

Thomas P. Richmond

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LIGHTING DESIGN & ILLUMINATION OF FINE ART

IN THE NEWS

New Hampshire Profiles

Tom Richmond, Lighting Designer

New York lighting designer Tom Richmond considers his profession more of an art than a service. Word-of-mouth advertising has taken him all over the country doing interior and exterior art work, including the highlight of his career thus far: the lighting of an entire wing housing a permanent collection of early French paintings at the second-largest museum in the world, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. Richmond first entered the field of lighting design as an apprentice to a master, a gentleman who'd been in the business for more than 50 years. When the master retired, his protégé struck out on his own. Due, in part, to this old world passing of the torch, Richmond considers his work much more than a job. "I became so enthralled with doing something so unique and special that it's become my whole life," he says.

One of the things that makes Richmond's work unique is the fact that all the fixtures he uses are custom-made by himself - and used only for his work. The fixtures go with the lighting design; neither is sold separately. "It's about as custom as you can get," he says. Richmond's equipment comes with a lifetime guarantee. Unlike many store-bought exterior lights with short life spans, his custom equipment, he says, "is not going to fail in 5 to 10 years, and you'll have to throw it away.

Richmond immerses himself in every design project he tackles. When he was hired to do exterior

lighting for the Nicholson estate in North Hampton, Richmond walked the grounds to get a feel for the job. "The first thing I want to do is pick out the focal points. With the Nicholson estate, these were the facade and the tall shrubbery," he explains. "Then I slowly piece the area together. The (Nicholson) house was built in 1860 - mature plantings made my job easier." A new house with new shrubbery means that as the plantings mature, you'll need to amend the design. Richmond works this step into the initial proposal, at no additional charge to the client. Shrubby brings another important consideration in warmer climates; since things grow quickly, design must anticipate that growth.

Once Richmond feels comfortable with the layout of the grounds, he heads for the drawing board and works up a design and proposal that he submits to the client. His proposals sound more like poems than work orders, as evidenced in this paragraph from the Nicholson plan: "My principle in illuminating a garden is to achieve a unified composition, bringing the most beautiful features into their prominence. To create a moonlighting effect, the proper distribution of light must be tested carefully in place to ensure an even balance of light and shadows to animate a nocturnal setting."

Since Richmond had already worked on the estate's interior lighting, the Nicholson's had first hand knowledge of his work; the proposal was readily accepted. White brick, dogwoods, birches, an indoor garden and waterfall, and brick paths were the listed ingredients for "a fantasy-like atmosphere."

Richmond arrived at the Nicholson's armed with well over 100 lights. After almost 2 months of working with the Nicholson's electrician, he finished the major

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parts of his plan. “You never want to overpower anything,” he says of the results. “You want to have a punch on your taller trees, but not (at the expense of) the smaller plantings. You should walk into the garden and think, ‘Gee, where are all the lights?’ and not be blinded. This is my number one consideration when designing. Subtle elegance is the key to the whole package. It catches you off guard because it’s not overpowering.”

With that, the Nicholson facade became awash with light and the waterfall sparkled as if lit by a perennial moon. The lights are on a timer and “when people drive by,” Richmond says, “it clearly makes a statement.” “(Lighting) is nearly a lost art,” he laments. “I do all my work at night. Many designers I know wouldn’t think of going out at night.”

Most nights, Richmond found himself at the Nicholson garden until midnight or 1 A.M. “It can get very quiet,” he explains in a hushed voice, “no lawn mowers running, no people running around. I can get very creative.” One such night, he set off a silent alarm in the estates security system. The Nicholson’s were out for the evening and the caretaker was gone; Richmond finally convinced the police officer, who took him by surprise, that he, in fact, did belong there.

In New Hampshire and the northern climates, Richmond’s work is barely able to stretch six months. Concentrating heavily on lighting the tops of trees, weather often comes into play. “Once I lose foliage, my work comes to a halt.” The baked-on bell green paint he uses for the finish of his fixtures doesn’t have to worry about the cold winter months, its custom made for him and will last virtually forever. Cold and frost will try to push the fixtures out of the ground, and with store-bought ones it is usually successful. But, just as

he has created the fixtures themselves, Richmond has developed a special planting technique that solves any cold-climate problems. “My fixtures are firm in the ground,” he says. “You can kick them and pull them and they won’t come up.”

But the winter months sometimes worry his clients. While the fall creates an impressionist painting out of the Nicholson’s property, they figured that the onset of winter would put a temporary end to their enjoyment of Richmond’s exterior lighting work. “I tell all my clients,” Richmond explains, gathering his fingers like a chef after tasting a perfect *Sauce de Cerise a la Francaise*, “at the first ice or snowstorm, turn your lights on. It will be like a winter wonderland.” ■

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