

ARTISTS AND ARTISANS

Illuminating A HOME

BY CARA RANK



PHOTO: STEVE FONTANINI; OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: STEVE FONTANINI; BOTTOM: AIMEE CHRISTENSON

The Western Design Conference spurs an innovative commission from a Jackson family, uniting artists who work states apart.

When Jane Hill went to the Western Design Conference (WDC) last fall, she was looking for something that was missing.

As she wandered from exhibitor to exhibitor, she found herself pulled into a booth with glass lamp shades hand blown by Patrick Casanova of Hudson, Wisconsin.

“I was really drawn to the colors and the blend of traditional and modern styles,” Hill explains.

A vision began to form as she chatted up Casanova about his work. Ten months later, that chance meeting resulted in a custom steel light fixture—a combined effort of Casanova and local metal worker Steve Fontanini—affixed over a 12-foot-long bar in Hill’s Solitude home.

While the custom piece may have taken just months to complete, the story actually stretches back more than a

decade, to the first home Jane and Tom Hill bought in the valley, a little cabin also in Solitude.

Fontanini, whose work is forged in his studio in Hoback, had done various projects in that cabin, from a fire screen to a pot rack. The Hills decided then that when they built their new home one day, they would commission pieces from the metal worker.

“Steve is just really creative,” Jane Hill explains. “We love how he creates each piece for the space and blends them with the house.”

Three years ago, the couple relocated from Washington, D.C., full-time, building a larger log home that overlooks the Snake River and Tetons. Fontanini’s work was incorporated throughout, from steel truss turnbuckles and a stair railing, to a 750-pound chandelier and a twelve-foot bar with three bar stools.



This light fixture (opposite and above) was created by Wisconsin glass blower Patrick Casanova (shown at work in his studio, below) and Hoback metal worker Steve Fontanini (following page).





Metal artist Steve Fontanini (right), at work in his Hoback studio. His long relationship with Tom and Jane Hill led to the commissioning of the chandelier which now hangs over the family's bar (below). He also made the bar's supporting structure.



The one piece missing was a light fixture to hang over the bar, and there was no question about who would make the piece. Then, when Hill saw Casanova's blown glasswork at the 2009 WDC, she knew he and Fontanini would be the perfect pair to fill the space over the bar.

"She showed me some information about Patrick and I said, 'Yeah, it looks good to me,'" Fontanini remembers. "I told her to figure out what colors she wants. It didn't matter to me."

Says Casanova: "She has a really good eye. Some people can have very good taste in things, yet when it comes to something like a piece of art, they don't trust their own ability. They put so much effort into not making the wrong decision rather than trusting their ability to make the right ones. Jane is really good at making those decisions."

Hill essentially became the project manager connecting the two. After a few e-mail exchanges and phone calls among the three, Fontanini sketched

BOTTOM PHOTO: STEVE FONTANINI; TOP: STAFF

the five-pendant design, while Casanova provided a couple of glass samples for the Hills to select colors.

By December, the couple had decided what would go in the space. "Then it was just a matter of everybody having a busy schedule," Casanova says.

Fontanini was out of the country, while Casanova was exhibiting at the Smithsonian Institute. It wasn't until the spring that work on the piece got under way.

Casanova and his assistant blew ten shades to get the five needed for the lamp, plus an extra in the event one breaks. "It's easy to make one of a kind," Casanova says. "It's harder to make multiples of something, where the shapes have to match and all the colors have to match."

Creating each piece requires precise choreography, and Casanova and his assistant spent the better part of one day getting their timing worked out. The process started with a batch of clear glass cooked in a 2,300-degree oven, cooled to 2,000 degrees, and reheated to 2,100 degrees.

That clear glass, the size of a chicken egg, was then gathered at the end of a blow pipe before it was heated, layered, and shaped into the pendant. Casanova added three colors to the mass before rolling the piece to achieve the "nice, golden-brown sheen" that his wife named "Marcell," after the gauzy sheen on the fur of some animals. Each shade took about ninety minutes to make.

"I had to make sure that it was opaque enough that they couldn't see through it to the bulb, yet not so opaque that it wouldn't illuminate well or evenly," Casanova recalls. "To keep all of them looking like they belong together was difficult."

While Casanova created the pendants, Fontanini spent nine days forging the fixture and doing the electrical work. He hung the 100-pound piece in June.

"It's just amazing craftsmanship, especially because they've never met each other," Hill says. "And, it's hip." ■

Note: Current artist profiles of Casanova (page 16) and Fontanini (page 45) appear in this year's Western Design Conference SourceBook, bound with this issue of Teton Home and Living.