

Saigon Vintage lettering: From hand-painted shop signs to digital typefaces

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Abstract

Vintage shop signs and billboards dated back to the 20th century in Saigon, or currently known as Ho Chi Minh City, has been a familiar and mesmerising feature of the city landscape. From market stalls to high-street tailors, old cinemas to blacksmith's, these vintage shop signs appear in various unusual lettering styles and colours. The blacksmith's sign is bold and sharp. The tailor's sign is rather flowy and elegant. The paint shop branded themselves with a quirky script. There are no identical shop signs in Saigon despite the fact that streets might have a number of businesses in the same line living next to each other. This diversity shows the ultimate creativity and unique artistic flair of the Saigon Vintage artists.

Saigon Vintage itself conveys more than just the 'shops'. It's a result of Vietnamese's written language evolution from Chinese characters to Latin alphabet. It also carries the economics and social cultures from the French colony to United States throughout an eventful period of the country's history in the twentieth century. It's a unique style that needs to be preserved.

Modern printing and type design technologies provide the markets with extensive choice of advertising options. This has virtually made the hand-painted shop signs slowly disappear. However, these digital technologies themselves also hold the potential of preserving and further develop Saigon Vintage lettering in modern design world.

Throughout a series of analysis and qualitative research of Vietnamese typography, Saigon Vintage lettering, and digital type design technologies, this paper will present how modern digital type formats can be used to digitise this unique form of vintage lettering.