

TOOTH TRADE SIGN

Artist unidentified
Probably New England; c. 1850–1880
Paint on wood with metal; 26 × 12 ¼ × 11 ¼"
Gift of Kristina Barbara Johnson, 1983.8.1
Photo by John Parnell, New York

J.B. SCHLEGELMILCH BLACKSMITH SHOP SIGN AND WEATHERVANE

Artist unidentified
Southeastern Pennsylvania; mid-nineteenth century
Iron with traces of paint; 28 ¾ × 42 × ¼"
Gift of Ralph Esmerian, 2005.8.61
Photo courtesy Sotheby's, New York

BASEBALL PLAYER SHOW FIGURE

Samuel Anderson Robb (1851–1928)
New York; 1888–1903
Paint on wood; 76 × 21 ¾ × 24"
Gift of Millie and Bill Gladstone, 2008.16.1
Photo by Gavin Ashworth, New York

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The most successful early trade sign left little confusion as to its meaning, with or without the use of words. Symbols that were immediately recognizable relied upon a shared system of emblematic meaning, and this interaction between trade sign and viewer still lingers as a traditional method of advertising a business. Some of the earliest signs were flat and painted on both sides, but increasingly through the nineteenth century they were three-dimensional carvings hung off the façade of a building to catch the eyes of passersby. These carved signs were often oversize versions of everyday objects immediately associated with the trade they advertised. Their size helped to draw attention, especially as towns became congested with competing businesses. Many of the early signs established symbols that remain with us to the present time, such as the tooth that was used to advertise the services of a dentist, or the baseball figure that advertised an establishment that sold tobacco. Other signs reveal trades less prevalent today, such as the pictograph weathervane that graphically describes Mr. J.B. Schlegelmilch as a blacksmith “& horse-shoe-er.”

RESOURCES

- American Folk Art Museum:
www.folkartmuseum.org
- Hollander, Stacy C. *American Radiance: The Ralph Esmerian Gift to the American Folk Art Museum*. New York: American Folk Art Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2001.
- Hollander, Stacy C., and Brooke Davis Anderson. *American Anthem: Masterworks from the American Folk Art Museum*. New York: American Folk Art Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2001.
- Meadows, Cecil A. *Trade Signs and Their Origin*. London: Reading and Fakenham, 1957.
- Sessions, Ralph. “The Image Business: Shop and Cigar Store Figures in America.” *Folk Art* 21, no. 4 (winter 1996/97): 54–60. Also available at Antiques and The Arts Online, www.antiquesandthearts.com/archive/image.htm.
- . *The Shipcarver's Art: Figureheads and Cigar-Store Indians in Nineteenth-Century America*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005.

OPEN FOR BUSINESS

QUESTIONS FOR CAREFUL LOOKING

- What strikes you about these objects?
- What can we say about how these objects might have been used? What visual clues lead you to that conclusion?
- Through careful looking, what can we learn about the time in which these signs were made and displayed?
- What comparisons can we make between these objects?
- What more can we learn by looking carefully at these objects?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- Like advertisers today, the makers of these signs likely considered their target audiences carefully before executing their design. Who do you think the intended audiences were for these objects? What clues give you this idea?
- One reason advertisers have used graphic images in their work is to communicate their idea even across language barriers. This was particularly true for the immigrant populations that grew in nineteenth-century America. What do each of these trade signs communicate, and how do they accomplish their purpose?
- What story do these signs tell us about American life in the nineteenth century? How do the trades these signs advertise compare with modern-day businesses?
- How is today's advertising similar to these examples of nineteenth-century advertising?

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEXT

- What were literacy rates in nineteenth-century America? What factors led to these low rates?
- How many advertisements do you think the average American encounters on a daily basis today? In the nineteenth century?
- Why have imagery and symbols remained an important element of advertising today, even though the population is predominantly literate? What examples can you think of?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Ask students to choose a business or trade and to design two separate signs or advertisements for it—one in the graphic style of the nineteenth century and one that we might expect to see today.
- Ask students to develop an image or sign without any words to represent their school. What visual elements will best communicate ideas about the school to people from another time or place?
- Have students photograph modern-day shop and trade signs. Display the photographs together and look for patterns among the signs. How do these signs tell the story of what

you can expect to find in the shop? How do these signs tell a story about life in America in the twenty-first century?

- Have students collect printed advertisements for modern-day businesses, trades, and products similar to those represented in the nineteenth-century trade signs. How do the examples compare to each other?