

# Vintage Sam

The files yield a decade-old stash of Sam Pitino's sign work

By Tom McLtrot

While back as I slid a folder out of my file drawer, a stack of classic hand-lettered signs spilled across my desk. I didn't have to look inside to know it was some vintage work from the brush of Sam Pitino. I knew you'd like to see them.

In mid 1990, Sam had included a few photos of his sign work with his subscription renewal. The work showed the influence of the classic sign work of decades before. When I called to ask for more photos, I didn't expect it to be coming from the brush of a 21 year old who had stumbled into sign painting



just four years before. He was living in north Florida and running his own shop.

We featured his work in the November/December 1990 issue of *SignCraft*. By the time we did a *Follow-up* on him in the March/April 1997 issue, he was living in Massachusetts and shifting gears—moving into the world of graphic design.

Sam started learning the trade as computers were being used to produce more and more of the lettering for signs. The trade was changing. He enjoyed design work and decided to put his skills to work in the broader field of graphic design. Today Sam does a wide range of graphics work—logos, package design, book covers, Web sites and more.



Hand-lettered 4-by-4-ft. overlaid plywood panel. "This is one of my all time favorite knock-outs," says Sam. "The client called that morning needing *something basic* to put out along the road. I had a pair of these for him the next day."



Hand-lettered 6-by-8-ft. metal panel. "Frank Richy was a big influence on my work," Sam says. "I started out sweeping his shop and filling his coffee cup. His form of sign painting is from the Long Island school of thought. This sign has a lot of Frank in it."



Hand-lettered 8-by-8-ft. overlaid plywood panel

I sent Sam copies of the photos and asked him about his approach to sign design back then.

"I was always digging through old copies of *SignCraft*," says Sam, "and soaking in all that great work. We have to pay homage to those who did it best. I soaked up so many ideas from the work of Chester Cunningham, the Seelanders, and to some extent Mike Stevens. There were also many sign painters in my own area that I looked up to. Frank Richey was a huge influence for me. I learned all the basics at his shop; from brush handling skills to effectively executing a really kicking knock-out.

"Then there were the guys that came at it from a different angle—the snapper school of sign painting. People like Pete Reindschmidt and the guys that just drifted into town and did a window or two. I learned a totally different, but equally effective skill-set from their work. There have been a lot of great sign designers. And, there still are—folks like Bob Behounek and Lane Walker. Everyone has something to offer if you pay attention.

"I spent time developing workhorse letter styles that I could render quickly. I was trying my best to create effective layouts with the least amount of effort when it came time to put the brush to the board. All the thinking had to be done first. To me, this approach is what the art of sign painting is about. I get more satisfaction executing an effective knock-out than doing a time-consuming beveled edge. You get instant satisfaction and make fast money doing it.

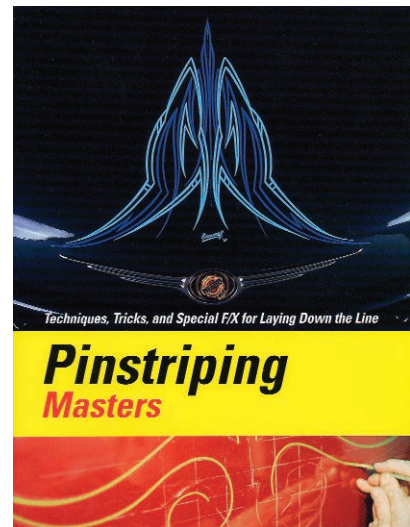
"There are tight budget limits on most sign work. If it had to be done in one color, I'd ask

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Hand-lettered 4-by-32-ft. metal panel. "I had just gotten back from a Letterhead meet in Chicago," says Sam, "and was so inspired by all the old storefront signs from the 60s that were still around."



Hand lettered van. "The owner came to me and claimed he saw my work on other trucks around town," Sam says. "He wanted the works—a design with all the bells and whistles. I wanted to do something classy and refined, but Chub had this vaudevillian sense of humor and a name to match. I threw a nutty, can't-miss-from-10-mile design sketch in, along with the classy sketch I worked up, and the rest is history."



Hand-lettered 2-by-2-ft. metal panel. "One of about 35 knock-outs (all with different copy) I did for a video arcade geared toward younger children," says Sam. "I remember lining them all up on four easels and going through each color down the line. I was exhausted by the end of the day, but I had a ball."



Hand-lettered 12-by-16-in. overlaid plywood panel

myself what could be done with just one color and still make it an engaging sign. How much design could I inject into this sign so it didn't look like it was knocked out in two minutes? I still wanted to be able to knock it out in two minutes—but I didn't want it to look like I did.

"That's where design comes in to play. You use your mind and the elements of design—contrast, balance, line value and the other simple principles that make a sign easy to read. With practice, you can quickly come up with an idea that gives the sign some real appeal. This approach can then be used on any sign the budget requires. It's all about developing a method that works across all mediums. The only thing that changes is the nature of the problem. Sadly, this is what is missing in most vinyl shops today—basic design skills.

"Looking back, I think I might have gone overboard on some of the more ambitious projects. I probably had a little too much going on in them. I could have reduced the number of bells and whistles and had better results."

Sign work remains in Sam's blood, and he still letters a truck for a friend now and then. He liked producing the signs as much as coming up with the designs.

"I had a lot of fun working with a relatively limited palette of tools. I still do some fun projects at home—graphic design and identity work for small companies. It's fun going from one extreme to another. The great thing about sign work is that you're in touch with the client from the start, and you handle everything from initial contact to conception to production to delivery. Not many businesses operate like that anymore." •SC

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Hand-lettered 4-by-45-ft. store fascia. "A lot of the display faces in my work came from typographic catalogs," Sam says. "I would look at the book and draw what I saw, manipulating it a bit to suit my design needs. I did that here with the name of the business."



Hand-lettered 10-by-24-in. magnetic panel. "Although I emulated Bob Behounek constantly in my work," says Sam, "I could never measure up to the real Bob himself. You're the man, Bob!"



Hand-lettered 3-by-8-ft. banner. "The script on this was inspired by Russ Mowry," says Sam. "Russ is the kind of sign guy you have to see working live to really appreciate what he's doing. Amazing!"



Hand-lettered 2-by-10-ft. paper banner. "Whenever I had some time to kill," says Sam, "I would do something like this. It satisfied the knock-out craving and provided for some in-shop self-promotion."



Hand lettered van. "Ron wanted something understated, but purposefully designed," Sam says. "I wanted to steer him away from the classic New England spur serif on an arc with a split shade. After I showed him my ideas, he hired me to create logo artwork and design, and produce business cards."



Hand lettered truck. "This was a typical in-and-out truck project," says Sam. "The owner had a small budget and I wanted to give him an effective design for his money. I could do these all day."



Hand-lettered 2-by-3-ft. metal panel. "I felt that a simple tree graphic would be more memorable than a shadow or outline here," says Sam.



Hand-lettered 2-by-4-ft. paper sign



Hand-lettered 18-by-24-in. metal panel



Hand-lettered 2-by-3-ft. metal panel. "This sign reads okay, but suffers from tight spacing between messages," says Sam. "It's a bit suffocating."



Hand-lettered 4-by-8-ft. metal panel. "This is an obvious Chester Cunningham rip-off," says Sam. "The man was a genius. Thanks, Chet!"



Hand-lettered 4-by-8-ft. overlaid plywood panel. "This sign demonstrates why it is important for sign designers to develop a knock-out language," says Sam. "It can be used on all applications and sets itself apart from the visual onslaught of poorly designed signage."