

Show off with chandeliers – Another blast from the past, they can be edgy and artistic as well as bejeweled and pretentious

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The light show begins just inside the front door of the mansion at 3701 Washington St., where 500 shimmering strands of garnet and mica dangle from San Francisco Decorator Showcase's Highland Rain chandelier.

The Highland Rain -- assembled on the spot, strand by strand, over the course of eight hours by the staff at Chris Reed Interiors -- excels at the traditional foyer-chandelier job of telling visitors they've arrived at the showcase home. But it also sets the stage for a design clinic in the potential of ceiling fixtures, with room after room in this showcase putting chandeliers old-fashioned and newfangled to work not as mere accessories but also as focal points and exclamation marks.

"It's jewelry, it is an accessory," said Cecilie Starin, who managed to install a French chandelier under the 95-inch-high ceiling of her "traveler's hideaway" guest room. "But depending on the kind of chandelier you have, you can create an effect that's edgy, that's industrial, that's techie -- it can be a zillion things.

"There was a time in the late '80s and early '90s when people weren't much for chandeliers, but they've really made a comeback. There are a lot of great choices out there."

"I think they're making a comeback," agreed Susan Lind Chastain, who made big use of a chandelier in the house's small nursery. "The Shades of Light catalog has gotten huge."

Experts at the American Light Association suspect that our obsession with things big has brought the chandelier back. Bigger rooms and higher ceilings mean more room for light fixtures that aren't meant to help our eyes so much as our spirits.

Tish Key used two opulent yet almost opposite chandeliers strictly for effect in the master bedroom she designed. Holly Hunt's Paris, with crisp parchment shades and sinuous polished nickel arms, commands a contemporary presence in the sitting room; Niermann Weeks' rock crystal Rinaldi evokes old Venice over the sleek bed Key designed.

"Ours were more for elegance and ambience, more about setting a mood," Key said. "I just wanted the balance of new and old, and of masculine and feminine. The bedroom, it already has side table lamps for reading, a lamp by the chaise for reading. To me, a bedroom doesn't have to have overhead lighting; this is more a statement."

At around \$8,000 for the Paris and \$8,400 for the Rinaldi, money does talk. The Highland Rain, coming soon to Sloan Miyasato in the San Francisco Design Center, will retail for between \$25,000 and \$30,000, said Sarah Glover, of Chris Reed's staff.

"We chose it as the first item in our space because of its elegance and uniqueness," Grover said. "We think of the light as a fabulous piece of jewelry for the entry."

While Grover and friends labored over hanging the Highland Rain strands, Nathalie Pasqua was in the next room assembling her mirrored ceiling sculptures for Steven Volpe's drawing room. Pasqua became a glass sculptor when her Paris ballet career ended, and Volpe has used her work as chandeliers for clients. This time, he commissioned her to do a pair (for sale at \$4,800 each) to fit his "smoke-and-mirrors" concept. She shipped the pieces from Paris and then flew to San Francisco to put them together for two fixtures of more than 130 pounds each, which the ceiling of the 104-year-old mansion managed to support.

Though some have commented that the chandeliers were hung too close to the ceiling to be fully appreciated in the more than 12-foot-high room, Volpe designer Martin Young said they competed with the room's mirrors and tree sculpture when hung lower. Too much competition is no better to a designer than being too "matchy matchy," a contemporary design taboo that gives us freedom to hang whatever we want from our ceilings without worrying about whether the finish matches that of the desk lamp.

Here's a look at design considerations of some of the showcase magicians who used chandeliers, with product information:

Don't say light, say lantern: That's the choice that Douglas Durkin and Greg Elich made for their antique- and artifact-filled dining library, with what Durkin describes as a "hybrid" Italian piece from the late 19th century that has a bit of English and a bit of French. The lantern, which is on loan from C. Mariani Antiques, is priced at \$32,000, complete with the original beveled glass panels that the designers removed just for the showcase.

"It was actually the first fixture we chose for the room," Durkin said. "We wanted a vertical feeling to the room, and a moody one, which is why we replaced the glass panels with shirred smoke-colored silk panels to bring the light quality down to support the 'library' like feeling of the room."

Votives and shells for supper: The kitchen features two showstopping chandeliers. The first to be installed was a Kevin Reilly fixture that looks like a tray of various-size candles casting a warm glow the length of the island and through the room with 25 25-watt bulbs. (Available to the trade only, this chandelier come in a range of sizes from 43 inches to 80 inches, at \$7,320 to \$15,360.)

"Then we had to find something that didn't compete," said Chantal Lamberto, designer for Kensington & Associates. "Too traditional would be too far away; too modern would compete too much."

The designers settled on a 12-light, round chandelier made of natural, undyed shells in ecrus and beiges to anchor the kitchen dining niche and leather banquette. "It's a modern interpretation of something from the 18th century, yet, with the shells, has a sense of whimsy," Lamberto said. The piece, from David Kensington's own collection, can be had for about \$5,500 after the showcase, she said.

Elle parle Francais: Starin wanted to create a lot of charm in a little room, so she managed to find a 19-inch French chandelier from the early 20th century in an antique store. She had

it unwired and dipped in bronze because she didn't like the shiny brass finish, then had it rewired and cleaned; it's got a \$2,200 price tag on it now.

"Fortunately, the foot of the bed is right at the center of the room, so I was able to hang something there," she said.

Vintage modern for a teen: Caitlin Stewart-Jones was all set to hang an ivory silk pendant in the center of her genteel bedroom for a teenage girl, when a week before the showcase she decided that "a more playful fixture" would be the right choice. Noting chrome details on nail heads affixed to the bed's headboard and on the floor lamp, she chose a 1950s chrome chandelier that she found retail for \$600 at Past Perfect on Union Street.

It looks sort of galactic and adds the desired touch of fun; a one-of-a-kind piece, it will be for sale by the designer after showcase.

Luxury for baby: When seamstress and nursery designer Chastain visited the warehouse of Ironies looking for something to hang in a room higher than it was long or wide, she only had to see one piece.

"It was a sea grass green beaded chandelier in the exact color of fabric I'd been carrying around with me," she said. "And it was ethereal, light and airy -- elements that fit the style we were trying to convey."

So though it measured 30 inches tall and 37 inches wide, she anchored it in the center of her 8-by-9 1/2-foot room with its 10-foot ceiling painted by her showcase partner, Willem Racke. Many visitors, she said, have coveted the Ironies chandelier, but it's available to the design trade only through Kneedler-Fauchere, which, Chastain said, wouldn't reveal the price even to her.

Tips for those who are still in the dark about chandeliers

Choosing a chandelier or ceiling fixture can be intimidating, confusing and costly, particularly if done as part of a permit-writing remodel that invokes California's new lighting standards. (Title 24 spells out requirements for fluorescents, motion sensors and other energy-saving measures.) Without getting technical, designers who put chandeliers to work for them in this year's San Francisco Decorator Showcase offered these suggestions:

-- Although it may seem tempting to buy on the Internet, Caitlin Stewart-Jones recommends shopping in person for central ceiling fixtures. "Shades, both glass and fabric, can affect the light that is emitted, and you want to make sure that it won't cast any additional colors on the furniture in your room."

-- On the other hand, Susan Lind Chastain offers, "The Shades of Light catalog (www.shades-of-light.com) is a good place to find some bang with not a lot of buck behind it."

-- "Pottery Barn and Crate and Barrel have gotten into the business these days of providing stylish, low-cost, clean-lined alternatives for ceiling fixtures," says Douglas Durkin. "For the

more modern feel, try Design Within Reach." He singles out the acrylic Nelson as classic and affordable.

How to make your chandelier fit into a room

-- Consider the ceiling.

Stewart-Jones says that a high-gloss finish in a light color will reflect more light, but glossy paint will only make a cracked, bumpy ceiling look worse.

-- Consider the table. Over a long, narrow table, Durkin likes an elongated, center-mounted fixture or two or three aligned smaller fixtures. "Round tables," he says, "work great with round-style fixtures."

-- Make your mistakes big ones. "Even if you're watching the budget, if it's not a big incremental difference to spend more to get more, then I think bigger is better," says Tish Key. She likes to hang chandeliers at about 7 feet in open space, and at just above standing eye level over a table, and put each light fixture on a separate dimmer.

-- If it's an antique that's

put a twinkle in your eye, keep in mind that it may have to be rewired. "You do need to have them checked because you don't want to burn the house down," says Cecilie Starin.

-- Above all, says Chantal Lamberto, "remember that light fixtures are a focal point, and so you should go with what you really love."

For more tips and articles about selecting fixtures, as well as information about swapping out incandescent bulbs for energy-saving fluorescents, visit the American Lighting Association's Web site, www.americanlightingassoc.com.

-- Susan Fornoff

Seeing the showcase

The S.F. Decorator Showcase is open through May 29 at 3701 Washington St.

Admission: \$30, \$25 for seniors. Includes self-guided audio tour.

For hours or information: Call (415) 447-5830 or visit www.sanfranciscoshowcase.org

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