

## **Advertising plates in sheet metal and vitreous enamel from history**

### **Today, valuable pieces of art and collectors' items**

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They decorated our facades and walls for almost half a century, at a time when advertising was still designed for eternity. Sheet metal and enamel advertising signs are now enjoying a real renaissance, no longer as advertising media, but as collector's items.

The temporary exhibition presents some 150 wonderful examples from the collection of Michael Müller from the Basel region. The objects on display cover the period from 1890 to 1970. Advertising signs have fascinated him since his childhood. Mr. Müller started collecting old advertising plaques at the age of 23. Today he has several hundred of these sought-after plaques. Over many years, he acquired important knowledge regarding advertising plaques. He is therefore a specialist in the field of compiling these objects.

Sheet metal and enamel signs have written a chapter in the history of advertising and convey some of the most exceptional concepts of international graphic design. The exhibition presents, among other things, the famous advertising creation dated 1926, attributable to Niklaus Stoecklin, graphic designer from Basel, for Wybert pastilles. We also find the most classic Swiss enamel plaque for Union lignite briquettes from 1948, created by Fritz Bühler and Ruodi Barth, scenographer at the Basel theater. As well as other works by renowned graphic designers, dating from the golden era of advertising plates.

The multi-colored enamel plaques punctuated the grayness of the industrial cities of those times like striking symbols, from 1890 until their functional decline in the 1950s. Advertising already covered various areas: lighting, fuels, coffee, body care, beer, alcohol, tobacco, chocolate, food, etc. We must name the white lady, from Persil, from Henkel, in the field of textile detergent advertising; she has written herself into history. You will learn more in the exhibition and form your own opinion about this unique advertising panel.

### **The enamelled panel**

The enamel plate consists of a sheet metal plate covered with a protective layer of vitreous enamel (molten glass). Different elaborate techniques are known for making advertising plaques. These techniques require both skill and artistic talent. Stencil work for reproducing text or figurative design is most often carried out using thin, easy-to-cut stencils made of flexible material. Brass, aluminum, zinc, tin and lead are used for this purpose. Plastic material will be added later to this list, as a constituent of solid and inexpensive stencils. Liquid enamel color is applied to the backing plate using a spray gun. The stencil always covers during this operation the representation which must be preserved. This is why it is necessary to use several stencils during this operation. This gives relief to the surface. This work is only carried out by hand and for plates decorated with simple patterns.

Screen printing, on the other hand, is used for detailed designs. The pattern that must be affixed to the advertising plaque is photographed, before being reproduced on a screen print, which is then covered by the enamel layer.

### **The enamelling**

The support materials for enamelling the plates consist of cast iron or iron sheets, prepared as plate blanks. Old cast iron plates are particularly characterized by their weight. Sheet iron has been used for enamelling advertising plaques since the 1890s.

The design of the blanks requires a certain skill and technique. The blank must first be cleaned of all grease and rust by being reddened before it can be used. The acid should cover the entire surface during the stripping process that follows. We thus obtain a sheet with a pure metallic surface, an essential condition for basic enamelling. The sheets are then rinsed for a long time before being neutralized in a soda bath. Enamel is obtained by melting different raw materials. The mass is then cooled in cold water, before being crushed and finally ground. The prepared blanks can now be coated with a thin layer of base enamel on their front and back. This has a different composition than the

covering enamel. The role of the base enamel targets both the constitution of a solid assembly between the iron and the enamel as well as that of an insulating layer between the base containing carbon and the covering enamel. We will later recognize the base enamel layer on the back of the enamelled plate. Its gray color on iron plates will be gray-black on steel sheets.

Each manufacturing company had secret recipes for enamel production. Different metal oxides were used in the enamel mixture of the colored cover layers to achieve the desired color effect. In order to protect the fragile glazed ceramic colors, the plates were covered with transparent enamel during the last firing. This resulted in a transparent shine, which was not necessary when making matte enamel. The plate manufacturer distinguishes different ways of applying enamelled layers: sprinkling, spraying, immersing. The average cooking time of the base enamel on the iron sheet is between 2 and 10 minutes. For cast iron, the process lasts almost 20 minutes. The plates are taken after the first firing to a special decoration workshop. This is where the flamboyant enamel of the writings and figurative decoration will be applied.

### **The history of enamelled plaques as advertising media**

Ludwig Stollwerck is considered the inventor of enamelled signs used for advertising, as they were known during their golden age between 1890 and 1960. Fascinated by the range of possibilities offered by a rot-proof, weather-resistant poster used for outdoor advertising, he entrusted the production of the first German advertising poster, in 1893, to Schulze & Wehrmann in Elberfeld. It was the first industrial enamel company for advertising signs in Germany.

Other major producers of consumer goods quickly recognized the effectiveness of new advertising media. Julius Maggi was another of these pioneers who used enamelled plaques as innovative advertising media. Several thousand editions of these steel plates were spread throughout the European market to promote its products.

This form of advertising was also used for company signs or price plaques. An accumulation of numerous enamelled plates was often found at the entrances to business houses, sometimes comprising several backyards. The popular voice called them "mute doormen" (Stummer Portier). The plaques indicated the names of the businesses present, as well as the floor and backyard numbers.

Companies developed marketing strategies specific to advertising plates for their products. The Swiss company Galactina (now Adapta/Hero), from Belp (BE), had an original idea. At the beginning of the 20th century, the children's food manufacturer had a porcelain coffee service made with several pieces bearing the image of its advertising baby. A midwife who managed to convince a young mother who had just given birth to feed her newborn in the future with Galactina porridge was offered part of her coffee service. This service, as well as its advertising medium, the enamelled plaque, are presented in this exhibition.

Also very widespread, weather-resistant enamelled plaques were also used for indicator signs, street signs or house numbers.

*The White Lady*, by Persil, created by Kurt Heiligenstaedt in 1922, certainly represents an icon among enamelled plaques. It is reaching the heights of popularity for plaque enthusiasts and is naturally present in this exhibition.

The Second World War sounded the death knell for the enamelled plate industry. More than 300 enamelling factories were located in Germany alone. Since the 1950s, enamelled plaques were almost entirely replaced by paper posters in the urban landscape. This is explained by the high production costs. But even more by the changing trends and the pace of innovations in the consumer market. Added to this were radio, television, and the ever-rapid change of products, their packaging, and their design, which contributed to the disappearance of enamel plates as a durable commercial medium.

### **The enamelled plaque advertising support**

According to advertising technology, an enamelled plaque is none other than a durable display which, to achieve the desired advertising goal, must be particularly striking and also skilfully pleasant. A successful plaque has the following characteristics: clear writing and illustrations and little text. It is often a short, concise slogan, sometimes just the name of the item being touted or that of the manufacturer.

The costs of manufacturing enamelled plaques as advertising media were very high for the time. This is why only major brands like Maggi, Dr Oetker, Persil, etc. could afford to use these plates. Simple written advertising panels were naturally less expensive to produce, but they could not compete with colored enamelled plaques, decorated with striking pictorial representations.

Around 1895, advertising was still taking its first steps in the German-speaking world in terms of its graphic evolution. The representations were limited to naturalistic reproductions of children, feminine beauties, and illustrations of the products being praised. These representations are often striking, with extraordinary accuracy in detail and finesse in their fidelity to their model. It was even partly possible to read the wording on the label.

Like the production process, the quality can vary from one enamelled plate model to another. Their profile can be flat, folded or rounded (arched), their edge folded or molded. Most enamelled signs were rectangular, as oval or round shaped signs were more difficult to make. This is why there is only a small percentage of panels of round, oval or unusual shape. An additional effect was sought by affixing a large number of enamelled plaques of advertising in commercial premises or in front of stores. The effect of the plates was thus mutually cancelled. This advertising absurdity was recognized on several occasions, but salesmen and store owners nevertheless added plates for reasons of prestige or to achieve a fixed turnover. Various administrative services or interest groups attempted to establish limitations through bans. The associations of advertising agencies intervened in return against these decisions. It was a constant back and forth. This is the reason why this mass advertisement was referred to during the first years of the 20th century as a Blechpest, literally a "sheet metal plague". Today, however, enamelled plaques in good condition are often rare and sought-after pieces.

The enamelled sign has many advantages which made it a popular advertising medium for a long time. First of all, it tolerated bad weather particularly well and lost neither shine nor color under the effect of UV rays. It was then scratch resistant, easy to maintain and required little maintenance. Likewise, its environmental sustainability and recycling capacity promoted its use in advertising as colorful and attractive support.

From the second half of the 19th century, the few major brands had set themselves the goal of develop, among consumers, a pronounced notion of brand awareness. Their loyalty to this concept was a guarantee of sustainability for most of the companies and products which have remained on the market until today. We can name Coca-Cola, Nestlé, Suchard or Maggi. Manufacturers therefore primarily wanted to widely establish their products and increase their notoriety. Advertising plaques were the instrument intended to achieve this goal.

### **Art and advertising**

At the beginning of the 20th century, while Blechpest was still rampant, many companies discovered new possibilities for promoting and distributing their products. More artistic and demanding, their signs and advertising posters become more attractive and original. A billboard with an interesting graphic design, for example bearing unusual motifs, was well received by the public. Sales figures for the product thus increased rapidly. More and more companies in Germany, Switzerland and Austria relied on eccentric and sophisticated advertising. Advertising agencies therefore most often entrust the design of their advertising plaques to renowned painters and graphic designers.

Niklaus Stoecklin and Herbert Leupin were among the best-known artistic poster illustrators in Switzerland. It is to the Basel graphic designer and painter Niklaus Stoecklin that we owe the creation of the century in terms of advertising plates. Dated 1926, this is the plate for Wybert/Gaba pastilles. He used his life during the writing Sütterlin. During the 1940s, Herbert Leupin designed the famous Pepita billboard, with the colorful parrot. The two enamelled plaques are presented in the exhibition.

The most famous work of Kurt Heiligenstaedt, a German artist, poster illustrator, advertising designer and caricaturist, is the poster for Parsley of the White Lady. Its characteristics are humorous drawings with an elegant touch. This advertising icon is not missing from our exhibition.

Depending on the period, the graphic application of patterns and writing was oriented towards artistic movements such as Art Nouveau, Bauhaus or Art Deco. At the same time, advertising had to be conspicuous. Large format panels, placed for example along railway lines, were often reduced to the essentials. The brand as well as the message conveyed by the product had to be quickly recognized and taken into account in passing.

### **The enthusiast and collector Michael Müller**

Michael Müller is not only a collector and lover of old advertising plaques, but also a recognized expert in this sector. He lives among his beloved plaques, which decorate his entire apartment. He only temporarily parted with his treasures for the duration of this temporary exhibition.

A major event, which took place when he was five years old, constitutes the foundation of his later passion for compilation. He accompanied his father when he played music in the small café in his native village, Waldsassen in Bavaria. The young boy was sitting there in leather pants and listening to the music. The atmosphere was relaxed and in one corner he saw a plaque depicting a smiling monk, with his tankard overflowing with frothy beer, with an inscription at its base: Mönchshof-Bräu. This advertising character for the Kulmbach brewery represents a part of his childhood for Michael Müller and conveys to him the feeling of an intact world.

During his apprenticeship as a building designer, his contact with old advertising plates became closer. The architect's office was located in the same building as a small grocery store. The young man found in the attic a large number of old advertising plaques which he acquired and which constitute the foundation of his large current collection. He always discovers new treasures at flea markets, through his peers, but also through contacts established with new media.

Today, it is still possible to arouse Mr. Müller's interest in an advertising plate if it concerns a particular field, a special design method, an interesting graphic designer or a specific story. However, he is still researching. Michael Müller is happy to evaluate advertising plaques and also to purchase them. Requests can be sent directly to [mijomueller@bluewin.ch](mailto:mijomueller@bluewin.ch). Who knows if unknown treasures aren't still sleeping in attics?

### **The enameled plaque as a collector's item**

Enamelled plaques are sought-after collector's items these days. Collectors have a particular interest in plates which, due to their method of production, have a convex shape. This underlines their three-dimensionality, itself highlighted by the colors applied one after the other during the different cooking processes. Other enamelled plates are flat or have a folded edge approximately one centimeter wide, which gives greater stability to large format plates.

The door plate constitutes a particular form of enamelled plate. It is often a small reproduction of a large plaque. It was designed to be placed on the front door or on the store counter, so to speak as a final reminder not to forget the product being praised when shopping. The collectible value of these miniatures has increased in recent years.

The value of an enamelled plaque depends on its manufacturing technique, its state of conservation, its degree of rarity, its age, its motif and the product being touted. Well-known names are still sought after today.

An important factor is certainly its state of conservation. An enamelled plaque in very good condition can reach a sale price of several thousand Swiss francs, while the same plaque in very poor condition will barely reach a value of fifty Swiss francs. The degrees of classification of the condition of an enamelled plate are as follows: perfect conservation, absence of screw holes or deterioration of the

edge, extensive damage on the edges or at the corners, small isolated damages on the plate, several damage to the plate, matte plate or faded colours, significant damage affecting the overall impression, plate requiring extensive restoration.

Premium plates are offered today by famous auction houses as works of art and sometimes fetch five-figure sales prices.