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Courtesy Las Vegas News Bureau.

THE NEON MUSEUM

A Midcentury Vernacular Gets its Due

By Kirsten Swenson



Courtesy Las Vegas News Bureau.

Just as visitors to Paris flock to the Musée d'Orsay to see great works of art from the *Belle Époque*, visitors to Las Vegas seeking cultural relics from Sin City's storied past come to the Neon Museum. The museum preserves exemplary signage from Vegas's several gambling strips — most notably "The Strip" that is Las Vegas Boulevard, but also downtown Fremont Street and Boulder Highway, a once-major thoroughfare that connects downtown Las Vegas and the town of Boulder, site of the Hoover Dam. Neon's brightness, vivid color and clarity made it the perfect vehicle of expression for anyone with something to sell — wedding chapels, motels, bail bondsmen or brothels — to hail passing motorists traveling to or from the Hoover Dam or Nellis Air Force Base. The art of the sign has thrived here as perhaps nowhere else and, for a few decades beginning in the 1940s, neon was the primary medium.

The Neon Museum got its start in 1996 when YESCO, the Young Electric Sign Company, turned over its "boneyard" — a collection of "retired" signs — to the Allied Arts Council, a local group that recognized the need to preserve Vegas's vanishing neon as

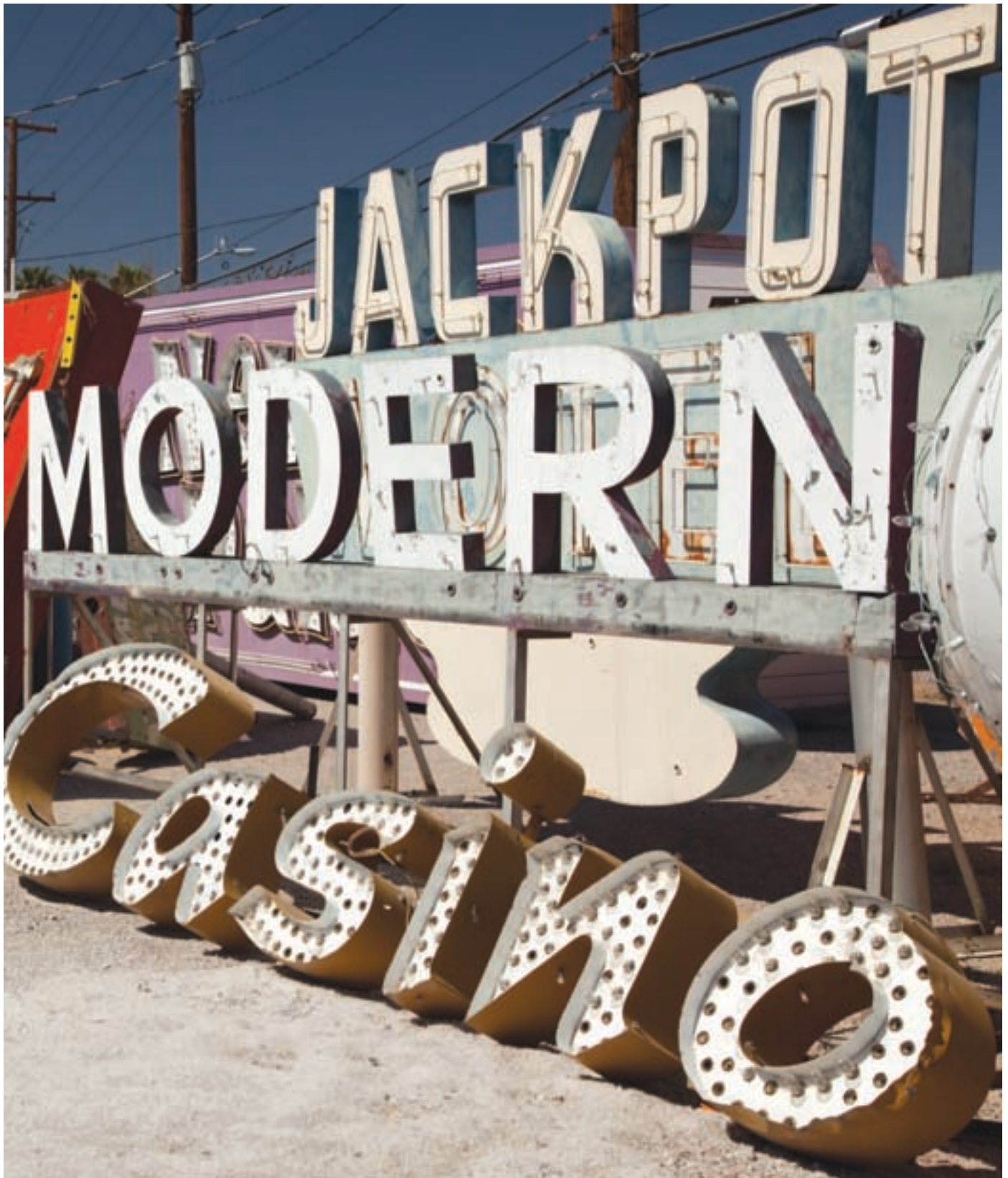


Photo by Steve Lewis.

Above Dismantled signs from long-shuttered casinos housed at the Neon Museum's "boneyard."

Opposite, top The "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas Sign," designed by Betty Willis in 1958, as it appears today at the south end of the Las Vegas Boulevard "Strip."

Opposite, bottom Fremont Street in the early days of neon, c. 1940s.



Courtesy Las Vegas News Bureau.



Photo by Steve Lewis.



Above Signage from the Silver Slipper at the boneyard.

Right The Silver Slipper Hotel and Casino (1950–88) in the 1970s.

Opposite, top The Stardust Hotel and Casino (1958–2007) shortly after its opening.

Opposite, bottom The Stardust sign gathering dust in the Neon Museum’s boneyard.

one fabled midcentury establishment after the next fell under the wrecking ball. YESCO, a Utah-based company run by a Mormon family, opened its Las Vegas location in 1945; the firm would become a world-renowned sign-maker and, in the words of author Tom Wolfe, “the designer-sculptor geniuses of Las Vegas.” YESCO first produced monumental and elaborate neon signs for a series of downtown casinos in the 1940s and 1950s. These included a 48-foot sign that crowned — and dwarfed — the single story Golden Nugget Gambling Hall and a winking cowboy known as “Vegas Vic” for the Pioneer Club, transforming the stretch of Fremont Street into “Glitter Gulch.”

YESCO typically operated on a system of five-year leases that included maintenance contracts for the high-wattage extravaganzas. After five years — a long stretch in Vegas’s culture of constant renewal — clients might choose to have their sign spruced up or to commission a new sign. Because YESCO owned the signs, if the client went out of business or chose not to renew its lease on a given sign, the sign was reclaimed by YESCO and cannibalized for parts or retired to the company’s “boneyard.” The five-year cycle meant a constant renewal of visual motifs and fostered a spirit of one-upmanship when it came to the display of “neon spectacles.” And significantly, the leasing of signs and their subsequent reclamation by YESCO resulted in a rare trove of historic artifacts from Las Vegas’ seventy-some year history as a tourist destination.

The oldest sign in the Neon Museum collection dates to 1930, well before YESCO or other sign companies had a foothold in Vegas, and advertises “The



Courtesy Las Vegas News Bureau.



Green Shack,” a humble eatery first located in the town of Boulder, near the edge of the Colorado River, that sprang up to serve the thousands of dam workers who came to build the Hoover Dam (then Boulder Dam) in the 1930s. Its message is straightforward: “COCKTAILS STEAK CHICKEN” hovers in simple neon lettering over a green painted background. Business was good. Not everyone could afford a neon sign, still a novelty in 1930, and when The Green Shack relocated to Fremont Street to serve a new clientele of military personnel based at Nellis Air Force Base after dam construction was completed, the sign followed.

The proliferation of neon in Las Vegas in the 1940s is inextricably linked to tourism, the town’s economic engine dating back to the construction of the dam. Then the largest public works project in American history, the dam was also the world’s biggest concrete structure and generator of hydroelectric power. Hundreds of thousands of tourists flocked annually to see the mighty Colorado River harnessed by a seventy-story wall of concrete. Most stopped in Las Vegas which, with legalized gambling and prostitution, had already gained a reputation as a capital of vice. The dam — and then the Air Force base — generated a considerable volume of automobile traffic, and the dam meant that Las Vegas was supplied with abundant cheap electricity. Neon

signage thrived under these conditions, and a new roadside vernacular was born.

In addition to some of the original “Glitter Gulch” signs from the 1940s, highlights of the Neon Museum collection include signage from the Stardust Resort and Casino, designed by Ad Art in 1964 and victim of a dramatic demolition by implosion in 2007. The “stardust” theme related to the popular pastime of watching atomic tests conducted at the Nevada Test Site to the north of the city (928 announced nuclear explosions took place between 1951 and 1962). Hotels would organize parties with themed cocktails around the tests that could be viewed from town, a big draw for tourists. Pink fallout dust coated surfaces after the tests. Hence the Stardust’s original 1964 sign was “atomic pink.” Peering at the scattered Stardust sign parts at the Neon boneyard, one notes layers of paint: atomic pink for the 1960s, then shades of purple in the 1970s and 1980s — along with the conversion to a less “atomic” sans serif font — as Vegas sought to dissociate itself from nuclear testing.

Every sign tells a story, and perhaps none is more compelling than the faux-Arabic script of the Moulin Rouge. The Kasbah theme suggested by this sign’s typography conjures the exoticism of French colonies in North Africa in the 1950s, surely deliberate

Photo by Steve Lewis.



since the Moulin Rouge was Vegas's first integrated casino and the first instance of an African-American woman holding a gaming license. The Moulin Rouge sign, dating to 1955, is a recent arrival to the neon boneyard; though the shuttered casino has been subject to arson and foreclosure, its extant neon remains a monument to its existence.

The Moulin Rouge is among several signs in the Neon Museum collection designed by Betty Willis, the only female sign designer to work for the dominant firms during neon's heyday. Willis was employed by YESCO, Western Neon and Ad Art, yet her most indelible work is in the public domain, designed to provide free publicity to her hometown. The "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign, designed by Willis in 1958, sits at the southern end of "The Strip," where it was planted to welcome motorists arriving from California with a red neon starburst. Another of her designs, famous among locals, has not yet arrived in the boneyard (though staff confide their interest in acquiring the piece): the Blue Angel Motel, situated at the point where Boulder Highway turns into Fremont Street, features a well-endowed angel rising high into the sky from the roof. Willis recalls being criticized for her sexy celestial in the early 1950s, to which she countered, "Show me an angel, and I'll draw her."

Since the Neon Museum's initial holdings were formed by the YESCO boneyard in 1996, signage by other

Courtesy Las Vegas News Bureau.



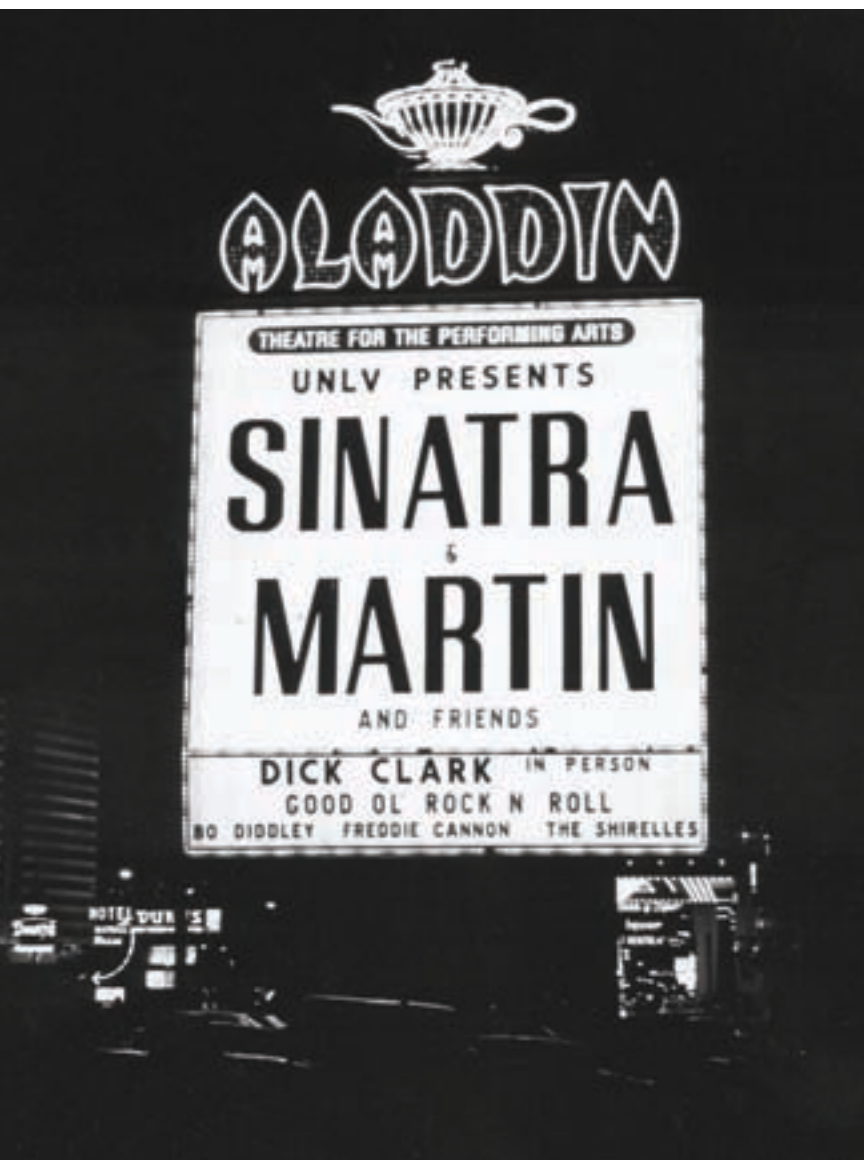
Above The Golden Nugget as it appears today.

Top The Golden Nugget's original signage in the boneyard.

Opposite The Golden Nugget Gambling Hall on Fremont Street in the 1970s.



Courtesy of the Neon Museum, Las Vegas, NV.



Courtesy Las Vegas News Bureau.

companies such as Ad Art has joined the collection and the Museum has expanded its mission to “collect, preserve, study and exhibit neon signs and associated artifacts.” Currently the museum’s collection can be viewed only by way of scheduled tours through two lots of decommissioned signs that sit on the edge of one of Las Vegas’s first residential neighborhoods, once called City Center, with unassuming concrete block bungalows from the 1930s. But in the summer of 2011, the Neon Museum will be unveiled as a major regional cultural center comprising a park on the current site designed to display the mammoth neon structures that currently sit propped against one another in a haphazard, though appealingly picturesque, manner.

A centerpiece of this project will be a visitor’s center housed in the shell of the reclaimed lobby of the La Concha Motel, completed in 1961, a dramatic instance of “Googie” design by Los Angeles architect Paul Revere Williams (best known for his entertaining “Theme Building” at Los Angeles International Airport, also from 1961). The center will also serve to welcome visitors to the Las Vegas Strip “Scenic Byway,” as designated by the U.S. Department of Transportation. The Neon Museum, with the assistance of a “Scenic Byways” grant, is restoring a series of notable signs, including an outsized Aladdin’s lamp (from the now-defunct Aladdin Casino) and a silver slipper (from the eponymous and defunct casino once owned by Howard Hughes), for placement on the median of Las Vegas Boulevard, giving a bit of historical perspective to the “neon trail.”

In 1996, the founders of the Neon Museum recognized the importance of the YESCO trove of iconic signs at a moment when Vegas’s iconic neon streetscape was fading. On New Years Eve, 1995, the “Fremont Street Experience” was introduced by the city of Las Vegas: a massive canopied arcade comprising 2.1 million LEDs – the world’s largest electronic sign – spanning the historic stretch of Fremont Street known as “Glitter Gulch” for its over-the-top neon. But to make way for the new, many of the original large neon signs of “Glitter Gulch” were displaced, ending up first in the YESCO boneyard and then the Neon Museum. Las Vegas is the city of the “eternal now,” famously demolishing its most recognizable institutions such as the Desert Inn, the Stardust and the original Flamingo, casino resorts developed by infamous figures like Howard Hughes and Bugsy Siegel. Very little historical awareness exists here, but the idea of preservation is gaining traction as the city’s constant reinvention erases some of its most recognizable features.

Left, top The Aladdin Hotel and Casino lantern.

Left, bottom The Aladdin lantern on “The Strip” in the 1970s.

Opposite, top The El Cortez casino sign.

Opposite, bottom The Moulin Rouge casino sign.



Photo by Steve Lewis.



Courtesy of the Neon Museum, Las Vegas, NV.



Courtesy Las Vegas News Bureau.

Above The Luxor Hotel and Casino, as it appears today.

Top The LED canopy of the “Fremont Street Experience.”

Indeed, neon is less widespread in Las Vegas today than in its “golden age” of the 1940s through the 1960s. In its stead, more recent casinos have absorbed signage into the architectural form itself, a prime example being the Luxor Las Vegas, a massive pyramid of black glass curtain walls that proclaims the resort’s ancient Egyptian theme. Architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown sketched this distinction in their classic study *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972): the Vegas of loudly competing neon signs was, architecturally speaking, comprised of “decorated sheds,” standard post-and-lintel structures clad in ornamental signage, as opposed to fantastical constructions such as the Luxor that have reigned since the early 1990s. In the lexicon of Venturi and Scott Brown, this latter “building-becoming-sculpture” was called a “duck” (after a duck shaped drive-in poultry stand on Long Island). And the rise of the “duck”— in Vegas, the fantasy-themed megaresort that acts as a kind of microcosm of some faraway place, whether the Luxor or The Venetian with its canals and gondolas — has meant the decline of neon in Las Vegas.

As architect Steven Izenour, who collaborated on *Learning from Las Vegas*, said in a 2001 interview “the sign is the ultimate artifact of impermanence. There is a delicate line crossed when you put them in a museum — ordinary in one life, extraordinary in another.” While the “museumification” of Las Vegas might seem anathema, the Neon Museum possesses work of serious sociological and artistic interest, and as such offers an abundance of data — and visual pleasure — for those drawn to that most American of art forms: the neon sign. ■

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