What makes a sign “historic”? Is it the sign’s age? Its design? The materials or techniques that made the design possible? The improbability of a sign’s survival due to environmental or economic conditions? Is it the message conveyed in a specific time, or the cumulative record of patronage and service with a sign as witness? Within our region, examples of sign making over a number of decades serve to meet one or more of these benchmarks. One of the earliest existing signs I’ve found in the city hangs over the street entrance of Hunt Stained Glass Studios at 1756 West Carson Street. I’ve driven by it over the years, finally making an image for the first time for this column.

Since 1951, the sign has advertised the Hunt’s stained glass studios. Prior to Hunt’s move to the building, the same sign served as the roadside invitation to Wittman’s Garage, which appears as early as 1930 in the Pittsburgh City Guide. The age of the former repair shop and the details, such as the wear on the sign’s porcelain enamel surface, the bulb perimeter (popular before the widespread use of neon), and the decorative end piece of the support bar suggest many years of service in its original version.

While the discovery of a sign such as this is enough of an unlikely occurrence, it’s a look inside Hunt Studios that continues to reward curiosity. The history of the studio spans over 100 years. Founded by Henry Hunt, the business has been sustained by a varied group of subsequent owners and designers all dedicated to a beautiful product.

What I love about Hunt Studios is the degree of sign and symbol employed, not only on the building but within the prolific amount of work produced for places of worship, residences, and businesses spanning both time and geography. St. Thomas More Church in Bethel Park, Glenshaw’s St. Bonaventure Church, Tree of Life Synagogue in Squirrel Hill, Hope Lutheran Church in Forest Hills, and the restoration of downtown Pittsburgh’s Union Trust Building dome are but a few of the regional large-scale commissions from the past five decades. A chapel at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri; a residence chapel in Indianapolis, Indiana; and St. Paul Lutheran Church in Warren, Ohio, are works that can be found in other parts of the country.

On a recent visit I spent some time with Nicholas Parrendo, who has been with Hunt Studios as a designer since 1950 and owner since 1987. At 80 years of age, Mr. Parrendo is...
the business’ living history and lifeblood. During my informal tour I was treated to the story of how the business came to be. Henry Hunt learned the craft from his father in London and opened his shop in Pittsburgh in the early 1900s. Sons George and James took over in 1943. J.R. Lally owned the business from 1966 to 1987, when Mr. Parrendo took the risk of mortgaging his house to become the new owner. 1 Through several rooms, photographs of the Hunt family, the Parrendo family, pieces of ephemera, drawings upon drawings by designers Helen Carew Hickman, Roy Calligan, and Mr. Parrendo himself serve as a timeline of an enduring and successful endeavor. Dating to the origin of the business, the drawing archive is a broad and varied record in style and substance that is a joy to see in person. Artifacts are present as well, including the second sign image accompanying this piece, hanging on a wall in a work area. Preserved in its original state, this wooden sign is believed to be from Henry Hunt’s original location on Steuben Street in the West End.

Current works-in-progress can be seen on the studio walls and work tables. Charcoal sketches, bins of glass, and even resin statuary all serve to illustrate the materials and processes involved in satisfying a range of clients and challenges. Color is everywhere, made even more dramatic when sunlight streams through the studio windows. The sum total is an appreciation for how an object of artistic and spiritual significance is actually made. The rarity of places like Hunt Studios, with a distinguished past and a vibrant present under one roof, cannot be underestimated. They contribute to the richness of our culture and in this case, offer the chance to see a centuries-old medium brought to life with great passion and skill. 2

Chuck 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.


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http://web.me.com/huntstainedglass/Hunt_Stained_Glass/Welcome.html