

*Dedicated to  
the sign writers who  
helped rewrite the future  
of the great nation we call  
The United States of  
America.*



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**INTRO**

# SIGN WRITERS

At the turn of the 20th Century, a new commercial art form began to develop in the United States of America. Merchants found themselves in need of small display signs that gave customers information on their products, or drew attention to special items in their stores. Initially sign painters were the only ones who were skilled enough to fulfill their orders. It soon became apparent that the lettering of merchant display cards would prove to be a lucrative trade. This caused many sign painters to focus their attention on painting these smaller display cards as a full time occupation. These new display card artists became known as “sign” or “show card writers”.

Parallel to the golden age of the show card writers was a moral struggle of civil equality shaping the landscape of America. African men and women, who were sold into slavery, were becoming free again through the work and determination of several courageous law makers. As laws were written and passed to give the African American equal rights as all other Americans, a sect of bigoted separatists rose up in the southeast sector of the United States, drafting laws that sought to re-establish a society of Caucasian supremacy and exclusion. This legal system of “segregation” (the action or state of setting someone or something apart from other people or things) became known

as the “Jim Crow” laws. To combat these divisive laws, committed and intelligent African American leaders sprang forth from a suppressed people, to conduct civil rights demonstrations and protests. One of the central forms of communication during these demonstrations was hand written signs, that appealed to the hearts of a nation for equality and inclusion. At the same time, other signs were present throughout the civil rights era that promoted segregation and the separation of Caucasians from people of color. Protestors and advocates alike would wear, carry, or post hand-painted signs, trying to influence their audience to vote in favor of their ideals.

In this book we will take an allegorical look at the commercial art form of “sign writing”, studying some of the pioneers of this trade, and examining the specific techniques and fundamentals of the occupation.

Specifically, we will thoroughly examine a specialized group of sign writers, known as “show card writers”. Their hand-made merchant display cards were commissioned by business owners to draw their customer’s attention to specific products and services (Fig. 2).

As we survey the parallel history of the civil rights movement in America, we will notice how many of the hand painted signs created during times of segregation bore many of the same typographic characteristics of show card writing (Fig. 3)

The sign writer’s goal was to draw the attention of the viewer and communicate to them a message. We will see how this goal was realized by the courageous strokes of the sign writers of civil rights, as they helped a nation of fifty states truly become united.

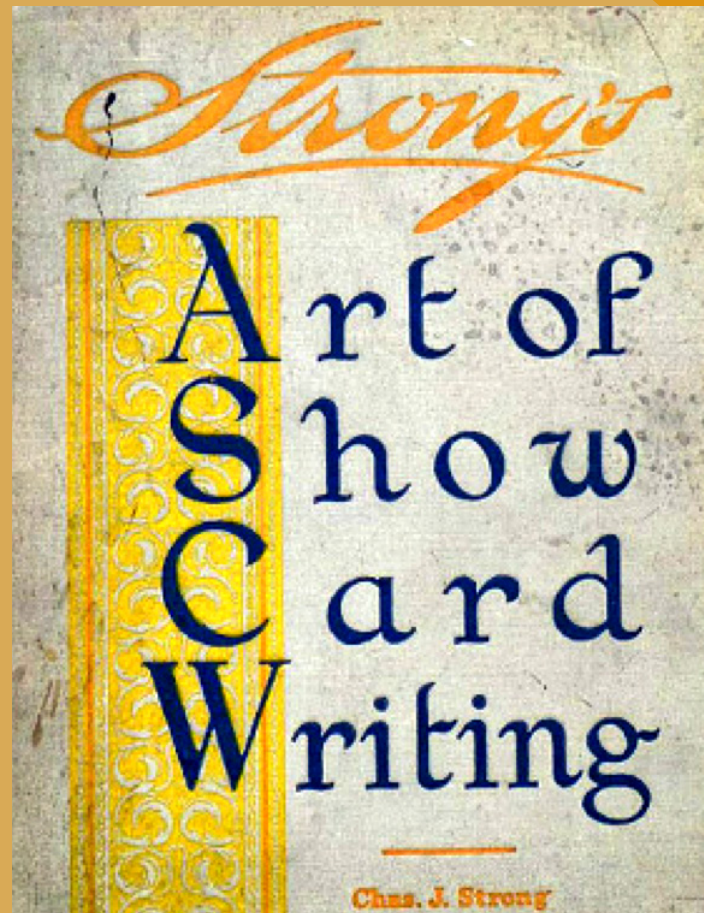


Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



There was something different about walking into a main street store or a theatre one hundred years ago, and walking into one today. In today’s experience, something would be missing...hand made show cards.

At the turn of the 20th century, one of the most readily used forms of point-of-purchase advertising came via hand painted signs called “show cards”. The name is said to be derived from merchants needing a small informational sign to “show off” their new product or draw attention to an item on sale. Various types of businesses began to hire former sign painters who were transitioning to this smaller card-like sign, usually produced on cardboard or thin rectangular pieces of wood.

By the early 1900s these hand written cards were being seen everywhere. It became big business for sign painters and commercial artists. Just as every town had need for a butcher and barber, most towns also had a show card writer.



Fig. 4

But don't call it sign painting. The art of creating the show card was something more akin to writing. William Hugh Gordon, one of the show card masters, would state that show card artists called themselves "writers" instead of "letterers" because the lettering "is really written... they are produced by the rapid single stroke method, much the same as writing, regardless of whether a brush, pen, or other device is used." Show card writing was actually a combination of the ornate art form of calligraphy and the functional craftsmanship found in public sign painting. The period from 1890 to 1920 is when Show Card Writing was at its peak. Many of the writers also had drawing and painting skills, which made borders and illustrative devices easy for them to

implement into the layout. Calligraphy came to be known for its ornamental lettering style. In the early stages of show card writing, borders and graphic elements called "ornaments" were added to the signage. This style could be readily seen in price tags, or "price tickets" and product advertisements. A similar typographic style could also be seen in silent movie text frames.

As the show card art form evolved, fewer ornaments were used and a cleaner approach to the signage took precedence. Yet, on later cards, small ornaments would be used to highlight a price or balance out the spacing for a smaller word or conjunction in the phrase.



Fig. 5

# SHOW -CARD- TECHNIQUES

The main writing tool for professional show card writers in the late 1800s was the "rigger" brush. The rigger style brush was a long red sable brush that came in two styles, round and flat. The round brushes came in eighteen different sizes. There were twelve variations of the flat brush. But for the beginning writer, two or three round sable brushes of different sizes and a 1/4 inch flat brush were sufficient for a show card writer start-up set. The best grade of these brushes were those that were imported from Russia. Their tips could be flattened out to make a stroke of even width in the pull direction, and a thin stroke when moved sideways.



The brush gets its name from being used by nautical draftsmen to paint the “rigging lines” (ropes) of sailing ships on plans or technical drawings. Painters would also use this type of brush to paint the ropes of a ship in an artistic painting. Since these brushes were good at creating long thin lines of uninterrupted paint, they became known as the script or “rigger” brush.

A rigger is held between the thumb and index finger in a manner that allows the brush to be rotated during a stroke (Fig. 6). That turn of the brush is necessary to make the “Gothic” and “Block” letterforms. Often times, writers would wrap the ferrule with waxed string to improve their grip. The brush would be held

far down the ferrule and pulled toward the writer with a movement of the fingers. Many writers used a hand rest or “bridge” to aide in the process of writing.

Many other writers found the bridge to inhibit their movement and used their ring and pinky finger to stabilize the brush as they pulled their strokes. Used properly, the rigger brush can be used to make all of the letterforms a skilled show card writer would need to make when writing a sign. One of the most important parts of being an experienced show card writer is the handling and care of ones tools. For instance, if a writer is using a set of brushes with a water based paint, those same brushes were not used with an oil based paint or ink.

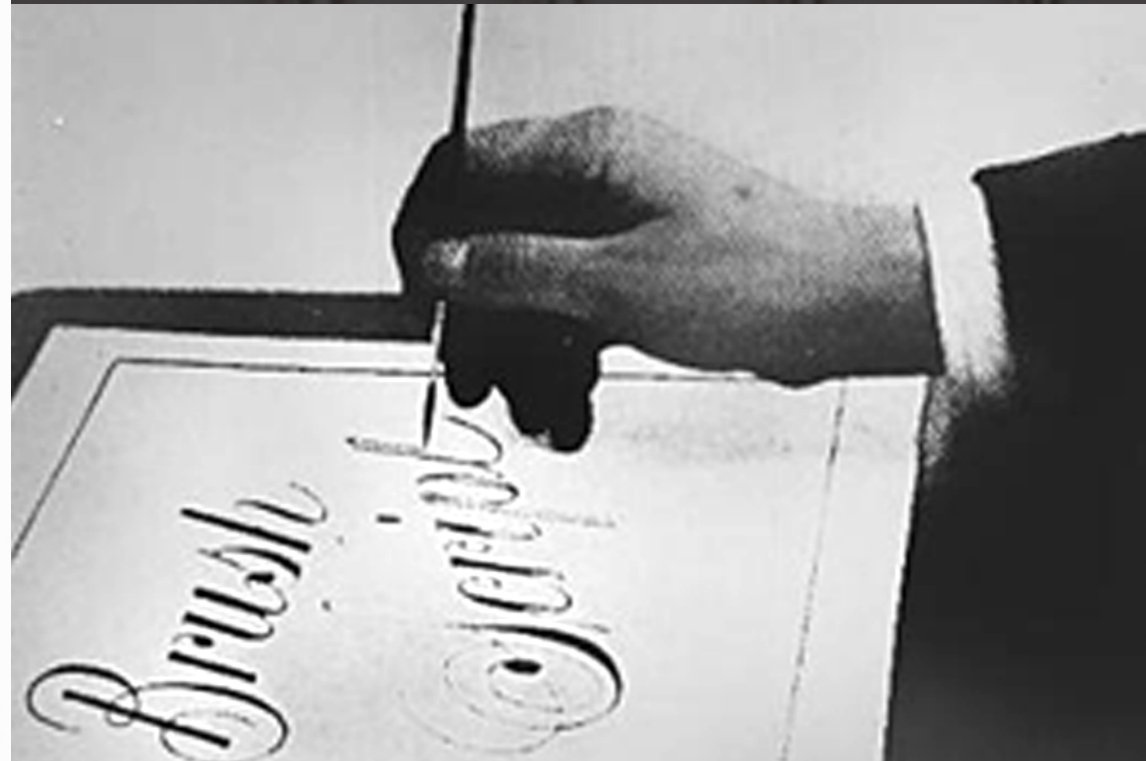


Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Careful cleaning of the brushes after use was also employed to assure that no color is left in the hair of the brush. If any color did begin to dry on the brush, the brush would be soaked in water first before cleaning.

Brushes that were used with an oil-based pigment would be cleaned immediately after use with turpentine to remove every particle of color. Hardened particles of color in the brush could result in a blot or inconsistency during the writing process.

The media used by show card writers was a water-based paint prepared from dry pigments with a binder like mucilage, a plant derivative that was also used as a binder for glue. Since most show card writers were former painters who were familiar with mixing their colors, preparing their colors for show card writing came easy.



Fig. 9



As the industry grew, and the desire for more consistent colors throughout a set of cards, more pre-mixed "Show Card Colors" were made available by paint companies like "Wallbrunn, Kling & Co." in Chicago (Fig. 10).

The colors that the Wallbrunn Kling Company produced would be used at 100% opacity for darker, more saturated colors, or slightly diluted for softer pigments. Although the show card colors came in 24 pigments, the main colors used by beginning show card writers were black, red, white, yellow and blue. Knowing how to mix colors, the show card writer would know that, of those 5 colors, all other colors could be created.

Ink is another media that was used for show card design, but in the early 20s, it was not the norm, since it was much more expensive than Show Card Colors. India ink was a good choice for smooth opaque lettering. Still, it is only useful when the lettering must be black, which many times was the case.

This need to use ink in show card writing brought about the patenting of a new tool and the establishment of a new company that helped support the show card writing trade.



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

# THE SPEEDBALL -PEN-

Ross F. George was a sign painter and lettering specialist who was deeply influenced by W. H. Gordon, the show card master mentioned earlier.

W. H. Gordon and R. F. George developed the "speedball" pen. After they obtained a patent on it, they took it to the C. Howard Hunt Pen Co., located in Camden, New Jersey.

The year was 1915 and the Hunt Co. would agree to manufacture the "speedball" pens in six sizes, along with a Speedball



text book that was written by George on how to use the pens. Initially the pens were called "Gordon and George Speedball Pens". Eventually the name was shortened to simply "Speedball Pens". Although other types of pens existed during the time of show card writing, the Speedball Pen quickly became a favorite to the show card writer for its ease of use and rapid speed at which it allowed them to work. The Gordon and George Speedball Pens were uniquely equipped with a double reservoir fountain and tip-retainer over the extreme point of the shoe, which prevents an excess overflow of ink or color.

# HOW CARDS

Another characteristic of the speedball pen enjoyed by show card writers is that it could produce strokes drawn in any direction, with a uniform width throughout.

With the square nibbed speedball pen, thick and thin strokes are easily accomplished with the change of direction. Therefore Roman style letters and serifs could be quickly drawn with the speedball pen. Most people, familiar with the art form of calligraphy, have heard of a speedball pen. These pens are still being used

render the letters with consistency. This was one of the basic requirements of being a successful show card writer.

What Blair taught show card students to do in the early 1900s, was to write each letter in the same manner, with the same amount of strokes each time. Figure 12 is an example from Blair's book on how to render each letter. An arrow shows the direction in which each stroke was drawn. The strokes are also numbered in the order in which they should



Fig. 12

today. But what most people don't realize is that the invention of the speedball pen came from a typographer who was heavily influenced by a commercial show card writer.

But what good are the tools without the proper techniques? This is one of the things Lawrence Blair sought to teach aspiring show card writers in his book, "Principles and Practice of Show-card Writing" Every show card writer needed to have a firm grasp on the elementary English alphabet and be able to

be made. By repeatedly following this process to write the letters, a consistent and uniform look can be established for each letter. The goal for Blair in writing his instruction manual for show card writers, was to establish a systematic approach and methodical process for those seeking to master the art of show card writer. Those who did were able to make it a profitable career. Many sign painters adusted their trade to become show card writers.

# SHOW -CARD- TECHNIQUES CONCLUSION

One final note regarding the basic techniques of show card writing, is the writer's understanding of capital letters and how they differ from lower case letters. As shown in Figure 13, the "cap height" is how tall the capital letters are. This height would have to remain consistent for all capital letters in the phrase, using the same typeface and size. The same is true for the lower case type.

The "X-height", or height of the lower-case letter from its baseline to the median, needs to remain consistent throughout all words using the same typeface and size. The height and depth of the ascenders and descenders need to be consistent as well. Beginning show card writers would use horizontal rules to guide them in making their cap and x heights consistent. More experienced writers no longer needed the guide rules, having mastered the art of show card writing.

Authors like Blair and Strong treated show card design as a specific art form. Their books go into great detail describing the process of properly designing and writing a show card. Blair and another show card author by the name of Strong emphasized many of the basic composition principles taught to graphic designers today. For instance, they discussed the difference between actual and optical centers.

On a vertically positioned card, to place the text in the actual center, will cause it to look slightly low on the card. Pushing it slightly above actual center will allow it to look centered visually (Fig. 14). The same is true for horizontally oriented cards (Fig.15). We see this with letter spacing and letter heights as well.



Fig. 13

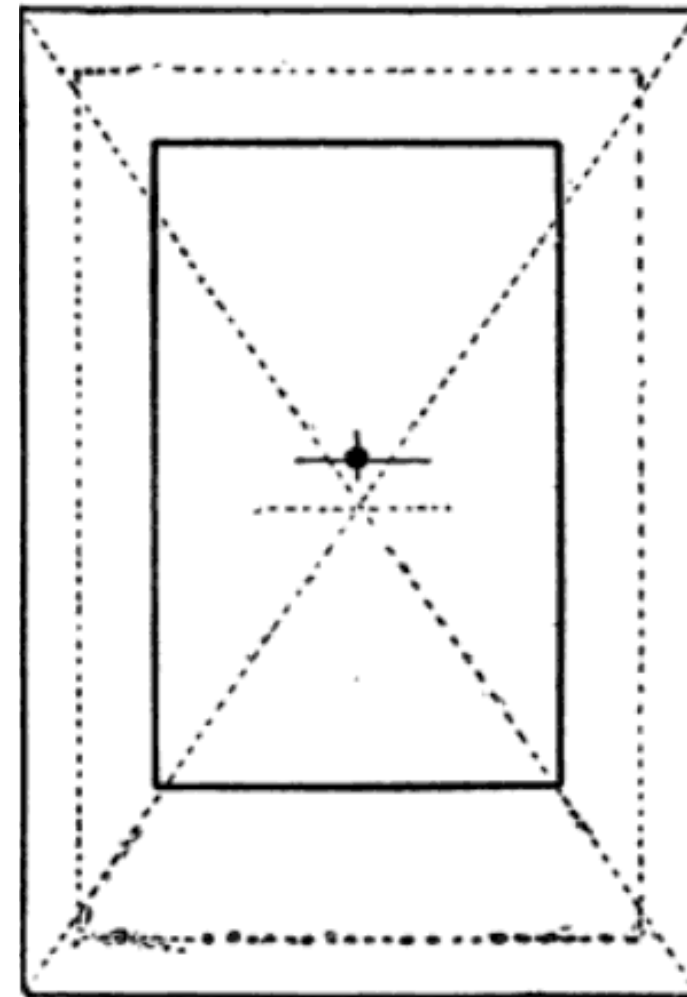


Fig. 14

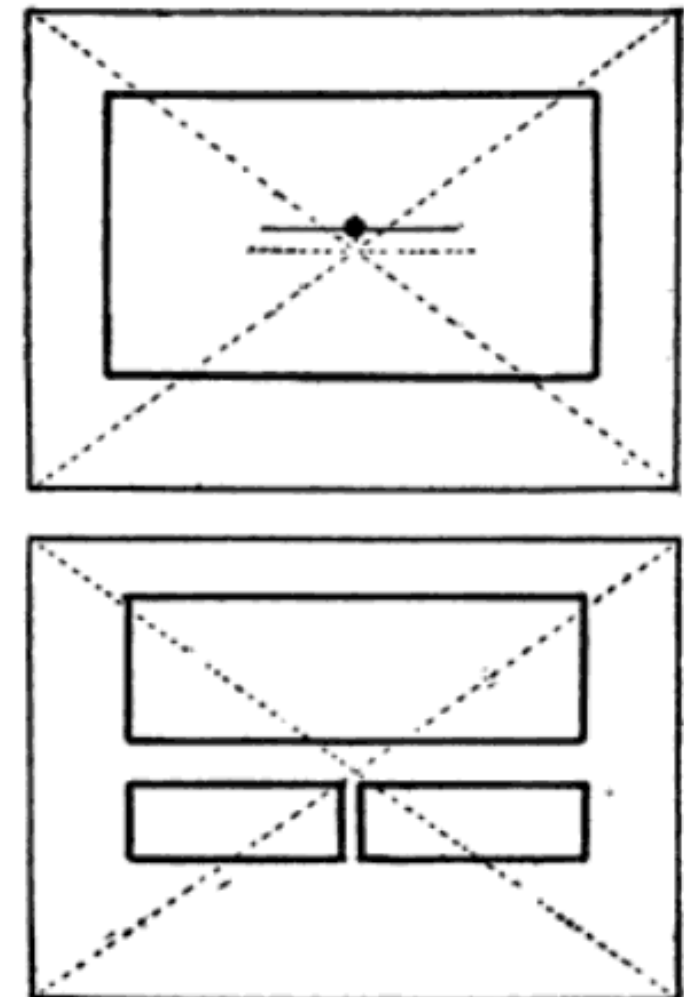


Fig. 15



Fig. 16

The show card writer had to be familiar with how composition, letter spacing and character heights vary slightly, in order for the text to look uniform and consistent optically. Spacing the letters equidistant from each other can cause visual gaps in words or phrases and hinder readability. The same goes for the height of the letters.

Most show card writers would use a reference line created by a straight edge. Or they would use another technique, popular at that time, using a piece of string. The writer would tie his pencil to one end of the string and hold the other end with his other hand. Positioning the drawing utensil where he wants to start the line, holding the string taut, he would move both hands across the page in a parallel motion, guiding the string along the edge of the board (Fig. 17). Of course this method assumes that the edge of the board is straight.

What I like about what Blair was trying to teach young show card writers is that being “fancy” didn’t make you a better artist. He may have been one of the first to teach the concept that “less is more”, although he didn’t use that phrase. But what he did write was that, “the term “artistic” applied rightly means good taste, or containing quality. An artistic card is one therefore, which is suited to the place and purpose for which it was intended.”

I’m sure the tendency for the early show card writer was to add stylized borders and ornaments to all show cards. But this wasn’t always suitable for all situations. Knowing how to treat a subject typographically in a limited space, communicate what your client wants communicated, and make it attractive to the viewer, are the fundamental characteristics of a successful typographic design.



Fig. 17



Fig. 18

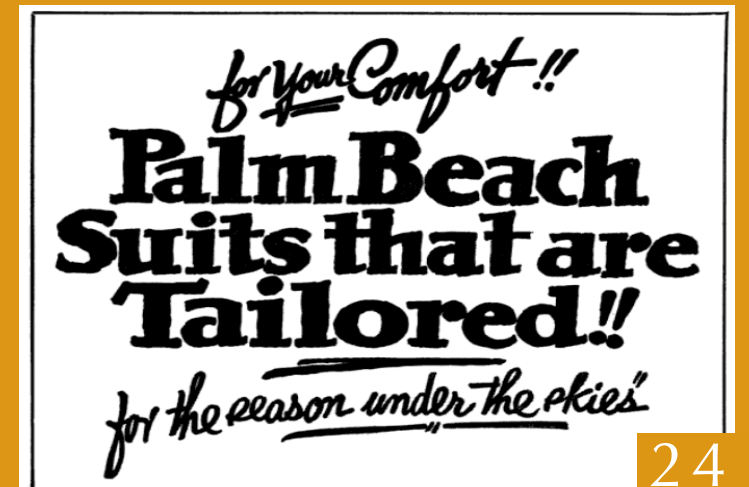


Fig. 19

Other extremely important aspects of show card writing includes; Composition, Balance, Symmetry, Ratios (referred to by Blair as proportioning), Harmony, Unity, Rhythm, and Hierarchy (referred to by Blair as controlling the eye). One technique that allowed the writer to produce several cards that were practically identical to each other, was the use of stencils, also called “cut-outs”.

In Fig. 20 you will see the basic steps a writer would take to ensure that his successive cards are consistent in their composition. He would begin by writing his initial card. Then a sheet of tissue paper is placed over the sample card and the areas marking the limits of the lettering would be outlined. The tissue paper would then be placed on a new blank card, the same size as the sample, and traced with a hard pencil. The traced lines would make an indentation in the card. The outlined spaces showing the positions of the lettering are then cut out and used as a stencil for the following cards.

The writer would use the cut out to draw thin lines, outlining the area where the text should go. But note that the writer is not tracing the lettering, but only the area where the lettering resides. His artistic freehand writing abilities are still employed to produce a consistent set of show cards. It was important for show card writers to produce a large quantity of signs within a short period of time, since the supply

*- THE -*  
**SHOW  
 CARD**  
*OCCUPATION*

FULL SIZE CARD -----	\$0.75
HALF SIZE CARD -----	\$0.50
QUARTER SIZE CARD -----	\$0.25
1 HOUR OF CARD WORK-----	\$1.00
30 MINUTES OF CARD WORK -----	\$0.50
15 MINUTES OF CARD WORK -----	\$0.25

and demand factor did not work in their favor. The occupation had grown and many were performing the practice. Even schools were created that young aspiring writers could attend to become professional show card writers. This caused the show card market to flood, forcing the writers to keep their prices competitive.

In 1920, according to “The Art of Show Card Writing” by Charles and Lawrence Strong, an hour’s worth of show card work was worth 1 dollar. A half hour of work was worth 50 cents, and so on. Understanding the economic landscape at that time, being a show card writer was a decent occupation. If a client would rather pay by the sign, the average full card size would cost 75 cents. A half size card would cost 50 cents. A quarter size card would be priced at 25 cents.

The writers would make their profit on the amount of cards they could produce. This made speed all the more important. The rigger brush provided that speed, by being able to hold a good amount of paint. Likewise, the speedball pens allowed the writer to make multiple rapid letter strokes before getting more ink. But unlike sign painters, show card writers did not outline their letters and fill them in. To do that would take too long. Even William Hugh Gordon, one of the masters of his time, stated “quantity first” when it came to show card writing.



Fig. 20

# SHOW CARD TYPEFACES

There are certain characteristics inherent in the letter styles used for show card writing, because each alphabet takes on the character of the tool that constructed it. In the beginning of show card design, the main typefaces used were patterned after the “Classic Roman” typeface, which is characterized by thick and thin strokes. As type styles became more bold and sharp, the “Gothic” or “Old English” style of letting was implemented into the show card writer’s collection of type styles.

Gothic style letters were condensed in width and bore broader strokes with smaller open spaces. Due to their heavy strokes, they were also known as “Black letter”. Interestingly, as typefaces became more simplified, some sans serif typefaces were also called “Gothic”. These styles were easier and quicker to write, but not as attractive. So show card writers would mix typefaces to establish a more attractive layout.

A specific group of show card typefaces were designated for show card production due to the speed in which they could be written. Their titles consisted of: Modern Italic, Modern Full Block, Bradley Text, Heavy Script, Italic Script, Architect’s Stroke, Draftsmen’s Styles, Old English (Gothic), Tuscan Block, Egyptian, Modern Italic and Classic Roman. Figures 21 through 25 display samples of some of these popular typefaces used in show card writing.

As the golden age of show card writing was at its peak, a pioneer of poster writing gained prominence as an acclaimed graphic designer and lettering master. F. G. Cooper, an innovator in lettering and poster design of the 1910s–30s became famous for his hand written posters produced during World War I. His effort won high praise for their use of all lower-case hand lettering. The warmth and character of the type eliminated the need for additional illustration.

The posters showcased Cooper’s expertise in commercial sign writing, at a time when two wars were taking place, one overseas and one in our homeland. Eventually posters and signs would be written for the homeland struggle known as the civil rights movement.

Parallel to F.G. Cooper’s success as a typographer, during the golden age of the show card writers, was a struggle for equality and inclusion, taking place among citizens and lawmakers across the southeastern region of the “United” States. The struggle was regarding “Segregation”. Many “show cards” were written during this period that bore a message

that sought to sell something more substantial than a pair of shoes, but rather a way of life, a mindset and ideology. Although some of the writers of signs during the civil rights movement may not have been as skilled as some we have already discussed, their hand written messages riveted a nation, and caused brave men and women to write a new type of show card, that would sell the ideals of a unified nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

## HEAVY SCRIPT



Fig. 22

## CLASSIC ROMAN



Fig. 24

## EGYPTIAN



Fig. 21

## MODERN FULL BLOCK



Fig. 23

## ARCHITECT'S STROKE



Fig. 25

CIVIL RIGHTS  
**SIGN**  
WRITERS

# IVUJL

On the heels of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, after President Andrew Johnson formally declared the end of the Civil War in 1866, millions of formerly enslaved Africans hoped for equal access to educational opportunities, voting rights and employment in the United States of America. Amendments to the countries constitution included the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 that abolished slavery. The Fourteenth Amendment of 1868 extended equal protection of the laws to all citizens.



Fig. 26

Two years later the Fifteenth Amendment guaranteed that the right to vote could not be denied "on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude". A period of "reconstruction" was taking place after the civil war, but unfortunately it wouldn't last.

It wasn't long before supporting the former slave's citizenship and voting rights became unpopular. By the late 1870s Reconstruction was coming to an end. Most Caucasian politicians in the former Confederacy and neighboring



states abandoned the cause of protecting African Americans, in place of more potential voters and campaign support. Local governments in these states, determined on re-establishing a society based on Caucasian supremacy, constructed a legal system of segregation. Their laws legally barred African Americans and people of color from voting, equal integrated education, housing opportunities, jobs, and access to public places like restrooms. Denying black men the right to vote



Fig. 27



Fig. 29

# RIGHTS

through unconstitutional laws and violence was the first step in taking away their civil rights. Beginning in the 1890s, southern states established literacy tests, poll taxes, elaborate registration systems, and eventually Caucasian-Only Democratic Party primaries to exclude black voters. Unfortunately their prejudicial laws proved very effective. In Mississippi, fewer than 9,000 of the 147,000 voting-age African Americans were registered after 1890. In Louisiana, where more than 130,000 black voters had been registered



Fig. 28



Fig. 30

in 1896, the number had plummeted to 1,342 by 1904. The southern lawmakers and law enforcement were succeeding at establishing a society of hate and inequality. Their system of unconstitutional laws became known as “Jim Crow” laws.

Jim Crow was a character from a song that a struggling actor by the name of Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice, heard an old black man singing about. Rice took the song and created the character “Jim Crow” from it, beginning in 1828.

Rice was one of the first Caucasian performers to wear blackface makeup. With his “Jim Crow” character he would mock the African’s way of talking, smiling, singing and dancing. His Jim Crow song-and-dance routine was an astounding success that took him to many of the major cities of the U.S. He even performed his show in London and Dublin.

To advertise the Jim Crow Minstrel Show, elaborate show cards were written and illustrated by talented artists. (Fig. 29). Eventually, “Jim Crow” became a common character in minstrel shows, along with subsequent blackface characters Sambos, Coons, and Dandies. Rice’s “Jim Crow” character enjoyed great success as Caucasian audiences eagerly received the portrayals of imported Africans as singing, dancing, and slap-happy fools.

A few years after “Jim Crow” rose to popularity, the term was being used as a collective racial slur for blacks, similar to coon, but not as offensive as nigger. The popularity of minstrel shows clearly aided the spread of “Jim Crow” as a derogatory term. But by the 1950s, the phrase “Jim Crow” was less likely to be used as a racial slur towards Africans in the U.S. Instead, the name would be hand written on multiple signs of protest in the Southeastern United States, describing the laws and the culture that ended Reconstruction and oppressed Africans and other people of color.

“Daddy” Rice and those who imitated him, by their stereotypical depictions of blacks, helped to propagate the mind-set of “Jim Crow”: that Africans were lazy, stupid, inherently less human, and unworthy of integration. During the years that blacks were being victimized by lynch mobs, they were also dehumanized by the prejudicial caricatures propagated through novels, sheet music, theatrical plays, and minstrel shows, all of which helped form a society that would support discrimination and segregation.

Throughout the south, a new type of sign writer emerged promoting the ideas of segregation. Fortunately, sign writers voicing a different view would emerge as well, seeking to rewrite the narrative of a nation and change the hearts and minds of its people. But before they could do so, they would have to confront an evil organization known as the Ku Klux Klan.



Fig. 31



Fig. 32



Fig. 33

The Ku Klux Klan was, and still is today, a terrorist organization determined to restore Caucasian supremacy throughout the United States. It was founded in Pulaski, Tennessee, in 1865 by six Confederate veterans. Their aim was to combat Reconstruction reforms and intimidate African Americans from trying to establish their citizenship in the United States. Their hatred also extended towards immigrants, Catholics and Jewish people.

A few years after the KKK was established, similar organizations like the Knights of the White Camellia and the White Brotherhood were also organized across the United States. “The Klan” derived their name from the Greek word “kyklos” (meaning circle) and combined it with clan. For a short time they were known as the “Kuklux Clan”. The name later evolved into the Ku Klux Klan.

The Klan used fear, brutality, and murder, to help overthrow local reform-minded governments and restore white supremacy to the southern states where slavery flourished. The Klan would die out shortly after 1870, but gain prominence again in the mid 1920s, just as show card writing was at its peak. After a series of scandals among the Klan’s leadership, the membership plummeted once again and the Klan lost its popularity. But by then the Klan had created hatred of ethnic groups and influenced political powers throughout the country. The establishment of the civil rights movement, led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, in the 1960s caused a resurgence of the KKK organization in support of “Jim Crow” laws and a white supremacist culture in the south.

# COURAGEOUS SIGN WRITERS

The establishment of Jim Crow legislation in the south also caused the creation of the various civil rights organizations, including the Civil Rights Congress, founded in 1946. It briefly became a major force in post World War II battles for civil liberties for racially motivated labor movements. In the midst of the struggle were the writings of freedom signs, denouncing unfair treatment of actors and athletes via the Jim Crow Laws. Figure 35 shows one of the signs that were written in support of equal labor laws. Notice on the bottom of the sign, the organization supporting the protest is the Civil Rights Congress.

Although the golden age of show card writers had come and gone, the art form and trade was still in demand, especially as the need for hand painted signs became one of the main forms of communication during the civil rights movement in the 50s. Although show cards were actually about a quarter of the size of the civil rights sign shown in figure 35, the two actually have many typographic characteristics in common.

Consider the show card in Figure 34 from the 1920s and let us compare it to the sign in figure 35. For starters they both are obviously hand written. Although show card writers were proud of their ability to write signs that looked very close to printed text from a distance, the minor inconsistencies of writing, as opposed to type set printing, could still be seen up close.

Another similarity between the two signs is the underlining of certain words, like the words “try our” on the show card. This was a design element used quite often on show cards to create balance and hierarchal emphasis. This same treatment is used in the civil rights sign to emphasize the plight of the “actor” and “athlete”. As we move down both examples we are presented with a characteristic inherent in most show card writing, the use of several type styles in the same typographic design.

As type design developed as an art form, the use of several type styles in one layout became discouraged, as it actually limited readability. Initially, show card instructors taught that bringing emphasis to certain words through varying type styles was effective. The thought was that varying type styles would make for a more attractive card. But treating the text as one unit, with roughly two type styles from the same type family proved to be a more conservative layout. But in keeping with the teaching of the times, both of these pieces use four type styles. One of them is an italic or script typeface that was usually used for conjunctions and less significant text on the sign. This is shown in the words “and” and “at” in the civil rights sign, and in the word “glass” on the show card.



Fig. 34



Fig. 35

Under and above those same words are graphic elements known to sign writers as “ornaments”. Ornaments and borders were common in the design of show cards. As we’ve discussed, very early show cards may have been too laden with ornaments. Eventually they were simplified, and made easier to read. Still the ornament was used sparingly in the latter years of the sign writers, to balance space and add minor decorative elements to the design. Both examples show the use of ornaments, the show card – under the word “glass” and the civil rights sign above the word “and”.



Fig. 36



Fig. 37



Fig. 38

Demonstrations at government buildings, sit-ins at public restaurants, and peaceful marches began to manifest themselves in major cities in the south where segregation was at its peak. At the center of those demonstrations was the writing of **segregation's "show cards"**. Whether they were hung on the bodies of demonstrators, mounted to wooden handles and held up high, or attached to a building, signs that supported segregation, or argued against it, were being written and displayed throughout the southeastern sector of the United States.

The hand painted signs of segregation became part of **the civil rights narrative** as news reporters and photographers focused their cameras on the hand written signs and the ideology they expressed. Still, the signs were only part of a challenging history that would change the civil rights landscape in America.

As African American men and people on the side of equality continued the struggle for equal rights for every citizen of the United States, many supportive judicial decisions were passed and new legislation was established, notably the **Supreme Court's Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka decision of 1954**. Other notable legislation was the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These legal changes greatly affected the opportunities of not only African Americans, but were available to women, other minorities, disabled individuals, and other victims of discrimination.

The civil rights reform period was divided into several phases, all of them beginning with isolated, **small-scale protests** that grew into more militant movements led by charismatic leaders. The Brown decision demonstrated that the litigation strategy of the National

Association for the Advancement of Colored People (**NAACP**) was a successful tactic in undermining the legal foundations of southern segregationist. But the strategy only worked when small groups of African Americans disregarded the risks associated with crossing racial barriers.

This truth became apparent when, even after the Supreme Court declared that public school **segregation was unconstitutional**, civil rights activism was necessary to compel the federal government to act upon its decision and extend its benefits to all areas of public life, not only to the educational environment. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, the NAACP was instrumental in sponsoring legal suits and legislative lobbying that influenced lawmakers and re-wrote a political script that sought a broad range of social changes.

One of the most notable protests in the history of the civil rights movement were the **Montgomery Bus Boycott** by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. This protest and rally kicked off the beginning of the post-Brown period of the movement. Who can forget Rosa Parks of Montgomery, Alabama, who refused to give up her seat to a white passenger, thereby defying a southern custom that required blacks to give seats toward the front of buses to Caucasian passengers?

After Parks was jailed, a community boycott of the city's buses began and lasted over a year. It demonstrated the unity and **resolve present in the African community**. Their fortitude and courage inspired people of color throughout the nation to say as James Brown sang, "I'm black and I'm proud". The self-esteem of the African American was improving. Still more signs needed to be written and more protests needed to take place for America to come to a turning point.



Fig. 39

The civil rights movement would come to its pinnacle when the son of an African American Baptist Preacher from Atlanta Georgia, by the name of **Martin Luther King, Jr.** would emerge as the movement's most effective orator and charismatic leader. King was endowed with a powerful voice and poetic presence that caused every eye and ear to be stayed on him as he spoke eloquent words of justice. He understood the larger significance of the boycotts and quickly instituted non-violent tactics used by Indian nationalist Mahatma Gandhi. King explained, *"I had come to see early that the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of non-violence was one of the most potent weapons*



Fig. 40

*available to the Negro in his struggle for freedom".* The silence of the hand written signs helped to accomplish the peaceful demonstrations King demanded of his fellow protesters. The writing of signs for the abolition of segregation and Jim Crow laws simply communicated a people's desire to be equal, in a non-violent manner. Often times boisterous speeches that insighted anger were not necessary in the presence of the silent messages from **segregation's sign writers.**

Motivated by King's leadership and example of non-violent protest, four freshmen at North Carolina A&T began a wave of student sit-ins at local restaurants (Fig. 41) designed to end the



Fig. 41

segregation at southern lunch counters. These protests spread rapidly throughout the South and led to the founding of the **Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).**

These young advocates for change stressed the development of autonomous local movements that were empowering young people to take a stand for their rights under the United States Constitution. In the midst of the "sit-in movement" is the hand written show card (Fig. 42) informing the public that the soda fountain is closed, due to the possibility of a discriminatory confrontation occurring, simply because young African American men are sitting at the counter. Looking closer at the



Fig. 42

sign, notice the inconsistencies in similar letters like the "O". This speaks to the fact that the sign is hand written. Still, the message behind the writing of the sign speaks even louder. Aside from the magnitude of the signs connotation, let's look at the layout of the sign a little closer. Although the bold type at the top looks like it may have been outlined and filled in, professional sign writers at that time used a wide brush to create this extra bold typeface. This typeface would later be digitized for use as a computer font and titled **"Eckhardt Brushletter"**.

# SEGREGRE



Fig. 43

The lighter typestyles below the extra bold text was most likely written in single rapid strokes. Notice the writer is still accustomed to using more than two type faces, and sacrificing readability, as the script text used for the word “in” could be misread as “is”. The writer could have made the sign cleaner by using the same text as the lower half of the sign for the word “in”.

As the civil rights movement continued to flourish, the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference** achieved its first major success in 1963, when they launched a major campaign in Birmingham, Alabama. The protest caught national attention, as policemen confronted protesters with clubs, fire hoses and police dogs.



Fig. 44

Washington, DC could no longer ignore the “signs” of injustice. The Birmingham confrontation, and other civil rights efforts taking place at the time, caused **President John F. Kennedy** to push for the passage of new civil rights legislation. On August 28, 1963, the civil rights movement would culminate at the Washington monument in Washington, DC. Martin Luther King, Jr. was set to speak to the nation about his dream of a truly united America. The event attracted at least 200,000 participants as they listened to King capture the idealistic spirit of civil rights supporters when he said, “*I have a dream, that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.*”



Fig. 45

King went on to say that his dream was that his “*four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream....*”

Many of us are familiar with the “I have a dream” portion of King’s speech, but are not familiar with the poetic artistry and power found in the rest of the speech as well. To read King’s speech in its entirety, go to the following web link. (<http://www.archives.gov/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>)

King’s leadership in the abolishment of racial discrimination, helped bring the death of Jim Crow Legislation and create the Civil Rights



Fig. 46

Act of 1964. This legislation outlawed segregation in public facilities and racial discrimination in employment and education. In addition to African American men, women and other **victims of discrimination** benefited from the act as well. (Fig. 46).

That same year Dr. King was awarded the Nobel Prize.

# CONCLUSION

In the late 1800s a new trade for sign painters was established. Merchants created a market for small signs that could advertise their products and services. The small signs became known as show cards. The letter painters of this specific letter writing trade were known as “show card writers”.

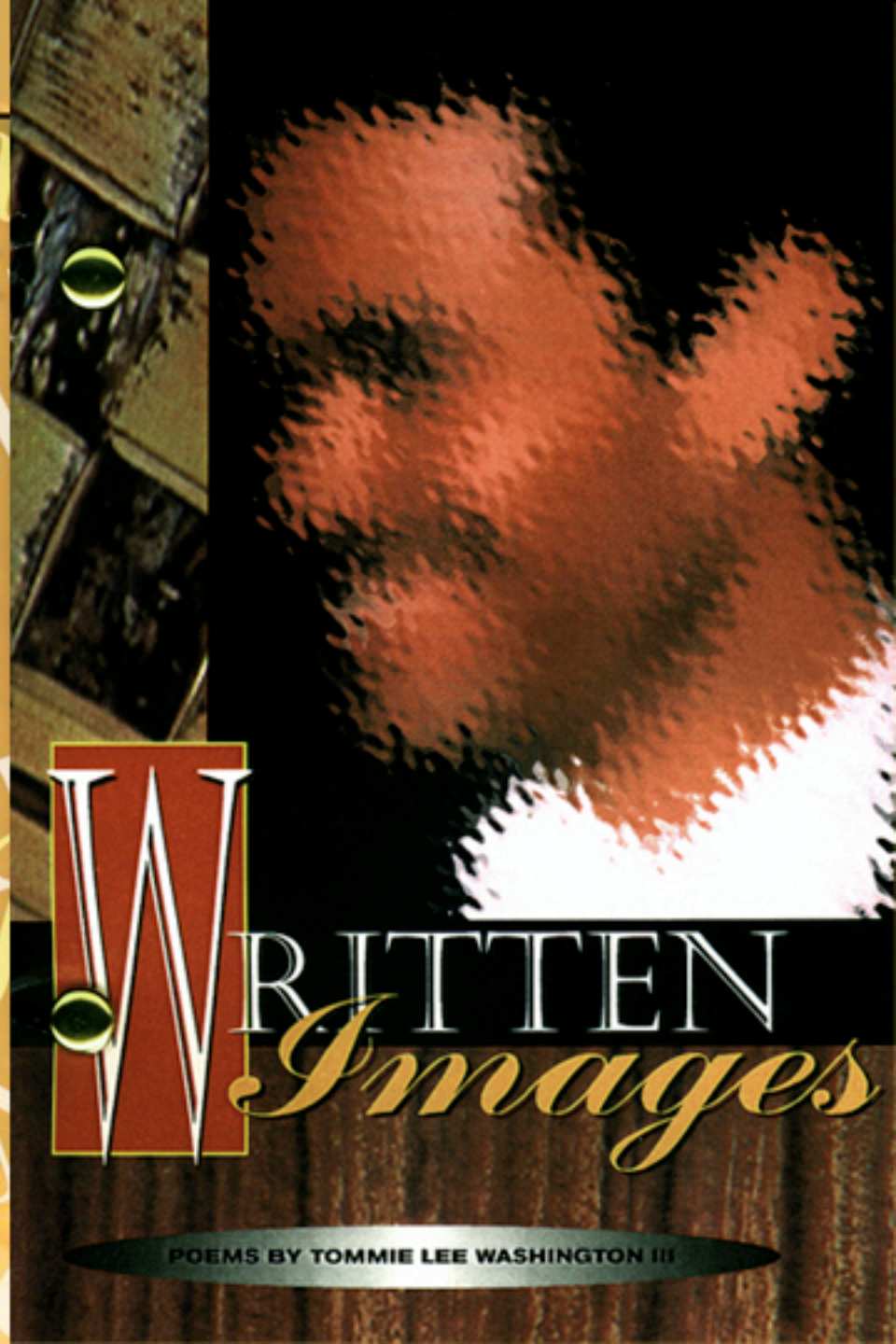
At the turn of the 20th century, as the golden age of show card writing was at its peak, a struggle for equality was taking place among slaves who had been set free, and those who wanted to keep them separate from a civilized society. The struggle continued throughout the 1950s and 60s, as a different type of sign writer would emerge.

Their writings would plead for civil rights for all people and help America wake up from a nightmare of segregation, to embrace its diversity of culture and ethnicity. The need for a balm of prejudicial healing still exists in various parts of the United States. But a reconstruction of a more perfect union has taken place with the help of the sign writers of our history, turning once darkened souls, back towards the light.



Fig. 15

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Images  
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WRITTEN



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WRITTEN  
*Images*

POEMS BY TOMMIE LEE WASHINGTON III



## *Fragrance Of Love*

*When the King  
Puts forth His scepter  
And deemed you to love and conquer  
You responded with grace and courage  
Your fragrance enveloped our souls  
Providing a fortified canopy  
Of truth and joy  
That sings like a child  
On the day spring  
And flows sweet  
From your vineyard of sacrifice  
Into our hearts  
Forever*

