

THE HISTORY OF SIGNS

Humanity has always created signs and graphics, from early man painting on cave walls to printing and cutting digital graphics with the latest Roland DG technology. Here are some selected graphical highlights from signage history.

18,000 BC Paleolithic Era

45,500 years old, the earliest cave painting of a wild board was found in Indonesia—the first visual communication.



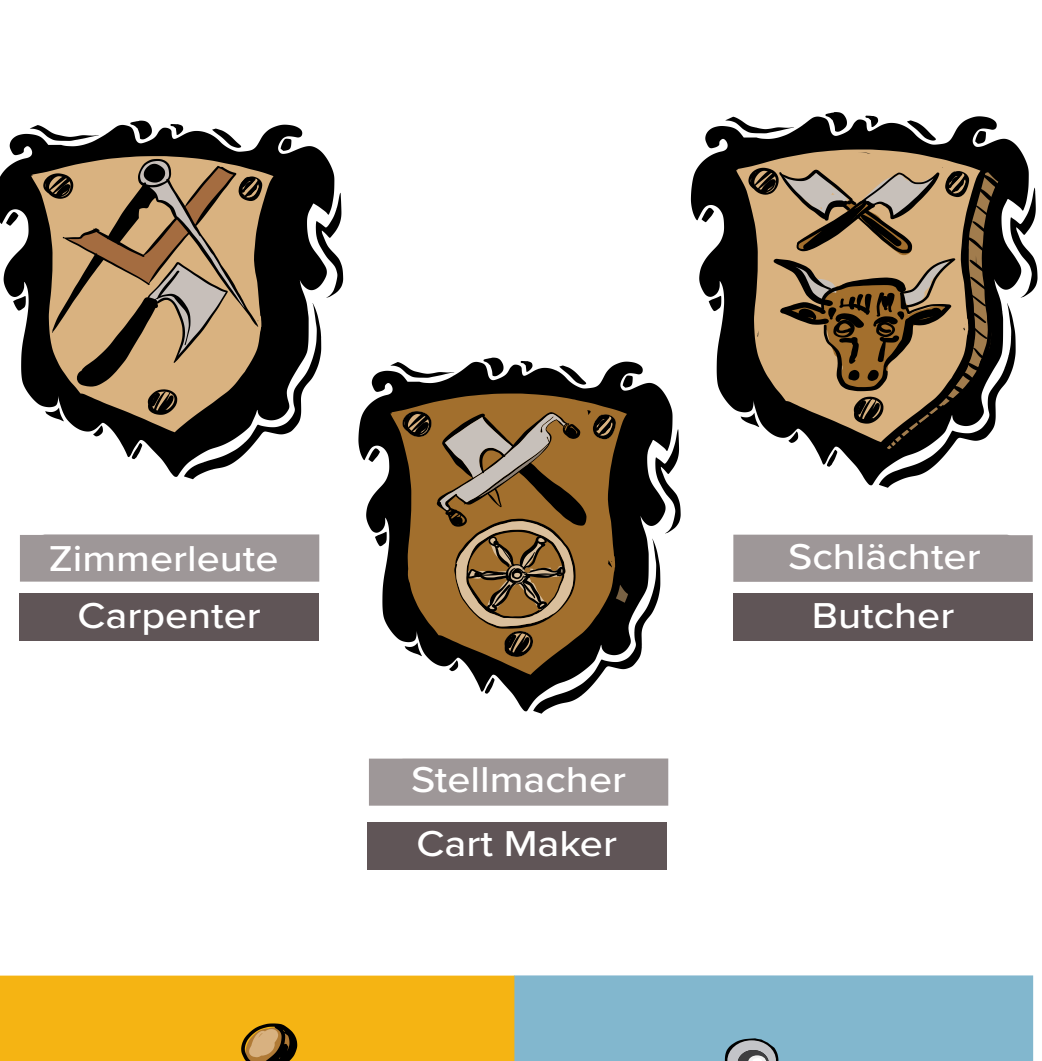
Symbolic graphics were painted on cave walls by early man.

800 BC Ancient Greece

Ancient Egyptians and Greeks painted and chiseled signage in temples, marketplaces, hospitals and other locations.



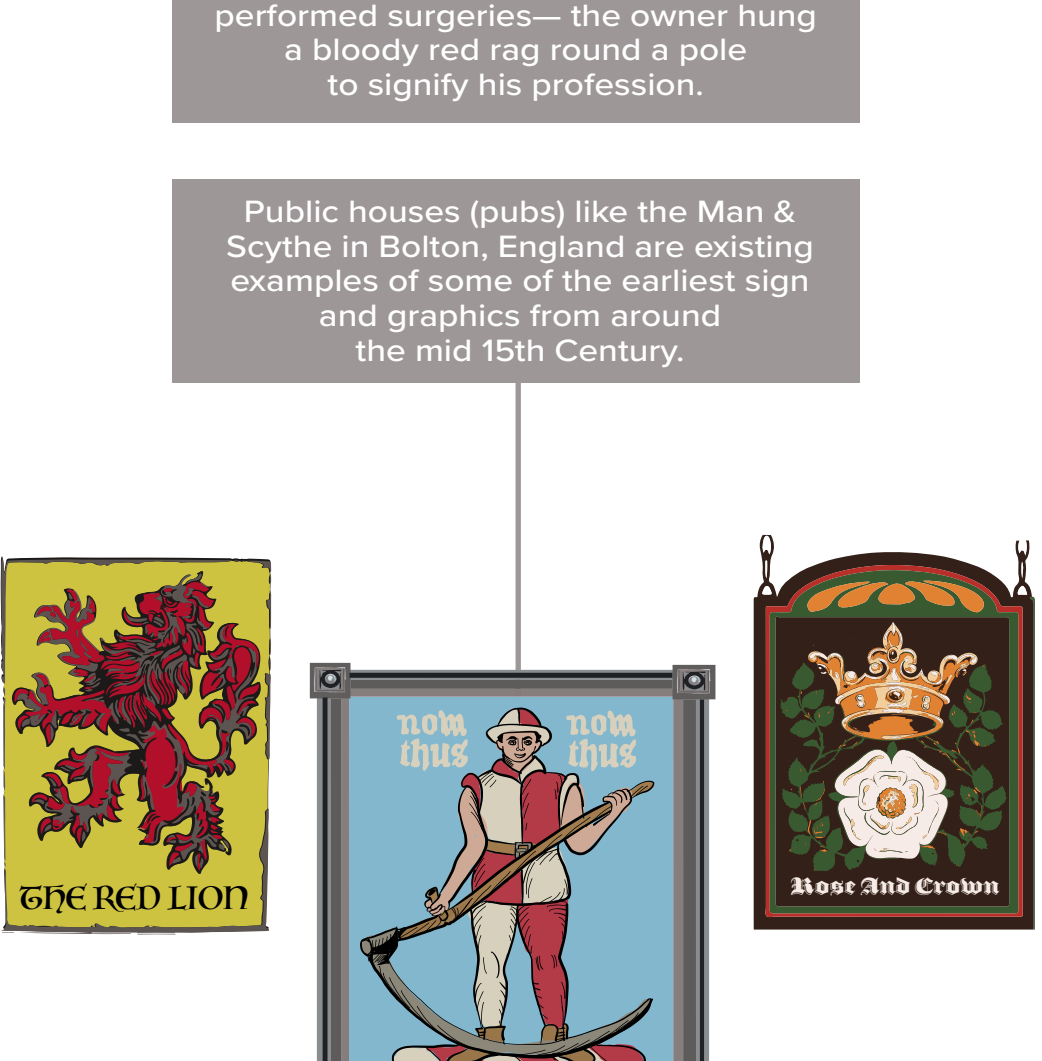
Ancient Egyptian signs used symbols to differentiate different sellers, goods and services.



To communicate to a largely illiterate public, Ancient Greeks used logos in their signage to specify different trades and artisans that are still used today.

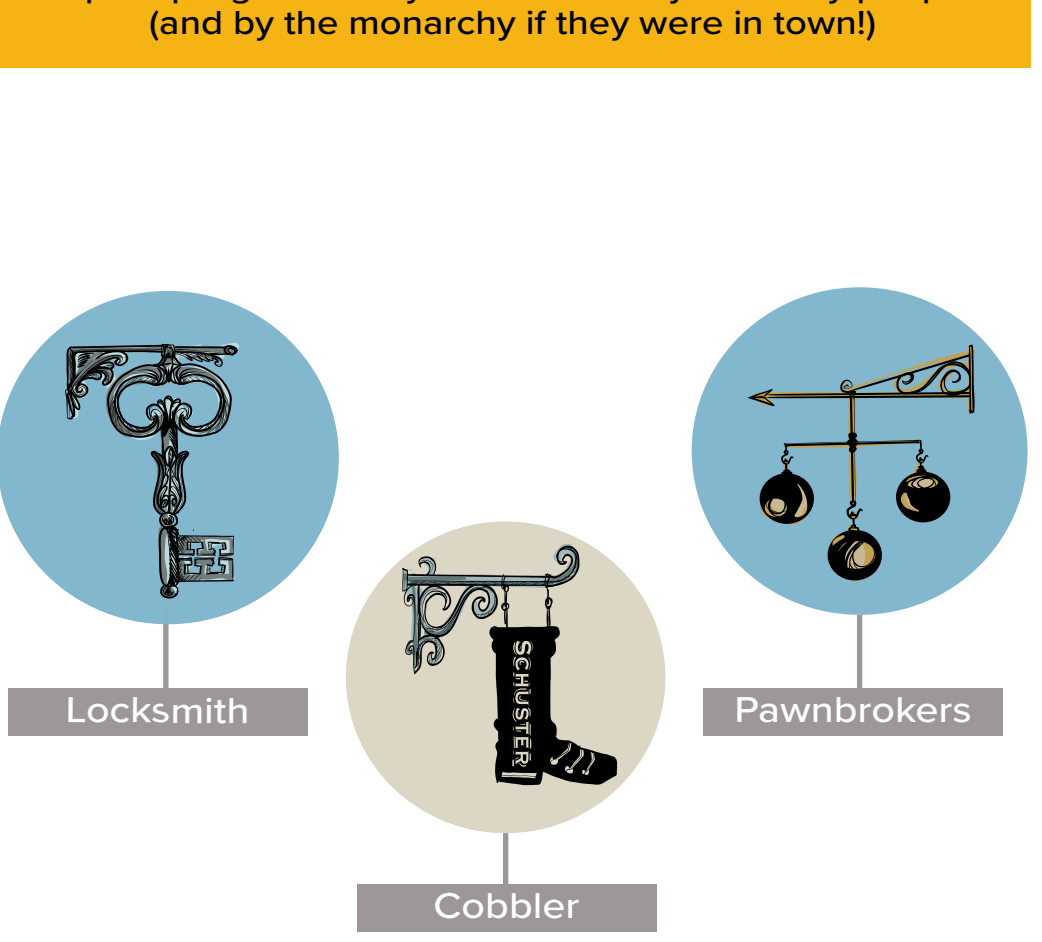
500 BC Ancient Roman Empire

Cities of the Roman Empire had street signs and other signage made from wood, animal skin, brick, stone and marble.



The discovery of Pompeii revealed ancient street signs—including this wine merchant street sign.

A mosaic "Beware of the Dog" sign was discovered in the ruins of a Roman house.



Rome put traffic signs all over their conquered world—mile markers still stand today to specify the distance to Rome.

1000 AD Medieval Europe

Literally a golden age of signage with carvings, bright paint, ornamental iron and even gilding of elaborate signs.



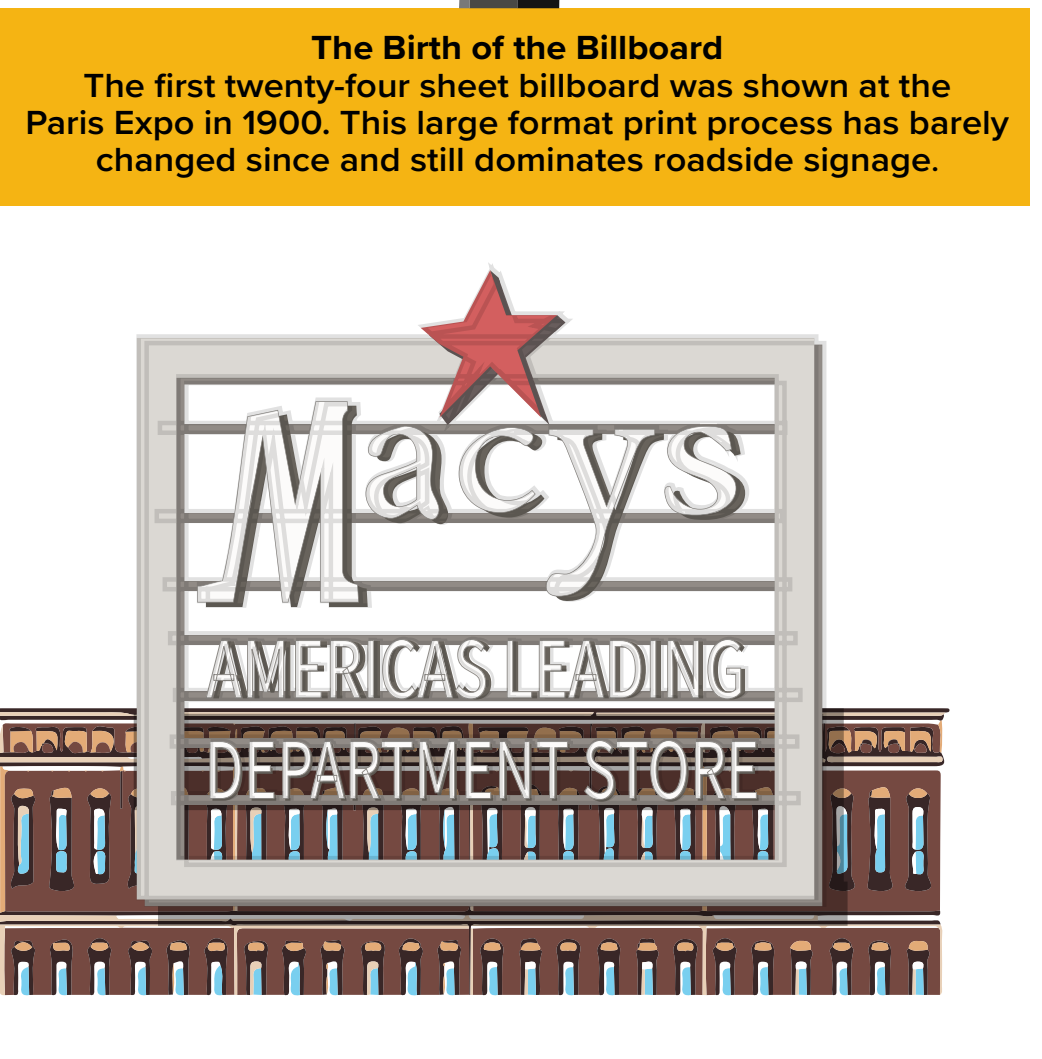
Public houses (pubs) like the Man & Scythe in Bolton, England are existing examples of some of the earliest sign and graphics from around the mid 15th Century.



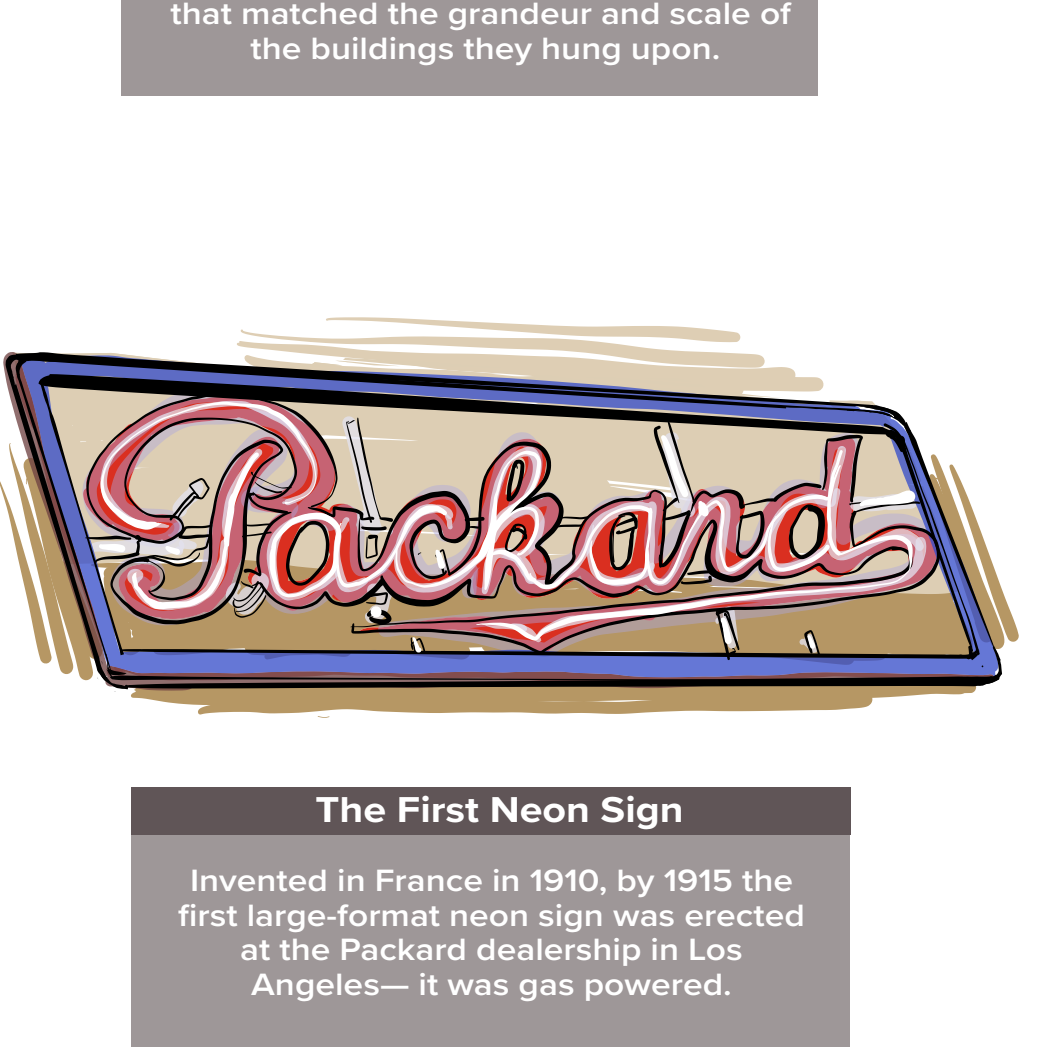
Ale House Signs
In 1389, King Richard III ordered all ale houses in England to put up signs so they could be easily found by people (and by the monarchy if they were in town!)

1700 Age of Enlightenment

Cities became bigger, populations grew and the world of trade and exploration flourished—streets filled with elaborately crafted wooden and wrought iron signs.



The Language of Signage
Cities like New York, London and Milan developed universal symbols for shops that we still use today.



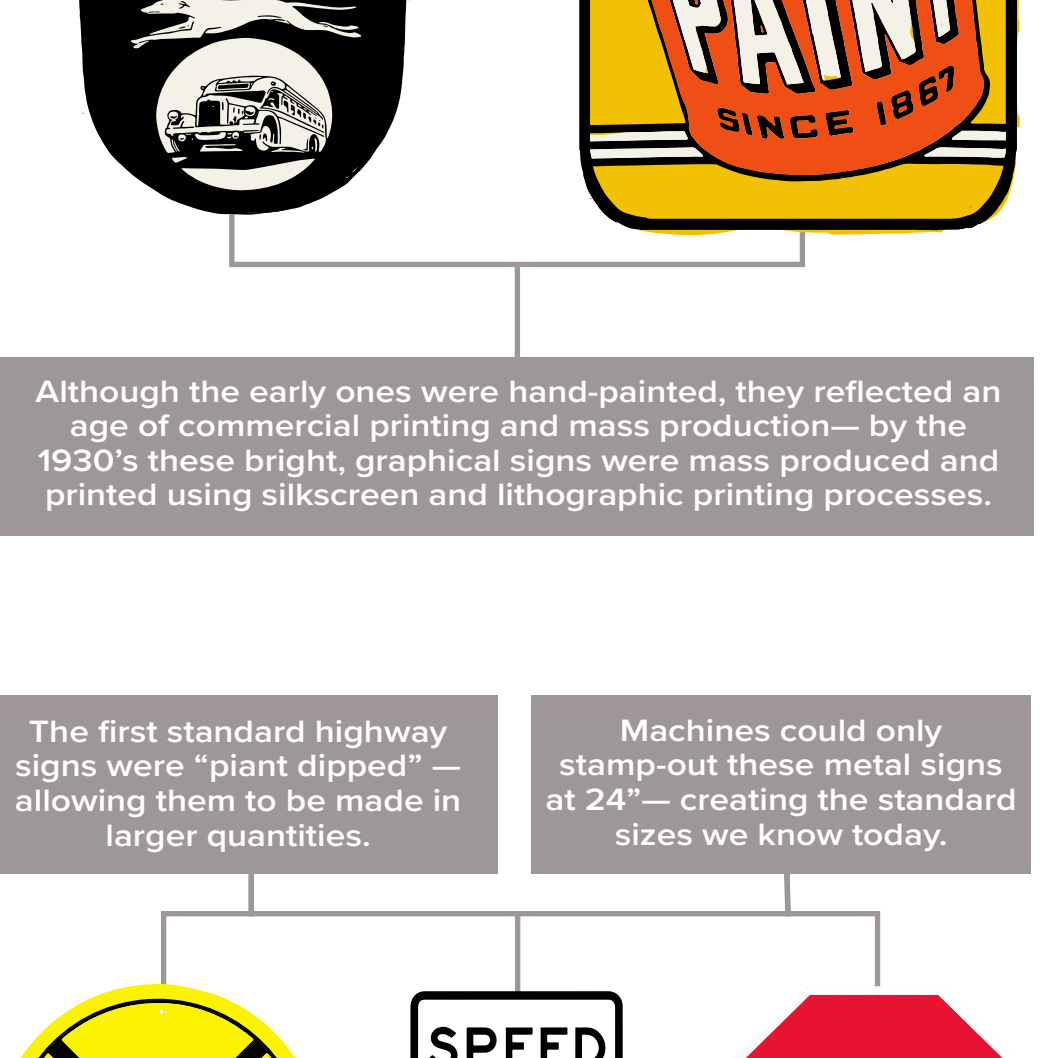
Origin of Shopfront Signs
By law, hanging signs in London and other European cities had to be taken down by 1769 because they kept falling down and killing people—a new tradition of painted signs against shopfronts is established.

1800-1900 Large Format Arrives

As businesses start to turn into recognizable corporations, big brands want signs that are easily seen by a mass of consumers.



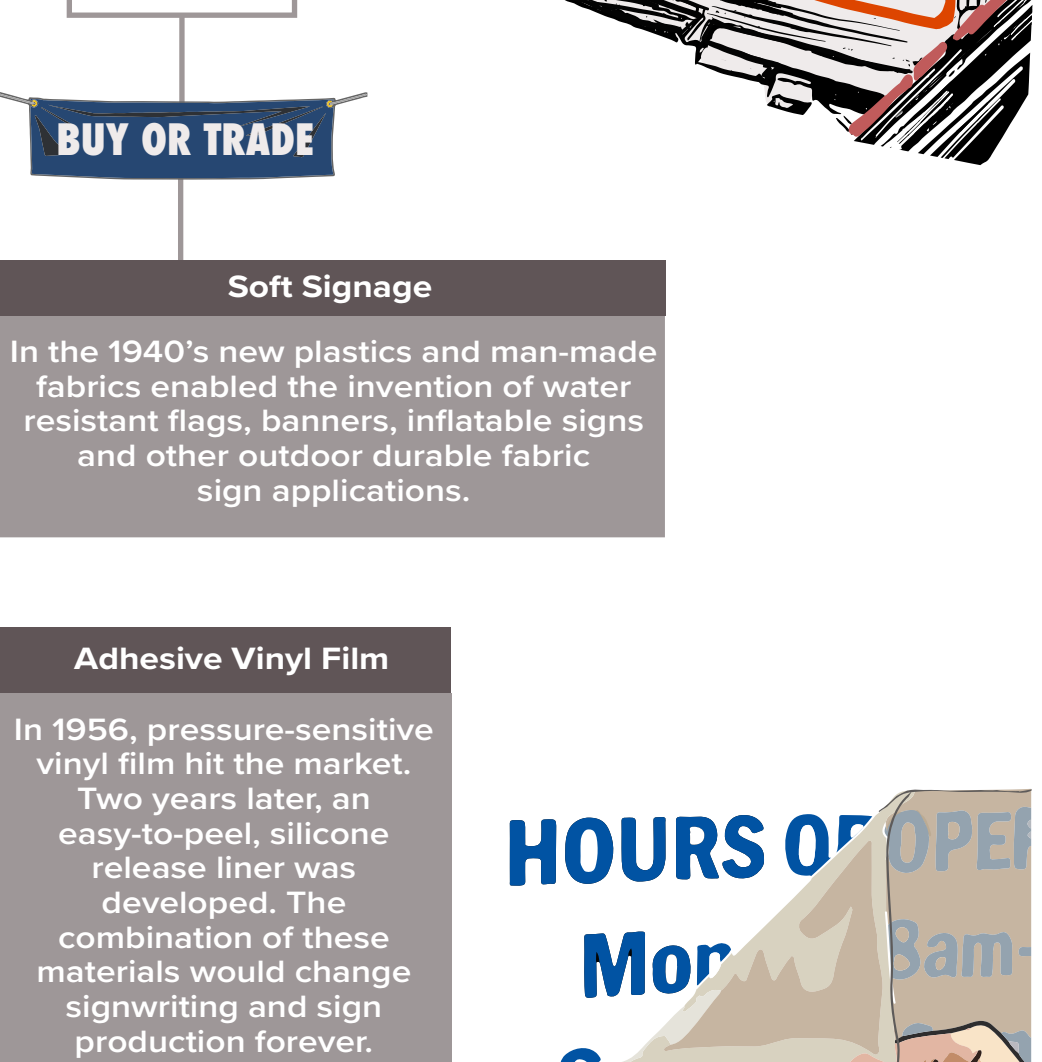
Gaslit Streets and Signage
With the invention of gas lamps that lit-up streets at night like never before in the early 1800's, signage became more easily-readable and artistic.



New US legislation in 1860 allowed advertisers to purchase outdoor space—this enabled billboard advertising



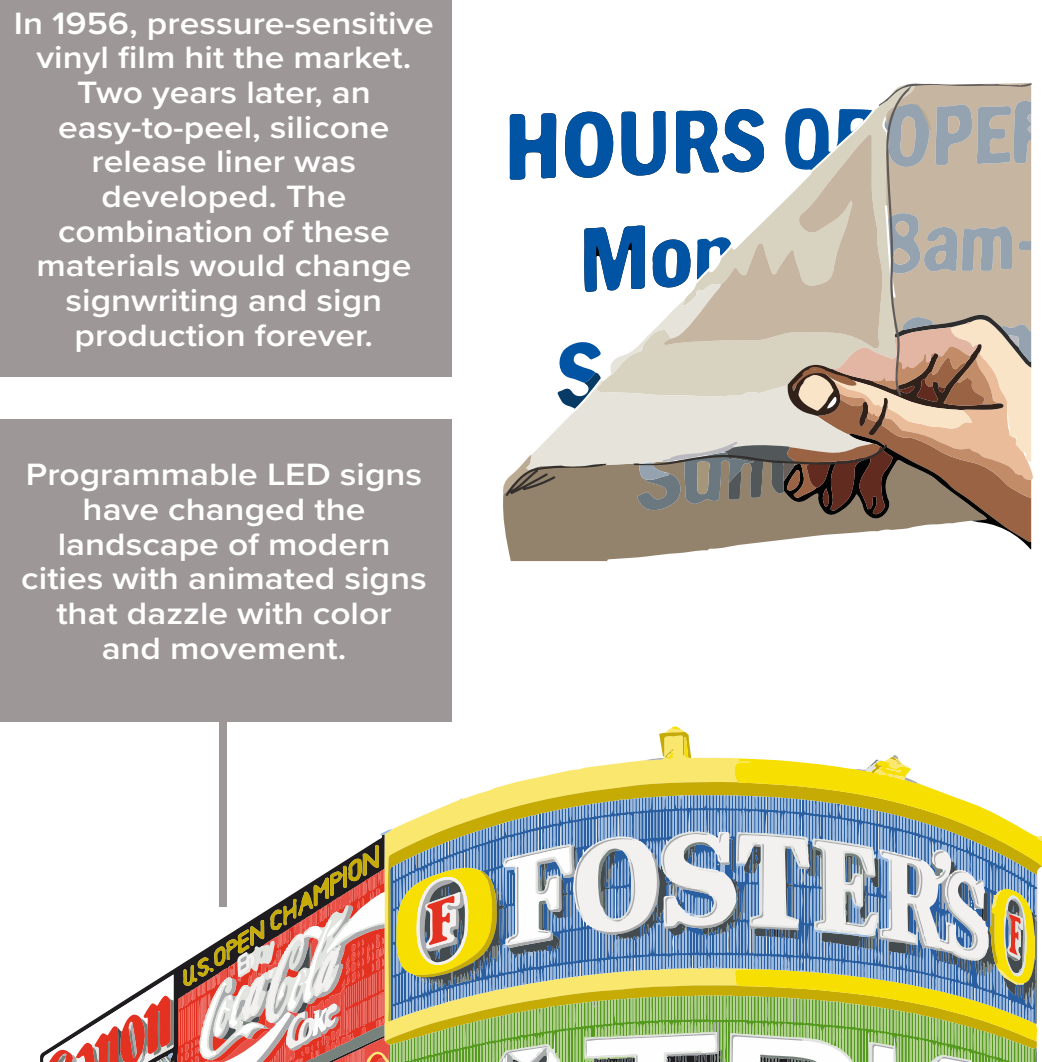
The Birth of the Billboard
The first twenty-four sheet billboard was shown at the Paris Expo in 1900. True large format print process has barely changed since and still dominates roadside signage.



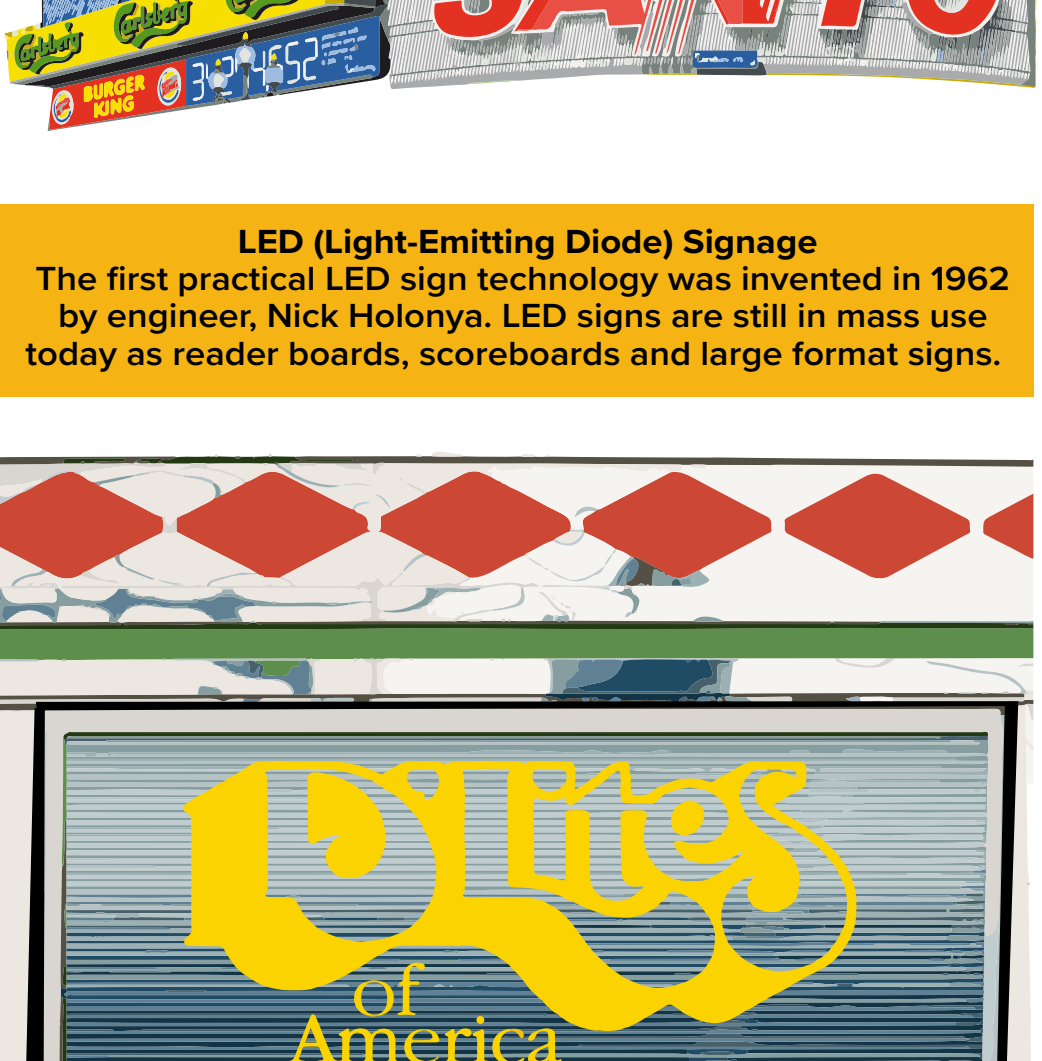
The First Neon Sign
Invented in France in 1910, by 1915 the first large-format neon sign was erected at the Packard dealership in Los Angeles—it was gas powered.

1900-1930 Gas and Electric

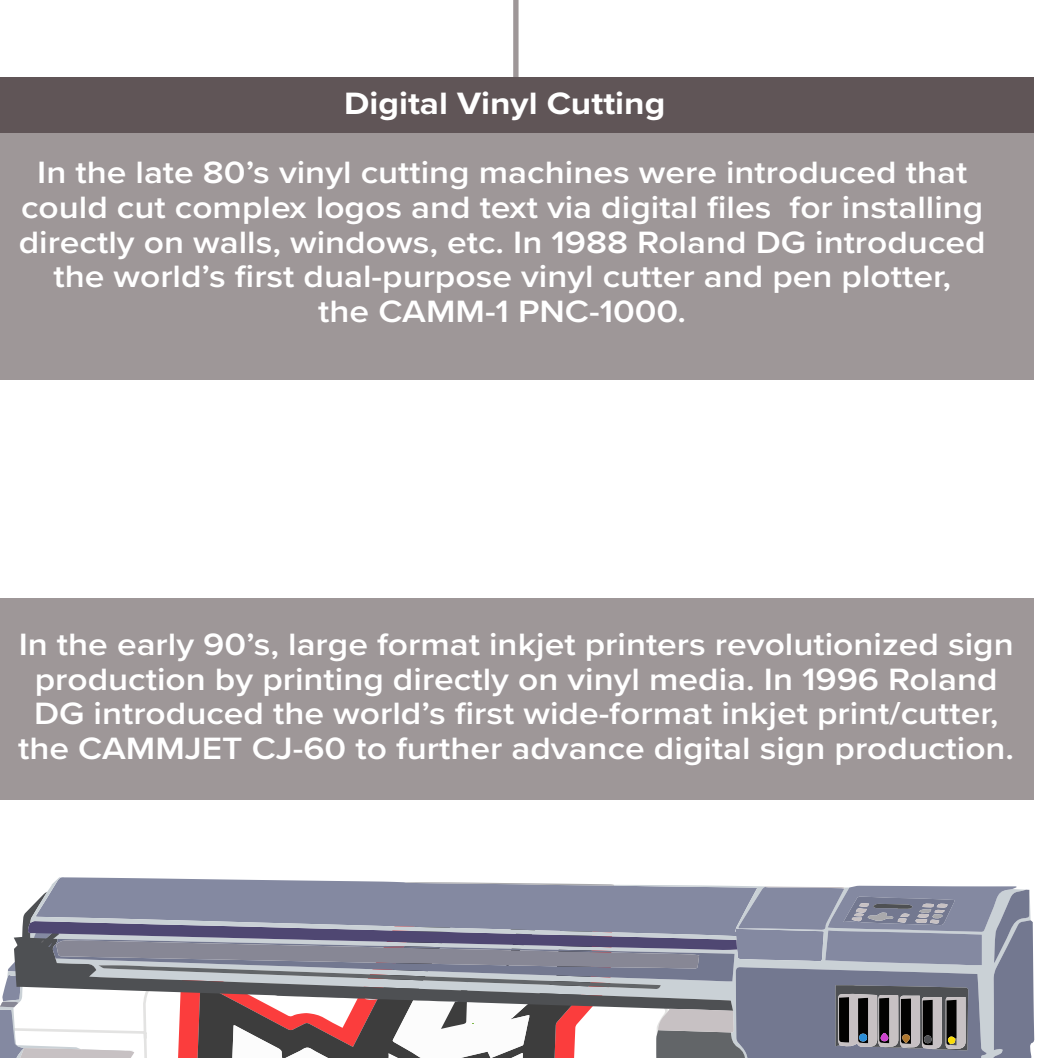
Signs became bigger, brighter and more recognizable with the rapid rise of industry, capitalism and corporations.



Porcelain Signs
Originating in Germany in the 1890's, porcelain enamel signs that promoted brands and products were in widespread use in US stores by the early 1900's.



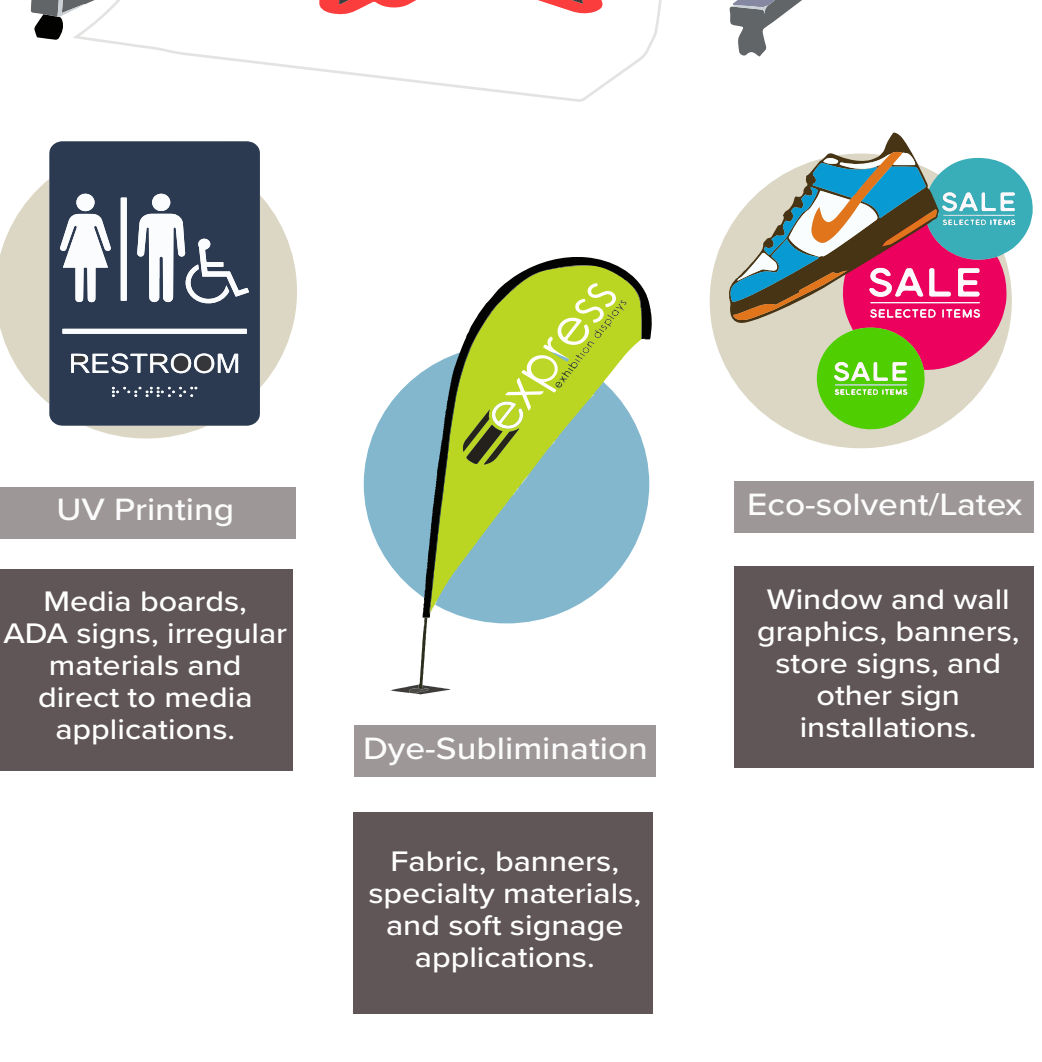
Although the early ones were hand-painted, they reflected an age of commercial printing and mass production—by the 1930's these bright, graphical signs were mass produced and printed using silkscreen and lithographic printing processes.



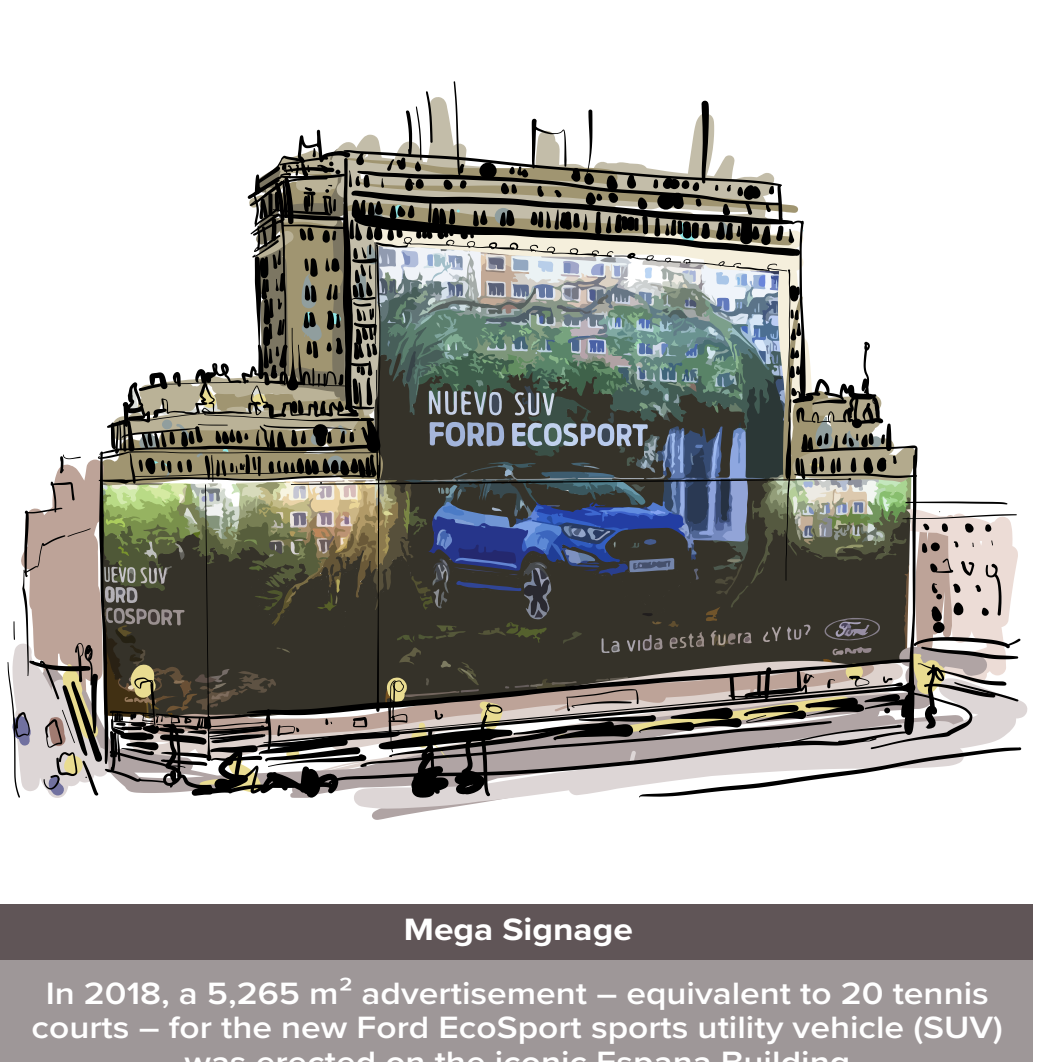
Standardized Highway Signs
In 1923 the Mississippi Valley Association of State Highway Departments created a manual of the first standardized traffic signs.

1940-1990 New Materials

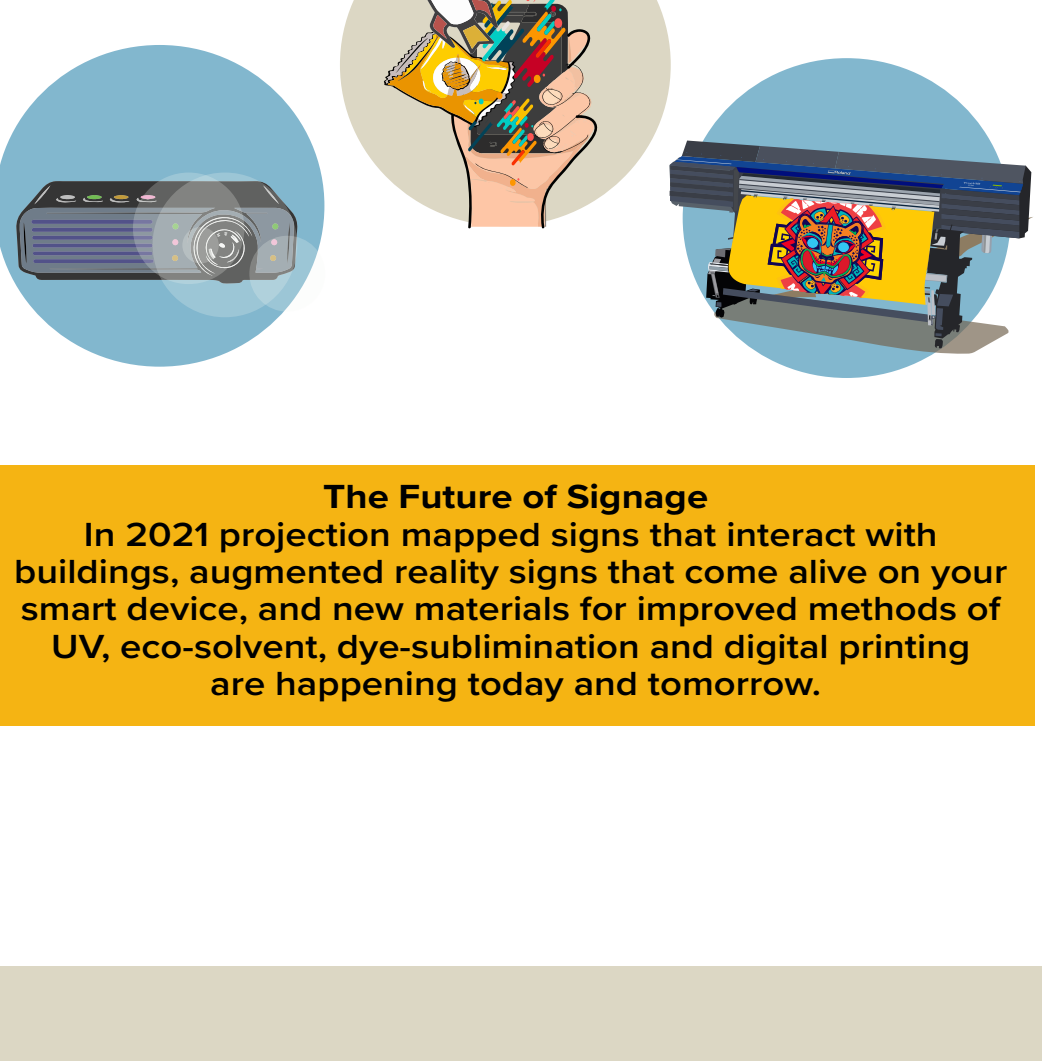
Post War plastics, vinyls, and large format print machinery revolutionizes signage—sign shop businesses were created to meet mass-consumer demand.



Plastic Signage
Plastics were developed post WWII that could be molded into lightboxes and other forms that were cheap to make and needed little maintenance.



Soft Signage
In the 1940's new plastics and man-made fabrics enabled the invention of water-resistant flags, banners, inflatable signs and other outdoor durable fabric sign applications.



Adhesive Vinyl Film
In 1956, pressure-sensitive vinyl film hit the market. Two years later, an easy-to-peel, silicone release liner was developed. The combination of these materials would change the landscape of modern cities with animated signs that dazzle with color and movement.



LED (Light-Emitting Diode) Signage
The first practical LED sign technology was invented in 1962 by engineer, Nick Holonyak. LED signs are still in mass use today as reader boards, scoreboards and large format signs.

Digital Vinyl Cutting
In the late '80's vinyl cutting machines were introduced that could cut complex logos and text via digital files for installing directly on walls, windows, etc. In 1988 Roland DG introduced the world's first dual-purpose vinyl cutter and pen plotter, the CAMM-1 PNC-1000.

1990-Now Digital Technology

Signs created on a computer and cut or printed take over sign production. Advanced new technologies create new and easier ways to make signage.

In the early 90's, large format inkjet printers revolutionized sign production by printing directly on vinyl media. In 1998 Roland DG introduced the world's first wide-format inkjet print/cutter, the CAMMJET CJ-60 to further advance digital sign production.

UV Printing
Media boards, ADA signs, irregular materials and direct to media applications.

Dye-Sublimation
Fabric, banners, specialty materials, and soft signage applications.

Eco-solvent/Latex
Window and wall graphics, banners, store signs and other sign installations.

Digital Sign and Graphics Technologies
As large format inkjet printing advances, new sign machines start to emerge on the market in the mid 2000's—compacting industrial UV and dye-sublimation print processes into digital output devices for sign shops.

Mega Signage
In 2019, a 5,265 m² advertisement — equivalent to 20 tennis courts — for the new Ford EcoSport sports utility vehicle (SUV) was erected on the iconic Espana Building in central Madrid, Spain.

The Future of Signage
In 2021 projection mapped signs that interact with buildings, augmented reality signs that come alive on your smart device, and new materials for improved methods of UV, eco-solvent, dye-sublimation and digital printing are happening today and tomorrow.

Infographic Sources:

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