

Rambusch

THE NEXT GENERATION

A collection of projects from
the last 25 years

Rambusch: The Artistic Culture, Traditions, and Future of Four Generations

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This book is a compilation of projects that represent some of the most aesthetically successful, complicated, and unusual work done by the Rambusch Decorating Company over the course of the past 25 years along with some generational projects for clients with whom the firm's principals have worked for decades.

As of 2023, Rambusch, located in Jersey City, New Jersey since 1997, has thrived for 125 years, not only as the creators and purveyors of the finest custom decorative art, lighting, restoration, and conservation work but also as a privately-held business passed down from fathers to sons for four generations. The company is now operated by twin brothers, Edwin and Martin Rambusch, the great grandsons of the founder, Frode Rambusch, a Danish immigrant. Their father, Viggo Bech Rambusch, Emeritus Chairman of the Board and Senior Project Manager, purchased control of the company from his father, Viggo F.E., and his brother Harold.

Martin, Edwin, and Viggo continue the company's unbroken dedication to excellence in the interior decoration of buildings, the ecclesiastical arts, the creation of stained glass and art metal, as well as the design and manufacture of fine architectural lighting fixtures in the company's own studios and craft workshops. Every project is personally managed by one of the Rambusch family.

The firm's interior and decorative design projects and its stained glass studio are managed by Martin, while lighting manufacturing and restoration work is managed by Edwin. Their father, Viggo, continues to work on special projects with long-term clients. However, because lighting and decorating complement each other on many projects, there can be some overlap in the responsibilities of each principal.

Rambusch's *raison d'être* is to make beautiful objects and lighting that transform architectural spaces. The art is intended for specific places and created based upon the needs and desires of its clients and, most importantly, their clients' communities.

A Rambusch church mural or window might tell worshippers biblical stories or establish or extend the church's heritage and traditions. At an existing university lecture hall, the Rambusch lighting system installed a generation ago might be updated to enhance visual comfort, provide a better environment for today's media projectors, and be more friendly to the environment while reducing operating costs by thousands of dollars annually. Many of the firm's clients have come back to the firm for decades to continue long-term projects and modernize its work.

The firm's conservation and restoration skills renew and improve art and lighting fixtures. In some cases, the entire interior of a space may be redesigned to bring unity where patchwork renovations over the decades have led to a visually discordant environment or because original work or repairs are now in need of restoration. For example, this work might involve putting in a new color scheme, cleaning and repairing damaged or faded artwork, or replacing the came in leaded-glass windows that has been damaged or has deteriorated. A new accent and downlighting and dimming system might go in as a part of the project, while period lanterns are dismantled, cleaned, repaired, and rewired with an updated light source.

The Rambusch Company has maintained its standards of excellence and remained a successful business during a period when the cost of handicrafts, the acceptance of mass production techniques, and the swiftly changing whims of popular style and fashion have conspired to assure the disappearance of almost every other decorative arts workshop in the United States.

But Rambusch's innovations have often extended far beyond craft. In World War II its forward thinking earned it an "Excellence in Production of War Equipment Award" also known as the Army-Navy Production Award—an award given only to five percent of companies who manufactured goods for the war effort. The "E" that signified this honor was proudly displayed in Rambusch's workshops.

AN ARTISTIC CULTURE THAT HONORS TRADITION

It is not unreasonable to suggest that if artisans from the Renaissance workshops of Ghiberti, Michelangelo, Da Vinci or others were teleported to the Rambusch's Jersey City studios today they could pick up charcoal and brushes from the worktables and continue working without noticing they had traveled ahead in time by centuries. The ecclesiastical art done by the firm today that includes images of Jesus, Moses, the Virgin Mary, and the Saints might be indistinguishable from the work liturgical artists have produced across the ages.

There are important differences, however, between the culture of the company started in 1898 and traditional studios. While the Rambusch family has always considered itself the stewards of the traditions of the great artistic workshops, the firm was never run according to the whims of a single studio master or bound to a single style. Many other studios have based their success around a

star designer who employed a distinctive vocabulary, but few of these kinds of workshops survived beyond a single generation; when the style for which they were known went out of favor or the designer was no longer active, the studios disappeared.

Another difference with the workshops of the past is that rather than a master dictating his work to clients Rambusch's projects often do not begin with a clear, fully-defined solution. Rambusch aids its clients, be they a community, clergy, or committee, by moving through a process it calls the "Thread of Design." By creating a preliminary verbal and visual solution that is refined as the project moves through design development, goals gradually come into focus and gain clarity through the refinement of form, details, materials, and, finally, values. This Thread of Design allows for a dialogue between the designer and the client that ensures all considerations are integrated into the final design solution, resulting in a clear record of what took place and why. Many people feel this is the definition of collaboration.

Rambusch sometimes commissions work from some of the great workshops of Europe that still exist and specialize in the creation of tapestries, mosaics, or sculpture and foundry casting. However, the objects they make are always based on designs created by Rambusch's artists. Independent artisans are also often hired by Rambusch to participate in the teams it puts together to help with the painting, decorating, and fabrication for a specific project.

Church interiors that Frode Rambusch designed and painted early in the firm's history still exist and perfectly illustrate the way many styles influence each other while creating something original. He absorbed elements from many stylistic precedents and incorporated their influences into his work. St. Paul's Church on Staten Island in New York, completed in the early 20th century, is a great example. Its pendentives and frames incorporate scrolls and interlocking lines in a manner that reflects his visits to Basilica di San Clemente in Rome and his viewing of the Book of Kells, now displayed at The Library of Trinity College in Dublin. These are combined with his knowledge of Scandinavian art, which in turn incorporated various elements of Viking art. To this day work in the Rambusch workshops is done in whatever particular style or blend of styles is appropriate given the client's wishes and the context of the architectural setting.

But of paramount importance is the collaborative process between Rambusch and each client's wishes, keeping in mind budget and scheduling constraints. The subject matter of a stained glass window for a church, for example, will be chosen in consultations with the client or the wishes of a major donor, a design committee, or congregation. Sketches and often mockups are employed so that all of the parties understand what is being undertaken. However, the specific composition of the figures is informed by the encyclopedic knowledge of artistic precedents by the Rambusch principals and their artisans.

MORE THAN A CENTURY OF INNOVATIONS IN LIGHTING

Rambusch's technical innovations in architectural lighting fixture development date back to the earliest days of the company. Thomas Edison filed his first patent for the electric light bulb just eight years before Frode arrived in New York. As an artist, he witnessed firsthand the change in lighting from soft gaslight to tungsten filament light, whose brightness often had the effect of obscuring the artwork it was supposed to illuminate. Rambusch responded by creating fixtures with repousséd metal shades that shielded the bright pinpoints of light and instead reflected it onto the walls.

The firm also developed plumb bob-shaped pendant fixtures whose light sources were concealed by glass held in place by decorative metal cases and suspended from chains or pipe, providing good general illumination while defining tall spaces and giving them scale. Fixtures that would provide light for reading or wash walls, uplight ceilings, and provide accents where there was often beautiful artwork, vaulting, moldings, and tracery—the innovations Rambusch is known for today—were some years in the future.

Frode's early observations about lighting led to an important second line of business for the firm, one that contributed beauty and elegance to the decorating work for which the firm was already known. Rambusch's lighting division manufactures some of the most high-quality lighting fixtures available anywhere. In some cases, complete lighting systems, including dimming systems, finishes, and customization of fixture optics and housings are designed for clients. The company also fabricates custom lighting for special, high-end corporate and institutional settings according to its own designs or the designs of lighting and interior designers or architects. Other projects have required the restoration of unique, precious antique fixtures or the re-creation of fixtures that were lost. Lighting fixtures resembling those of a specific period are often created out of antique parts sourced from pieces that Rambusch has on hand from decades ago.

Several fixture types that were revolutionary appear in the company's catalog over the decades. One is the Downlite, the first ellipsoidal downlight, patented by Rambusch in 1936. The fixture is so-called because it employs a round, ellipse-shaped reflector that reflects the pinpoint of light produced by the lamp downward into the space being lit through a small aperture in the ceiling. The bulb housing and reflector are completely concealed above the ceiling plane. These can be used to illuminate tasks such as reading, although some reflector and lens combinations can be built that make them suitable for wall-washing or use as accent lights.

Another fixture-type patented by Rambusch much later is a small, low-profile uplight. The smallest of these was originally called the Lite Pak, and the LED version is known now as the FlitePak. These are used to wash a room's ceiling plane. They are available as utilitarian, box-like housings that can be concealed above an interior soffit, for example, or put into decorative, architectural housings

made of brass or bronze designed to be mounted in full view on a column or pilaster. The firm also makes small accent fixtures that are aimable, compact, and as unobtrusive as possible. These are used to provide visual emphasis for a special piece of artwork or an architectural feature.

While the concepts behind these fixtures sound simple, the optical reflector designs that are needed to do such things as providing an even wash of light over a short distance are highly complex. They are proprietary designs that are the product of years of research. Over the decades, the innovative fixture designs have evolved to accept the latest innovations in light sources, changing over time from simple single-filament bulbs to quartz-halogen, compact-fluorescent, and low-voltage sources. Today, Rambusch's entire line of fixtures is manufactured with LEDs and are compatible with a number of different dimming systems.

Rambusch's lighting production philosophy is completely unlike that of most manufacturers. whose products are mass-produced, commodity-grade items, frequently produced off-shore and stored by the tens of thousands in warehouses. While the company maintains a full catalog of fixtures on its website, every light fixture ordered is manufactured in its Jersey City workshops, cut and shaped by workers standing at stomp-shears and metal brakes, beefy milling machines, lathes, drill presses, and grinders. Some of these machines are more than 75 years old and have been with the company so long that this is the third Rambusch factory where they have been used. The work is still manufactured, wired, buffed, and finished at benches by humans, not by robots. Many Rambusch fixtures proudly wear the label "Made in the USA."

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Since Rambusch was founded in New York City on December 7, 1898, it has been a partner to clients and designers on hundreds of thousands of projects. These range in scale from a few fixtures on a job to truly extraordinary work such as designing, commissioning, and overseeing the installation of the massive mosaics that cover the domes at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. where the firm has been working on various projects since 1931. No two companies would approach this many projects in exactly the same way, but it is hard to imagine any company other than Rambusch that could complete all of them.

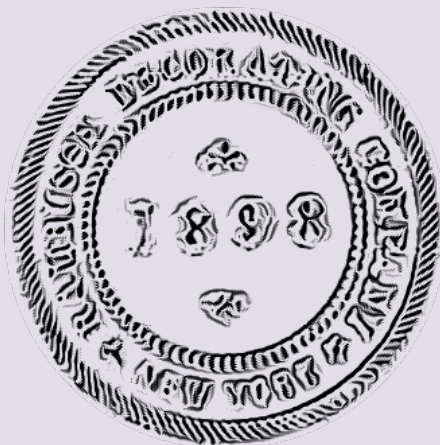
The firm's success in mastering these complex, multifaceted projects is due not only to the ability of its employees and artisans to design and make beautiful objects but also to the ability of its principals to gather and organize massive amounts of information to manage the work. Just establishing a scope and budget for a large, complicated restoration project, for example, might include making detailed inventories of hundreds of pieces of equipment to be removed, restored or replaced, and reinstalled, documenting and evaluating the condition of each of these items, starting sketches, and design drawings. During this process, timelines and schedules for the completion

of each task, including coordinating its work with other trades and contractors, are developed. Everyone's eyes are kept on the budget at all times.

Much has been made in recent years of a new method of project delivery called "design-assist contracting" and "value-based selection" in which the designers or, in some cases, the artisans who will actually complete the work are hired in the early stages of a project, prior to the creation of drawings, specifications, and bidding documents. This is so that they may lend their expertise to the architect or general contractor.

It is worth noting that design-assist and value-based selection aren't new ways of contracting for Rambusch. The truly spectacular variety of work, each project coming with its own unique characteristics, simply could never have been accomplished without the institutional knowledge that has been passed from father to son for the past 125 years. Rambusch's culture of collaboration among client, artists, and installers requires looking at every job as a problem-solving process where every component must be approached creatively.

The projects in our book are divided into four sections: engineered lighting, decorative lighting, interiors, liturgical environments, and artwork and mosaics. Please enjoy looking at the remarkable breadth and depth of the work accomplished by this extraordinary American company.



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