

## Dining: When Lighting Sets the Mood

William Lee Joel, II, Senior Lighting Specialist, Richmond Art Company

In the figure to the right, which of the scenes would you prefer as the setting for a relaxed evening of fine dining?

Okay, I'll confess. The choice of answers above is somewhat loaded. Just from the wording alone, I suspect that no one would pick Choice #1 except under duress. As for Choice #3, it is surprising how many fine restaurants still choose to go this dubious route, perhaps under the impression that the darker the setting, the more romantic the ambience. (On the other hand, if you can't see what's on your plate, maybe you shouldn't eat it.) So that leaves Choice #2 which, as you have no doubt surmised by now, is my choice as the "best answer."

To illustrate, let's take the lighting situation in a fairly typical residential dining room and see how we might improve it. Here, more likely than not, there will be a chandelier centered over the dining room table. Whatever its style, the basic design of the chandelier probably dates to the 17th, 18th or 19th century, to the eras of candles or gaslight. The updated version has been fitted out with electric bulbs of one sort or another, either bare bulbs or behind shades, that are generally too bright. But, you say, this light can be muted through the use of dimmers. True enough, but I submit that the net effect will more likely turn out to resemble Choices #1 or #3 because by themselves, most chandeliers simply aren't capable of producing light as described in Choice #2.

No, this is not a plea to junk your chandelier. Some chandeliers I've seen are handsome objects, indeed. I don't think, however, that chandeliers are proper fixtures for good lighting. We should treat them as they were originally conceived – as an important decorative accessory, lit



either by candles or with low-level bulbs as candle substitutes.

But as a lighting solution in the dining room, I would suggest small, state-of-the-art recessed ceiling fixtures with low wattage lamps, probably halogen, to achieve an ambience that can be absolutely breathtaking. With such a set-up, a small amount of soft light accents your centerpiece and individual plates while the effects of light and shadows add sparkle to the scene. Everyone can clearly see the colors and texture of the food, enhancing their tastes, while the soft light reflecting off the table cast a glow that make both you and your guests look at your best. If there is a crystal chandelier above the table, the light from the recessed ceiling fixtures passing through it will magnify the effect. Or where there is no chandelier – restaurants, for example, seldom can have a chandelier over each table – just the

recessed ceiling lights alone can get the job done.

The lighting over the dining table is only one part of the total dining room solution. The sideboards, serving tables, and wall decorations all help to make this the most dramatic of rooms. Each of these areas need their special and correct level of lighting to make the dining room a complete, pleasing entity. Each also helps to add a new dimension to the phrase:

***“Dining at Its Best”***

### About the Author

Bill Joel received his B.A. from Brown University with creative design courses at the Rhode Island School of Design. He did further studies in interior and lighting design at the New York School of Design and Pratt Institute.

A professional member of AID-ASID from 1963 to 1993, Bill received a

Fellowship from ASID in 1978. In 1992, he became one of the first Certified Interior Designers of the Commonwealth of Virginia. His work experience includes residential, commercial and institutional remodeling and new structures, as well as a

number of feasibility studies, all with an emphasis on effective, energy-conscious, quality-lit environments. For more details, consult *Marquis Who's Who in America*. Bill has also served as a member of the FIDER Board of Visitors and Accreditation

Committee, Foundation for Interior Design Education and Research; set and lighting designer for the Richmond Forum and Barksdale Theatre; and guest speaker on various radio and TV spots. Bill may be reached at [Rich@RichArtCo.com](mailto:Rich@RichArtCo.com).