

The Enlightenment

A Charlestown metalworking shop illuminates some of the region's grandest spaces.

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Winter 2010
Boston Magazine

If you've ever wandered through Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, danced in a ballroom at the Westin Copley Place hotel, or even walked past the Back Bay building that houses Filene's Basement, then you've probably seen Custom Metalcraft's brilliant creations. And we do mean brilliant: The local firm creates light fixtures large and small for both commercial spaces and private residences.

Inside the company's easy-to-miss Charlestown workshop, employees work on completely bespoke lighting products. Metalworkers bend sections of stainless steel mesh for a set of sconces; nearby, some of their colleagues polish hanging fixtures. Meanwhile, a seamstress preps a swath of ecru linen for a giant shade. "Plenty of companies make off-the-shelf fixtures," says owner Mike Elson, who purchased the 60-year-old business in 2004. "We're custom guys."

That doesn't mean they're small-time, though. By Elson's estimate, Custom Metalcraft handles 100 to 125 jobs each year, with projects ranging in size from a single pendant lamp for a Weston home to 1,000 wall sconces for a condo complex. One ongoing assignment involves creating hundreds of identical light fixtures for a growing national restaurant chain.

Despite the company's long reach, Elson strives to keep its sourcing close to home. Many shades are constructed from sailcloth made in Fall River and Marion ("Sailcloth makes great shades, since it's so durable and moisture resistant," Elson explains), and the blown glass used in more-delicate fixtures is created by a Randolph native. For funkier installations, Custom Metalcraft frequently partners with Burlington's Philips Color Kinetics, a manufacturer of color-changing LEDs.

It's the quirky requests, Elson says, that test creativity and yield the greatest personal satisfaction. Flipping through a project portfolio, he points out a group of pendant lights made from recycled paint cans for the Boston nonprofit City Year, and waxes rhapsodic about "the Cascade," a \$25,000 chandelier with 43 glass shades that was designed for a residential tower in New York City.

Historical restorations often offer special challenges: For the Watertown Free Public Library, for instance, Custom Metalcraft workers were asked not only to repair a damaged iron and glass fixture, but also to make several more just like it. At the same time, they gave the old lighting an upgrade by replacing its incandescent bulbs with energy-efficient fluorescent and LED varieties.



A handful of thread-cutting dies at the Custom Metalcraft workshop.

While most orders come from area builders and designers, the company also does plenty of work for homeowners. After settling on a design, Elson generates a quote based largely on the amount of fabrication and finish work needed. (Size isn't a determining factor, he notes: An intricately molded foot-high brass lantern created for the Library of Congress commanded \$12,000, whereas a seven-foot-wide ceiling fixture with a fabric shade might cost "only" a few grand.) All told, it's about 10 to 12 weeks from sketch to finished fixture. "Custom work is not for rush jobs," Elson says with a laugh.

It's not for bargain shoppers, either. But for those willing to splurge on a one-of-a-kind fixture, it pays off. "I once had a designer ask, 'How can this cost as much as a small car?'" says Elson. "To which I said, 'Imagine if that car was made from scratch.' From then on, he got it."