

Hounds of the Baskervilles

Creating a multi-faceted, multi-media sign job.



BY DAVID
MCDONALD

About the author: David and Robin McDonald own and operate Avila Sign & Design, a custom sign shop in Grover Beach, Calif.

THIS STORY INVOLVES a client for whom I had done past work. She is a dog breeder — German Shepherds to be exact, but not just any German Shepherds. These are high-quality canines with exceptional blood lines. Mary at Shepherds of Leybourne is a serious breeder and it shows in her product of dogs.

I was driving over to Shepherds of Leybourne to measure a new sign that we were going to put together for Mary, and as I approached her driveway I found myself admiring the main sign out on the road. It was sand-blasted and carved, with appliques and gilded letters, and I had created it.

(I often find myself staring at past sign jobs, because I can't help but be critical of my own work; I see all the things that I could have or should have done. But I believe that this in itself is what makes us all better at what we do and helps bring us to a higher level.)

My attention was soon focused on the logo pictorial commanding most of the positive space on this mini-monument sign. I was drawn to remember the labor and intensity that went into rendering it. I was soon consumed with the pressure that I felt when I was first asked to reproduce this for Mary. The logo of the little girl hugging that beautiful black German Shepherd had been reproduced for her in the past many times,

and every time she was very disappointed. My wife, Robin, assured Mary that we would make a difference, and I felt pretty good with the results of my efforts on that sign. Mary was also pleased.

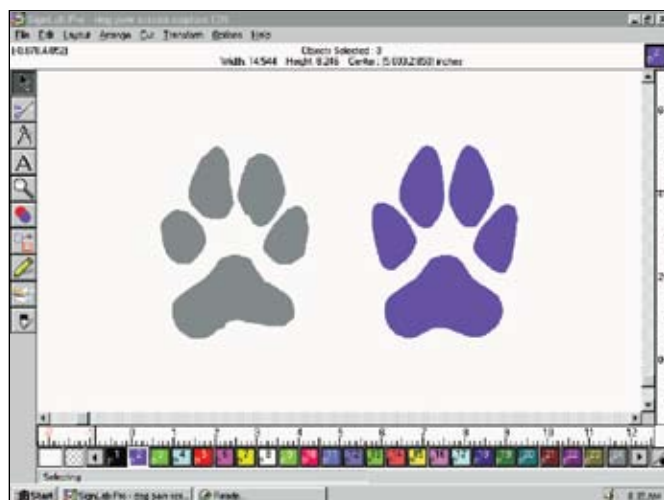
I have to admit, I wasn't real delighted about rendering this pictorial again. The budget we had to work within was sure to bring about all those pressures that I felt when doing this job the first time.



This entrance sign (which we had previously made for the customer) features the elaborate logo we would reproduce on another sign for the property, detailed in the following step-by-step instructions.



The left paw is scanned and the right paw is cleaned. I like to duplicate the item scanned, so I can compare as I clean up.



The paw on the right is all cleaned up and ready for cutting on the plotter.

INSPIRED BY GRACE

As I was heading up the driveway to Shepherds of Leybourne, in the distance I heard the sound of what seemed to be a gazillion dogs of all ages (and frequencies) welcoming me as I approached. I was immediately taken in by this choir of dogs and the way that not a single one of them would sing the same note at the same time.

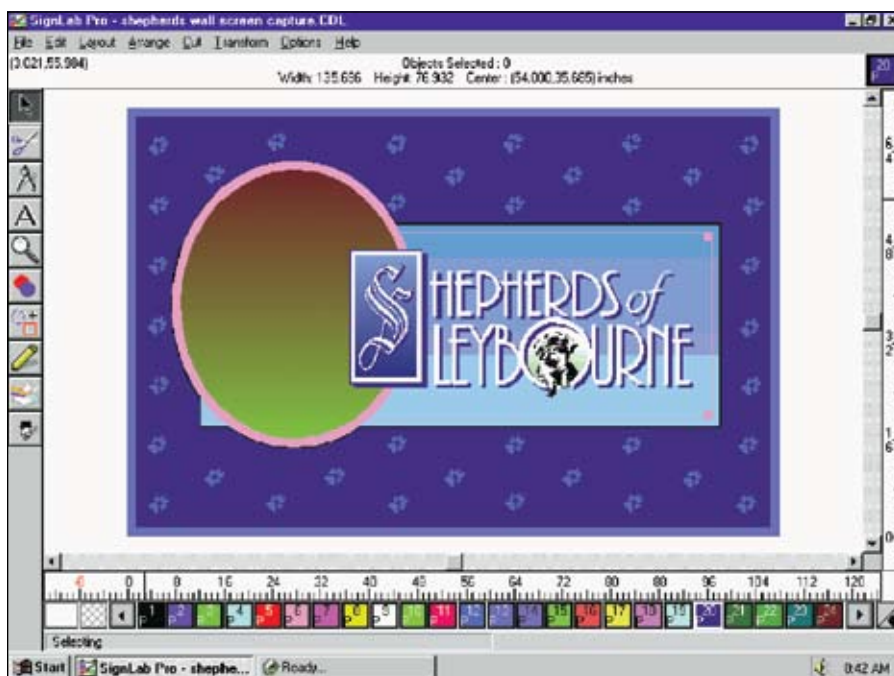
It was an incredible lack of harmony, and it was evident that I was not going to drive up, measure the sign we were to redo and then escape unnoticed. I was sure that everyone living in that canyon was aware of my presence.

When I stopped the truck at my destination, I looked over to my left and saw a group of dogs galloping around and around in circles, connected to one of those exercise gizmos that you would normally associate a horse team being harnessed to.

There was one shepherd among this group of canines that really caught my eye. Boy, what an attractive animal it was. To watch this dog move... the stride in her gate was so fluid that in contrast, she made the other animals moving in the choreographed number look like clumsy ballet dancers.

Every time she would come around parallel to me, her eyes would lock with mine. She had a self-confidence and intensity that commanded immediate respect; what a noble beast.

After inquiring, I found out that this dog's name was Grace Kelly, and that even if I was interested in purchasing her, she wasn't for sale. Grace was one of Mary's prize breeding bitches (excuse the language). At least I have good taste.



After putting all the elements together, this was the final rendering that I referred to in producing the sign. Notice how the logo was not necessary to include, as it was already established.

Mary names most of her animals after celebrities, and a lot of her dogs are purchased by famous people such as Mel Gibson, Bo Derek and others of Hollywoodish-type fame.

PLAN OF ACTION

Exiting the truck with my trusty tape measure in hand, I began assessing an older sign that Mary wanted to replace.

After measuring the sign, I was disappointed to find out that it was oversized — larger than any material you could purchase over the counter. This would mean that I would have to construct a unit which would be very labor-

intensive and time-consuming.

Considering the time it would take to render her logo, I elected to go back to the shop and design a sign utilizing her existing background panel. My idea was to apply another panel over the existing one.

This would achieve two things: First, we could produce an interesting sign with a background, middleground, and foreground. Second, this concept would allow me the time within Mary's budget to focus more on her pictorial logo rather than labor over constructing an oversized, flat panel that wouldn't contribute much interest to the sign.

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As you read on, I will take you step-by-step through the process we employed in producing this sign for Shepherds of Leybourne.

THE DESIGN STAGE

During my creating stage, the ~~the~~ ~~the~~ I do things are as important as the process by which I do them.

We had decided to utilize our client's existing sign (see **Photo 1**) because it was not cost effective to try to recreate the size she needed.

The design for the new sign face came together as follows... Her existing structure would serve as the background. It would be painted a solid color (brilliant blue), and we would use a wallpaper pattern (paw prints) in grid form that would be a softer shade of blue.

In creating the paw prints, I wanted to keep it simple. I have a boxer, and I chose to use her paw print as my original. Getting this was another story. I used a stamp pad and paper for her print, in the same manner you would take someone's finger prints. I do have to say, she was probably more patient than most people who go through this process. After several tries, I chose one that matched what I had mentally pictured for my background.

Putting this on a light table, I laid another sheet of paper over it. With a felt tip pen, I traced the print. This is what I scanned into my computer, cleaned up and later used on the sign.

I decided to use a 4' x 8' panel in the center of the sign for the middle and foreground panels. I thought it would add more to the sign if these were cut-out shapes, versus a rectangle inside of a rectangle.

The middleground is where I felt the lettering would be most effective. I decided to use a fade and texture behind the lettering to contrast with the background panel. I wanted the lettering integrated into a nice silhouette. To keep this panel simple yet eye-catching, I used only minimal techniques.

I chose to do the *S* in *Shepherd's* in a storybook drop capital. I was also given the challenge of incorporating puppies into this already busy sign. I saw the perfect opportunity to do this inside of the

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Photo 1: We decided to utilize the main panel on the existing sign that our customer wanted to have replaced. This would help us stay within budget despite the sign's large size. (I didn't make this sign.)



Photo 2: I created a roller blend on the middleground panel using three different shades of blue, working from darkest to lightest.



Photo 3: Texture was achieved with crumpled up wax paper. I dabbed it in my palette and applied the paint, starting lightly and using wide spacing. I increased my pressure and tightened up my spacing as I went along.



Photo 4: Next, I airbrushed around the lettering to create cast shadows.



Photo 5: Working with my light source, I did a quick, one-stroke convex effect to sharpen the edge of the letters.



Photo 6: I brushed a slightly darker shade of gray into the center of the letters; this looks best if done irregularly.

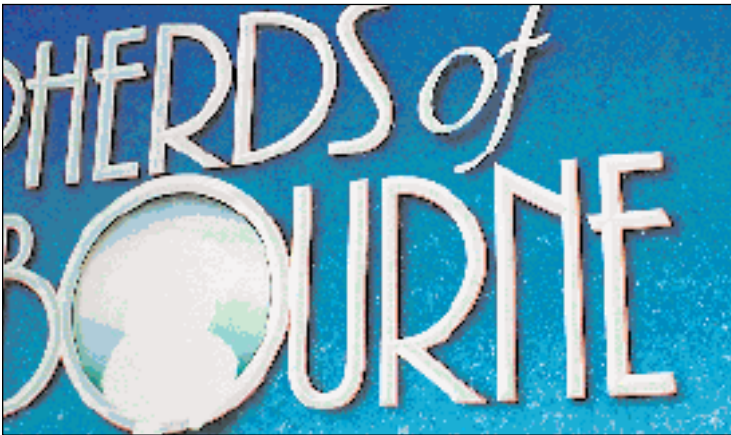


Photo 7: Pulling a faint pink line to the shadow side of the lettering and pin-striping around the panel did wonderful things for the text.

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oin *Leybourne*. I believe this was a perfect spot because there was already so much going on in the other panels.

For the foreground, I was confident that Mary would be pleased if I reproduced her logo in lettering enamel, because this is how we had done her other sign.

After putting all of these ideas together on my computer, I was very happy with the end results. We had been given creative license for the sign before I started designing, so with confidence I decided to give it the go-ahead.

THE PRODUCTION PROCESS

I began by projecting the middle and foreground shapes onto a 3/8" thick, 4' x 8' sheet of Medex. Then I traced the shapes onto the Medex and cut them out with a jigsaw. This panel was then sanded, primed, and given a base coat of white enamel.

Now focusing on my middleground panel, I cut out the vinyl lettering (*Shepherds of Leybourne*) using my computer. This would serve as my mask.

I then painted this panel, using three different shades of blue, working from

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darkest to lightest, as in **Photo 2**. I used my rollers to create a blend. I lightened my lightest blue, using white, and darkened my darkest blue, using black. This gave me the five colors I would use for my texturing.

I chose to work with wax paper to create my texture. I have found it works best for me to tear off about two feet of paper, wad it up, and crumple it with my hand. After pouring my paint onto a palette (paper plates work well), I carefully dabbed my crumbled wax paper into it. I usually dab a dry pallet first to rid any excess paint (omitting this step can create a very messy texture).

When I began to apply the paint to the sign panel, I started very lightly and used wide spacing, moving very swiftly throughout the whole process. As more paint came off, I increased my pressure and tightened up my spacing. I did all of this along the line of color I was blending.

I find it helpful to turn my wrist as I go; this helps me to end up without a distinct pattern in my finished product. I also try not to overwork the wax paper, getting fresh pieces often; this helps to avoid a mushy texture (see **Photo 3**).

With my texturing complete, I picked one light source, and stayed true to this on the whole sign.

Next, I began to airbrush around my lettering to create the cast shadows, as in **Photo 4**. I removed the mask.

Working with my light source, I chose to do a quick, one-stroke convex effect to sharpen the edges of the letters (see **Photo 5**). I brushed a slightly darker shade of gray into the centers of the letters; this looks best if done irregularly versus as a straight line (see **Photo 6**).

With the client's colors being pink and blue, I decided to pull a faint pink line to the shadow side of the lettering, as well as a pinstripe around the panel. I felt this did wonderful things for the text (see **Photo 7**). It also made it harmonious with the design. This would complete the steps I took for my lettering. The capital S panel was treated in this same manner.

To begin my foreground, I projected the silhouette of the logo and traced it onto the panel with a Stabilo. I added critical detail lines as needed to indicate

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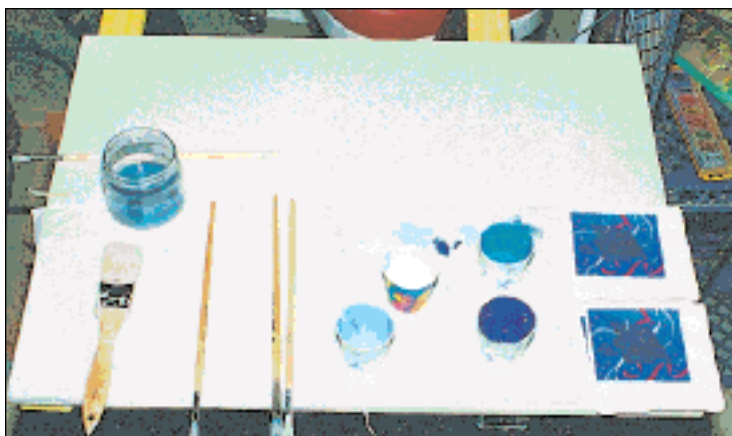


Photo 8: I used wall fitches to paint the foreground pictorials.



Photo 9: I began the pictorial painting by laying the colors on in posterized form.



Photo 10: While the paint was still movable, I blended my tones, working from dark to light, until I was satisfied with my results.



Photo 11: I applied the same techniques in my rendering of the puppy.

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Photo 12: I attached the cut-out panel to the main existing panel (which Robin had repainted on-site) using 1/2" Medex spacers and drywall screws.

certain changes in color value. With application tape, I masked off the areas of the sign that had already been painted to help protect them.

I then mixed my paints. I used three values of blue for the main color, black for shading, and white for tinting. I added Smith's cream to slow down the drying time of each paint; this makes it easier to manipulate.

For my brushes, I used wall fitches, shown in **Photo 8**. There are better brushes that could be purchased for this procedure, but wall fitches are what we keep on hand.

When working with a piece this large, I choose to break it up into separate portions: dog's fur, dog's eyes, girl's clothes, out-of-focus landscape.

I began by laying the colors on in a posterized form, as in **Photo 9**. While my paint was still movable, I blended my tones, working from dark to light, until I was satisfied with my results.

The background landscape was done in the same fashion, only I blended more aggressively to achieve a greater out-of-focus look. The results of my final blending process can be seen in **Photo 10**. I applied all of the same techniques in my rendering of the puppy in **Photo 11**.

When I was finished with the pictorial, I painted a frame to help separate the panels so they did not appear to float. I chose a convex frame versus a flat one, in our client's shade of pink. I added black to sign-finishing clear for a glaze. Then

I added a shadow to the frame so it would appear to stand off the panel. This concluded the cut-out panel that we made in the shop.

Robin went on location to re-paint the main sign panel. This was much more cost effective than bringing the sign into our shop, considering its size. Robin went through the procedures of prepping the sign: cleaning, lightly sanding and using Prepsol. Then she painted the background brilliant blue with a roller. With a softer shade of blue, she cut in around the edge trim.

The next morning, I cut 38 paws in high-performance vinyl on our plotter and weeded them. On my computer, I created a mathematical grid to use as a map when installing the paws. I also measured where the cut-out lay on the original sign to make my job easier once I got there. Then I loaded up the panel, the paws, and my tools needed to install this job.

Arriving at the sight, I began applying the paws. I took a ruler and laid out the grid according to my printout, marking where each paw would go. This went fast, and the paws were applied.

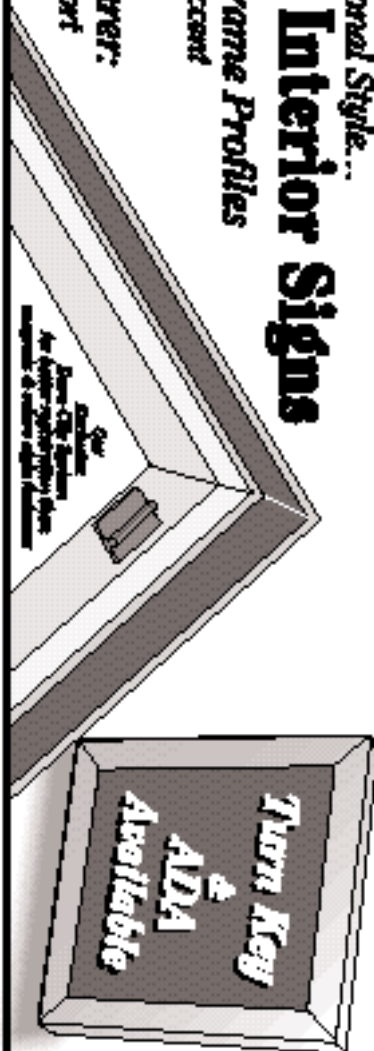
The cut-out panel had been pre-drilled. To the existing sign, I had already screwed in 1/2" spacers made out of Medex. All that was left to do was attach the cut-out panel with drywall screws to the main sign (see **Photo 12**). Our job was now complete, and we howled for weeks afterward.

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September
1997

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Coffee to Go?

BY DAVID MCDONALD



Taking a sound design and breaking it down into practical production elements.

About the author: David and Robin McDonald own and operate Avila Sign & Design, a custom sign shop in Grover Beach, Calif.

I COULD USE A CUP OF COFFEE right now. As I sit writing this article by hand, across from me is a computer technician tearing through my computer, which is now beginning to look like an old beat up appliance one might see in a boneyard somewhere. What a scary sight!

My computer is down; there I said it! You hear about this kind of thing happening, but never did I think it would be happening to me. How stupid can I be?

I find it very ironic how just today I received my Zip drive by mail to handle this kind of situation. I guess I'll just have to chalk it up to having a bad experience (with a great lesson thrown in).

When I look back to the way things used to be done in this business and compare them to how things are done now, I

realize there is a certain amount of control we as sign makers have exchanged for the sake of the speed and accessibility a computer offers.

Now, I'm not saying I would go back to the old way; I love my computer! I do realize that though we are becoming more and more dependent on these tools — whether it be a computer, toaster or coffee maker — if you take it away you create total chaos.

The Coffee Cafe at Bean Junction sign was done the old-fashioned way, by hand. I'm sure a lot of people reading this are thinking, "Why not just cut it out on a computer-controlled router table?"

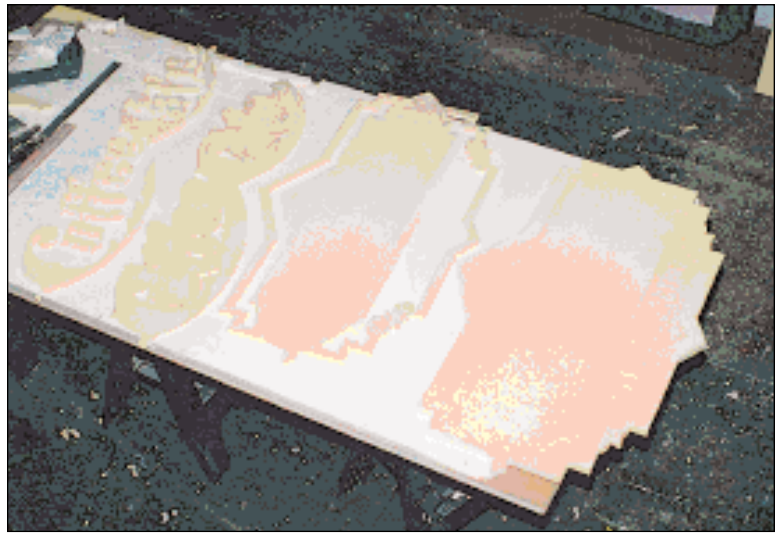
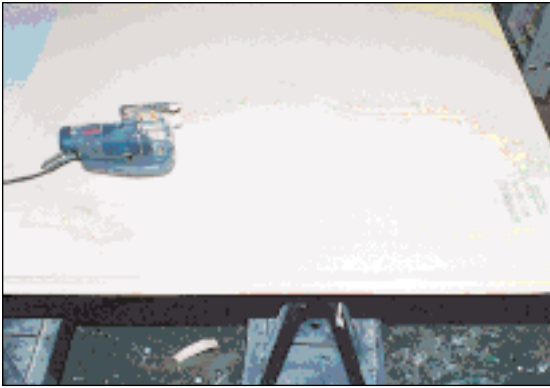
Well I could have, if I had one, and it probably would have been done much quicker and been more efficient. We have been considering purchasing a table because the bulk of our work is dimensional signage, but as I watch this computer tech hack away at my hardware I start to question the whole transition.

But ultimately, I know it's a good idea!

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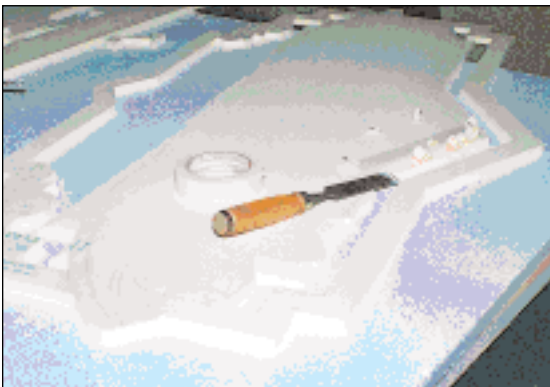
Using epoxy to glue the layers together gave us our finished results.



To keep the pattern lines from wiping off, I sprayed them with a light mist of shellac. When cutting the shapes out with a jigsaw, it becomes a lot easier if you first lay down Styrofoam for support.



We used a band saw and a router table to create the letters and profiles.



After chiseling most of the material away, I used the masking tape as a boundary during the sanding process to form the round-over on the edges.



Intricate details in the embellished borders were achieved using a Dremel.

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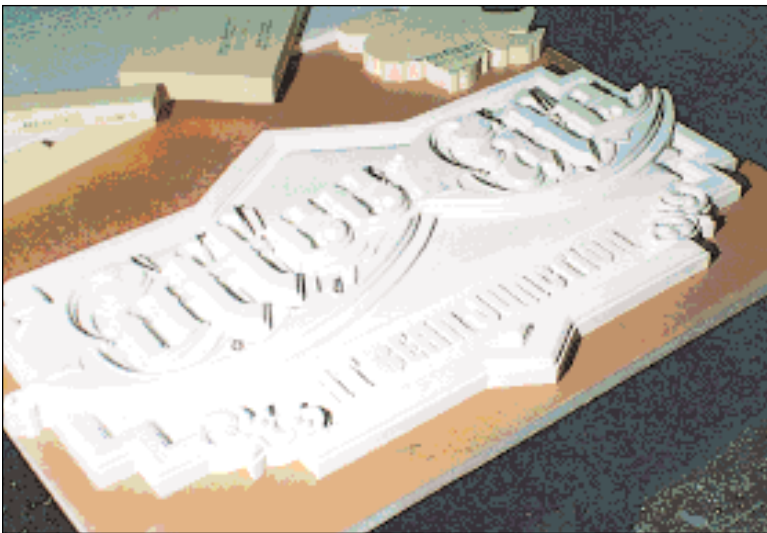
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After scoring with a #11 X-ACTO blade the material was removed with a flat chisel to accept the inlay of glass.



Sandblast resist has been applied and hand cut. Now it is ready to be sandblasted.



After the layers were sealed they were stacked to assure their fit. At this stage everything was ready for finishing.



Here, fine sand is being sprinkled onto the wet paint to create an embossed effect.



The embossed areas of the letters were blended with 23-karat, 18-karat, 16-karat and 12-karat loose leaf gold. Note: The leaf does need to be stomped in with a brush because the surface is so irregular.

FOOT IN MOUTH

I was on the phone with the editor of this fine magazine, Mr. Dickinson, and we were discussing the series of Coffee Cafe design articles David Butler was working on. I told him how cool I thought it was and how I felt all of the readers could really sink their teeth into it.

I asked if the process of design would end this series, or was someone actually going to make the sign. Mr. Dickinson thought this was a great idea and I began to wonder, what with this being a busy time of year and all, just how many brain cells I had left in my noggin to instigate such an undertaking.

Well, our conversation ended and I was left to ponder how I would put this piece together. David Butler is an incredible designer and I have always admired his work. I was sure this was going to be a very exciting adventure.

STACKED LAYERS

After receiving the artwork on a JPEG disk file I sat down in front of my computer and started breaking down the artwork into the layers I would use to assemble the sign.

As it was coming together it seemed there would be mostly cut-out shapes with a little sandblasting on the foundation layer and some hand carving on the letters.

There's a technique I've done in the past of inlaying tempered glass, and I wanted to employ this onto the capital *C's* of *Cof fee Cafe*. To do so I would need to separate those two letter forms with a center embellishment.

I was not comfortable changing the integrity of Mr. Butler's design on my own, so I contacted him. I asked him if he would design some centers and possibly fax them to me. He graciously agreed and I was on my way.

SignFoam II, high-density urethane (HDU) was the material I chose to use for this sign. I knew I could count on its stability and ease of workmanship for this dimensional project.

After some manipulation it made sense to me for the layers to go together in this sequence:

Layer #1 (1" thick): It would be the black outline and border that defines the sign. Including the secondary copy, *At Bean Junction*, it would contain the panel receiving the green smalt.

Layer #2 (1/2" thick): It would consist of the tablecloth panel, the green border with flourishes, and the bullet.

Layer #3 (1/4" thick): It was simply the outline and shadow of the main copy (*Cof fee Cafe*).

Layer #4 (5/8" thick): The *Cof fee Cafe* cutout letters.

PRODUCTION TIME

The first thing to do was to make an accurate pattern. In doing so I printed a transparency of the design on my inkjet printer. I laid that on my overhead projector, and sketched and perforated the design to the intended size of 48" x 28".

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Coffee to Go?

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After applying the yellow colored Instacoll size 1 wiped on the activator with a lint-free rag. Then I gilded with 23-karat patent gold leaf to achieve an extra brilliant burnish.



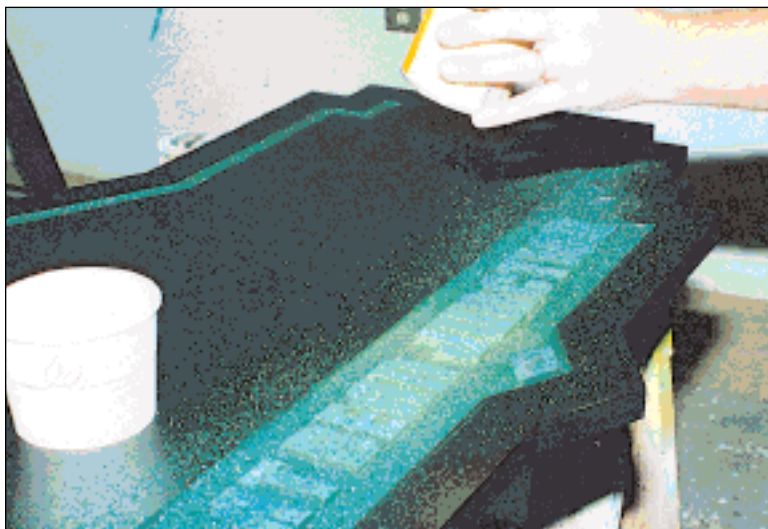
After pounding the tempered glass in this fancy peanut can of ours, the glass is refined through a screen to achieve appropriate size for the inlay.

The pattern was measured for the individual panel blanks needed, which were cut and set aside. The piece used to make up the shadow was then milled from 1/2" stock to 1/4" on a planer.

The letters were also milled from 3/4" stock to 5/8". The 5/8" figure was needed to fit the profile of the router bit I intended on using on the letters.

The pattern was applied and pounced onto the appropriate blank. The pounce lines were given a light mist of spray shellac to act as a fixative and to eliminate any lines from rubbing off.

It was time to start cutting out the shapes. Rather than use the band saw I elected to use my saber saw (the length



To achieve a blend with a small background you need to use extreme tonal contrast in the colors applied.

CONTINUED



I used a sponge to create the fade. You must be cautious when blending over a small background; if it is not done delicately you will create fuzzies on your letter edges.



of the panels would be too cumbersome for the band saw). This operation can go very smoothly if you lay a piece of regular Styrofoam down first and cut your shapes on top of it.

With the shapes cut out they now needed to be profiled. The bevel on the border of Layer #2 was handled with a beveling bit in my hand-held router.

The tablecloth round-over was done by hand. To do this I scribed the panel with a line 1" from the outside edge, then applied masking tape to the line. Using a flat chisel I carved out most of the material.

At this point I simply hand-sanded (with 100-grit sandpaper) to the line, which formed the round over. This was a very quick process due to the structural makeup of the HDU.

The embellished design on the border of Layer #2 was hogged out with a small Dremel tool. I then came back and hand carved the chisel profile.

Layer #4, the letters *Cof fee Cafe*, were hand-routed on a router table using an ogee bit. The capital *C's* were hand carved to allow for the inlay of glass as well as the center embellishments.

Next, we applied sandblast resist to Layer #1 and pounced the pattern. After I cut the border outline and the line of copy, *At Bean Junction*, we sandblasted about 1/4" and removed the stencil. At this point everything was put together so I could see how it looked; things were starting to get fun!



The checkerboard patterns were applied in sections to keep the integrity of the registration.

THE HOUSE BLEND

Two coats of primer were applied to everything except *Cof fee Cafe*, which received three. The depicted colors were mixed and two coats of paint were applied to all of the surfaces.

The centers in all of the *Cof fee Cafe* letters were masked and painted. Onto this wet bath of paint I sprinkled fine sand, then I removed the mask. This would produce an embossed effect, and since I elected to gild the letters, this texture would produce more of a matte center to break things up a little.

The centers were oil sized and blended with 23-karat, 18-karat, 16-karat and 12-karat gold leaf.

The outlines were then oil sized and gilded with 23-karat gold and outlined with Chocolate Brown lettering enamel.

The areas left in the capital *C's* for the inlays of glass were sized with Instacoll (from Sepp Leaf Products) to receive 23-karat gold leaf. Instacoll delivers an incredible shiny mirror-like finish for surface gilding. It's a two part solution; the size and the activator.

After the size is dry you wipe on the activator and you're given about a half-hour window to gild. The shiny gold color is what I was looking for to push through the inlaid glass, keeping it warm.

The tempered glass was applied as follows... I brushed in Frog Juice as a

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binder and sprinkled on the glass. Then I dumped off the excess glass. It was as simple as that. Hint: The Frog Juice is pretty optically clear but dries fast so you have to move quickly!

The center embellishments of the *C's* were oil sized and copper leafed.

For the green smalt on Layer #1 I mixed two colors — dark green and emerald. I blended this to highlight *At Bean Junction*. The two colors needed to be very exaggerated because when you apply the smalt it will cover most of the color and marry them together.

The lettering, *At Bean Junction*, was blended with a sponge. The white was first applied to the bottoms of the letters

If you're ever in the neighborhood, stop in and have a look. We may even serve you up a nice hot cup of coffee.

and a golden brown (coffee color) was applied to the tops. I charged (primed) the sponge with gold and gently blended back and forth until I was happy with my results.

The checkered pattern on Layer #2 was created and vectorized in my SignLab program. Red vinyl was cut on my plotter and applied to the layer.

Each piece of the sign was epoxy-glued together, finishing this sample that I will be proud to display in my shop.

I guess you can say our business, in some regards, will become the home of the *Coffee Cafe at Bean Junction*, so if you're ever in the neighborhood, stop in and have a look. We may even serve you up a nice hot cup of coffee.

Hey, by the way, that glitch in my computer system turned out to be a complete hard drive failure, so before you go home tonight don't forget to back up your work. SB

Reprinted from *Sign Business Magazine*

May/September 2008

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