

# WHAT'S YOUR SIGN?

RETAIL ARCHITECTURE AND  
THE HISTORY OF SIGNAGE

UNIVERSITY OF IOWA MUSEUM OF ART

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*What's Your Sign? Retail Architecture and the History of Signage*

All works included in this catalog are from the UIMA permanent collections.

Cover: Emil Ganso, *Electric Sign*, 1927, Lithograph, 19 3/4 x 13 7/8 in. (50.17 x 35.24 cm), Gift of Charles R. Penney, 1981.597

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The Legacies for Iowa project is a large-scale arts-sharing initiative that brings the extraordinary collections of the University of Iowa Museum of Art to communities across the state. Each object in our collections is a repository of our past and our present. As a cultural and educational institution, the UIMA has a responsibility not only to preserve these collective histories, but to create a legacy for the future of art in everyday life. With the generous support of the Matthew Bucksbaum family, the UIMA is empowered to do just that. Through this project, the UIMA facilitates collaboration and conversation between the people of Iowa and UI faculty and students. The Legacies project waives the loan fees associated with borrowing artworks and provides educational materials, installation support, feedback in developing publicity and marketing materials, and assistance in facilitating exhibition programming.

# WHAT'S YOUR SIGN?

RETAIL ARCHITECTURE AND THE HISTORY OF SIGNAGE



On a drizzly Saturday afternoon, I pouted in the back seat of my mother's white Ford Fiesta. I was five years old, bored with errands and sulky with little kid-impatience, and had just been denied ice cream. Glowering out the window, I glimpsed a colossal vanilla ice cream cone rising from the roadside weeds. Shimmering in the rain, the monumental frozen treat was a Candy Land board game come to life—I always knew I was secretly Queen Frostine! Of course, this ice cream cone was sculpted from plaster and paint. Candy-clad royal attendants did not whisk me away to my edible throne, and I still didn't procure a treat despite the renewed urgency of my shrieks. This was my first encounter with the enticing power of the shop sign. In a glorious display of literality, this mammoth ice cream cone advertised the dairy deliciousness that awaited dessert-seekers in the tiny stand just beyond.

For as long as goods have been bought and sold, shopkeepers and traders have found visually arresting ways to communicate their wares. However, signs are much more

than advertisements. Sometimes, signs (like the giant ice cream cone of my childhood) are the manifestations of desire. Alternately, signs can be textually directive, informing pedestrians and drivers of the wonders awaiting them within the shop. Occasionally, the product functions as its own signage, displayed alluringly for passersby.

Unlike buildings, which are massive and exude a sense of permanence, signs are transitory. Though the structure may remain more or less the same when ownership transitions, signs let us know a shift has transpired—without signs, how would we discern that the greasy pizza place had transformed into an upscale vegan wrap emporium? Often employing design principles apparent in other contemporary print and visual media, signs tell us where we are in time as well as geography.

This catalog explores works in the University of Iowa Museum of Art permanent collections related to the evolution of signage. The first three entries, contributed

by Curator of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas Cory Gundlach, contextualize the art of sign-making in West Africa. The middle pages of this volume are dedicated to examples of signage from Japan and India respectively, while the latter half of the catalog is dedicated to signs and spaces of retailing in American and European art. In combination, these writings address larger issues of signage. How have symbols of selling shifted over the centuries? How do retail signs reflect or reject broader visual cultures? What technological advancements have precipitated the most dramatic design departures? These brief essays examine the iconography, typography, and materiality of retail signs and spaces as well as the cultural, financial, and geo-political forces that shaped storefronts and retail spaces in the past.

#### VERO ROSE SMITH

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Legacies for Iowa Collections-Sharing Project, 2017



Ghana (Accra); unknown artist  
 Painting for the film, *Return of the Snakeman (Prince of Doom, part I)*  
 Late twentieth century  
 Oil on canvas  
 University of Iowa Museum of Art  
 Gift of Janet Berry Hess, 2015.312

Ghanaian film paintings began with the work of Alex Nkrumah-Boateng in 1985, when mass numbers of imported video cassettes began to appear in the country.<sup>1</sup> Professor Janet Berry Hess acquired this painting at Accra in the mid-1990s, when video clubs were increasingly replacing mobile cinemas in Ghana. An unknown artist created this painting for the 1996 film, *Return of the Snakeman (The Prince of Doom, part I)*, directed by and featuring Bob Smith Jr. The film centers upon the story of a ne'er-do-well (Stephen Prince Yawson), who is cursed by one of his victims. After a snake bites him, he transforms into a snake himself and starts biting others. He forces his female victims to vomit money. Ultimately, he winds up in a cage at a zoo thanks to Christian intervention. In a sequel released in 1997, *Judgment Day (The Prince of Doom, part II)*, Snakeman seeks revenge on his Christian captors but receives punishment by the devil and ends up in jail.<sup>2</sup>

The proliferation of snakemen in this and other films (such as the *Diabolo* series) involving Smith Jr., originated from two things. First is John Landis' 1981 film, *An American Werewolf in London*. Because there are no wolves in Africa, however, director William Akuffo chose a snake to explore a second interest: rumors about the ways in which Nigerian businessmen mistreat migrant women from Ghana.<sup>3</sup>

In this painting, two young male figures in school uniforms appear within a cemetery. Silhouetted trees on a pale blue

horizon suggest early dusk, and yet the dark side of a crescent moon is jet black. Seven concrete tombs appear closely together and credits for the film replace the names of the dead. On the tomb closest to the foreground lies a young boy on his back with a large snake tail instead of legs. Fangs and a forked tongue emerge from his open mouth and he holds a green object in his right hand. Behind him, the other young boy appears screaming with clenched fists. With knees and elbows bent, he appears caught in a fit of terror.

In Clive Barker's insightful reflection on a Ghanaian painting in his personal art collection made for his film, *Hellraiser III*, he writes that, "The image is a grimly playful fantasia, entirely of the artist's creation [...]. There is a delightful mingling of naïveté and power in the rendering, like an old carnival poster advertising something freakish."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the scene in *Return of the Snakeman* is in fact not found in the film itself, but is a product of the painter's imaginative combination of multiple scenes into a single image. In the first, two mischievous brothers steal fruit (seen in the proper right hand of the snake-boy lying on the tomb) from a woman. Rejoicing their exploits, they smoke cigarettes in a cemetery where a snake bites them both. One boy dies immediately and the other is hospitalized. Under a full moon, the dead brother appears before his suffering sibling at the hospital, who transforms into a snake.<sup>5</sup> The painting thus portrays a deft compression of time and space into a single image of grisly transformation.

1. Ernie Wolf III, "Adventures in African Cinema," *Extreme Canvas: Hand-Painted Movie Posters from Ghana*, ed. Ernie Wolfe III (New York: Dilettante Press/Kesho Press, 2000), 26.  
 2. Kofi Anyidoho and James Gibbs, eds., *FonTomFron: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, Theater and Film* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: 2000), 294.  
 3. Tobias Wendl, "Wicked Villagers and the Mysteries of Reproduction: An Exploration of Horror Movies from Ghana and Nigeria," *Postcolonial Text* Vol. 3, no. 2 (2007): 13.  
 4. Clive Barker, "Horror," in *Extreme Canvas*, 164.  
 5. Wendl, 14-15.

This sign painting belongs to an artistic tradition that began sometime between 1930 and 1950 among urban centers of West and Central Africa. Barbershop owners typically referenced international print media to commission self-trained artists for examples such as this. For the local audience, it displayed the latest in fashion at the time. Barbers commonly named hairstyles after fast moving vehicles, such as airplanes, and hence the “Concord” and “Boeing” styles featured in this painting from the Keith Achepohl Collection.

Sign paintings from sub-Saharan Africa are modern in style and purpose. Using brightly colored commercial pigments (such as oil or enamel) on an industrially produced ground (such as plywood or cotton sheeting), closely cropped heads or busts and text in one or more type face float upon monochromatic backgrounds or patterns of geometric abstraction (here, the American flag). As an advertisement for the urban masses, it is central to the everyday life of the local market economy. Designed for consumers to see and who want to be seen, the painting functions in a context where the *visual* cues for status, beauty, and prestige are very important.

With a focus upon the head, however, images such as this also belong to a tradition in West and Central African art that has

been in place for centuries. Special attention to the head and headdress in African art commonly refers to status and rank, if not nobility, and for customers who form the audience for this painting, the translation has not been entirely lost. Like most forms of advertising, this image not only suggests an opportunity to improve self-appearance, but the chance to become associated with something exclusive and modern—presented here as America.

Indeed, international identity appears as one of the dominant motifs through which portraits of well-coiffed individuals seek to identify with and oblige a consumer’s need to improve self-image. An American flag, for example, prominently supports the word, “Boncoiffeur” above profile portraits of four attractive and sharply dressed individuals. Stars of the American flag decorate the head in the uppermost portrait. Beneath it, the word “Concord” is underlined six times, creating both an abstract pattern found elsewhere in the painting and a sense of urgency for the relationship between word/identity and image/style. To the lower left, a small geometric abstraction in white suggests a firecracker, complemented by festive red and blue dots of confetti below. Cosmopolitanism is only a few snips away!



West Africa; artist unknown  
Barbershop sign painting for Boncoiffeur, 1960–1980  
Pigment on plywood  
48 x 19 1/4 in. (121.92 x 48.9 cm)  
University of Iowa Museum of Art  
Gift of Keith Achepohl, 2000.108



Ghana; Workshop of Isaac "Azey" Otchere  
 Barbershop sign painting for Kennedy's Special Hair Cut, mid to late 20th century  
 Oil on plywood  
 24 x 48 1/8" (61 x 122 cm)  
 University of Iowa Museum of Art  
 Gift of Janet Berry Hess, 2015.30

In spite of a signature on this painting that reads, "Azey Art. Circle," and a published photograph from 1999 that features the Ghanaian artist Isaac "Azey" Otchere (b. 1966) with his "circle" of apprentices working on barbershop sign paintings, Otchere claims no ownership for this image.<sup>1</sup> Unlike this painting gifted by Janet Berry Hess, he writes that, "My style of work of art is images of commentary base[d] on global event or issues, i.e. social, sport, political and heroic personalities. I use gloss enamel and mostly acrylic on canvas as medium."<sup>2</sup> Dr. Atta Kwami, a Ghanaian scholar and artist who took the photograph referenced above, writes that, "It's common that some signatures are accompanied by workshop addresses/ location, telephone numbers, etc. In that case, 'Circle' is a part of Accra, a shorter name of the Kwame Nkrumah Circle."<sup>3</sup> Hailing from Kumasi, Azey's great success as an artist is surely not limited to the city in which he works and lives. Sign painters working in Accra have not only appropriated the artist's name, but that of a famous US president for the name of this barbershop. The "JFK" hairstyle (not pictured here) was also popular in Africa in the 1960s, and was a particular favorite of the Africanist art historian Roy Sieber (UI '57).<sup>4</sup>

1. Personal communication with the artist, April 14, 2017. For the photograph, see Atta Kwami, "L'Art du Ghana à l'époque des mouvances contemporaines/ Ghanaian Art in a Time of Change," in *Ghana: Hier et Aujourd'hui / Yesterday and Today* (Paris: Musée Dapper, 2003), 287.

2. Ibid. April 17, 2017.

3. Personal communication with the scholar, April 16, 2017.

4. Natasa Njegovanovic-Ristic, *Frizerske / Berberske Table Afrike/ Hairdresser and Barbershop Signs in Africa* (Belgrade, Serbia: 2009), 80.



Created in the early 1830s, this print features the Echigoya Mitsui Clothing Store, which has expanded over the intervening centuries to become Mitsukoshi, present-day Japan's largest modern department store. Instead of keeping customer charge accounts that were paid off once or twice a year like most other stores of the period, this emporium demanded payment in cash at time of sale. Doing so enabled the company to offer products at lower prices than competitors. Both *kaban* (shop signs) in this image inform us of these radical retailing practices, each stating the store's policy of "Cash Payment" and "No Padded Prices." Additionally, each *kaban* describes the goods potential customers could expect to find inside. The *kaban* on the right advertises "Clothing" while the left promises "Braided Cords and Threads."<sup>1</sup>

Though these *kaban* include no images of the products within, many contemporaneous *kaban* were more literal. For example, a fish restaurant might feature a hanging three-dimensional representation of the specialty dish. Similarly, a fan shop was often identifiable by a larger-than-life folding fan inscribed with details about the store. However, the fan shape was also adopted by shops of all categories because

of both aesthetic appeal and symbolism: fans had been regarded as lucky for centuries, and still connote luck today.<sup>2</sup>

Aside from providing geographic context, the *kaban* in this image also function as a frame for Mt. Fuji, which towers in the distance, echoing the steeply pitched roofs of the stores. To achieve this framing effect, Katsushika Hokusai masterfully exaggerated the perspective. By taking a high position from a foreground point on the roof, the artist manipulated the angle of the view so as to drop other buildings from sight.

Born in the Honjo quarter of Edo, Hokusai gravitated towards drawing at an early age. At nineteen, Hokusai published his first prints under the tutelage of master ukiyo-e printmaker Katsukawa Shunshō. This first series of prints featured actors from the kabuki theater, a genre particularly dominated by the Katsukawa school. Over the following years, Hokusai produced historical *uki-e* (historical landscapes), book illustrations for many different literary genres, and images of a wide range of subjects. His career ultimately spanned more than seven decades.



Katsushika Hokusai  
*View of the Mitsui Stores at Surugachō in Edo, from Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji, 1829-1833*  
Woodblock print  
9 7/8 x 14 1/2 in. (25.08 x 36.83 cm)  
Gift of Owen and Leone Elliott, 1974.10

1. The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, Hokusai and Hiroshige – Great Japanese Prints from the James A. Michener Collection, (Honolulu Academy of Arts: The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 1998), 75.

2. Frank B. Gibney, *Kaban: Shop Signs of Japan* (New York & Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1983), 11-19.



Unidentified artist

Untitled (Durga or Vaishno Devi), c. 1980

Paint on sheet metal (lid of kulfi peddler's cart)

35 3/8 x 23 5/8 in. (89.85 x 60.01 cm)

Gift of Georgana Falb Foster, UI Class of 1949, 1998.38

In the blazing summer heat of 1980, this aluminum painting of Vaishno Devi was prised from the side of a *kulfi* (milk popsicle) cart in the Ludhiana Bazaar of Punjab, India.<sup>1</sup> Identifiable by her companion tiger (sometimes depicted as a lion) and the objects she carries, this deity is a form of the goddess Durga, whom is also revered as a mother figure and a giver of food.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the nurturing, food-giving attributes of Durga, Vaishno Devi is often symbolic of the attempt to achieve

middle class status in contemporary India.<sup>3</sup> These associations explain the presence of this precisely rendered and brilliantly colored tribute to the goddess on a kulfi cart—Vaishno Devi lends her power to the kulfi wala, who works tirelessly to sell his delicious frozen treats. Though not a specific advertisement for products on its own, this sign was likely accompanied by many other lettered signs describing the cold confections contained within the push cart.

1. Georgana Falb, acquisition notes accompanying donation, May 12, 1998.

2. Frederick W. Bunce, *An Encyclopedia of Hindu Deities, Demi-Gods, Godlings, Demons and Heroes With Special Focus on Iconographic Attributes* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd., 2000) 162-163.

3. Susan Snow Wadley, *Raja Nal and the Goddess: The North Indian Epic Dhola in Performance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 103.

Emerging from the richly textured linework, the distinctive lettering of Café Momus' sign beckons to Bohemian spirits. In the 1840s, the café became the meeting place of choice for Parisian creatives such as Gustav Corbet and Henri Murger. When Iowa artist George Henry Yewell etched its façade decades later, the café was still considered the ultimate destination for artists. Referred to as “the gipsies of literature and art,” by author Henry Sutherland Edwards, the poets, painters, and musicians that frequented the establishment were often rather bad for business. Edwards described what he considered to be a typical afternoon in the café, during which a single cup of coffee would be passed among several exceptionally cheap patrons:

“The proud paymaster, after sipping a little of the coffee, would pass it to a friend, who, having helped himself, would hand the remainder to some other member of the party. The cognac was in like manner shared, and the last served came in for the sugar, with which he would sweeten a glass of water.”<sup>1</sup>

While it is uncertain whether Yewell partook in such coffee sharing, he clearly found this cultural landmark important enough to document. Though born in Havre De Grace, Maryland, Yewell spent much of his adolescence in Iowa City, Iowa after his widowed mother relocated the family in 1841.

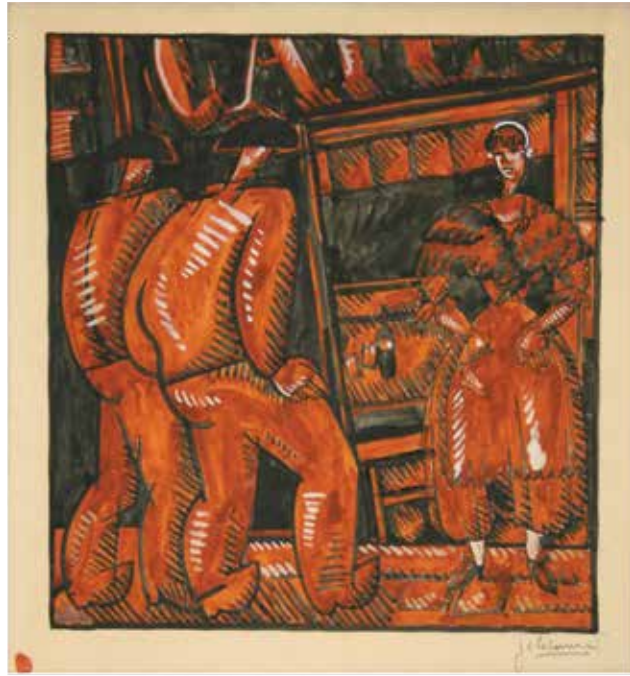
As a teenager, Yewell was apprenticed to a tailor. However, this pragmatic profession was cast aside when young Yewell earned statewide recognition for a political cartoon. In fact, this cartoon launched his artistic career. This cartoon caught the eye of Judge Charles Mason of Burlington, who decided to sponsor the burgeoning artist. By the 1850s, with assistance from Judge Mason and his wealthy friends, the young artist was a permanent resident of New York City, though he often returned to Iowa City for visits. His return to the comforts of Iowa may also have had something to do with his starving-artist lifestyle—despite continued support from Iowan gentry, Yewell’s journal entries from this period describe meals made of crackers and shivery nights without lamp oil or heat. Despite hardship, Yewell successfully studied under the painter Thomas Hicks for several years. Yewell had a proclivity for travel (as the paintings included here demonstrate). In 1856, Judge Mason again assisted Yewell in his artistic endeavors and sent the budding painter to Paris. Yewell remained in Paris until the outbreak of the Civil War, which brought him back stateside. Yewell returned to Europe in 1867, and maintained a studio in Rome while he traveled the continent for the next eleven years. However, Yewell’s wanderlust was not satiated by Europe—he adventured to Egypt as well, as evidenced by an oil study of Cairo also in the University of Iowa Museum of Art permanent collection.<sup>2</sup>



George Henry Yewell  
Co. Café Momus, 1885/1978  
Restrike of copperplate etching on Rives BFK,  
printed by Virginia A. Myers in 1978  
15 x 11 in. (38.1 x 27.94 cm)  
Gift of Virginia A. Myers, 1978.125D

1. Henry Sutherland Edwards, *Old and New Paris: Its History, Its People, and Its Places*, Volumes 1-2, (Paris: Cassell and Company, 1893), 110.

2. Oneita Fisher. “The Journals of George Henry Yewell.” *Books at Iowa* 5 (1966): 3-10.



Jean-Emile Laboureur  
*Le Café des Allies (The Cafe of Allies)*, late 19th century–mid-20th century  
Watercolor  
6 3/4 x 6 in. (17.15 x 15.24 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Peter O. Stamats, 1973.256

Born on August 16, 1877 in Nantes, France, Laboureur originally aspired to a career as a lawyer, and even graduated from the Faculty of Law in Paris. However, an introduction to wood engraver Auguste Léperre changed the course of young Laboureur's life, and the former law student quickly took up the study of printmaking under Léperre's tutelage. In 1896, Laboureur became acquainted with Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, who sculpted the burgeoning printmaker's aesthetic sensibilities. Compulsory military service solidified Laboureur's determination to pursue art as his career, and he embarked on a journey at the turn of the twentieth century that indelibly informed his work for the rest of his life. In Dresden, he examined the comprehensive collections of the Print Room, and the knowledge gained from exploring this comprehensive collection led the artist onwards to other grand cities across Europe and the United States. By the 1910s, Laboureur's style had solidified into an individualistic cubism that favored bold geometries, flattened perspective, and exaggeratedly marble-smooth figures whose limbs and features alternately dissolved into confederacies of straight lines or ballooned into rounded, fruit-like shapes.

However, the outbreak of the first world war brought a return to military life, and Laboureur was mobilized as an interpreter

to the twelfth Division of the British Army. In 1916 Laboureur published thirty-one somewhat sterile engravings of his harrowing experiences while deployed. This small watercolor preparatory sketch for a print may depict a moment from Laboureur's war years, as alluded to by the title of the work. Here we see two men approaching a small store front, their backs curved and their faces little more than notched rectangles. They each wear a rounded dark cap, giving the impression of a uniform. A woman smiles welcomingly, her figure distorted into a perfect hourglass by a heavy, ruffled shawl and a voluminous aproned skirt. A wine bottle with two empty glasses beckon from the window, underneath a carved sign that reads "CAFÉ." The combination of sign, storefront, and woman create a warm respite from the horrors of war. In particular, the sign reminds weary soldiers of life before the seemingly endless fighting, a beacon of normalcy.

The end of the war heralded a new career chapter for Laboureur, and he spent the subsequent decade illustrating and designing books in both English and French. In addition to producing books, Laboureur continued painting and expanded his skill in various printmaking techniques until his death in 1943.<sup>1</sup>

1. Robert Allen, *Jean-Emile Laboureur (1877-1943): Prints, Drawings, and Books* (New York: French Institute/Alliance Française, 1977), 5-9.

Rendered in tungsten tones of pink, burgundy, emerald, and gold, this painting depicts a sleepy alleyway. In the foreground, a shadowed figure pulls a two-wheeled cart piled high with cardboard boxes across the uneven cobblestone. Further down the alley, an aproned woman inspects her flower boxes from a second-story balcony. Near the center of the painting, a stooped figure accompanied by a small four-legged companion slowly stroll towards a cross street marked by a large sign. Though mostly illegible, an elongated “S” swoops down the left side of the sign. This sign might have advertised Sibbing’s Jewelry, a family-owned jewelry store first opened in 1882. Through much of the twentieth century, advertisements for the jeweler often featured exaggerated forms of the letter “s.” Furthermore, the 1934 Dubuque City Directory places this shop at 803 Main Street, just a few blocks away from the artist’s studio.<sup>1</sup>

Painter Christine “Criss” Glasell’s emotionally rich depictions of life in Iowa during the Great Depression captured the spirit of the era. Though this painting is characterized by warm, glowing tones, Glasell included less-than-savory details such as rubbish circling the telephone pole on the left of the composition. In particular, her inclusion of the signage in this image is a poignant example of her approach to capturing the mood of the rural state in which she lived and worked. To Glasell,

the presence of the sign and the ambiance created by large lettering was more important to convey than the actual content of the sign. The mountain of boxes on the cart was treated in a similar fashion—though lettering and logos are visible as dark, thin strokes against the brown of the cardboard, Glasell chose to treat the typography as a textural detail.

Born on July 8, 1898 in Vienna, Glasell trained at the Art Institute of Chicago.<sup>2</sup> During her student years, Glasell honed her painting skills by decorating lampshades at a local shop. After completing her studies, Glasell settled in Dubuque, Iowa, where she was active as a painter and craftworker. From 1932 to 1933, Glasell was a member of the Stone City Art Colony, where Grant Wood and Adrian Dornbush served as her mentors. Over the course of the 1930s, Glasell won several awards through the Iowa Art Salon, which led to the commission of a Works Progress Administration mural. Named *Rural, Free Deliver*, the mural graced a wall of the Leon, Iowa post office. Glasell went on to create many celebrated scenes of rural life and had solo exhibitions in Des Moines, Mason City, Cedar Rapids, and other Iowa cities. Active in numerous artist groups and cooperatives, Glasell’s work was also featured in multiple Midwestern galleries outside of Iowa.<sup>3</sup>



Christine Rosner Glasell  
*Collection Day*, c. 1935  
Oil on canvas  
37 1/4 x 41 5/16 in. (94.62 x 104.93 cm)  
On loan from the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration, 1935.1

1. *Dubuque City Directory 1934*, Dubuque: City of Dubuque, 1934, 35.  
2. Peter C. Merrill, *German Immigrant Artists in America: A Biographical Dictionary* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 77.  
3. Kristy Raine, “When Tillage Begins: The Stone City Art Colony and School,” Busse Library, Mount Mercy University, published October 2003, <https://projects.mtmercy.edu/stonecity/artists/glasellc.html>.



Richard Gatra  
*Struble*, 1938  
Oil on canvas  
25 x 28 1/2 in. (63.5 x 72.39 cm)  
University acquisition, X1968.135

This somewhat gloomy depiction of Depression-era Struble, Iowa offers an example of integrated signage in which the lettering is painted directly on the façade of the store. In the context of this painting, the logic behind this sign type is readily apparent: large letters directly proclaiming the contents of this shop are visible across the gentle roll of the Iowa landscape, without the expense or trouble of mounting a separate structure on the building. To further enhance visibility, the store front is painted a vibrant green while the lettering of the signs is rendered in a contrasting scarlet.

While the store no longer stands, the railroad tracks still greet visitors driving north from Sioux City, Iowa. With an estimated population of seventy-eight, Struble has never been a big town.<sup>1</sup> Named for Congressman Isaac S. Struble, the small community has remained relatively similar to this 1938 depiction. Near the very top of the image, and slightly to the right of center, we can see a shadowed church spire. This is likely St. Joseph's Catholic Church, which has been beautifully preserved and celebrated its centennial in 2003.<sup>2</sup> Like many rural towns in America, social life in Struble was likely concentrated in the most public gathering spaces available: the church and the grocery store.

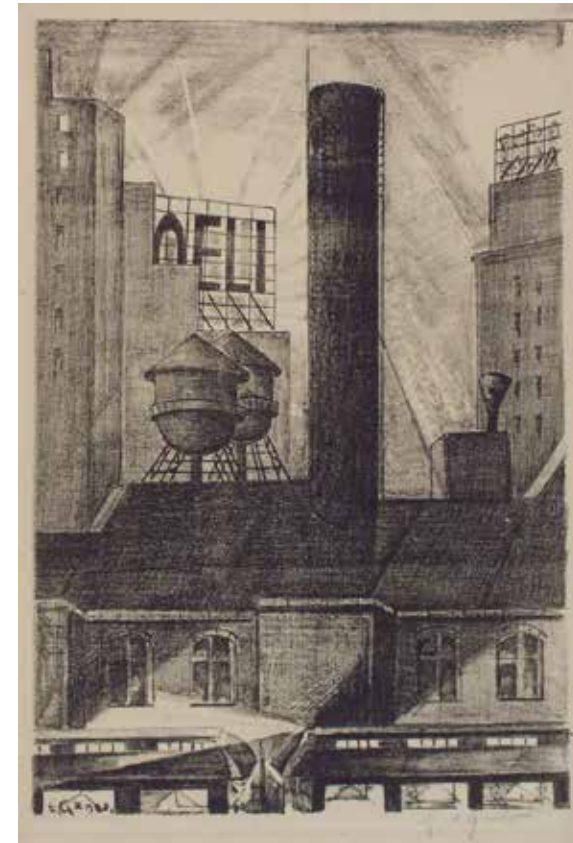
1. United States Census Bureau, "Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics: 2010 Demographic Profile Data, Struble city, Iowa," 2010 Demographic Profile Data Table DP-1, <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF> (accessed November 5, 2016).

2. William S. Freeman, *History of Plymouth County, Iowa* (La Crosse, Wisconsin: Brookhaven Press, 2001), 111.

In this work dated 1927, we see an electric New York, brimming with artificial light. At the bottom of the image, a glowing train hurtles through the twilight, guided by a conical ray. Above the shadowed building and water tanks in the middle ground of this lithograph, a gargantuan sign, possibly advertising a deli, beams brilliantly in the falling darkness. Typical of the grandiose, often gaudy electric signs designed in the 1920s, this sign appears to be multiple stories high, as evidenced by the gridded-steel support structure. First popularized by theaters and other entertainment venues, towering roof top signs abounded during this period in all major American cities.<sup>1</sup>

Born in Halberstadt, Germany, artist Emil Ganso found inspiration in urban and rural American landscapes alike.

He immigrated to America in his late teens and worked as a baker while taking evening classes at the National Academy's School of Fine Arts.<sup>2</sup> Ganso landed his first exhibition with the Society of Independent Artists in 1921, and exhibited in subsequent years at the Salons of America. By 1930, Ganso was invited to exhibit at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Five years later, Ganso exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Wichita Art Museum, Kansas. His work was also featured at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the Whitney Museum of American Art. In 1940, Ganso was offered an artist-in-residence position at the University of Iowa, where he passed away one year later.<sup>3</sup>



Emil Ganso  
*Electric Sign*, 1927  
Lithograph  
19 3/4 x 13 7/8 in. (50.17 x 35.24 cm)  
Gift of Charles R. Penney, 1981.597

1. Martin Treu, *Signs, Streets, and Storefronts: a history of architecture and graphics along America's commercial corridors* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 81-86.

2. Joann Moser, *The Graphic Art of Emil Ganso* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1979), 3-10.

3. Donald E. Smith, *The Prints of Emil Ganso* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1997) 19-26.

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