Georges Claude, Neon’s Founder

A few years ago I had an opportunity to spend some time with the Posner Collection in the History Center’s archives. The vast collection, donated by Henry Posner, Jr., includes many images from his family’s companies: AMG Sign, McBride Sign, and Pittsburgh Outdoor Advertising. Within the documents, photographs, and technical volumes related to our region’s sign industry one publication stood apart from the rest: a catalog titled Claude-Paz et Silva, a sales publication from Georges Claude’s neon company originating in Paris, France, dating from the early 1930s. As a sign lover and collector of related material, I was amazed to come across this catalog, and in nearly original condition.

Georges Claude first exhibited neon at the 1910 Paris Exposition. He patented his invention on January 19, 1915 (U.S. patent #1,125,476). It would be another eight years before neon appeared in the United States in the form of two Packard signs purchased by Earl C. Anthony in Los Angeles. (In the spirit of one-innovation-begets-another, Anthony is a legend unto himself in California’s automobile and broadcasting history.) Afterward Claude sought to franchise his invention in the U.S. but with mixed results.1

Bound in a plain brown wrapper with embossed title and address, the catalog is both practical and understated in outward appearance. As a source of information, the benefit inside is entirely visual with only a single typewritten line below each image to identify street address and city. The images are original glossy photographs shot in the documentary style of neon lit at twilight and night, primarily in Paris. Tipped-in (mounted), the prints give the publication a handmade appeal and offer a world both exotic and vibrant to sign makers and their potential clients. Neon adorns all manner of commercial façades including theatres, restaurants, cafes, and of course, car dealerships. The sum total is an object of

Historic Signs

By Charles Biddle

The Posner collection also contains images from Pittsburgh’s early neon displays, including Iron City Beer, Gulf Oil, and Clark Candies. All L&A Posner collection.
Only a single typed line of text appears beneath each mounted photograph in the catalog.

beauty and the promise of an invention’s power to transform the commercial environment.

One can draw a straight line from the Posner Collection’s original Claude catalog to neon’s effect in our city and surrounding areas. Within the collection’s three boxes are photographs of neon displays for Iron City Beer, Gulf Oil, and Clark Candies as well as more examples familiar to anyone who grew up or lived in this region from the 1930s to the 1970s. For those new to or visiting Pittsburgh, it is a glimpse into what and who powered the region—illustrated in glass tubes and fabricated steel. Great imagination and skilled manufacturing are on display in abundance. Countless small and large businesses chose to embrace the medium as an effective invitation to use their products or services. The 1939 Pittsburgh phone directory lists no fewer than 70 sign vendors with many offering neon as an option.

As we experience present-day street life, evidence of interest in neon signs continues to appear in new establishments—Double-Wide Grill, Southside Works, Seviche, and Dinette—along with the restoration of beauties from the past like The Modern Cafe, Kelly’s, Klein’s at the History Center, and The Harris Theater. I certainly hope the trend continues and the result is a vitality and diversity of expression on our region’s streets.

Growing up over my parents’ restaurant in the 1960s, I had no idea who Georges Claude was, how he arrived at his invention, or where neon came from. Our neon sign was a part of everyday life and an emblem of a young couple’s progressive attitude and willingness to pursue their dream.

As it is with the human-made world of then and now, we think of our own goals and how best to achieve them with the tools available to us. We tend to take for granted that in another time a particular product or service was not available until someone created it.

Ephemera such as the Claude Neon catalog and the Posner Collection afford the opportunity to appreciate and understand how one fabled invention, commonly thought of as quintessentially American, came to be.

Charles Biddle is an artist/photographer and a native of Western Pennsylvania. He loved the neon sign at his family’s Gondolier restaurant in West Elizabeth but has never found a photo of it.