

# Building Panel Lamps

## The Quick Way to Make Lampshades

by Brian McMillan



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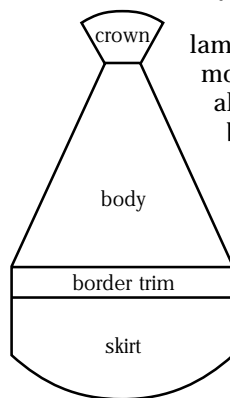
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### Building Panel Lamps or How to Make a Lamp for Aunt Clara in Under 10 Hours

From day one, I have loved stained glass lampshades—everything from simple antique curved glass panel lamps to the real Tiffany lamps. I was truly shocked to discover that the “Tiffany style” lampshades which were advertised in Canadian Tire (our version of WalMart) really didn’t resemble the originals in any way. (Next, I’ll probably learn that Tiffany isn’t still alive and designing lamps in China.) After painstakingly reproducing a Tiffany dragonfly lamp using the traditional mold method, I realized that as much as I appreciated the artistry involved in this type of lamp, there was no way that I was going to be able to pay the bills making and selling them. I am not saying that this is an impossible feat in other parts of the world, but it certainly wasn’t going to work for me in the middle of the Canadian prairies in what is often lovingly referred to as “wholesale city.”



So I started designing my own flat panel lamps. Since a panel lamp does not require a mold on which to construct the lamp, I was already ahead of the game. Panel lamps can be made in many different shapes and sizes. A panel lamp generally consists of a crown, a main body and a skirt.

The main design is usually on the skirt. Occasionally, the design will continue on to the body and crown to tie the project together. Now here is where the fun starts.

For simple variations you can drop the crown as in diagram “A.” This makes the lamp look a little more contemporary. Now you can make the skirt in two parts and turn the bottom piece

inward as in diagram “B.” Or, if you make the skirt and body the same height and add another body section on the top, you will end up with a dome shape as in diagram “C.” I have found that four-sided, six-sided, eight-sided and twelve-sided lamps seem to have the best symmetry. Every lamp that I have made that has had either three, five or seven sides has looked slightly crooked from at least one angle.

If you drop by your local stained glass shop, you will find numerous books available with full-size patterns for stained glass lampshades. You will find patterns which could be used for hanging lamps, table lamps, floor lamps, ceiling lamps, goose neck lamps, pool table lamps or wall sconces. These patterns can be used exactly as offered in the books. However, you will often find that the design you really like is either too big or too small for your purpose. The size of the pattern can be easily altered by simply reducing or enlarging the pattern on a photocopying

machine. Remember that most machines will not copy symmetrically. A good way to check to see if your pattern is symmetrical is to cut each section of the lamp out of one single piece of cardboard or clear window glass. I prefer clear window glass because: 1) I always have cutoffs handy in my studio, 2) I can never find my paper scissors, and 3) the glass can be reused. If, after cutting, you flip the template over so the back is facing up and it still fits the pattern properly, you are okay. More often than not, it will be slightly askew. Redraw the pattern by placing your photocopy underneath a sheet of graph paper and using it as a guide. I prefer to use graph paper that has at least 10 squares per inch, or as many as possible. This way, I am always using full squares and my patterns are very accurate. Use the clear glass or cardboard testing

technique to ensure that your pattern is now square and you are set. Keep in mind that if your pattern is not accurate, the lamp will not fit together properly, so don’t rush this process.

If you are artistic, you can use the outside dimensions of a lamp pattern in a book and change the design to suit your needs. A suncatcher design or an element from a stained glass window will often work well. Remember that if you change the proportions of the panel—even slightly—the overall shape of the lamp will be affected, sometimes dramatically. For example, if you have a twelve-sided panel lamp and you add one square (on the graph paper) per side to the top width, it will make the top diameter of the lamp significantly larger and the pitch of the lamp will increase noticeably. I highly recommend making a cardboard mock up of the lamp before cutting any glass to avoid disappointment. Keep adjusting the mock up until you are satisfied.

Traditionally, stained glass lampshades have been constructed out of opalescent glass. The main reason for this was to cut down on the glare of the light bulb. This is still an important consideration. However, beveled glass, textured cathedral glass and wispy opalescent

glass give a sparkle and life to modern lamps which wouldn’t be possible otherwise. There are also some beautiful lighting fixtures available which add to the beauty of the lamp—especially if the glass is translucent.

Your assignment at this point is to find a lamp design that you wish to make and purchase the glass needed. Books are available with designs for contemporary, arts and crafts, beveled glass or traditional lamps. Better still, why not take some of the techniques suggested in this column and create your own design. You will be surprised how much fun the creative process can be. In the next issue, I will guide you through the cutting, assembling and finishing processes.

