

News Library

FORMER MONK TURNS SIGNS INTO WORKS OF ART

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When **Francis Lestingi** was a teen-ager, storefront signs in his Queens neighborhood routinely disappeared between the hours of 2 a.m. and 5 a.m.

"I used to 'borrow' store signs to learn how to do commercial lettering," said Lestingi, now the owner of Signs of Gold in Amherst. "I'd practice in the middle of the night so I could return the sign before the owner knew." Burning the midnight oil to sharpen his skills eventually paid off.

Lestingi's wood-carved, 23 karat gold-gilded signs recently won national recognition by the U.S. Sign Council and Sign Business magazine.

"His work is of very high quality even compared to a lot of the things we see," said Eddie

Wieber, associate editor of Sign Business, an industry trade journal.

He said the magazine selected Lestingi's signs for inclusion in a portfolio of high-caliber signage.

"There were more than a hundred submissions and two of (Lestingi's) were picked."

Signs of Gold has made signs for about 60 Western New York locales, including Forest Lawn Cemetery, Buffalo State College, a number of churches and parochial schools, the village of Williamsville and Amigone Funeral Homes.

Lestingi's work for Holy Angel's Academy, St. Mark's church, the Manhattan Square Apartments, and Roberts Funeral Home have been nationally honored as some of the best signs in the country.

"Francis is the Michelangelo of sign design," said JoAnne Grippi, principal of Holy Angels on Hertel Avenue at Wesley Avenue. "I've had nothing but rave reviews about the sign. Neighborhood people and people I don't even know call me to say how beautiful it is. They say it brightens the entire corner."

Lestingi, a former professor who

took early retirement to dedicate his time to the art of sign making, said it takes about eight to 10 weeks to complete one sign. His goal, he said, is "to recreate some of the beauty of yesteryear.

"With him it's a labor of love," said Anthony Amigone Sr. of Amigone Funeral Home Inc.

"I've watched him and he's an absolute perfectionist who's exact and patient and absolutely conscientious."

Most of the carved signs are priced in the four-figures, according to Lestingi, who estimated that Signs of Gold grossed about \$60,000 last year.

"The signs sound expensive, but when you consider that all work is done with my hands and that they're made from mahogany and 23 karat gold, they are worth it."

Lesting does most everything at Signs of Gold himself -- the marketing, designing, carving, and gilding -- and gets installation help with from his son, a player on the Buffalo Warriors football team.

"He plays with big guys and their size helps a lot when we have to drill deep to install heavy posts," Lestingi said.

Lestingi -- who has a Ph.D. in physics, was a Catholic monk and has worked as an illustrator -- is truly a Renaissance man.

At Bishop Loughlin Catholic School in Brooklyn, there hangs an ornate calligraphied prayer from the Book of Kells. Lestingi, after teaching himself calligraphy and gold leafing -- a technique that adheres thin sheets of pure gold to various surfaces -- made it in high school as a gift to the school.

"I'm a letter head," Lestingi said, explaining that the phrase is used in the signage industry for people who are enamored with the letter as an art form.

"I made paper signs for ravioli shops and lingerie stores in Queens during high school. In my free time, I practiced brush strokes and calligraphy," he said.

His love of calligraphy and the painstaking hours he spent perfecting his stroke would have made Lestingi a perfect candidate for a medieval scriptorium. Instead, he said, "I was a teen-aged monk."

After joining the Christian Brothers, an international order, Lestingi, who declined to give his age, taught science at a number of parochial

schools. He used his artistic ability to make illustrations and diagrams that helped his students understand difficult concepts.

"I was still working in physics, but was illustrating teaching tools," he said. "I've always incorporated art into everything I've done."

Lestingi's creative teaching techniques won him a position at Harvard University, where he worked to develop multimedia teaching tools to help high school students struggling in the sciences.

"I was privileged to have the

Christian Brothers' permission to work at Harvard," Lestingi said. "But at Harvard, people didn't know (monks). They'd say 'you're a brother? What's that? It's not a priest?' "

Lestingi, who later left the Christian Brothers for personal reasons, got his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin at Madison and taught at Buffalo State College, where he received both the chancellor and president's awards for excellence in teaching.

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It was a vacation to New England in the late '80s that brought Lestingi into the sign business.

"There were beautiful wood-carved signs there that had gold leaf details," he said. "I thought 'I can do that.' " And he did.

Signs of Gold was founded almost 10 years ago and his business has steadily grown.

"He started just as a hobby, I thought," Amigone said. "But he keeps getting more and more work from people who see one of his signs around and call to find out who made it. They really stand out as the best."

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