



### **Collectrium Conversations: “Illuminating Collections” with Lighting Designer Claudia Librett & Anne Dayton**

Claudia Librett of 521 Atelier specializes in lighting design for private collections, considering how elements like the intensity and color of illumination can transform the experience of appreciating art in the home. In a conversation with Collectrium’s Anne Dayton, Librett expounded her philosophy and process, elucidating what to expect when working with a lighting designer to enhance your collection.

#### **THINK IN MOVEMENT – Explain this for us?**

Being able to project yourself into a three-dimensional space that often isn’t even built yet is critical to my job. I sometimes joke that if somebody looked at me working, they would just think I was zoning out, but when I’m studying plans and drawings of spaces that I need to apply some design to, I’m projecting myself into the space. I don’t think of space as stationary. I think of being in the space and moving around in the space. When I’m lighting an art collection – and most often it’s a private art collection – I’m thinking about daylight in the space, I’m thinking about the finishes and materials, and I’m thinking about where people might be sitting and what they might be doing. That kind of experience of dealing with art is very different from museums.

#### **KNOW THAT PERCEPTION IS SUBJECTIVE– How do you engage with your clients?**

We all have our own idiosyncratic way of perceiving things. I’ve always been very conscious of how light influences the way we perceive everything – perspective, color, form. I think this ability has something to do with having been a serious dancer for many years because, as a dancer, you are constantly perfecting this moving form, which happens to be your body, and the influence of light on that experience is profound. With each project, I try to understand how a client perceives things. I don’t assume that anybody has the same attitude of anybody I’ve ever dealt with before. I elicit as much information as I can so, as much as possible, I can see through their eyes. I frequently get samples so the client can see the real quality and color of the illumination I am proposing. Everyone sees color differently and most people are unconscious of it. That’s why the little

experiments and demonstrations that you can do together are very useful, so there is no misunderstanding.

#### **CHANNEL BRILLIANCE – Tell us about a most memorable project.**

There’s no typical project. I’ve worked on a 40,000-square-foot house in the Caribbean, the construction of which took 6 years. We had a yacht project where the marine architect was from San Diego, the cabin designers were British, and it was built in South Africa. I’ve had the opportunity to light all different kinds of Alexander Calder mobiles – that work is so joyful. It was an opportunity to play with moving shadow in a really meaningful way, which is a delight. It really varies a lot. One experience that stands out, however, is lighting a black Nevelson for a collector – he was a dealer but this was a work by Louise Nevelson in his private collection. I said, “You know, I would like to use a subtle blue gel on the light.” This is an unusual thing for me to suggest because it seems like a very theatrical effect. I said, “We’re not trying to make this black wood look like a different color, I just think that it will enrich the surface somehow.” And the client stood there and he slowly smiled. He told me, “That’s what Louise said once.” That was very gratifying. I felt like I was somehow intuitively sensing what the artist wanted.

#### **PLAN AHEAD —There are many options**

With each project, we have to assess whatever limitations we have architecturally in the space for me to start determining what kinds of sources, and which sources in particular, will be feasible. Sometimes there are just physical limitations – you have low ceilings or concrete slabs or it’s an old frame house and you don’t have the full sets of plans. We do a little investigation at the beginning because I don’t want to backtrack once I make my decisions. The specification of control devices is a whole other arena that needs to be coordinated. And conservation issues are important, especially for works on paper and for textiles. You have to worry about exposure to ultraviolet and infrared light. New technologies like LEDs and advances in fibre optics are helping us with those kinds of issues. If someone has an expanding collection we design the space to anticipate that. I always propose alternatives to a client too because there’s never just one way of doing anything.

#### **ILLUMINATE INVISIBLY – How would you describe your work?**

My work is not flashy. My lighting design serves the art and the client’s need for using the space in a certain way. A lot of times when the lighting is really successful, people aren’t even aware of it. They are just having this wonderful experience, and that’s certainly enough. I have to be conscious about how I create the lighting design, but the client doesn’t necessarily need to be. They should just be enjoying the results of it. I’m in the background having a profound, hopefully positive, impact on their experience.

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