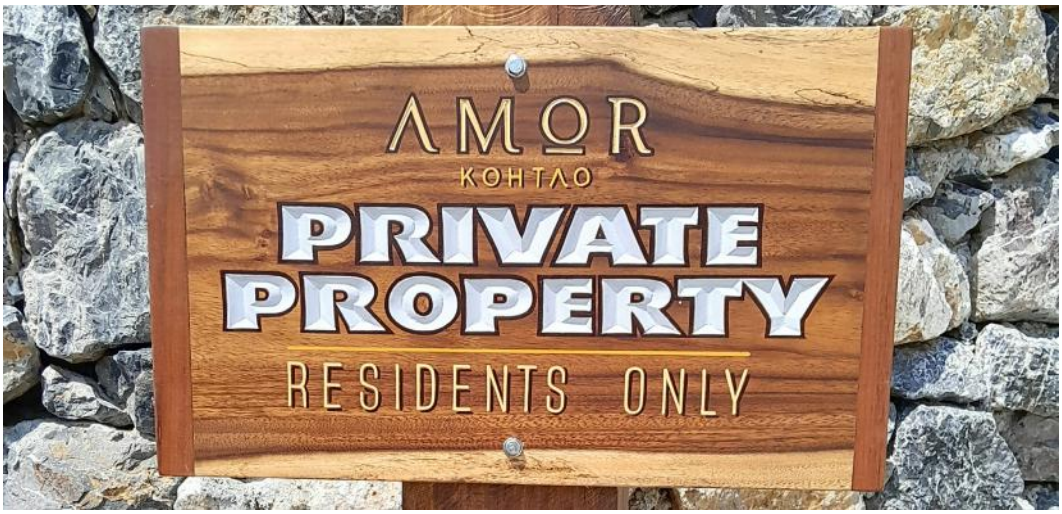
The small but powerful information signs of Koh Tao

Rob Cooper turns everyday info signs into messages tourists actually read

The small informational signs that tell folks where to go, what to do (or not do), or give instructions of some kind have an important job—yet their layouts often get little attention. Many times the layout and colors of the typical informational sign seem to say "Please ignore this boring sign…" and the message fades into the landscape.

Rob Cooper makes his home in Koh Tao, Thailand, where he turns out plenty of primary signs for the small businesses there—and also lots of informational signs to get tourists to where they need to go as easily as possible. Room numbers, pool rules, parking signs—they all look inviting to see and read.

Rob uses the traditional tools of





effective layout—especially contrast in letter size and weight, negative space, color and very legible letter styles—to get the job done. If the sign has multiple messages, he organizes the copy in order of importance so the reader doesn't have to decide what to read first.

Some are simply lettered in black-on-white. Others get vibrant colors with illustrations and still others are carved in wood or slate. In every case, though, the fundamentals of effective layout make sure the message is delivered to the reader in an effective, appealing way.

Take a look at how Rob gets the important messages across quickly and easily in these examples. A simple cutout, a quick special effect, a fun letter style are just some of the ways that he makes sure these signs are anything but "generic." SC











There's even more to see on the web

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From Basement Beginnings to Building Signs Nationwide

How Bavarian sign codes built a basement shop into a nationwide sign business

By Rusty Gibbs

When Amanda and I graduated from art college we didn't have a business plan. We just knew we loved creating things.

In 2004, we started Gibbs Graphics in the basement of our off-the-grid home outside Leavenworth, Washington. We took on just about any creative job we could find. We hand lettered mailboxes, painted murals in kids' bedrooms, designed business cards for friends, and said yes to almost everything that came our way. Like most new businesses, we were simply trying to make it work.

Over time, things slowly began to fall into place. We finally got electricity at the house. We hired our first employee. More businesses started trusting us with their branding, and before long we were designing logos, websites, stationery, vehicle graphics, apparel, and, of course, signs.

Eventually, we outgrew our basement shop and moved into a 2,400-square-foot building in Leav-







enworth, a small Bavarian-themed town of about 1,500 people. More than twenty years later, we're still in that same building. Today, our team consists of six employees, plus Amanda and me.

Looking back, Leavenworth probably had more influence on our business than we realized at the time. Downtown sign regulations require businesses to maintain an old-world Bavarian appearance, so nearly every sign had to look handcrafted. We spent years carving wood, sandblasting cedar, hand chiseling details, hand lettering, and learning traditional finishing techniques. At the time it just felt like the work we had to do. In hindsight, those years became our education.

After fifteen years of building carved and dimensional signs almost exclusively for our local market, we realized those same skills were becoming increasingly uncommon. While many shops were moving toward flat graphics and standard sign systems, we had developed a passion for carving, sculpting, and custom fabrication.

That realization changed the direction of our company.

Changing directions Several years ago, we took a hard look at our business and realized we were spending an incredible amount of time managing hundreds of small jobs. We were staying busy, but much of our energy was going toward estimating, scheduling, invoicing, and administrative work instead of creating.

So, we made a difficult decision.

We stopped offering many of the services that had helped us grow and focused almost entirely on what we enjoyed most: dimensional signs, sculptural work, and murals.

Today, our shop revolves around two CNC routers, carving HDU, sculpting custom features, and shipping fin-







There's even more to see on the web

Additional photos on SignCraft:
https://go.signcraft.com/qrpd

Gibbs Graphics website:
https://gibbs-graphics.com

CustomSigns3D website:
https://customsigns3d.com

ished signs throughout the United States. We still enjoy the occasional logo design or unusual project—a 30-foot faux rock-climbing wall comes to mind—but our niche has become designing and fabricating custom dimensional signage.

Launching our second website, CustomSigns3D.com, helped us reach customers far beyond our small mountain town. Suddenly, businesses from across the country were finding us specifically because they were looking for carved, layered, or sculpted signs that many local sign companies simply didn't offer.





AI-generated sign concepts The latest shift has been one we never saw coming: artificial intelligence.

More and more customers are arriving with AI-generated sign concepts. They aren't asking us to design a sign from scratch—they're asking, "Can you build this?"

Sometimes the answer is yes. Sometimes the design needs to be re-engineered to work in the real world. AI is very good at imagining dramatic dimensional signs, but it doesn't understand gravity, materials, structural engineering, or fabrication methods. That's where experience still matters.

Like many designers, we have mixed feelings about AI. We don't like seeing technology replace creative jobs, but we also recognize that every industry evolves. Rather than resisting it, we've chosen to treat AI as another design tool—one that often sparks interesting conversations and ambitious projects. In many ways, our role has shifted from creating every concept ourselves to helping clients transform imaginative digital ideas into durable, buildable pieces.

After more than twenty years, we've learned that the tools will continue to change. The materials will change. Technology will change.

What hasn't changed is the satisfaction of standing back at the end of a project and seeing something that didn't exist a few weeks earlier. Whether it starts as a sketch on paper, an AI-generated image, or simply an idea in a customer's mind, bringing that vision into the physical world is still the part of the job we enjoy most. SC

Rusty and Amanda Gibbs, owners of Gibbs Graphics and CustomSigns3D, are located in Leavenworth, Washington.

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Jobs, equipment, services and opportunities from across the sign trade

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December 5, 2026:

Opening Reception for En Route, Letterform Archive Museum, San Francisco, California.
Letterform Archive, www.letterformarchive.org

January 28–April 1, 2027:

Intro to Modern Type Design with Kel Troughton, online via Zoom.
Letterform Archive, www.letterformarchive.org

February 25–27, 2026:

Idea Exchange 2027, AAA Signs, Broussard, Louisiana.
Mid-South Sign Association Inc, www.midsouthsign.org

March 31–April 2, 2027:

ISA International Sign Expo 2027, Mandalay Bay Convention Center, Las Vegas, Nevada.
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Shop reader survey results

What tools does your shop depend on?

Ask a sign maker what they'd grab if the shop were on fire, and you'll get a better answer than any equipment review will give you. We wanted to put this to the test, so we launched a survey which asked sign professionals, "Which tools can you absolutely not live without? Which tools do you regret purchasing?"

This anonymous survey was in long-form answer, not multiple choice. Shop owners were able to give a true representation of what they need and to make their voices heard.

The answers came back long, specific, and occasionally blunt. Thanks to everyone who took the time to participate.

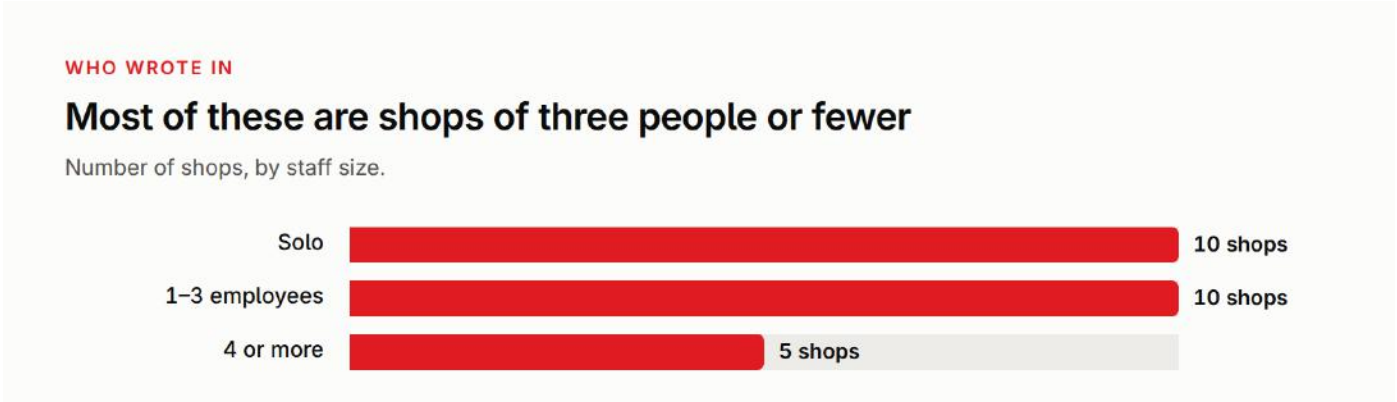
Who wrote in

First, a bit of background on the shops behind these answers.

They were experienced. Nineteen of them have been in the sign industry more than 20 years. The rest have been at it 11 to 20 years. Not one newer than that wrote in.

They were small. Ten work alone. Another ten have one to three employees. Five have four or more.

Keep that in mind as you read the rest, because it colors everything that follows. These are veteran small shops, and the answers below are what decades of trial-and-error look like.



SignCraft Reader Survey, summer 2026. Nineteen of the shops that answered have been in the sign industry more than 20 years; the rest have been at it 11 to 20 years.

Design software

Let's start with what's on the computer, since that's where most jobs begin.

There is no dominant package. When asked which design software readers rely on most, the answers split almost evenly across four.

Six shops named more than one utility—usually a sign package plus Illustrator or Corel, using each for what it's good at. Four shops are still running Gerber Omega, all of them 20-year veterans. Not one browser based tool was mentioned.

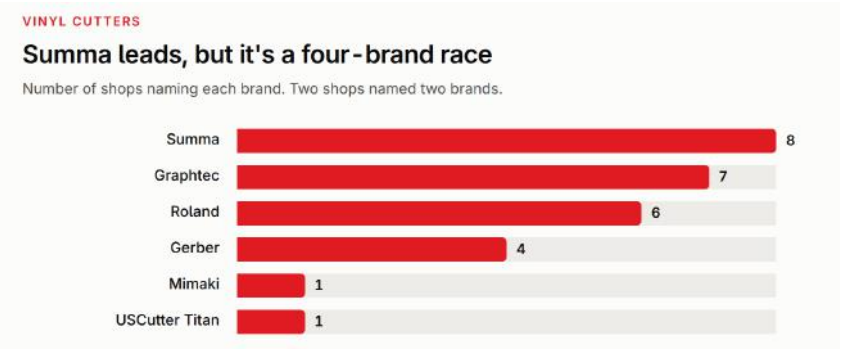


Number of shops naming each package first. Counting every mention, Flexi and LXi together – both SAi products – lead with nine. Vectric Aspire and EnRoute were each named as a second package.

Vinyl cutters

The interesting part isn't the ranking; it's the pattern underneath it. The Summas and Graphtecs that got named were mostly wide production machines—S2 and S3 series at 140 and 160 cm, FC8600s and FC9000s. The Rolands were almost all 24-in. machines: the Camm-1, the GS-24, the GX-24. One shop is running three Graphtec FC8600s at once.

Those 24-in. Rolands are the small shop's first real plotter, and they really are workhorses, with some shops noting that they have had the plotter reliably many years.



Number of shops naming each package first. Counting every mention, Flexi and LXi together – both SAi products – lead with nine. Vectric Aspire and EnRoute were each named as a second package.

Wide-format printing

Most of these shops print in-house, but we noticed a correlation on shop-size vs. in-house printing. Less than half of the shops with a solo employee that responded print in-house, while shops with 1-3 employees print in-house at double the rate of a solo shop. But shops with 4 or more employees who responded have all indicated they print in-house. It appears that shops tend to do their own printing once they have their first employee.



Track length is scaled to the number of shops of that size, so the bars are directly comparable. Printer brands among the shops that print in-house: Roland 7, Epson 5, HP Latex 4, Mutoh 2, Mimaki 1.

And these machines last, with two shops still running the Roland VersaCamm VP540i, a model that's been out of production for years. As one of them put it: "Yes, it still works fantastic and I can still get Roland ink."

CNC routers and lasers

Eleven shops responded that they have a CNC router or laser in their shop, and two have stated they had them, but it didn't work out.

ShopBot was the favored brand in this question, but Multicam, Gerber Sabre, Epilog, Inventables, Shaper, Pinnacle, and xTool were also named.

Something surprising we noticed in the results is CNC ownership has almost nothing to do with shop size. Four of the ten solo shops have one. So do four of the ten shops with one to three employees. It tracks with what a shop makes—carved and dimensional work—not with how big it is.



Number of shops. One respondent named SignCraft's own pricing guide; another named the Sign Blue Book and the Sign Contractor's Pricing Guide.

Estimating and shop management

Only five shops use software built for a sign shop. ShopVox, Sign Conductor, SquareCoil, and Estimate were the ones named. Eight use general accounting software and nothing else, mostly QuickBooks. Two use Excel or something they built themselves. Two utilize printed pricing guides.

But five use nothing but their experience and time and material to price their work.

Now sort that by shop size:

- Solo shops using shop-management software: 0 of 10
- Shops with one to three employees: 2 of 10
- Shops with four or more: 3 of 5

Every shop that named a sign-specific package has employees. Not one of the solo shops does, and after reading their other answers, that makes a lot of sense.

When you've been quoting this work for decades, the pricing is already in your head—and it's faster there than in any software. You know what that job takes because you've done it four hundred times. "My experience & brain," as one shop put it, is a real system, and it's one that took decades to build.

What seems to change things is the second set of hands. Once somebody else in the shop is quoting work, what's in your head has to get out of it somehow, and that's where these packages start showing up. One shop that made the move told us, "Recently, it's been Sign Conductor. We've improved organization, cash flow, and reduced software spend."

The hand tools

When asked what application and finishing tools the shops used more often than others, one answer came back more than any other, from every size of shop and every level of technology: the squeegee. After that were straightedges, rulers, and set squares as well as razor blades, X-acto blades, and laminators.

The specific answers are the good ones, though. A Pacific Art 12-in. TypeSet ruler. A "big lexan set square with handle." A homemade premask dispenser. English chisels. A corner rounder. Foam brushes. And our favorite: "Tape measure and camera on my phone!"

The tool that made the biggest difference

The majority of the responses in this category are printers, CNC routers, and lasers. Following that are application tables, laminators, saws and sheers, and lift trucks. Only two named a software as a tool that made the biggest difference in their work.

Here's what they had to say

"My Roland VersaCamm VP540i. Best employee a solo operator could have!"

"The Gerber Edge. We do a lot of small decals, and it is perfect for that. It eliminated 95% of the need for a silkscreen shop."

"CNC router. Allows for absolute accuracy of cutting. Without it I could not carve signs."

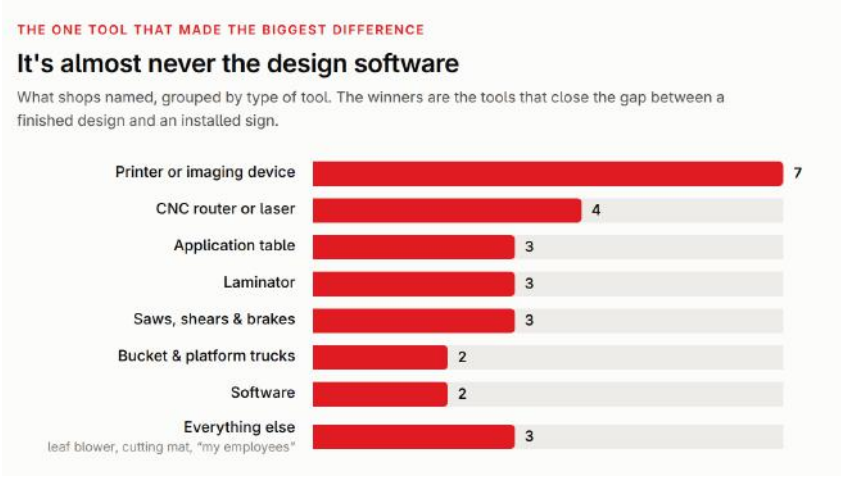
"4×8 CNC—dimensional is everything."

"CNC router because of the profit."

"The flatbed printer. It's made volume orders much, much quicker."



Track length is scaled to the number of shops of that size. Every shop that named a sign-specific package has employees; the solo shops price the work from experience.



Number of mentions. Several shops named more than one tool.



Regrets—and the CNC paradox

Our last question asked what they regretted buying, or wished they'd bought sooner. The answers pointed at the same machine from both directions.

One responder said, of regret, "I totally regret buying a used 4×8 CNC router. Worst financial decision of my entire 40-year career. It's been nothing but a big fat disappointment. It worked for a little while, then the brain died and I can't get replacement parts. I rely on outside CNC work now when needed and let 'them' handle the headaches of the tech."

While another answered the same question with, "The CNC sooner. It's paid for itself 5x over in just a few years."

The same category of machine with opposite sentiments. The difference isn't the technology—it's how it was bought. The shop that regrets it bought used, and another told us he "regrets buying cheaper CNCs" before finally buying the Multicam he wishes he'd started with.

There's a lesson in there that goes well beyond routers, and it's the one thing these answers said loudest: Proven quality tools have a more successful outcome than cutting corners for cost.

But there were more opinions on this question than CNC Routers. One reader mentioned their silk screen setup was not worth purchasing. "There is so little profit in it that I no longer use it," they said.

Another responder was displeased that vinyl has a shelf-life, and "It goes bad and there goes your money down the drain."

Not every regret is full regret, either. For example, one shop purchased a Safety Speed panel saw, and, while they don't fully regret the purchase "…it doesn't live up to what it is marketed as. We haven't been able to make the ACM cutter and the ACM v-groove tool work."

Similarly, another shop purchased a KeenCut wall cutter. They use it daily, but do not feel it was worth the price.

Two answers in this category really stood out regarding a latex printer. One responder stated "Prints beautifully, but is a piece of junk in every other way. So wasteful of ink and material."

While another response in favor of the tool read "Latex / Resin Printers do not require a 24hr Off Gassing. Straight to Lamination and to Cut", indicating that it saves time and is easy to use.

Other responses showed that shops valued installation ease. For one responder, it was a scissor lift they wished they had purchased sooner, while another wishes they had purchased their forklift sooner. And one response said, "41-ft. reach platform truck with a two-person bucket and 1,000-lb. capacity lifting jib. It paid for itself in half a year. The 52-ft. reach version we just got makes installing signs almost too easy — I wish I had one 35 to 40 years ago. Single-person bucket trucks are not nearly as useful for installing signs."

In Closing

We always love getting a glimpse into your shop and learning more about what keeps you going. The results are always surprising, and they give us insights on future content and tools for our valued members. It's true that no two sign shops are alike, and the contrast in the responses show just how diverse and adaptable sign makers can be.

Thank you to everyone who responded. Keep an eye out for our next reader survey. SC

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Putting it together: Moonshine Runner

How hand-painted patina gives a business coupe its whiskey-label look

By Teunis Spits

There are loads of great ideas in the photos of outstanding signs on SignCraft.com. But what about the back story: How did the layout come together? What paints were used? The finished product can't tell the story behind the design — the decisions about letter styles, colors, illustrations, and the like.

There's a lot to learn from a behind-the-scenes look at specific projects. This week, Teunis Spits, of Future Relics in The Netherlands, tells how this unique car lettering project came to be:



The phone rings.

An older man with an accent is on the other end. It's clear that he's not from my part of the Netherlands, but from the other side of the country.

The man has a question for me: Can I paint aged lettering and logos on his business coupe?

"Yes, I can, and I would really like to do that for you." However, I tell him that my town, Drachten, is quite a distance from his location.

"For good work," he says, "I am willing to travel, and your work really appeals to me."

I ask him what he means by that. He tells me that he likes the natural patina in my painted work. And he'd like to have lettering on his coupe similar to the style of a Jack Daniel's whiskey logo.

"Can you do that?" he asks.

"Absolutely!"



The design I made a rough, distressed version of the logo in Photoshop so the customer could see what it could look like, especially regarding the placement. I also gave him an idea of how the design will work on the spare wheel.

Design transfer process After the customer approved the design, I properly degreased the car, cleaned it, and degreased it again. Preparation work is often underestimated, but it is so important for the final result.

For the doors, I used Saral Transfer Paper and a Stabilo pencil to transfer the design onto the car. I paid close attention to the placement and balance of the design.

Design challenge The doors were done quickly, but the spare wheel was more difficult. I couldn't get the design to work properly there, so I sketched it directly onto the wheel with a Stabilo pencil.

The paint When I was happy with everything, I prepared the paint. I make this paint myself. It is a mixture of 1-Shot, clear coat, and matting paste, combined with a little bit of experience that you develop over the years.

I make three versions of the paint so that I can create a natural variation in coverage, mattness, and drying. For the drying, I use siccative.





Creating the patina After the logo has been painted, I wait for the right amount of tackiness and drying before I start working with water and solvent. I wet the design with glass cleaner and use a damp cloth with solvent. It's a difficult process to explain. Over the years, I have developed a "feel" for it, which gives the lettering a unique, aged result.

I let the paint dry properly and then clean everything up. Sometimes a light haze can appear on the surrounding surface. Of course, this has to be cleaned properly for the customer. I don't want to deliver half a job.



Final result I took photographs of the completed job and sent them to the customer. At first, there was no response, although I could see that he had read the message.

Then the phone rings, and there is a man on the other end who is absolutely bouncing with happiness. This is exactly what he had in mind, he tells me!

I achieved the final result through craftsmanship, but also by really listening to the customer during the conversations you have before you start a project. As sign painters and designers, we have to make visual what the customer has in his head. And when you succeed in doing that, it's a unique feeling that never gets old.

Additional projects My work focuses almost entirely on authentic hand-painted lettering, faux vintage advertising, patina preservation, ghost signs, traditional pinstriping, and



hand-crafted finishes. Rather than restoring vehicles to look factory new, I often recreate decades of natural wear while respecting the character and history of the vehicle. Every brushstroke is painted by hand, without digitally printed textures or artificial shortcuts.

Besides commercial signs, I regularly paint vintage trucks, motorcycles, hot rods, survivor vehicles, and custom builds. I also work with gold leaf, aged finishes, and traditional sign painting techniques that were once common throughout Europe but are becomin`g increasingly rare.

To be among the keepers of the craft, and to see the roots of signage back on the map — and to have that appreciated — means a lot to me. In Holland, it can be challenging to make a living doing this. But I would not trade it for any other job on the planet. Thanks also goes to my wife, Agnes, for supporting me and supporting the craft. SC





There's even more to see on the web

Additional photos on SignCraft:
https://go.signcraft.com/gb60

Teunis Spits's Instagram:
@future_relics_nl

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2017 Chevrolet Silverado. Black regular cab, lowered with 22" wheels and tires. David Showalter, David Design, Bryan, Ohio



"This was my Grandaddy's truck. After he passed I got it and I recently started a business after having the truck a few years. Thought it needed the look of a proper shop cruiser." Travis "Tuki" Hess, Kolor by Tuki, Martinsburg, West Virginia.



2010 Chevrolet HHR. John Oldham, Oldham Sign & Design, Waco, Texas



2003 Chevrolet Silverado with 1/4 of a million miles on it. Jeffrey Cross, Cross Signs, St. Petersburg, Florida



Volkswagen Caddy Mk4 carrying a full hand-painted rear window panel. Tomos Jones, Momo Signs, North Wales, UK



2003 Chevrolet Tahoe, 5.3L V8 and custom lowered coil-over suspension. Justin Stilson, Stilson Sign and Custom, Essexville, Michigan

There's even more to see on the web

Additional photos on SignCraft:
www.signcraft.com/shop-trucks

Fifty Years of Sign Making

Five decades of handmade signs in Santa Fe — no boss, no plotter, just a brush

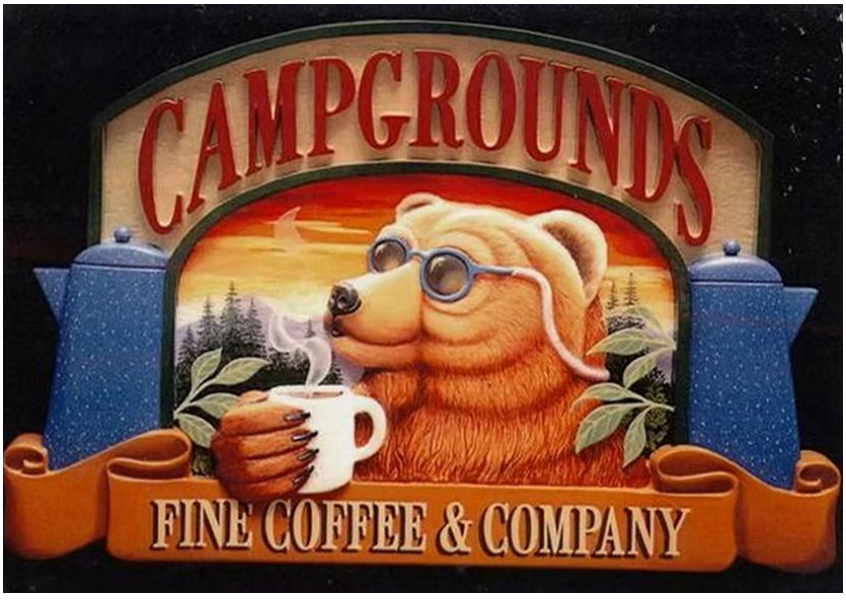
By Tom Hyland

I guess my career began a few days before Christmas vacation. Just about to turn six on December 20th, my first-grade teacher taped a decorative portrait of Santa Claus onto the blackboard. It was probably the work of Haddon Sundblom, who was employed by Coca-Cola. His Santa Claus was as good as it gets and his imagery was everywhere.

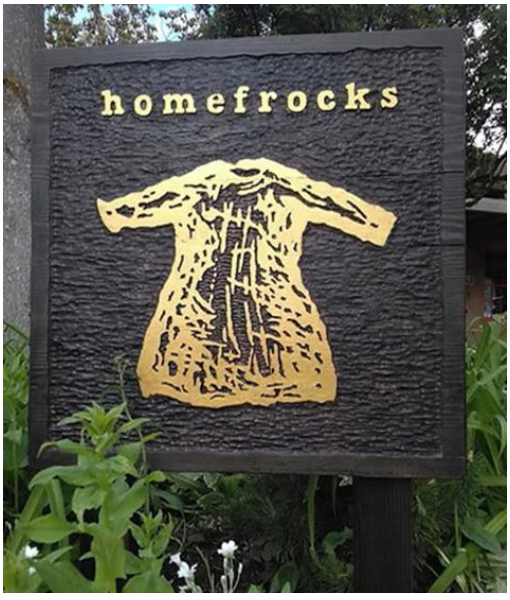
The teacher said, "Okay, kids, draw Santa!" With a black pencil on white paper we commenced sketching. When we completed the exercise she walked up and down the aisles, commenting and holding up a few for all to see. When she arrived at my desk she asked with an accusatory tone, "Where did this come from?" I was confused and told her, "I just drew this. It didn't come from anywhere." It was by far better than every other effort by the class. She held it up for all to see and said, "Look what Thomas has drawn."

I was an instant celebrity among my peers. This recognition continued throughout my school years. However, I never enjoyed art classes. I did not like having my art graded nor being commanded to produce a rendition of subject matter I felt nothing about. After one year of art class in high school, I dropped it and joined the choral department.

Leaving that art class didn't stifle my artistic activities. I was recruited to paint the cheerleaders' megaphones, design backdrops and posters for the choral musicals, and draw



24-by-48-in. hand-carved, hand-painted wood sign



Hand-carved sign for clothing store

enormous layouts on paper decorating the pep rallies in the gymnasium. That is when my lettering skills began to take form.

Starting my own shop

During my senior year in high school, I started working in a local sign shop — a neon sign factory where fifty other men performed every task required to erect huge signs all over New Mexico and neighboring states. I would drive the paint van to the edge of town and repaint a weathered road board advertising a motel or restaurant. On my first signs, the paint was dripping and the lines were wavy, but eventually my abilities improved.

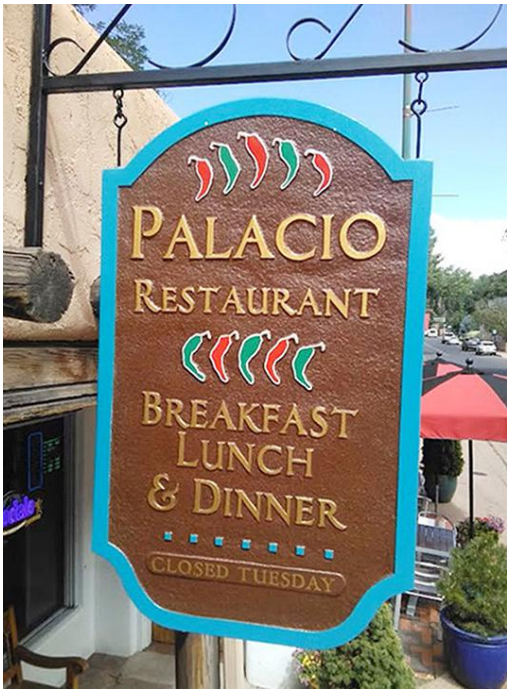
The sign factory, however, was jarring my nerves. There was a different radio station blasting in every department and incessant yelling in the concrete and metal building. You have to be there at 8 a.m. and you'll leave at 5 p.m. There's a 15-minute coffee break at 10 a.m. and another at 3 p.m. You can't work too slow or you'll be fired, and you can't work too fast or you'll be threatened by your coworkers.

I was deeply depressed from listening to guys at coffee break saying they'd been there twenty years. After one year at the sign shop, I quit, not knowing really what I was going to do. But I was desperate to leave employment and go out on my own.

Now, 52 years later, I'm still lettering and making signs. Since leaving the sign factory, I've never had a boss. I've never had a business partner nor an



Flat surface painted sign



Sandblasted medex sign



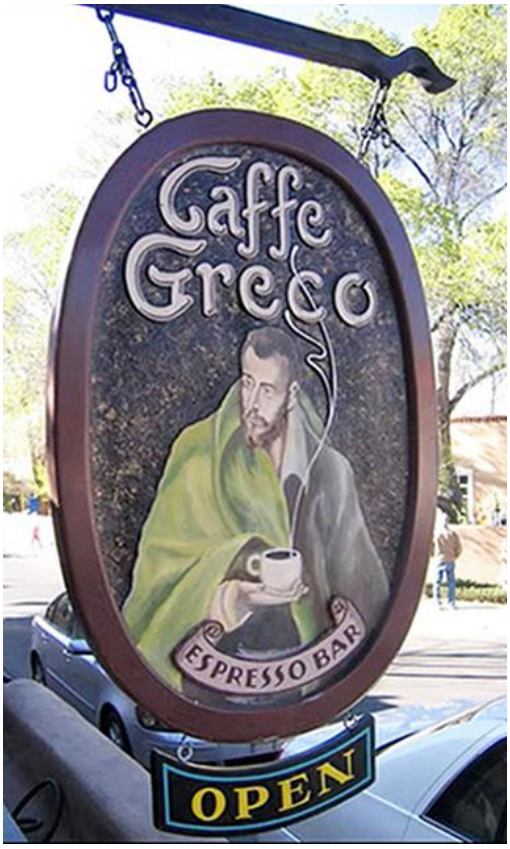
Sandblasted medex, hands painted in oils, letters cut and affixed

employee. I've never had a sign shop on a public street corner. I've worked only under my own roof. When customers contact me, I go to them, with measuring tape in hand, and see where they are and what they require. Then I create the sign that best suits them and their business.

Sign-making equipment

I've never bought a vinyl plotter nor set up for screen printing. There are some amazing machines that cost many thousands of dollars that route and carve wood or foam. But my sign kit is a small, plastic fishing tackle box containing brushes, a compass, Stabilo pencils, a pounce wheel, and little else. A closet contains shelves of power tools and cans of paint.

One valuable tool I have is "The Spotlight Opaque Projector" man-



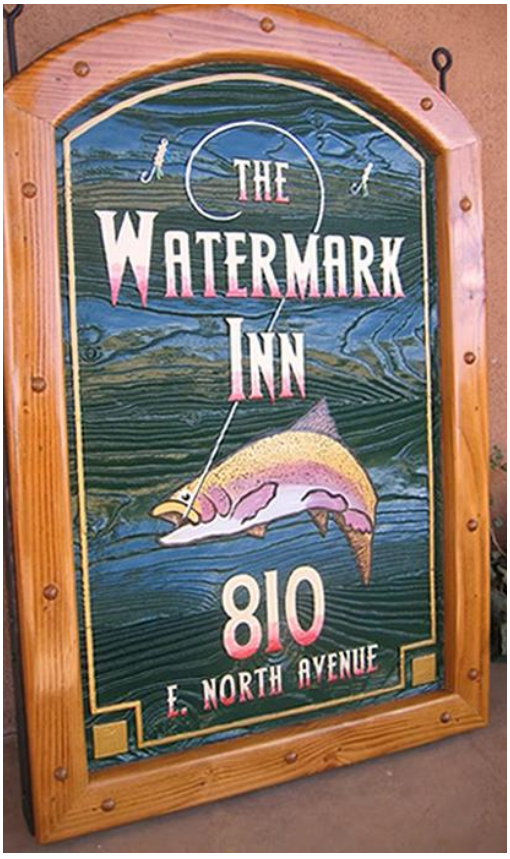
Double-faced sandblasted sign



Hand-carved sign



Welded steel was used to create this sign from bygone days.



Sandblasted wood sign wrapped in steel

ufactured in 1950 by the J. Y. Taylor Co. of Garland, Texas. Customers will email me their logo, and this machine enables me to sketch the layout to the precise size. Expensive routing machines produce attractive signage, absolutely. Still, a handmade sign has a quality of genuine personality that can't be imitated.

Santa Fe, where I live and work, is filled with abundant restaurants, boutiques, jewelry stores, and art galleries. However, I've seen art galleries, with paintings priced at ten thousand dollars and up, with only a basic vinyl sign that maybe cost a hundred dollars. All of that effort to open your doors to the public, but a disconnect from aesthetic awareness, will result in a short-lived enterprise.

Most of the signs I've reated are my design. I also enjoy it when customers give me artwork they have contracted through a design agency, and it displays graphic impact and sensibility. Those projects are nice to do. But, on occasion, a customer offers an amateur's rendering that they might even proclaim their nephew designed! Unfortunately, it actually does appear the beloved nephew designed it. When that happens, it's a delicate act of diplomacy to persuade them to improve the image without hurting their feelings.



24-by-16-in. hand-carved wood plaque



Sandblasted foam with cut foam letters



14-ft.-wide stucco sign

There's even more to see on the web

Additional photos on SignCraft:
https://go.signcraft.com/ts6k

Tom Hyland's website:
www.santafesignmaker.com

Creating unique custom signs

There's been several times over the years when I've created signs for new businesses just opening their doors. After I've installed the sign, the new business owner comes outside and looks up. He calls out, "Honey, the sign is up."

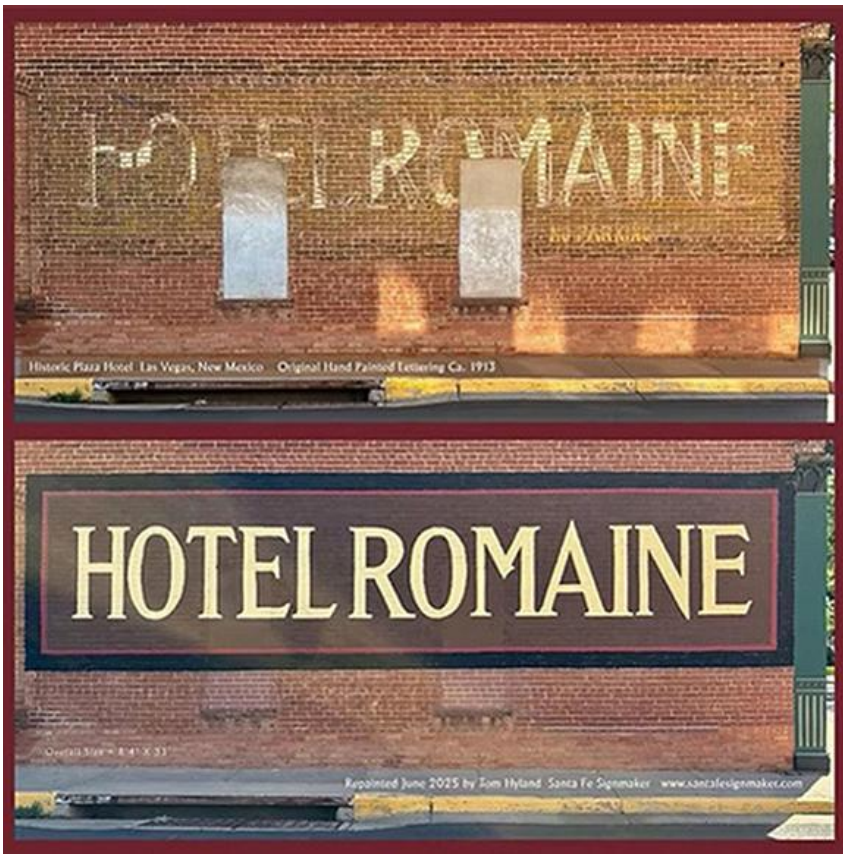
She comes outside, they stand there looking at it… and they start crying. This never happens to the electrician or the plumber. It isn't what I did; it's what the client did. To start their new business, they've possibly invested their life's savings or gone into debt. But this is the moment when they realize that they'll forever be the boss of their own lives. Their name is in place above the door, and all I did was leave them sitting pretty.

I want everyone on opening day to appear like a class act. Though beautiful lettering alone is many times all that's desired, my favorite signs are those I've illustrated lavishly. Those are the signs the public ponders, much like encountering a specimen in a museum.

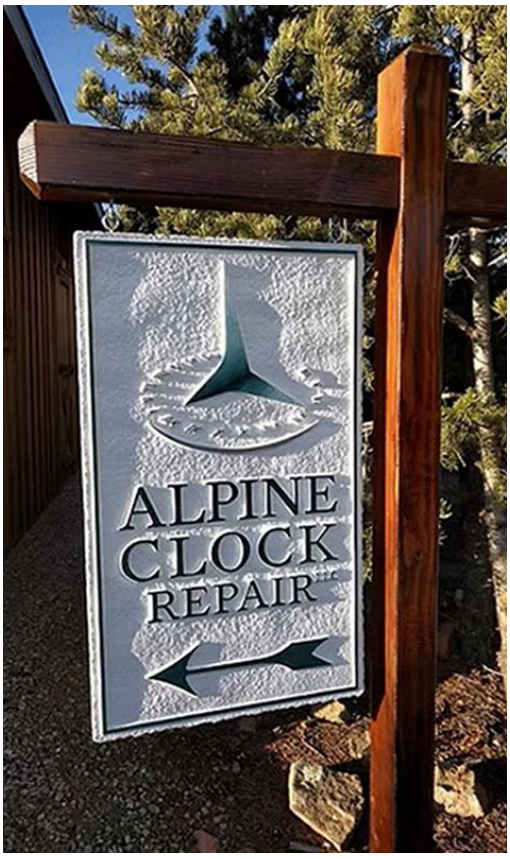
Having turned 70 years of age in December, there are limited days remaining to simply paint. Customers, sign gigs, installations, climbing ladders, and such has been very good to me. However, it's a sublime experience to sit still and create a painting — the ultimate game of solitaire. If I can still hold a brush at 90, I'll paint a sign or hopefully sell a painting. Creatives never stop creating. SC



Tom Hyland owns and operates Santa Fe Signmaker in Santa Fe, New Mexico.



Restored wall mural (bottom) of the ghost remains from the original mural (top).



Sandblasted medex panel

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