

# A Capacious Collection of Vintage Tin and Porcelain Advertising Signs.

This October, Michaan's Auctions has many exciting lots on offer, including the stunning painting by Roman artist Pietro Barucci, as discussed in our previous blog post. Today, we'd like to highlight an extensive collection of vintage tin and porcelain advertising signs, all from one consignor's collection. We have over 50 considerable sign lots on offer, from a **Standard Unsurpassed Gasoline Mickey Mouse Tin Sign** (\$2,000/4,000) to a **Spitting is Unlawful Vintage Porcelain Sign** (\$600/1,000), and even a **Wonder Bread Vintage Tin Advertising Sign** (\$200/400). All to be sold in our October Gallery Auction on Friday, October 18<sup>th</sup>, Michaan's will be offering signs with a vast



range of rarity, quality, and collector's value.

Advertising can mean anything from the attempts to persuade an audience to purchase a good or service, to building corporate brand identity, and even soliciting political votes. Advertising as an industry is still relatively new, with it gaining legitimacy in the 1920s. However,

advertising has always been an industry that is entirely dependent on changing business



demands, available media technology, and most importantly, cultural context.

## **History**

Pre-1920 advertisements relied heavily on newspapers, putting forth persuasive attempts along with dry descriptions of goods on hand with little to no frills and images. A disturbing, and unfortunately all too common, form of early advertising came in the way of notices of slave sales or appeals for the capture of

escaped, enslaved people. Surviving advertisements of this nature are now used as a research aid in examining slave-owners – and the general American population’s – perceptions of the people they held in bondage. These ads can also offer some insight into the enslaved population’s tactics of resistance and escape, and help researchers build a more complete truth of American life in the 1800s.

As the economy, societal attitudes, and arguably most importantly technology, evolved and grew, American advertising followed suit. Total advertising volume grew from \$200 million in 1880 to \$3 billion in 1920. The rapid growth of America’s advertising industry can be linked to the ‘second industrial revolution;’ by 1920, automobiles and telephones were fairly widespread and investment, employment, and productivity were flourishing, riding the

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economic coattails that the enslavement economy created in America. In the early 1920s, consumers dove head first into using the novel concept – credit – to buy more. There was an uptick in magazine circulation, as well as more media to advertise on, like movies and radio. Advertisements were now placed where most likely to attract buyer attention and began to target specific groups.

### **Tin vs. Porcelain**

Tin advertising signs had been around pre-1920, but they were expensive to produce. Tin signs are stamped sheets of tin that had to be hand painted, stenciled, or lithographed in order to create a design. Lithography allowed for eye-catching, colorful, and often photo-realistic designs to be (relatively) easily transferred onto tin. These colorful advertisements were a far cry from the bland newspaper blocks of days past, and encouraged competition between

manufacturers. Competing companies were constantly trying to one-up each other, and we start to see the emergence of brand identity. As manufacturing technology evolved and porcelain signs were introduced to the American market, tin signs became the cheaper advertising option. Figural motifs, logos, and mascots became a mainstay on tin and porcelain advertising signs, with Tuscarora and Standard Advertising Companies emerging as the top manufacturers of these signs. They are now some of the most sought-after and valuable



vintage signs for modern collectors.

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As 'le style moderne' (Art Deco) design period continued its development,



porcelain advertising signs overtook their tin counterparts in popularity. People preferred the stenciled, stylized look of porcelain signs and their resemblance to Japanese woodblock prints. These signs are made by fusing layers of powdered glass (porcelain) onto a heavy, rolled iron base. These bases could be die-cut to create unique and even figural shapes. Some were double sided, and could be hung from a bracket to be read by passerby going in any direction. In fact,

Michaan's has a few examples of double-sided porcelain signs on offer this month, like this **Blue Gillette Blades Vintage Porcelain Advertising Sign** (\$1,000/\$1,500). In their infancy, porcelain sign makers had to be 'imported from Europe,' until Tennessee Enamel in Nashville made so many porcelain signs for Coca-Cola, the public began to think the technique was purely American. It originated in Germany.

### **What makes them so valuable?**

Once ubiquitous, these tin and porcelain advertising signs are now a rare and prized collector's item, especially those made by the manufacturing giants Standard, Tuscarora, and Tennessee Enamel. The disappearance of these signs is in part due to trigger-happy marksmen who would use these signs for target practice, but the main culprit was World War II. In America's bid

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for supplies and war-time materials, many tin and porcelain signs were melted down for their base metals. Porcelain signs took more losses, because of the amount of iron they contained. While they made a comeback after the war, plastic and steel signs became leading sign-making materials, due to their cost-efficiency and weather resistance.

Now, what makes a vintage advertising sign worth \$2,000 versus \$400? It comes down to a few things: rarity, size, condition, and manufacturer. The most prized signs have rare designs, discarded logos of both current and extinct brands, are true relics of the past. Plus, size matters. Larger porcelain signs are usually less valuable as they are harder to display, and it could be argued that due to the intricate process it took to make these signs, smaller porcelain signs are a truer feat of skill and

less likely to survive the test of time. As for condition and manufacturer, the better the condition a vintage sign is in, the more valuable it is. The same goes for



manufacturer, a sign made by one of the top manufacturers is going to be more valuable for the same reason a Nike t-shirt is more expensive than a Hanes: brand name and quality.

The interesting history of tin and porcelain advertising signs makes it all the more exciting that Michaan's has such a large collection on offer this month. The

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rarity and quality of our offered lots is especially exciting, when one considers the context in which they exist today. Our October Gallery Auction is set to go live at 10am on Friday, October 18<sup>th</sup>. Michaan's Gallery Auction catalog will be available on October 3<sup>rd</sup>, and can be viewed on our website: [www.michaans.com](http://www.michaans.com), Live Auctioneers, and Michaan's Live. Join us day-of in our gallery or remotely via online, phone, or absentee bidding.



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