

The American Sign Museum: A Place for the Public and Signage Researchers to Understand the Past, Present and Future of Signage in the U.S.

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INTRODUCTION

The American Sign Museum (ASM) is dedicated to restoring, preserving, and displaying historic signs, and educating a broad public about the contributions of the sign designers, fabricators and users to commerce, culture, and popular art (ASM, Mission, 2022). As such, the ASM serves as a unique and valuable resource for signage researchers apart from the museum's mission "to celebrate the rich history of American signage through preservation and education" of an interested public (ASM, Mission, 2022). The National Signs of the Times Museum was founded in Cincinnati by Tod Swormstedt in 1999. With additional support and growth, it was renamed and re-opened as the American Sign Museum in 2005 as a nonprofit corporation. The museum was subsequently moved and greatly expanded at its current location in 2012. Major support has been provided by the Swormstedt family and others interested in the history and role of signage in the U.S., especially Jim and Sharon Weinel (ASM, Support, 2022)

Tod Swormstedt had been on the staff at the *Signs of the Times* for twenty-six years, a publication for sign-industry news, technical information, and analysis since 1906, and served as the fourth-generation editor of the "bible of the sign industry" (Beckman and Ranieri, 2017). Tod parlayed his knowledge and contacts into a self-proclaimed "mid-life crisis project" that would eventually become the American Sign Museum. This was Tod's chance to preserve the 3-D artisanship of multi-generational sign companies, to tell their stories and bring these signs to life before they were lost forever (ASM, Story, 2022).

The museum originally resided in an arts center, but as the collection expanded and larger signs were acquired, including iconic McDonald's

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and Holiday Inn signs, a larger space was needed to display these to their full height. Eventually an empty century-old industrial building with 28-foot ceilings able to accommodate the museum's growing display needs was secured in Cincinnati's historic Camp Washington neighborhood, a mixed industrial-residential area sandwiched between a busy urban interstate highway and an active railroad switching yard. The building had been part of the Oesterlein Machine Company-Fashion Frocks, Inc. complex and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places (ASM, Story, 2022). After additional fundraising that again included substantial support from Jim and Sharon Weinel, and extensive renovations, the location became the museum's new home, opening in June 2012.

Given the Weinels' dedication to giving back to the sign industry, it is not surprising that the ASM has received their significant support. The Weinels have been major supporters of ASM from its initiation, and subsequently provided additional support to complete the renovation of the museum's current building. As acknowledged on the ASM website, "without them, there would not be an American Sign Museum" (ASM, Support, 2022).

WHY THE AMERICAN SIGN MUSEUM IS IMPORTANT

Information about signs can be found in journals, reports, books, public

(L) American Sign Museum
Entrance (L)

(R) American Sign Museum
Big Boy Welcoming Visitors.
Image Credit: Wayne Clause



documents and on a variety of websites but those materials are challenged to communicate what can be learned from direct observation and touch. The ASM staff are able to provide details of the design, construction, operation, and use of their signs that may be impossible to replicate through other research sources. The collection in the ASM, as in other good museums, is a tangible, physical resource allowing visitors to experience up close the actual objects that shaped our history. Seeing and touching these objects with one's own eyes and hands creates an understanding and appreciation that reading about something or simply seeing pictures of it cannot. Indeed, museum studies research has shown that museum experiences shape how visitors understand the past and shape attitudes about the future (Rennie and Johnston, 2004). This is especially important for signs and signage, given their ubiquitous and important presence in everyday life, and the critical function they serve in wayfinding, and public and commercial visual communication.

Museums also are important laboratories for

research on the objects and artifacts in their collections and have served as important partners with universities so that researchers and students have the opportunity to utilize their collection (Rennie and Johnston, 2004). This research helps explain how the world works, and answers some of the questions about the how and whys of what was and why what we have has come to be. The signs displayed in the ASM tell stories not only about the displayed signs and the people that created and viewed them, but also about the physical, political, and economic nature of places where they were displayed. As such, ASM displays provides a visual story to visitors about the evolving nature of American culture, institutions, and technology over the past 150 years. Without those stories, it would be far more difficult to understand the need for and nature of visual communication in today's world.

The progression and preservation of society depends on museums like the ASM. At the ASM, visitors leave with vibrant memories of the displays and signs observed, but also with the lessons they learned. Visitors



Downtown St Louis at Night B&W
Source: American Sign Museum

to the ASM who experienced and can remember when the displayed signs were in common use are likely to have their memories reinforced and leave with an extended knowledge about the role and importance of those signs, as well a better understanding of the role of signage more generally in contributing to everyday life as we know it today.

It was within this context that the importance of Jim and Sharon Weinels' support of the ASM can best be understood and appreciated. Specifically, the ASM serves both the public and the sign industry by providing lessons about:

1. Evoking and speaking to local, regional, and national nostalgia with respect to the signage of products and retailers that are remembered or have been learned about from the past.
2. Local, regional, and national histories with respect to commercial communication.
3. The history of sign design (and branding) and the impact of these on product impact, as well as their impact on the creation of place for the locations where the signs are located.
4. History of the evolution of signage craft and technology, and the innovations that have driven changes in signage design, placement and use with impacts on communication effectiveness of signs.

CONNECTION OF THE AMERICAN SIGN MUSEUM TO SIGNAGE RESEARCH

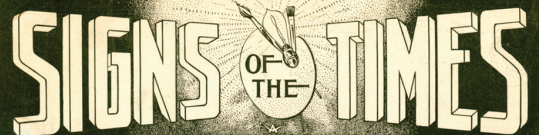
As the only museum in the U.S. dedicated to the art and craft of sign-making, the ASM seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the impacts of on-premise signs on people and places. With more than 200 signs on display and over 3,800 items cataloged, the collection ranges from the late nineteenth century to the 1970s (Skyticket, American Sign Museum, 2022). When in their original use, the signs now displayed at the ASM advertised specific businesses and brands in specific locations along specific roadways within specific communities. As such, they were subject to the tastes and preferences of business owners and any local sign regulations, if they existed. Their purpose was to market and brand a business, organization, or institution, and identify its specific location. Just as important was how the signs individually and together with other signs and visible features contributed to the creation and maintenance of a "sense of place" for a specific location and its surrounding area (Jackson 1994). Yet as part of the ASM collection these signs now have the potential to serve a different role as historical objects reflecting a socio-

cultural-physical context of the times and places in which the signs were created and displayed. To those interested in American history more generally, the historic signs provide nuanced insight to how patterns of visual communication may reflect the changing social norms and evolving development patterns and technology. For those interested in the various sub-areas of signage research, the ASM signage collection provides several opportunities. These include the opportunity to learn from the historic patterns of sign design and response to changing technology as a basis for understanding current signage design and regulation challenges. This is especially important given the rapidly changing display and cell phone technology over the past two decades, especially when considered in the context of multi-generational differences in social norms and expectations for commercial communication.

In addition to the museum's collection of historic signs, the ASM collection also includes books, catalogs, tools, blueprints, equipment, and other items related to the history and process of sign-making. One of the most crucial elements of this part of the ASM collection is the complete



American Sign Museum
McDonald's Sign on Main Street.
Image Credit: Wayne Clause



SIGNS OF THE TIMES

MONTHLY MAGAZINE DEVOTED TO
Sign Painters, Sign Carvers and Electric, Glass and Metal Sign Makers.

Vol. I, No. 1. **CINCINNATI.** MAY, 1906.

Foreword.

Customs declare that some little over a year ago the birth of a new paper was made possible by the fact that the sign industry was being reorganized and reformed by tradition and unbroken by progress. In the reorganization it is made no pretense that we have to make a special paper and a welcome to the new one.

As to how we are going about it, we have been discussing the matter for some time in the paper. The first step was to get the sign painters, sign carvers, electric, glass and metal sign makers, together. The object was to see that the sign industry was being reorganized in the best way possible. We have to make a special paper and a welcome to the new one.

The only question we will make at the moment is to see that the sign industry is being reorganized in the best way possible. We have to make a special paper and a welcome to the new one.

It is to be a sign industry paper, not a general business paper. It will be a sign industry paper, not a general business paper. It will be a sign industry paper, not a general business paper.

A PAPER WITH A PURPOSE.

Signs of the Times is devoted to the sign industry. It is a sign industry paper, not a general business paper. It will be a sign industry paper, not a general business paper.

WHAT WE ADVOCATE.

We advocate the sign industry. We advocate the sign industry. We advocate the sign industry. We advocate the sign industry.

TO SUBSCRIBERS


It is desired to secure the services of a number of active men and women to act as subscribers for this magazine. In addition to a liberal commission for every subscription, we will give to those who secure ten or more annual subscriptions.

O. J. Gude.

If there be among our readers any men who are interested in the sign industry, we will be glad to have them act as subscribers for this magazine. In addition to a liberal commission for every subscription, we will give to those who secure ten or more annual subscriptions.

AN OPPORTUNITY

It is desired to secure the services of a number of active men and women to act as subscribers for this magazine. In addition to a liberal commission for every subscription, we will give to those who secure ten or more annual subscriptions.



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SIGN MANUFACTURERS.

We invite communication from sign manufacturers of the sign industry. We invite communication from sign manufacturers of the sign industry. We invite communication from sign manufacturers of the sign industry.

archive of the Signs of the Times from its inception in 1906 to the present. This collection is the most extensive archive of documentation of the design, fabrication, and use of American signage, all portrayed in the Signs of the Times in a real-time reflection of the signs' functional role. Given the periodical's prominent position as the primary publication to inform and connect signage designers, fabricators, installers and users over the past 115 years, this archive by itself represents both a unique and potentially invaluable resource for archival signage research.

The ASM also includes an extensive collection of thousands of in situ photographs of U.S. on-premise signs. Because they document the actual context in which the signs are displayed, the photos allow assessment of the conspicuity, readability and the overall communication effectiveness of the specific signs given their actual locations of use and vantage points of photographers. The extent to which the photo vantage points are consistent with desirable viewing locations, analysis of the images provides insight to strategies for sign location, as well as signage design and regulation.

Inaugural issue of The Signs of the Times, May 1906: "Monthly Magazine Devoted to Sign Painters, Sign Carvers, and Electric, Glass and Metal Sign Makers."

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