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> **Yesterday's tin and enamel
advertising signs**

Yesterday's tin and enamel advertising signs

Today, precious pieces of art and collectibles

16 April 2016 – 9 October 2016

For approximately half a century – at a time when adverts were designed to last – they adorned façades and walls. Today, tin and enamel advertising signs are experiencing a true renaissance – not as advertising, but as collector's items.

This special exhibition shows over 150 wonderful specimens dating between 1890 and 1970 from the collection of Michael Müller, (originally) from the Basle area. Ever since his childhood he has been fascinated by these advertising signs. Mr. Müller began to build up a collection of historical advertising signs at the age of 23. Today he has hundreds of these coveted signs. Over the years he has collected a lot of background information on the individual signs and is an expert in this particular field of interest today.

Tin and enamel advertising signs have co-written a chapter of advertising history and handed down some of the most outstanding designs of international commercial art. In the exhibition, the centenary design for *Wybert-Halspastillen* by the Basle graphic designer Niklaus Stoecklin from 1926 can be seen, amongst other things. Or the 1948 Swiss enamel sign classic for *Union-Briketts* designed by Fritz Bühler and Ruodi Barth, stage designer at the Basle Theatre. As well as works from other well-known graphic designers from the heyday of the advertising sign.

From approximately 1890 up until their functional decline in the 1950s, bright enamel signs were impressive, colorful features in the bleak, industrial towns of that time. The advertising topics were varied, even then: lighting, fuel, coffee, body care, beer, alcohol, tobacco, chocolate, food and much more. With regard to laundry detergent advertising it is important to mention the famous *White Lady* of Persil from Henkel; she made history. In this exhibition you can learn more and develop your own opinion of this unique advertising sign.

Enamel signs

An enamel sign is a tinplate sign with a protective coating of enamel (molten glass powder). Varying techniques of different complexity are used to create enamel advertising signs, each requiring skill and artistic talent. For the stencil work, thin stencils made of soft material that could easily be cut were traditionally used to transfer the writing or figurative design. Brass, aluminum, zinc, tin and lead stencils were used for this purpose. Later on, plastic, too, was used as a durable and cheaper stencil material. The liquid colored enamel is applied to the base plate with a spray gun. The stencil always covers the part of the drawing that is to be retained. For this reason,

several stencils are needed for the process, the result being a relief-like surface. This process is only performed by hand and used for signs with simpler designs.

For more detailed designs, a screen-printing technique is used. The motif to be applied to the advertising sign is photographed and transferred to a printing screen, which is then covered with an enamel layer.

The enameling

The substrate for the enameling process is cast iron or sheet iron, which is processed into signage blanks. Early cast iron signs are clearly recognizable by their weight. From around 1890 onwards, sheet iron was used for enamel advertising signs. Making the blanks called for a certain degree of skill and technique. Before it can be processed further, the blank must first of all be degreased and derusted by annealing. In the subsequent etching process, the acid must cover the entire surface. In this way the sheet obtains a clean metallic surface, which is a prerequisite for base enameling. Afterwards, the sheets are watered for a long time and neutralized in a soda bath.

The enamel is formed by fusing different raw materials. The mass is then quenched in cold water, pre-shredded and finally ground. Now the prepared blanks can be coated on the front and back with a thin layer of base enamel. This has a different composition to the covering enamel. The task of the base enamel is to firmly bond the iron and enamel as well as to form an insulating layer between the carbonaceous substrate and the surface enamel. Later, the base enamel layer is still visible on the rear of the enamel sign. With iron signs it is grey, with steel sheet grey-black. Each manufacturer had secret recipes for the production of enamel. For colored outer layers, different metal oxides are added to the enamel mixture to achieve the desired color effect. To protect sensitive ceramic enamel colors, the signs were plated in a final firing with transparent enamel. This also brought a colorless gloss to the fore, unnecessary in the case of matt enamel. Sign producers use different techniques to apply enamel layers, including powdering, spraying and dipping. The average burn time for the base enamel on sheet iron is 2 to 10 minutes, for cast iron the process takes nearly 20 minutes. After the first firing, the signs are transferred to a special decor department. Here the fonts and figurative design are applied with a shiny covering enamel layer.

The history of enamel advertising signs

Ludwig Stollwerck is considered the inventor of the enamel advertising sign, the heyday of which was between 1890 and 1960. In 1893, intrigued by the possibility of creating a weather-resistant permanent sign for outdoor advertising, Stollwerck had the first German advertising signs manufactured at Schulze & Wehrmann in Elberfeld – the first industrial enameling plant for advertising signs in Germany. Other large consumer goods manufacturers quickly recognized the effectiveness of the new advertising medium. Another pioneer in the use of the new enamel advertising medium was Julius Maggi. He had thousands of steel signs made for advertising his products throughout the European market.

Enamel signs were also suitable for use as company nameplates or price labels. At the entrances to office buildings, some of which had several courtyards, a collection of enamel signs could often be found, popularly known as *Stummer Portier* (silent porters), with the names of the companies based there and their respective floor and courtyard numbers.

Companies developed special marketing strategies for their product advertising signs. The Swiss baby food producer Galactina (now called Adapta/Hero) in Belp (BE) came up with a novel idea: At the beginning of the 20th century, the company had its promotional image of a baby printed on a multi-piece porcelain coffee service. Whenever a midwife succeeded in persuading a new mother to feed her new-born child with Galactina baby food, the midwife was given some pieces of the so-called *midwife's crockery set*. This coffee service and the associated advertising medium, the enamel sign, are on display in the exhibition.

Enamel signs were – and still are – also used as weatherproof information boards, road signs and house number plates, which can still be seen in many places.

One iconic enamel sign is undoubtedly Persil's *White Lady*, created by Kurt Heiligenstaedt in 1922. It is the most popular sign among enamel-sign enthusiasts and can naturally also be seen in the exhibition.

The Second World War brought a sudden end to the enamel sign industry. In Germany alone there were over 300 enameling plants. Since the 1950s, enamel signs have been almost totally replaced in the streetscape by paper posters. This is partly due to high production costs, but also and more importantly to changing conditions and the fast-paced consumer market. In addition, the arrival of radio and television and the increasingly rapid turnover of products and their packaging and designs have rendered the enamel sign increasingly redundant as a durable advertising medium.

Enamel signs as advertising media

From an advertising point of view, an enamel sign is nothing more than a permanent notice board that, in order to achieve the desired advertising effect, must be particularly striking and pleasing. The characteristics of a good sign are clear letter art and pictorial drawings and not much text. Often it includes only a short, concise slogan, and sometimes just the name of the advertised article or manufacturer.

The manufacturing costs for enamel advertising signs at the time were enormous, so that only large brands such as Maggi, Dr. Oetker, Persil, etc. made use of them. Naturally, the more basic text-only advertising signs were the cheapest to produce, but were less eye-catching than the multicolored pictorial enamel signs.

Around 1895, advertising in the German-speaking countries was still in its infancy as far as graphics were concerned, and representations were limited to naturalistic portraits of children and female beauties or illustrations of the advertised products. It is precisely these representations, however, that are impressive with their extraordinary attention to detail, subtlety and fidelity to the original. In some cases it was even possible to read the writing on the product labels depicted.

Enamel signs vary in terms of production process and type. Their profile is either flat, beveled or cambered (arched); the edges are curled or crimped. Most enamel signs were rectangular, as oval or round signs were more difficult to manufacture. For this reason, only a small proportion of the signs were round, oval or exotically shaped.

Often the number of enamel advertising signs in commercial premises and on storefronts was so large that the signs cancelled each other out in terms of their impact. The marketing stupidity of this was recognized by various parties. Business travelers and shopkeepers, however, continued to add signs for prestige or target-fulfilment reasons. Authorities and stakeholders attempted to limit

the number of signs by imposing bans. They were countered in their efforts by the trade associations representing the companies engaged in advertising, and the battle went on for many years. In the early years of the 20th century, the term *Blechpest* (sheet-metal curse) was coined to describe such mass displays of advertising. Today, however, well-preserved enamel signs are sought-after rarities.

Enamel signs have many advantages, which made them a popular advertising medium for a long time. They are very weather-resistant and do not fade or lose their shine with exposure to UV light. They are also scratch-resistant, easy to clean and require little maintenance. Environmental friendliness and recyclability are additional arguments in favor of their use as colorful and attractive advertising media.

As far back as the second half of the 19th century, the few big-brand products around were attempting to develop a strong *brand awareness* among consumers. Virtually all the companies from that time that have survived to this day focused on this concept from the outset. These include Coca-Cola, Nestlé, Suchard and Maggi. The producers primarily wanted to disseminate their products nationwide and thereby increase their brand awareness, and advertising signs were one way of achieving this objective.

Art and advertising

At the start of the 20th century, when the so-called "sheet-metal curse" was still raging, many companies recognized that they could distribute their advertising signs and posters more successfully by making them artistic, sophisticated and pleasing to the eye. A graphically interesting advertising sign with, for example, exotic designs went down well with the public, and sales of the product quickly increased. More and more companies in Germany, Switzerland and Austria opted for eccentric or sophisticated advertising. Advertising agencies at the time mostly commissioned well-known artists and graphic designers to carry out the artwork for the signs. Among the most famous sign artists in Switzerland were Niklaus Stoecklin and Herbert Leupin. One of Basle-based graphic designer and artist Niklaus Stoecklin's most memorable designs is the advertising sign from 1926 for Gaba/Wybert lozenges (*Gaba/Wybert-Pastillen*). Throughout his career he only used the Sütterlin font. In the 1940s, Herbert Leupin designed the famous Pepita advertising sign with the colored parrot. Both enamel signs can be seen in the exhibition. The most famous work of German artist, poster designer, graphic designer and caricaturist Kurt Heiligenstaedt is the Persil *White Lady* advertisement. Heiligenstaedt is known for his humorous drawings and elegant touch. This advertising icon is naturally also included in the exhibition. Depending on the era, the graphical implementation of the designs and lettering reflect the prevailing styles, such as art nouveau, Bauhaus and art deco. At the same time, the advertisements also had to be striking. Large signs positioned along railway lines, for example, were often reduced to the essentials, as train passengers had to be able to quickly recognize and perceive the brand or message as they passed.

Michael Müller – sign-lover and collector

Michael Müller is now not only a lover and collector of old advertising signs, he is also a recognized expert in the field. He lives among his beloved signs, as they decorate his entire apartment. Only

for the duration of this special exhibition has he allowed himself to be temporarily separated from his treasures.

At the age of five, a key event took place in his life which laid the foundation for his collector's passion. His father took him with him to a musical engagement in the local tavern in his home town of Waldsassen in Bavaria. There, the little boy sat in his lederhosen listening to the music. The atmosphere was lively, and he saw in the corner the smiling monk with his foaming beer mug and the inscription on the base of the sign: *Mönchshof-Bräu*. For Michael Müller, this advertising figure embodies part of his childhood, and at the time gave him the feeling of a perfect world. He first came into actual contact with old advertising signs during his apprenticeship as a draftsman. The architect's office was located in the same building as an old-fashioned corner shop, and in the attic the young man stumbled across a variety of old advertising signs, which he was able to purchase and which form the foundation of his current extensive collection. He continues to make valuable additions to his collection by attending flea markets, engaging with like-minded people, and also through the new social media.

Nowadays, for a sign to interest Michael Müller it must have a special theme or be of a special type, have an interesting graphic designer or a special historical significance. At any rate, he is constantly on the lookout. Michael Müller is happy to value advertising signs and purchase them. Enquiries can be sent directly to mijomueller@bluewin.ch. Who knows, perhaps there are more treasures waiting to be discovered in attics.

Enamel signs as collectibles

Today, enamel signs are coveted collector's items. Among collectors, the signs that are of particular interest are those that have an intentionally curved shape. This further accentuates their three-dimensionality, already created by the successively applied colors in different firings. Other enamel signs can be flat or have an approximately one centimeter-wide folded-over edge, which is intended to ensure increased stability for large signs in particular.

One special type of enamel sign is the door sign, which is often a smaller version of a larger sign. It was intended to be fixed to the entrance door or shop counter as a final reminder, so to speak, not to forget to buy the advertised product when out shopping. In recent years, the collector's value of these miniatures in particular has risen.

The value of an enamel sign depends on the manufacturing technique used to make it, its condition, rarity, age, design and the product that is advertised. Names that are still known today are particularly sought-after.

Condition is undoubtedly one of the most important factors. Thus, a well-preserved enamel sign can sell for several thousand Swiss francs, whereas the same sign in a very poor condition will hardly be worth more than fifty francs. An enamel sign's condition is classified as follows: perfectly preserved, small screw hole or edge damage, major border or edge damage, minor isolated damage-spots on the sign, several damage-spots on the sign, sign with dull or pale colors, severe damage that impairs the overall impression, sign requires extensive restoration.

Signs in absolute top condition are nowadays traded at large auction houses as art objects, and are sometimes sold for five-figure sums.

Facts & figures

Opening hours

Museum and Shop, Tuesday to Sunday from 10 to 18

Museum and Shop, in December, daily from 10 to 18

Ristorante La Sosta, daily from 10 to 18

The Swiss Museums Pass and the Museums-PASS are valid for the Spielzeug Welten Museum Basel.

Admission.

CHF 7.00/5.00

Children up to 16 years are admitted free of charge, only if accompanied by an adult.

No additional charge for the special exhibition.

The building is accessible by wheelchair.

Media contact

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