

Mike Facemire

Port Richey, Florida

Shop name: Pro Signs, a commercial sign shop, and Gold Leaf Letters, a wholesale supplier of gilded graphics **Shop size:** 3400 sq. ft. **Age:** 55 **Graphics equipment:** A 52 in. Cam Tech router, Roland CAMM-1 Pro CX 50-in. cutter, Gerber Graphix Advantage software and CorelDraw **Web site:** www.goldleafletters.com



I got started in the sign business in 1982. Computers were just coming on the scene, but I didn't get one until 1987. I count that as a blessing. I learned how to do layout and lettering traditionally, and I think that gives you an edge. You really had to learn how letters worked and how to space them. I think that develops your eye in a way that the computer doesn't.

Like many starting out in the business, I wanted to do the high-quality work. A lot of sign people talk about that, but not many really succeed. In 1985, I took Dusty Yaxley's

carving class, and that turned me on to creating and marketing high-quality signs.

I have to get on the bandwagon of sign people who praise the late Mike Stevens [author of *Mastering Layout*]. I attended a couple of his seminars about this same time, and he really changed the channel for me. Mike gives you a roadmap that lets you take just about any layout situation you've got and come out with something clean and effective.

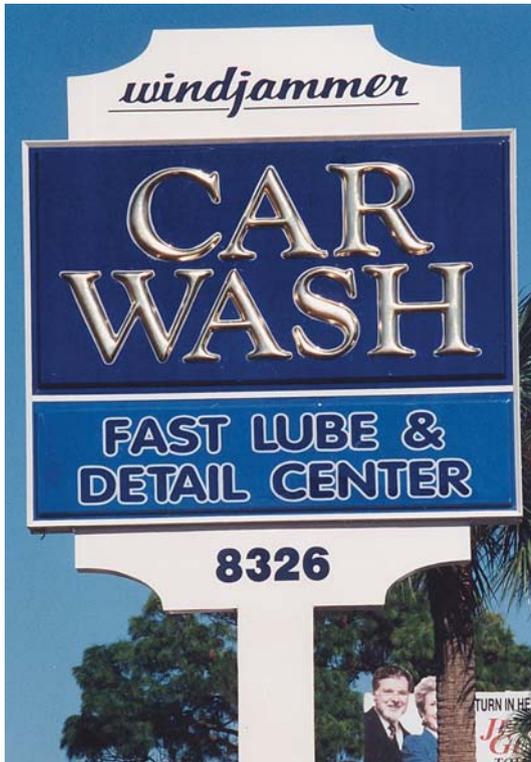
Then in the November/December 1987 issue, *SignCraft* published John Hannukaine's article, *Making the classic gilded wood letter*. John described in perfect detail how to make rounded-over, gilded wood letters. I discovered that the round-faced letter is the most beautiful display of gold leaf that there is.



Delectables is black 12-in. custom lettering, and *Fine Catering* is 6-in. Century Schoolbook Condensed lettering from Gemini [Gemini Incorporated, 800-538-8377, www.signletters.com]. The plate is 32-in. in diameter and the utensils are 4 ft. tall.



The graphics are all the same size as the sign on their storefront, but *Delectables* is gilded, too. This was an existing 5-by-10-ft. pylon sign, and Mike used polycarbonate for the faces.



8-by-10-ft. formed faces with 22-in. gilded main copy.

The rounded surface gives a constant transition of highlight and shadows. There's no other look quite like it.

I made letters out of wood for a while, then high-density urethane board. Making letters is time-consuming. You can expect to spend 30 minutes per letter, hand-rounding the corners. You also need a perfectly smooth surface to gild with the best results.

At a Letterheads meet, Gary Anderson [Bloomington Design, Bloomington, Indiana] told me about gilding Gemini's [Gemini Incorporated, 800-538-8377, www.signletters.com] formed plastic letters. They looked great, and I started doing them. I wanted to be able to form custom lettering and logos, so that led me to setting up to form my own graphics in plastic.

In 1999, I started doing some work for another shop. Steve Hart, my production manager, and I realized there might be a market for this work as a wholesale service to other sign shops, and Gold Leaf Letters [877-233-4587, www.goldleafletters.com] was born. We built a lot of our own equipment and developed a system for doing the letters efficiently.

The response has been good. We work for sign shops all over the country. Interestingly, I assumed that the many sign makers I knew who were doing rounded, gilded graphics in-



54-in.-by-12-ft. sign with polycarbonate background; *Tarpon Woods* is custom fabricated and *Country Club* is 6-in. Times letters from Gemini.



15-in. gilded letters on black granite tile. Diamond graphic is 4-by-6-ft., custom fabricated.

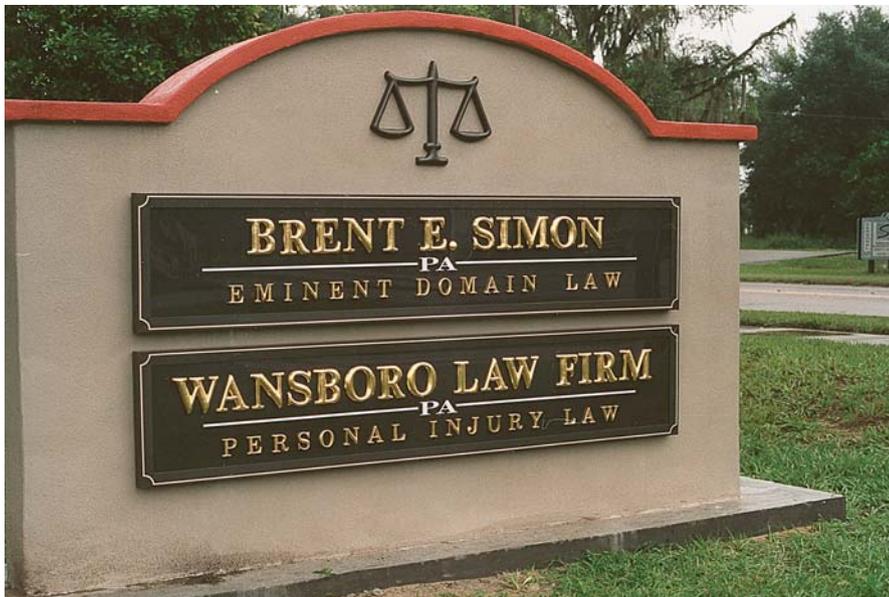


RH&D is 18-in.-tall gilded formed letters from Gemini; 22-in.-tall horse head was hand carved then vacuum formed.

“Gold has such a powerful, natural appeal to our eye. It attracts the eye—especially on rounded letters.”



Main copy is 6-in. letters from Gemini; other copy is SignGold [SignGold Corporation, 845-692-6565, www.signgold.com]. “I’ve had a lot of comments on this sign,” says Mike. “That window has a very dark tint film, and it really makes the gold look great.”



4- and 2-in. gilded letters on 1-by-4-ft. panels

house would not be potential customers. As it turns out, many of them have become our best customers. They know the time it takes, and prefer to outsource. It frees them up to design and sell more projects.

We encourage people to design Gemini letters into their projects if possible. It keeps

costs down and works very well. Gemini has plenty of styles and sizes. But some jobs require custom letters and logos, so customers send us a digital file. We form the graphics, gild them, and ship them back with patterns, ready to install.

It’s gaining momentum each year. For many shops, it’s just a matter of selling that first job. Once people can see it, it’s much easier to sell. That’s because gold has such a powerful, natural appeal to our eye. It attracts the eye—especially on rounded letters. Attracting the eye is really the first thing a sign must do.

So today, we’re two businesses under one roof. Pro Signs is a commercial sign shop. Gold Leaf Letters is a wholesaler that provides letters to sign shops. One of my goals for Pro Signs is to continue to refine our market to the type of work we enjoy doing best.

We’ve got a staff of ten. Steve has been a real asset to both businesses over the years. Peggy, my wife, helps out with the book-keeping and marketing.

Our most recent addition has been the Cam Tech [Cam Tech Industries, 800-514-8188, www.camtech.ca] router. It’s proving to be a great tool for us. We use it mostly to make the graphics over which we form the plastic.

We use a lot of gold leaf, as you might imagine. Sepp Leaf [Sepp Leaf Products, 800-971-7377, www.seppleaf.com] is our primary supplier. I’d say 95 percent is 23k gold—we do an occasional job in white gold, copper or bronze.

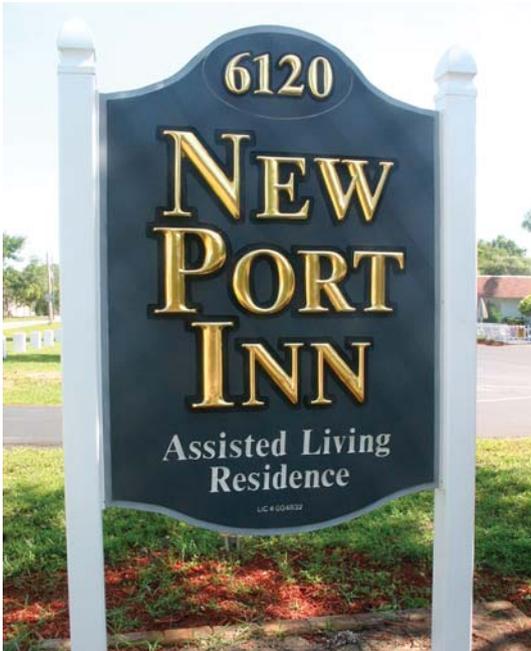
We don’t generally clear coat the graphics unless they’ll be used where they will be touched. Clear slightly diminishes the brilliance of the gold, and it limits the durability of the sign to the lifespan of the clear. Uncoated, gold leaf will last 20 to 30 years. It’s one of the most durable finishes known to man.

There’s a lot to learn in the sign business, and I don’t think sign people often realize the time we invest in learning, testing and experimenting. There’s a lot to know about the materials, the software, the equipment. You’ve got to plan on that time to educate yourself, and it really never stops. There are always new things to learn. •SC

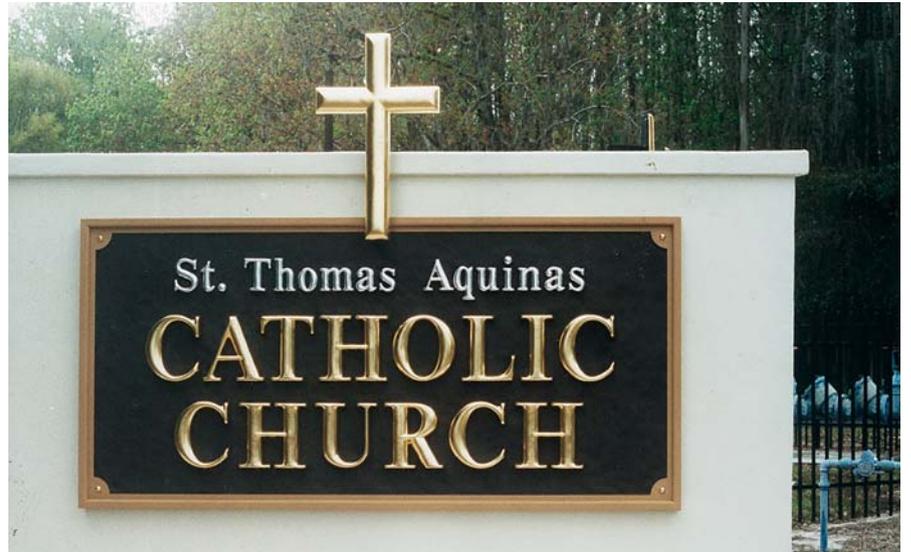
—From an interview with Tom McIltrout



The main copy is 24-in. Times letters from Gemini, with 12-in. Times Extended for *The Leader*. . . The list across the bottom is 8-in. lettering. Overall, the sign is 6-by-64-ft, with a background of PVC sheet painted with automotive paint. "That's the biggest single gold leaf letter sign we've done," says Mike.



6-by-4-ft. high-density urethane board panel with gilded Gemini letters.



4-by-8-ft. sign with gilded Gemini letters. The cross was custom fabricated.



6- and 3-in. gilded lettering on a 42-by-72-in. panel