



AUTOMOTIVE PINSTRIPING

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY CAROLYN FRASER

Bob Conway doesn't doodle. He tells me this as we flip through scrapbooks laid out on the tailgate of his unadorned truck. The highly doodle-able ornamental patterns we are looking at are familiar to me from 19th century typographic specimen books, the elaborately carved furniture of the Victorian era and the blazingly ornate chassis of 1950s hotrods. These patterns inspire Bob's pinstripping work, the fine line and scrollwork painted by sign writers who specialise in what Bob describes as putting "a bit of jewellery" on a truck. Pinstripping "finishes" a vehicle, highlights its contours and gives colour and character to a vehicle that might otherwise be indistinguishable from any other on the road. That this desire for individuality persists in face of the commercial realities of the trucking business is testament to both the skill of artisans like Bob who continue the practice and the human impulse toward ornamentation as a key to happiness.

Art historian James Trilling defines ornament as "the art we add to art." It is not design; a truck will still function as a truck without pinstripes. Nor is it simply decoration. Trill-

ing writes, "Ornament is decoration in which the visual pleasure of form significantly outweighs the communicative value of content." But what does a pinstriped truck communicate? About its owner, or the craftsman who painstakingly emphasises each panel, each curve?

Other than his signature painted on the lower outer corner of the cab door, Bob Conway does not advertise his work. My press mover, Peter Horne, whose fleet of trucks has been impressively pinstriped by Bob over the years, puts me in touch with him. Peter insists I ask for the Angry Penguin, not Bob. When I inquire about this later, Bob concedes that he has a reputation for gruffness, but it's only evidenced during our interview when he questions his client sharply about whether he's using a high-pressure hose to wash down his trucks.

The biggest change Bob has witnessed in the signwriting business is the ban on lead in paint. Durability disappeared with the lead. Contemporary enamels will only last two to three years; less if abused by power washing. Bob has switched to automotive paints,

which, although also lead-free, will last approximately 10 years. His sable and ox-hair brushes are slick with motor oil to keep the bristles moist and prevent paint from drying under the metal ferrules. They have names—sign pencils, quills, daggers, swords—that suggest their minutely differentiated and specialised capabilities. In a box of seemingly identical Mack lining brushes, Bob shows me his favourite, a brush whose superiority rests simply in the fact that it "works well." In precision work such as this, a single hair misaligned renders a brush inferior, if not completely unusable.

I ask Bob about the American style of pinstripping that originated in the 1950s in Los Angeles, and whether this style continues to influence local practitioners. We've got an Australian style, he declared. With regard to trucks, the Americans, he tells me, like to accentuate and work around the features of the vehicle—the door handle, for example. Australians, in contrast, will use line to cut across elements (the gap between door and panel, for instance) to create a larger decorative panel. Australians, he says, "like to panel things off and go a bit overboard."

Historically, pinstripping developed as a craft in tandem with the Industrial Revolution of the mid-19th century, a period in which new manufacturing technologies enabled the mass production of items that previously did not exist or were highly expensive, handmade objects. The aesthetic taste of the period veered toward the excessive, a style that became known as the Rococo Revival, harkening back to the ornate Rococo period of the 1700s. The ability to mass-produce both industrial and domestic items initiated, perhaps paradoxically, an explosion in ornamentation, a curious combination of the work of the machine and of the hand. The cast iron press I use in my work as a letterpress printer was made on an assembly line; its fine, gold pinstripping was almost certainly applied by a man wielding a narrow brush.

This tension between man and machine continues. Bob tells me that computer lettering technologies have all but killed freehand signwriting. He combines both, acutely conscious that "if you don't keep hand-writing, you lose it really quickly." He tapes lines, however, and uses stencils to remain financially competi-

tive. A truck might take a full day or two of physically demanding work—climbing ladders, scrubbing cabs, working in the cold—for which he'll charge \$1,000-1,500. In the face of cheaper competitors, Bob relies on his reputation among customers who demand and appreciate traditional handwork techniques. In the truck world, however, these customers are thinning out. Young people want bling, laughs Bob, not jewellery. Bling on a truck is decorative lights and fancy chrome work. He is interested when I tell him there is growing interest in pinstripping custom-built bicycles, but points out that the scale of bicycle work might not suit an older man's eyes. He sees his future in pinstripping historically accurate reproductions of horse coaches, carts and jinkers.

Pinstripping isn't taught in trade school anymore. There are some young guys doing it, Bob says, but he'll often see scrolls in the wrong place, or scrolls back-to-front. It's not just an ability to paint a line—there's an art to where to put the lines and scrolls that is only learned through careful observation and experience. Bob has always studied other

people's work to learn the trade, taking photographs of pieces he admires, including those by Melbourne signwriting legends Malcolm Ashdowne and Frank Kingman. He plans to attend a meeting one day of the informal guild of pinstripers known as the Pinheads. He's heard that these guys will stay up three nights straight talking shop.

In his 1908 essay *Ornament and Crime*, Viennese architect Adolf Loos wrote that "the evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from objects of daily use." Despite trying, however, not even Loos and his fellow 20th century modernists were able to stamp ornament out. How can we explain the pleasure gained from a single fine line terminating in a flourish? The persistence of ornament attests to the many pleasures found in craft, perhaps not least the pleasure gained in honouring the tools of one's work and the pride one can take in employing them well. When Bob Conway signs his name on a cab door, he is testifying to a tradition of ornamentation that extends back throughout history, a continuous line as yet unbroken. **U**