



MAKING CONNECTIONS

A SAN DIEGO-AREA DESIGNER LIGHTS THE WAY ONE BRIGHT IDEA AT A TIME.

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For an electric circuit to work, the current must begin and end in the same place. It’s an apt metaphor for Jim Gibson, the founder of Gibson Lighting. His own career path in the decorative and historic arts took him from the San Diego gallery scene of the 1970s, to a stint in conservation at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and then to San Francisco, where he restored Victorians, before returning to his home turf in Southern California. “I guess you could say I have an appetite for creative people and the decorative arts,” Gibson says of his trajectory.

Gibson had been working in architectural restoration when the opportunity to purchase a huge stock of antique lighting switched his focus. “I phased out the architectural restoration because of the enormity of the lighting collection—thousands of fixtures, parts and glass shades,” he says. “It demanded my full attention.” He and his father, who had recently retired, spent the better part of a year organizing and displaying everything. Thirty years on, Gibson still markets one-of-a-kind antique

pieces, but client requests have driven him to expand his business and his offerings.

These days, Gibson has a staff of four in his Chula Vista shop; plus, he has assembled a deep bench of metalworkers, woodcarvers and a glassmaker to call on. Together, they’ve restored, duplicated and fabricated fixtures for residential and commercial projects including the Balboa Theatre and the San Diego Zoo. Gibson and his crew have created lighting inspired by such varied sources as the art of Alexander Calder and 19th-century English church lamps. They’ve wired chandeliers composed of Chihuly-style glass plates, pool balls and, in one particularly memorable undertaking, pots and pans. “My work is about understanding someone’s personal idea of beauty,” Gibson says. “I try to get the same picture the client has and then make it tangible. My reward is when they see the completed fixture and love it.”

To cultivate a shared creative vocabulary, Gibson asks for as many photos as possible from his clients. “If we are discussing finishes, I have the client give me an example of what



Designer Jim Gibson (left) started in the lighting business when he acquired a stock of antique fixtures. Since then, his business has expanded. Not only does he continue to sell old pieces, such as the sconces mounted on a wall in his studio (bottom), he and his team also craft new fixtures (below and opposite).



Dozens of vintage light fixtures hang in Gibson's studio (opposite). He's often called on to recreate antique pieces. The nature of the designer's work requires him to be well-versed in any number of materials, from metal to crystal to glass, and to be able to produce work styles ranging from traditional (right) to more contemporary (below).



they want," he explains. "If they do not have any idea or images, we create a series of samples for them to start the conversation." To get finishes just right ("Color is the trickiest part of a custom fixture," says Gibson.), his team will make shade samples for clients to approve or have them into the shop to select one from an existing piece.

While Gibson and his team excel at reproductions and restoration—their work for the White House several years ago required them to recreate long-lost fixtures based on photographs—some of his favorites are those he describes as "visual jokes." His assemblages of found objects, including discarded trophies, ceramic figurines and plastic fish or repurposed items like the rotary dial phone with bulbs in the receiver, or the '50s-era toaster illuminated and mounted above a kitchen nook, might honor personal stories and relationships of his clients, but others are created purely for his own enjoyment and creative fulfillment. Regardless of the commission or the client, whimsical or straightforward, Gibson's eye is always trained on the details. "It's the transitional areas between elements that interest me," he says. ■

