

CURRENTS

Elaine Louie

PLANTERS PEANUTS



SIGN LANGUAGE

Their Regards to Broadway: Times Square's Light Shows



Mr. Peanut waving his walking stick on Broadway between 46th and 47th Streets. The Camel man blowing rings of smoke (actually Con Edison steam) on Broadway between 43d and 44th

Streets. These are some of the 150 images and replicas in "Signs and Wonders: The Spectacular Lights of Times Square," a

show that will open Wednesday and run through March 8 at the New-York Historical Society, 2 West 77th Street.

The exhibition traces the evolution of spectaculars, outdoor advertising's word for large-scale illuminated ads, the first of which appeared in 1892: red, blue, green and frosted white lights on the side of a building at 23d Street and Fifth Avenue extolled the attractions of Manhattan Beach as a resort.

In 1942, Times Square went dark as a blackout precaution, so Douglas Leigh, a lighting designer, devised the Camel man, who blew smoke rings every four seconds to attract attention without the use of lights. That spectacular endured until 1966, and the design was so successful that Mr. Leigh repeated it in 12 other cities.



Photographs of signs, Artkraft Strauss; oil painting, New-York Historical Society

In 1945, the lights came back, as if turned on by a single switch, in a huge choreographed ceremony, said Mary Beth Betts, the society's curator of architecture who organized the show.

"Spectaculars have had their ups and downs," Ms. Betts said, and their fans include advertisers and some members of the public. Their detractors? Urban planners and art and architecture groups, Ms. Betts said.

The historical society is open from 11 A.M. to 5 P.M. Tuesday through Sunday; \$5 for adults, \$3 for students and those 65 and older.