



# Saving Signs

Armed with hundreds of brushes and paint-filled Dixie cups, San Francisco's **Jeff Canham** is on a mission to preserve the endangered art of painting signs by hand.

## How did you end up becoming a sign painter?

Growing up in Oahu, I used to read *Surfer* magazine. I earned a B.F.A. in graphic design and got a job there. After five and a half years as the art director, I'd plateaued. A friend of mine was opening a surf shop in San Francisco. He needed to have a sign made for the store, and since he knew I was interested in typography, he invited me along to the New Bohemia Signs shop. I thought, "Wow, this is awesome." The work space was filled with paint, sawdust, and pictures of signs. I apprenticed there for five years. After that, I opened my own studio.

## How do you design on such a large scale?

I use a machine called an electro pounce for anything elaborate. You put pattern paper on a metal board and draw an outline in pencil. The current between the electro pounce needle and the sheet metal burns tiny holes in the paper that can be traced onto a sign surface. I transfer the pattern onto the painting surface using a chalk pad, sort of like a big powder puff, making adjustments as I paint and wipe away the excess chalk after the paint dries. Tattoo artists do something similar.

## What are the tools of your trade?

I use an oil-based enamel paint called 1 Shot because it's supposed to cover in one coat. It's an outdoor glossy paint that comes in peacock blue, sublime green, and vermilion. For indoor work, I sometimes use latex house paint because it dries faster and can be hurried along with a hair dryer.



I keep batches of leftover paint in Dixie cups with the mixing recipes written on them. Peel off the skin and you can use the old paint again!

## What about your brushes?

I probably have a hundred in my studio and more at home. I store them in transmission fluid because it won't allow the paint to dry. To keep your hand steady and out of the wet paint, I use something called a maulstick that comes apart into three pieces—nothing fancy. Typically, I wear a mask and gloves.

## Is it hard to do your work outside, with people watching?

It's funny. When you paint in public, you get used to the street theater of it. People want to talk to you. Once, I was painting a sign on the glass window of a store, and there was a middle-aged woman standing on the street who was convinced I was a mannequin. She brought her friend over to take a look and said to her, "I could've sworn he was real."

Check out Jeff's work in the documentary *Sign Painters* by Faythe Levine and Sam Macon: [signpaintermovie.blogspot.com](http://signpaintermovie.blogspot.com).

## EVERYWHERE THERE'S SIGN PAINTERS



### Woody Guthrie

► During his early days in California, Guthrie's skill with a paintbrush—not the guitar—paid the rent.



### Cassius Clay Sr.

► Muhammad Ali learned how to bust rhymes by cooking up ideas for his dad's sign painting business.



### James Rosenquist

► Former billboard painter Rosenquist's sign painting techniques helped make him a pop art legend.