

VARIETY

Minneapolis artist spreads the sacred light to synagogues around the world

Local show celebrates the work of Claude Riedel, who has created ner tamids for more than 175 synagogues.

By Erica Pearson (<https://www.startribune.com/erica-pearson/6370537/>) Star Tribune |

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Eternal lights — their shine refracting in pieces of fused glass, beautiful blown flames and intricate stained glass — fill the main gallery at Foci Minnesota Center for Glass Arts.

They are the work of Minneapolis artist Claude Riedel, who specializes in creating the ner tamid, or eternal light, that hangs above a synagogue's ark.

The lights he creates in collaboration with glass blowers and metal and bronze workers shine in more than 175 congregations around the world, including in several Twin Cities synagogues. Now his lights are shining in the show, "[From Darkness Into Light: Claude Riedel and the Art of the Ner Tamid](https://www.mnglassart.org/exhibitions-1/2021/12/2/from-darkness-into-light-claude-riedel-and-the-art-of-the-ner-tamid)," (<https://www.mnglassart.org/exhibitions-1/2021/12/2/from-darkness-into-light-claude-riedel-and-the-art-of-the-ner-tamid>) which runs through March 27.

The show includes nearly a dozen of Riedel's lights, clips from AMC's "Fear the Walking Dead" (which features one of Riedel's lights for an episode about a zombie-fighting rabbi) and photos of the strikingly beautiful ner tamid [he created for a St. Louis Park family](https://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-artist-turns-barbed-wire-from-holocaust-camp-into-eternal-light/377505331/) (<https://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-artist-turns-barbed-wire-from-holocaust-camp-into-eternal-light/377505331/>) using pieces of barbed wire from a Holocaust camp.

We talked with Riedel, who is also a psychologist, about how his artwork became known internationally ("My wife likes to say I'm on five continents," he said), its roots in his family history and how he recently decided to collect his life's work [into a book](https://clauderiedelart.com/) (<https://clauderiedelart.com/>). The conversation has been edited for space and clarity.

Q: Can you describe the importance of a ner tamid?

A: The ner tamid is the light that represents the eternal light, or the presence of God, that hangs over the front of every synagogue. ... The ner tamid is one of the most emotionally evocative or laden pieces of ceremonial art in the synagogue because often people have donated money in memory of someone for the previous ner tamid or for the current one. The passing of the torch, so to speak, is often challenging, and interesting and a very sensitive issue. You want to be respectful to the past while also moving in the new.

Q: How do you begin the work?

A: I collaborate with committees, sometimes with the rabbi directly, and I enjoy that period of conversation. I'm listening for the images or feelings they associate with the ner tamid and then I also ask them to describe to me, or show me pictures, or even respond to some of the pieces on my website to give us a sense of what they like about what I've done and what direction they might want things to go.

It's a collaborative process at first. And then at a certain point, we need to say, "OK, now you need to let go. Trust that you hired me, let me take it the rest of the way. And it will be special."

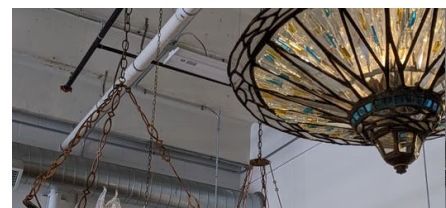
Q: You have ner tamids around the world, connecting Jews in different countries. What does that feel like?

A: It's very meaningful. It's that thread of connection that's inspired me to do this. It helps my connection to Judaism and, hopefully, it spreads the light so to speak, and passes on to others. The themes that I'm working from are really universal themes. The sense of moving from darkness to light, from pain, from suffering, from difficulty to



RICHARD TSONG-TAATARII, MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE

Claude Riedel is a Minneapolis artist known internationally for crafting Ner Tamids -- the beautiful "eternal lights" that hang in Jewish



healing and to the light. From shattered to back to whole.

Q: How did you create your first ner tamid?

A: This career, or this part of my life, came to me as a wonderful surprise. I had been doing stained glass windows for family and friends and some institutional pieces for about 15 years or so before Bet Shalom [now in Minnetonka] asked me to make the ner tamid for our sanctuary. I was delighted and honored to do that piece. But I didn't really understand or appreciate the significance of it to others as well as to myself until after services.

Many people would come up to me and thank me for the ner tamid, for how it had affected their prayer, their meditation, their experience of the service to be in the presence of something beautiful like that. It was very touching and very surprising to me.

A brief time after installing it, I sat with the ner tamid after services in a darkened sanctuary, and had this kind of revelatory experience of sensing and understanding that this light, it really pulled together all the threads of who I am. It pulled together the threads of my family's Holocaust survival and my own personal history and story. It was a way for me to contribute, to give back, to belong.

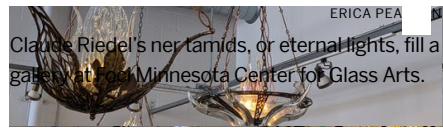
Q: Can you share some of your family's history?

A: My grandfather was arrested on Kristallnacht, trying to protect his synagogue, where the glass was all being destroyed, and then ended up in Buchenwald concentration camp. And my mother was able to get him out of there in 1938, risking her life to do so. And then she immigrated to Ecuador, where she reunited with my father. He had to escape separately because he was part of the socialist resistance. They agreed to meet in Ecuador if they survived, neither of them knowing what would happen.

Ten years later, they were able to get visas to come to the United States and eventually to Minnesota. So [when I looked up at the first light I created] it just occurred to me, because I grew up unconscious: This really is my life purpose. I decided at that moment, that this is what I wanted to do with my artwork. And I just dedicated myself to making ner tamids ever since.

Q: Are there some symbols that find their way into all of your pieces?

A: Not quite in every one, but in most of them, there are menorahs. All of them evoke in some way the burning bush, or the tree of life. All have some section that's made up of pieces that were not cut to fit, but rather were shattered, foiled and then pieced back together. Many of them have a quartz crystal Star of David in the bottom, or a Star of David in the chain. They all have flames in various ways, and they're all layered — showing the idea of light coming through multiple layers and moving out into space. The ever-expanding layers of life.



Erica Pearson covers faith and spirituality for the Star Tribune. Before joining the Star Tribune, she spent more than a decade at the New York Daily News, where she was an assistant city desk editor.

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