

Book Review:

Vintage Signs of America

by Jane Seltzer

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In *Vintage Signs of America*, Jane Seltzer examines the relationships among the history, cultural significance, purpose, and physical details of vintage signs across the United States from the early 1900s to the 1970s. Most of the signs shown and discussed throughout this book date back to the 1940s and 1950s since most of the signs that have been protected and restored are from this time period. Vintage signs embody an iconic, artistic, and historic flare. They serve as reminders of the types of businesses that were once popular during the early to mid-1900s—typically mom-and-pop restaurants and shops—as well as the standard cultural norms of these time periods. Unfortunately, many of the signs depicted and discussed in this book are no longer components of their innate vernacular landscape. Instead of writing chapters focused on regions or states, Seltzer chose to combine distinct collections of signs based on architectural qualities and characteristics. *Vintage Signs of America* is broken down into three sections. *Types of Signs* provides information about the various materials used, display methods, and unique features of vintage signs. Themes offers a description of sign figures, such as people, animals, and objects. *The Future of Vintage Signs (Preserving Vintage Signs)* addresses the resistance to and importance of the preservation of vintage signs, while discussing appropriate and practical approaches for their maintenance and protection. In this chapter, *The American Sign Museum*, *The Neon Museum*, and *Museum of Neon Art* are applauded for their work in this respect. Aside from these sources, few others are used, as most of the book content is original. Seltzer awards proper credit to the individuals and producers involved in the creation of the vintage signs portrayed in this book through discussion.

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Sunbeam Bread sign atop
Perfection Bakery in Fort Wayne,
Indiana. Source: Seltzer, 2017.

Seltzer began documenting and researching signs, buildings, and statues for her website called www.roadsidearchitecture.com in 2001. This website boasts over 2,500 pages of content and 60,000 photographs. Along this journey, Seltzer has also captured over 10,000 images of vintage signs across the United States, many of which are the primary subjects of this book. Since her continuous contributions to the *Society for Commercial Archaeology's* publications, Seltzer's passion for signs has compelled her to share her wealth of knowledge with others on this topic through *Vintage Signs of America*. This once popular but forgotten method for conveying ambient text and visual representations emerges once again as a curiosity to the eye and imagination. Seltzer's exceptional descriptions of documented signs clearly convey that vintage signs deserve to be celebrated for their important role in shaping American art, culture, the character of places, and the economy over time into their current forms and states.

In *Types of Signs*, Seltzer investigates bulb, Federal Electric, opal glass letter, mechanical, neon extension, rooftop, sputniks, star, and plastic signs. Signs, such as opal glass and neon extensions, portray architectural beauty, while others simply serve clear purposes like advertising products. A vast array of colors, representations, placement, and purposes of the signs in this chapter offer a glimpse into the past that allows readers to recall and relish childhood memories or imagine a uniquely adorned American landscape previously unknown to them. Due to the rapid spread of successful and highly demanded products spanning decades, many brands for which these signs advertised are still common household names. Examples include Kodak, Goodyear, Sunbeam, and General Electric. The many names of individuals and companies identified in the once thriving sign making industry are part of the story of how vintage signs were originally used and how creativity evolved out of a need to communicate to people interacting in and with public space. Although many vintage signs have captured the

attention of those in the neighborhood or passing by, Seltzer discusses that many of the signs have entered into a state of disrepair due to damage from weather events or lack of money to replace bulbs or other parts. Some towns and cities have realized the contribution of these historic remnants to their community's character and sense of place and have invested in restoring and maintaining decades old signs. The combination of words with various fonts and fine detailing assist in the creation of the identity of the towns and cities in which signs were once found. These signs evoke feelings of familiarity among a wide range of readers, such as sign enthusiasts and students. Seltzer captures the reader's attention through the emotionally, intellectually, and visually compelling content of the book.

In the second category, *Themes*, Seltzer analyzes different common vintage sign figures found across the United States. The subcategories composed of people, animals, and things can be further broken down to include various types of chefs, cowboys, Indians, men at work, women, birds, fish, dogs, cats, other mammals, donuts, fast food chains, bowling, roller skating, cars, and plumbing. Chefs, cowboys, and men at work are cartoonish, emotionally expressive, and colorful. The cowboys and Indians appear separately and are primarily found in western states. A primary distinction among the chefs, cowboys, and Indians is that the majority of the chefs appear rather short while the cowboys and Indians are taller with long legs and torsos. Seltzer describes the figures in a way that adds context through hints that these sign characters were of a style similar to what was observed in popular western films. Women are depicted in line with social norms of the times in which the signs were created and displayed. The women are slim, feminine, and are visualized taking on typical female roles, such as washing laundry and grocery shopping. Working men have a wider range of occupations that conform to traditional male roles. Such jobs include chopping wood, driving construction vehicles, chopping meat, and welding. Animals are bright, colorful, and animated. The purposes of the signs depicting women, men, and animals are to advertise a product or service housed inside the buildings to which the signs belong or to playfully incorporate

regional or local cultures. The signs in general range from realistic and detailed paintings to neon tube light that give the shape of a figure of a football kicker, for example. This unique assortment of vintage signs comes to life in Seltzer's photographs, and takes the reader on a sight-seeing road trip across the United States.

While *Vintage Signs of America* covers a wide range of signs, portraying a variety of structures that uphold these signs and settings would offer an opportunity to add greater substance to the text. Diversifying the demographic backgrounds of people and settings would enhance the complexity of the connections examined in the themes section. Aside from the Native American figures, almost all of the people represented by the signs are Caucasian. One side of the rich history from the 1910s to the 1970s is presented while many others are left unmentioned. Seltzer does not note that these signs point to human rights issues that were occurring during the years that these signs were made and used. While most of the vintage signs that remain live in museums, some areas of the deep south and southwest may have had some signs left that portrayed the influence of African American and Hispanic cultures on the United States in the 1910s to the 1970s. Much of the Native American sign art appears out of the context of Native American cultures, and instead is portrayed in a way that suggests that this minority group was not involved in the creation of these signs. These observations may lead readers to form specific conclusions about the book.

The final section, *The Future of Vintage Signs (Preserving Vintage Signs)*, acknowledges that the loss of interest in vintage signs was due to the significant amount of care and maintenance required for their upkeep. Many sign owners simply were unable to afford the cost of repairing signs after weather events and protecting signs from rust. Seltzer notes that it is not uncommon for neon sign restoration to cost \$10,000 or more. Unfortunately, signs of this type are generally not considered national landmarks and are, therefore, only offered protection by museums interested in collecting such relics. Seltzer relies upon her expertise to state that while historic designations should be awarded, at the local level it is usually not practical as building owners must commit to main-

taining top condition of the signs. When original building owners relocate, letters are rarely able to be rearranged to reflect the name of the new business. New owners may have their own opinions and limitations concerning care for inherited signs, which often leads to their deterioration and ultimate removal from the built environment. Seltzer shifts her focus to proactive approaches that have been, and continue to be, taken today to save and restore vintage signs. Seltzer states that large sums of funding have been awarded for repair and restoration due to increasing recognition of vintage signs as historic landmarks. Over time, the sign industry has shifted from creating signs with specific qualities and characteristics, to collecting and restoring these now vintage signs. Cities such as Saginaw, Michigan, and Rancho Cucamonga, California have created sign parks or have used vintage signs from closed businesses as a new aesthetic for their modern communities. Seltzer concludes the book by providing readers with a summary of *The American Sign Museum* (Cincinnati, Ohio), *Museum of Neon Art* (Glendale, California), *The Neon Museum* (Las Vegas, Nevada), and offers tools to readers who are interested in preserving vintage signs. Seltzer recommends sharing an appreciation for signs to local business owners, finding friends with similar interests in preserving vintage signs, fundraising, and becoming involved in determining the fate of a sign that may be removed due to a business closure.

Vintage Signs of America not only provides the reader with information pertaining to the history of signs, but also offers an opportunity to become involved in the preservation of vintage signs. Seltzer's ability to explore sign themes and beauty in a manner that relates to the past, present, and future, through her own images and expertise makes *Vintage Signs of America* a significant contribution to the research of signage and is a unique publication that is widely interpretable by a range of audiences.