Signs of the Times

Introduction
Looking down Duke of Gloucester St, you may notice the colorful signs hanging from the front of buildings. In the 18th century, as in the centuries prior, shopkeepers and tradespeople used pictures and symbols to identify their businesses. This made sense when many people could not read, and continued well into the 18th century when literacy rates had improved (at the time of the Revolution, two-thirds to 90 percent of white males could read, and half to two-thirds of white women).

Certain images associated with particular types of businesses such as the mortar and pestle for the apothecary might not be recognized today. The rhinoceros was a symbol of strength, so Dr. George Pitt advertised “at the Sign of the Rhinoceros.” Other signs reflected the owner’s name, such as those for the Peter Hay Shop and Hartwell Perry’s Tavern in Williamsburg.

In this lesson, students discuss the purposes of shop signs then make their own.

Objectives
As a result of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. create signs representing eighteenth-century shops or trades
2. use icons and graphics to express ideas

Materials
- Samples of Signs from Colonial Williamsburg
- Merchant Match-Up Game (http://www.history.org/foundation/journal/Autumn10/signs/)
- Occupations and Trades of the Eighteenth Century
- Brainstorming Sheet
- Practice paper (provided by teacher)
- 9 x 12 inch white art paper (provided by teacher)
- Poster paint or colored markers (provided by teacher)
Setting the Stage

1. When discussing eighteenth-century trades and stores, we often think about advertising. Discuss television commercials and other types of advertisements or signs that do not use words, but have only graphics and images. Discuss the possible reasons for these types of signs.

2. In eighteenth-century America, some people could not read, but they needed products they could not grow or make for themselves. To obtain these items, they went to a tradesperson or a store. One way customers located the shops they needed was by looking at the images on the signs.

3. Show students some examples of colonial signs. Some examples can be found in Samples of Signs from Colonial Williamsburg and in the Merchant Match-Up Game. Discuss what would be sold, made, or repaired in each business. Discuss the size of the objects depicted on the sign and why these objects were selected for the sign.

Strategy

1. Assign each student the role of an eighteenth-century tradesperson or shopkeeper. (See the list of Occupations and Trades of the Eighteenth Century.) Give each student the following problem:

You are a tradesperson or shopkeeper in eighteenth-century Williamsburg. You have rented a shop on Duke of Gloucester Street. Now you need a sign or symbol for your shop. (Remember, even though many people can read they still need to find your shop so they can deal with you.) Your sign should tell customers what your shop has to offer. It should be simple, colorful, and easily remembered by your customers.

2. Have the students create rough drawings on practice pieces of paper. Finally, have each student produce a finished copy of his or her sign on white art paper.

Helpful Hints for Students

1. Brainstorm ideas for your trade sign. Use the Brainstorming Sheet as a starting place.

2. Think about the image that you want to represent your shop. It should be simple, bold, and eye-catching. Sketch practice drawings on newsprint to get some ideas on paper.

3. Lay out the design for your sign on a piece of practice paper. Remember that your sign should be easy to read from a distance of ten feet.

4. Think about the lettering style that you want to use. Don't mix too many styles on one page—it's too confusing to the eye.
Lesson Extension

Project the Merchant Match-Up Game for the class or display it on an interactive whiteboard. Have students match each sign with the appropriate shop or trade.

Assessment

Students will be graded on their complete eighteenth-century sign and how well they can describe how they developed the logo for their trades or businesses.

This lesson plan was developed by Diane Self and Kim Rizzuti, Painted Rock Elementary School, San Diego, CA and members of the staff of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.
Occupations and Trades of the Eighteenth Century

These are some of the occupations and trades that were a part of daily eighteenth-century life:

- **apothecary**—acted as pharmacist, doctor, dentist, and general storekeeper
- **barber**—cuts hair
- **blacksmith**—forges, or hammers, metals such as iron and steel into useful shapes, including household tools and tools for other tradespeople
- **cabinetmaker**—makes and sells furniture of the latest fashion, including tables, chairs, and bookcases
- **carpenter**—constructs and repairs buildings
- **chandler**—makes and sells candles, soap, and other supplies
- **cooper**—makes wooden containers such as barrels, tubs, and buckets
- **harnessmaker**—makes and repairs leather harness and saddles for horses and carriages
- **hatter**—makes hats
- **mantuamaker**—dressmaker
- **milliner**—makes and sells retail goods such as caps, cloaks, aprons, and other clothing accessories
- **printer**—publishes newspapers, advertisements, legal forms, and other paper materials
- **saddler**—makes saddles
- **shipwright**—makes and repairs waterborne vessels, like boats and ships
- **shoemaker**—makes and sells shoes and boots
- **silversmith**—makes and sells fashionable flatware (such as spoons and forks), hollowware (such as bowls and cups), and jewelry
- **tailor**—makes men’s clothing
- **weaver**—makes cloth
- **wheelwright**—makes wheels, carts, wagons, and ploughs
- **wigmaker**—makes and styles wigs
Brainstorming Sheet

Type of trade or occupation _______________________________________

Business name ideas _____________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

Label and design your sign. Make quick sketches of three different designs for your sign. Use color!

Conduct an "opinion poll." Ask other students in the class which of your signs they prefer. (Make a series of tally marks under the designs as you conduct the opinion poll.)
Samples of Signs from Colonial Williamsburg