

ADDS A NEW
DELIGHT TO LIFE.



Turnwright's
TOFFEE
DELIGHT

PRESERVING TRADITIONAL AND BESPOKE SIGNWRITING

in Australia

An International Specialised Skills Institute Fellowship.

DAVID STEPHENSON

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i. Executive Summary

Over the years sign writing has been revolutionised with no turning point as big as when the vinyl plotter was released in the 1980's, closely followed by the printer. For many signwriters this spelled the end of using a brush as many never picked one up again and probably never imagined that nearly forty years later sign writers would still be oiling their squirrel fur brushes and laying wafer thin sheets of gold onto glass.¹

Fortunately the techniques and skills that were thought to be unnecessary by some, were treasured by others and passed down to a new generation of signwriter who uses new technology to assist in the design and creation of a sign which is still painted and gilded in a very traditional way. One of these sign writers is David A Smith, a traditional ornamental glass artist and signwriter based in Devon, England, who has nurtured a reputation for high quality, intricate and bespoke signs the likes of which are rarely seen in Australia.²

This Fellowship allowed David (the 'Fellow') to travel to England to undertake a workshop with David A Smith in which he created a gilded glass signs. During the workshop the Fellow used skills he already possessed as a basis to then focus on the techniques that were new to him. These included engraving and polishing the glass using stone wheels and different methods and designs for combining gold leaf and paint. An area that the Fellow found particularly interesting was the way in which David A Smith uses new technology to bring a precision and ease to the process that was not there in Victorian times and is not obvious in his finished

products. This knowledge comes from many years of David A Smith learning and studying new methods and techniques used by signwriters and artists alike, his driving desire to pass this knowledge on ensures that these techniques will still be used and known in future generations and helps to ensure that gilded glass signs do not become part of a forgotten trade.

1 *Sign Painters*, Faythe Levine and Sam Macon, USA, 2013

2 *David A Smith* [Website] 2017, <http://davidadriansmith.com/> (accessed 20 January 2017)

1. About the Fellow

Name: David Stephenson

Qualifications:

- » Certificate 3 in Sign Manufacturing (Victoria University), 2006 – 2009
- » Sign Manufacturing Apprenticeship, 2006 - 2010

Fellow's Background:

The Fellow's interest in Hot Rods originally sparked his desire to learn to pinstripe and then led to work experience at school with a local airbrush artist and pinstriper who recommended that the Fellow complete an apprenticeship to get into the industry. Once the Fellow finished school he enrolled in a sign manufacturing apprenticeship which he found gave him practical trade skills.

After working in Melbourne and locally in signwriting companies for several years the Fellow decided to start his own business so that he could focus on the hand painted and gilding jobs which he enjoyed. These were jobs which the previous companies he had worked for had not undertaken due to the level of expertise needed and being under pressure to finish time critical jobs.

The Fellow has now completed over thirty traditional gilding on glass projects as well as gold leaf honor boards and signs. More recently the Fellow has been able to indulge in his passion for antique motorcycles, completing many jobs that involved restoring these motorcycle tanks and reproducing the original hand painted and at times silver leaved names on the side.

2. Fellowship Background

The aim of the Fellowship was for the Fellow to attend a Gold Leaf workshop by David A Smith, who is a traditional ornamental glass artist and sign writer based in Devon, England. David has spent years learning from older masters and firmly believes that the knowledge that they shared with him must be shared with others, and this is what drives his workshops. He has cultivated in recent years a world-renowned reputation for high quality and detailed designs and gilded -reverse glass signs. David has undertaken commissions for the likes of Jameson Whiskey in Dublin, Sony Music in New York, Disney Florida, the V&A Museum London, Facebook, John Mayer, Kings of Leon and Tom Hanks.

Undertaking this course has furthered the Fellow's techniques of reverse glass decoration and ornate gilding, developing his skill set and enhancing the quality of jobs available to him in Australia and abroad. It has also linked him into an international network of signwriters working to preserve and further this craft in many countries around the world. This link will prove to be invaluable as the network and information sharing grows. As these are skills no longer taught at trade schools in Australia if the information is not passed down and/or acquired abroad, as the Fellow has, Australia will continue to fall behind which will result in the country relying on international signwriters for this type of work. Learning and furthering the skills and knowledge now will benefit younger signwriters in particular and help to keep traditional signwriting here in Australia.

Due to the physicality of painting with a brush the Fellow practiced hand brushed work well in advance of his applied Fellowship travel, thus preparing himself for the intensive course he undertook in the UK. Despite his decade of experience this practice was still necessary for the long days involved in the course, which relied heavily on holding and painting with brushes. The Gold Leaf course with David A

Smith provided practical hands on insight and technique whilst visits to well known signs and museums provided a visual experience. Some highlights included the Royal Mews, the Princess Louise pub, Ginstitute, Westminster Abbey, the Sammy Millar Museum and the London Transport Museum. These visits plus discovering inner London and the many examples of traditional signage helped to immerse him in the rich history of signwriting and to develop a visual diary featuring photos of inspirational pieces. These could be design ideas, finished effects, colour choices, or layouts and will be invaluable to the visual experience and knowledge gained.

3. Australian Situation

Signwriting in Australia flourished in the Victorian era, a time when hand painted and gilded shop fascias and windows were common. More recently our sign industry has turned to vinyl lettering and digital printing as an easier and cost-effective method of producing signs. This has led to a decline in the number of signwriters who still possess the skill and knowledge to produce traditional signs and work successfully with gold leaf. These skills are no longer taught at trade school in Australia, and must now be passed down from an older generation.

Luckily the Fellow was in the last year who were taught traditional signwriting skills and gilding on glass at trade school. This sparked his passion and encouraged him to seek further mentoring from some traditional signwriters in Australia and travel to the UK for the more advanced skills that can only be found overseas.

Although these skilled signwriters have diminished in number the importance of the work has not wavered as people look for a bespoke, high quality and long lasting option for their signage needs. Victorian and Deco buildings often look for gilded numbers or names to restore the originality of the era in which they were built, an example being the Fitzroy Town Hall Hotel whose gilded name above their entrance uses gold and silver leaf and mother of pearl. Gilded shop windows on these buildings are also popular and are used commonly by barbers, funeral parlors, tattooists, tailors, shoe makers, law firms and art galleries. One such example is Adriano Carbone a master tailor whose shop is situated in the prestigious heritage Block Arcade in Melbourne. Another common example of gilding that can be found in every town are Honor Boards, which hang in churches, schools, clubs and societies and are generally updated every year or so. There is also a need for the restoration of signs, gilded glass, gold leaf, industrial printers and machinery whose pinstripes have long faded as well as antique cars and motorcycles as they are restored.

4. Skills Enhancement and Knowledge

The Fellow studied and developed the technique of reverse glass decoration and ornate gilding to create, restore and preserve traditional and heritage signs around Australia. Specifically, he has learned the lost art of glass engraving and polishing, which is the foundation of Victorian glass signs. He was also able to enhance his own gilding on glass skills and learn the traditional techniques for combining silver, gold and paint on reverse engraved glass.

Whilst the Fellow was skilled in many areas such as gilding on glass the specific techniques and processes involved in this style of advanced signwriting are not available to be learned here in Australia. In order to become a serious contributor, mentor and leader in heritage signwriting here in Australia, the Fellow identified David A Smith as a world class leader in gilded Victorian signage and as someone willing to teach and pass these skills on.

During the Gold Leaf workshop undertaken with David A Smith, the following techniques were specifically taught:

- » Water Gilding (traditional gilding tip and cushion method, Smith tip method and various other application techniques)
- » Oil Gilding
- » Blending of gradients of gold leaf
- » Signwriting
- » Screen printing
- » Wheel cutting and polishing (brilliant cutting)
- » Abalone inlay (mother-of-pearl)
- » Shading of letters
- » Colour combinations
- » Incised carved lettering behind glass
- » Marbling and finger blending
- » Acid etching
- » Glass edge scalloping
- » Glue chipping
- » Paint silvered background
- » Brush blending.

Each of the skills and techniques taught during the course are discussed in more detail in the following 'International Experience and Discovery' section.

5. International Experience and Discovery

David A Smith's Gold Leaf Course was intensive and the skills developed saw me focus on the creation of two very different and unique signs which both drew on techniques that I was aware of but had not had the opportunity to learn and apply in Australia; skills that are increasingly rare here.

One major discovery was the way in which David A Smith uses modern techniques and technology such as computers to design his layouts and then transfer these to a screen to print as many of the same design as he needs later. This method also produces fine detail that would not usually be achievable using old techniques allowing the designs to be intricate and highly detailed. He also used a plotter to cut vinyl masks for the acid etch on the first piece and then again cut masks for the sandblasting and glue chipping process in the second piece produced which was a Whiskey, glue chipped mirror.

Using modern technology in this way was not something that the Fellow had ever seen before and he was particularly interested in the layout design method as a way of creating intricate detail. David A Smith then transfers this design onto a screen used for screen printing and then prints it onto the glass thusly allowing the detail that was achieved in the computer design to be transferred exactly onto the glass.



Image 1: Screen printing



Image 2: Finished screen prints



Image 3: Stone cutting wheels

David A Smith uses an element called a Pontie cut in almost every piece he produces which is a circular shape that he engraves using a stone wheel on the reverse side of the glass. This is then polished and twelve carat gold is applied to create a mirrored sphere when viewed from the front. Although this was the only wheel cut piece in the design, the Fellow was able to practice and learn different types of cut and polishes whilst in the studio.



Image 4: Finished Pontie cut example

The next step that was new to the Fellow was the acid etching. This involved using hydrofluoric acid and mica to create a thick paste which when applied to the glass and left for thirty minutes removed a layer of glass leaving a clear but textured surface. This effect is clearly evident in the bottom half of the 'Toffee De-Light' word and the 'T' in the crest on the Turnwright's sign.

Twelve carat (white gold), eighteen carat (green gold) and twenty three carat standard gold were then applied in the areas needed. This application of the gold leaf was something that the Fellow was already familiar with but would usually back the gold up with drop black paint brushed on. Instead David A Smith reapplied the screen on the back of the gold leaf to fulfill the job of the drop black and speed the process up considerably.

David A Smith has developed a Smith Tip which enables the signwriter to transfer a full sheet of gold leaf to the glass with ease without significant loss of gold which is the major problem with traditional tips. Post participation in the course the Fellow was able to purchase one of these to bring home for future jobs and demonstrations.



Image 5: Gold leaf transferred with the Smith Tip

Many of the next processes were ones that the Fellow already used, however he had not seen the pearl inlay applied in person having only seen this element in old signage. The pearl inlay comes in thin sheets from Australia and New Zealand and is essentially just glued into place and backed with enamel paint.



Image 6: Sheets of Pearl Inlay



Image 7: Example of Pearl Inlay in a finished piece

David A Smith draws on the talents of other trades to assist him when producing a sign, using a screenprinter to create the screen and a CNC router to cut the incised carved lettering which is then gilded and placed behind the glass to create a depth and prism effect to the lettering.

Placing this behind the glass is one of the final steps in the overall construction of the sign.



Image 8: Gold Leafed incised carved lettering

The second piece, the Whiskey sign, again used knowledge the Fellow already possessed, but it also included new techniques that were unfamiliar to him. One such technique was the use of the 'poor man's beveller' a tool which chips the edge of the glass to create a beveled edge. A vinyl mask is then applied to the

reverse of the sign before using animal hide glue on areas of unmasked glass. The glue once heated to 180 degrees is applied smooth and then left for twelve hours to harden. As it hardens it shrinks, taking chips of glass off the pane, once this process is complete a unique random feathered effect is left which is then finished off with the application of antique mirror paint.



Image 9: Poor Man's Beveller



Image 10: Animal Hide glue applied to glass



Image 11: Whiskey Sign after the animal glue is removed



Image 12: Completed Turnwright's Sign (photo courtesy of Kate Larsen)



Image 13: Completed Whiskey Sign (photo courtesy of Kate Larsen)

After completing the workshop the Fellow spent the remaining time studying the signs and gilding in and around London as well as visiting many museums which housed great examples of pinstriping and signage on buses, motorcycles and carriages. These experiences were valuable to the Fellow as he was able to document individual examples of gold leafed signage and hand painted signs. Although some of these can be found online or in books, it can be difficult to find and quite often the images don't show the details that are important to a signwriter; rather just the overall aesthetic of the particular piece. Just walking around inner London provided a unique visual diary which could not be obtained in any other way.

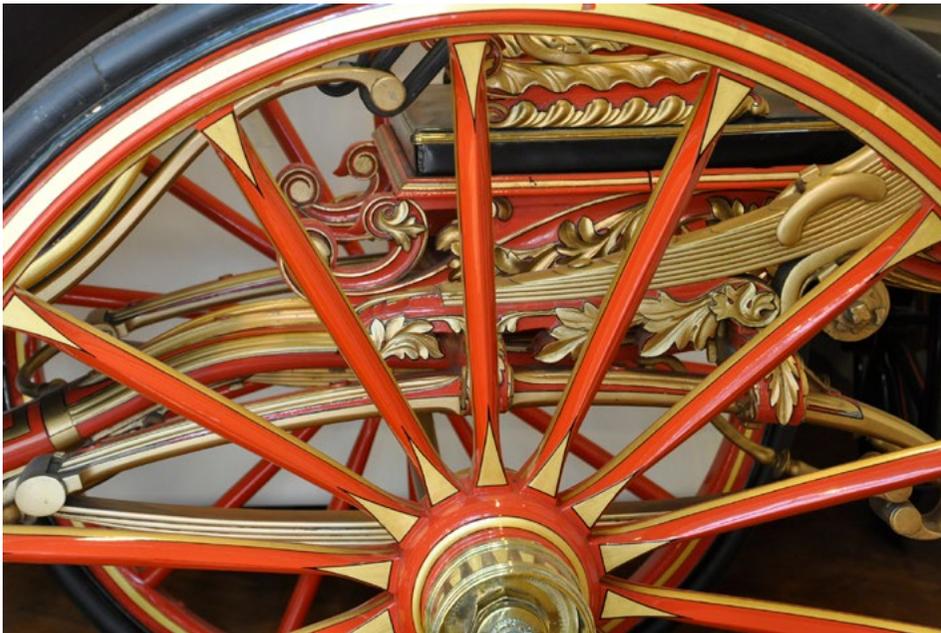




Images 14 - 17: Examples from the Fellow's Visual Diary

The Royal Mews houses twelve of the Royal Carriages which feature pinstriping, gilded decoration and pictorial artwork. The Carriages date from the eighteenth century and most notably include the 1902 State Landau built by the firm Hoopers for King Edward VII and recently used for the royal wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton and the Gold State Coach used at every coronation. The newest coach on display is the Diamond Jubilee State Coach built in Australia by W.J. Frecklington in 2012 for the Diamond Jubilee. This is only the second coach to be built for the Royal Household in over a century.

<https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/visit/royalmews/what-to-see-and-do/coaches-and-livery>





Images 18 – 21: Royal Mews' carriages

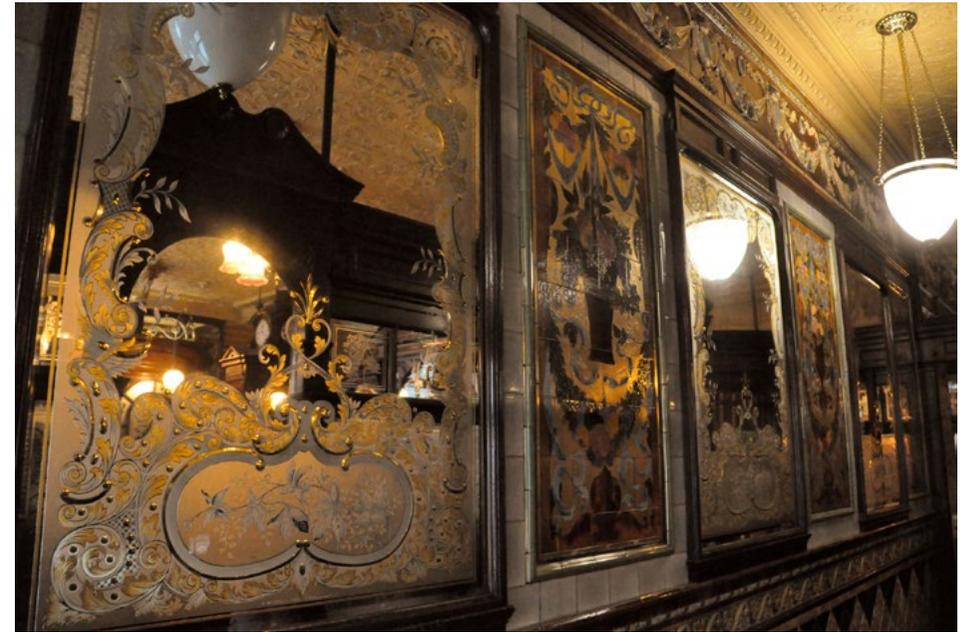
The London Transport Museum follows the history of public transport in London for the last 200 years, the collection originally began when the London General Omnibus Company decided to preserve two Victorian Horse Buses and an early Motorbus. It was these early examples of transport that interested the Fellow as they are covered in hand painted signwriting and pinstripping.

<https://www.ltmuseum.co.uk/about-us>



Images 22 and 23: London Transport Museum

The Princess Louise Pub was a recommended visit by David A Smith, it contains an impressive array of Victorian reverse gilded mirrors and etched glass. It is said to house one of the finest examples of a traditional Victorian interior and dates from 1891. It was remarkable to see such an ornate interior so well preserved in its original condition and this gave the Fellow an immersive experience which he could directly link to the work he had completed on the Gold Leaf course, now knowing the technique behind the etching and particular gilding.



Images 24 and 25: Princess Louise Pub

6. Knowledge Transfer, Application and Dissemination

The Fellow ran several signwriting and pinstriping workshops as part of a workshop program held by a local art gallery before he left for his Fellowship travels. These were focused on signwriting drop shadow letters and basic pinstriping, they gave him some insight into the practicalities of holding workshops and the knowledge that needs to be transferred. Since returning his focus has been to purchase and gather the equipment required to produce signs that emulate the style and techniques that David A Smith is internationally renowned for. These items include a premade screen printing screen with the particular design already applied and also source many of the materials needed such as animal glue for the glue chipping, a 'poor man's' glass beveller and mother of pearl inlay sheets. Having these materials and equipment will be of great benefit to the Fellow not only in his business but also when sharing his newly acquired knowledge with peers and members of the community.

Through his experience during the Gold Leaf workshop and conversations with David A Smith, the Fellow knows that students often have no experience in the field and in some cases David A Smith found some could not speak English. The Fellow now recognises that smaller classes offer a better and focused learning environment allowing time for students whose knowledge in sign writing is varying, to achieve better outcomes and learning amongst participants. There are also practicalities of space and equipment to be factored in and certainly working in David A Smith's own studio was of benefit to the Fellow as he saw that students are surrounded by his inspirational work with the ability to see exactly how he works, sketches and his source material.

The Fellow has been practicing the new skills he learned whilst overseas and has been purchasing the equipment needed. This is assisting him to refine what he learned so that he can easily transfer skills and knowledge in workshops in 2018 and beyond. The Fellow hopes to provide signwriting apprentices and signwriters with a space to learn the traditional techniques to members of an industry that has moved towards vinyl and modern signage. The workshops the Fellow intends delivering would cover various areas such as pinstriping, signwriting with a brush, gilding and then advanced sessions combining all of these techniques.

Although the workshops will transfer skills, the Fellow now has the ability to produce signs that he previously could not, opening up new and exciting commissions in the future and growing his business to offer a much broader range of signage solutions than many other sign companies. The David A Smith course, meeting other students overseas and seeing traditional heritage items in-situ overseas has reinvigorated the Fellow's passion for his own art-based work, inspiring him to continue pursuing that side of his career whilst also supporting others wishing to conserve traditional skills in Australia.

7. Appendix

International Experience - Workshop with David A Smith, Torquay, England

International Experience - Visit to the Royal Mews, Royal Mews, London (Home to the ornately gilded and pinstriped Royal coaches)

International Experience - London Transport Museum

International Experience - Sammy Millar Museum, Bournemouth

International Experience - Princess Louise Pub, Holborn, London (Original Victorian Interior)

8. References

Sign Painters, dir. Faythe Levine and Sam Macon, USA, 2013

David A Smith [Website] 2017, <http://davidadriansmith.com/> (accessed 20 January 2017)

Princess Louise Pub [Website] 2017, <http://princesslouisepub.co.uk/> (accessed 28 April 2017)

9. Acknowledgements

David Stephenson would like to thank the following organisations and individuals that gave generously of their time and their expertise to assist, advise and guide him throughout the Fellowship program.

Awarding Body – International Specialised Skills Institute (ISS Institute)

The ISS Institute exists to foster an aspirational, skilled and smart Australia by cultivating the mastery and knowledge of talented Australians through international research Fellowships.

The International Specialised Skills Institute (ISS Institute) is proud of its heritage. The organisation was founded over 25 years ago by Sir James Gobbo AC CVO QC, former Governor of Victoria, to encourage investment in the development of Australia's specialised skills. Its international Fellowship program supports many Australians and international leaders across a broad cross-section of industries to undertake applied research that will benefit economic development through vocational training, industry innovation and advancement. To date, over 350 Australian and international Fellows have undertaken Fellowships facilitated through ISS Institute. The program encourages mutual and shared learning, leadership and communities of practice.

At the heart of the ISS Institute are our individual Fellows. Under the International Applied Research Fellowship Program the Fellows travel overseas and upon their return, they are required to pass on what they have learnt by:

- » Preparing a detailed report for distribution to government departments, industry and educational institutions
- » Recommending improvements to accredited educational courses
- » Delivering training activities including workshops, conferences and forums.

The organisation plays a pivotal role in creating value and opportunity, encouraging new thinking and early adoption of ideas and practice. By working with others, ISS Institute invests in individuals who wish to create an aspirational, skilled and smart Australia through innovation, mastery and knowledge cultivation.

For further information on ISS Institute Fellows, refer to www.issinstitute.org.au

Fellowship Sponsor - The George Alexander Foundation

The Fellow would like to thank the George Alexander Foundation for providing funding support to the ISS Institute and for this Fellowship.

In 1972, George Alexander AM (1910 - 2008) set up an independent philanthropic foundation as a way of sharing his wealth and giving back to the community. Today, the main focus of The George Alexander Foundation is access to education for promising young people, particularly students with financial need and those from rural and remote areas.

The George Alexander Foundation (GAF) Scholarship Programs form the core of the foundation's work, operating in partnership with major tertiary institutions, while our Fellowships and other Education grants provide a variety of other unique and challenging educational experiences. George Alexander believed in the notion of 'planting seeds and hoping they grow into pretty big trees'. The programs supported by the Foundation endeavour to support this ideal and as GAF students graduate and go on to contribute to the community, George's legacy and spirit lives on through their achievements.

George Alexander came to Australia as a child migrant, and went on to become a mechanic, an entrepreneur and a businessman and later, a generous philanthropist, who held that you do not own the possessions you have, 'you're just minding them'. This philosophy guided him to give during his lifetime and to hope that through his example, he might inspire others to do the same.



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