The diversity, artistry, and impact of signs on our everyday lives are immeasurable. What sign will you notice next?

Signs are everywhere. They inform, educate, and promote. Big or small, they relay messages in a shared language. But common attributes in signage can be found beyond the bounds of the written word. Eighteenth and nineteenth century signs often used shapes and symbols to overcome language and illiteracy barriers: a shoe for a cobbler’s shop, mortar & pestle for a pharmacy, a tankard for a tavern. Today, we communicate in emojis in much the same way.

By the 20th century, many businesses created unique (often large and bold) signs to stand out in a more crowded market and attract customers who were now driving quickly by. Over time, many of these signs became part of the fabric of their communities - a way to orient people to a town, or a source of shared community memory.
Your attention, please!

Signs provide information, but first they must grab your attention. Through the years, signmakers have come up with many ways to do that. Sometimes that's through size — and it's usually the bigger the better. Signs on sides of buildings, oversized novelty items like chairs, boots, and of course, the billboard — large enough to be read by cars passing by at 65 mph. Color is another way to attract attention: bright orange construction signs warn us of potential danger.

Advances in materials and technology have led to even more ways signs can attract attention. Electricity brought lighted signs visible at night, and eventually colorful neon signs that transformed landscapes. The 20th century brought digital signs that can change their message daily.
Signs at work

In the 20th century, informational and governmental signs moved towards standardization as their key component, to better communicate with a changing population. Roadways, public areas, emergency services, and government institutions all received signs that featured common shapes, colors, sizes, and symbols to improve wayfinding for all members of the public.

Some signs reflect changes in culture over time. Civil Defense signs became commonplace in towns after World War I, nuclear fallout shelter signs after World War II. Many types of signs have come and gone as certain services have waned. Railroad, manufacturer, and toll road signs that were once common on the landscape are now fading away.
Express Yourself

Signs are often an opportunity for individual expression within the context of a shared culture. Nowhere is this more visible than with signs that express a viewpoint on a cause, political issue or candidate, or even local events and conflicts.

Political lawn signs have become ubiquitous on the landscape. They may help a candidate or political party, but more often they serve as the expression of an individual’s viewpoint. Historians believe John Quincy Adams was the first politician to use lawn signs in the 1824 election, but they became common in the 1960s when the plastic versions we know today were manufactured.

While some signs stay on the landscape for decades, those created for political expression are often transient in nature. They may be homemade and use household materials, like posterboard or bed sheets. This is especially true for those created for a one-time event, like a march or parade. Besides size and color, these types of signs often use wordplay or extreme language and visuals to stand out and be provocative.
Sign Here: Vermont

Vermont is home to many unique signs that reflect the character, history, and culture of the state.

Agriculture and foodways are an important part of Vermont’s history. “Real Vermont Maple Syrup” signs direct you to our many sugarhouses and nowhere else will you find a sign for a “Creemee.”

One part of Vermont’s unique sign history is actually about the signs we don’t have. Many people who admire the rural beauty of Vermont today do not know that early in the 20th century billboards were a common sight along the state’s roads and highways. Starting in the 1930s, individuals and municipalities began limiting or banning billboards. They believed they needed to preserve Vermont’s inherent scenic beauty amid a booming tourism market, and billboards were officially banned by the state in 1968.

Many other familiar Vermont signs reflect the rural nature of the state. Camp sign posts lead travelers down to a lake. Homemade signs advertising anything from firewood to honey to small engine repair can be found on any road you take.