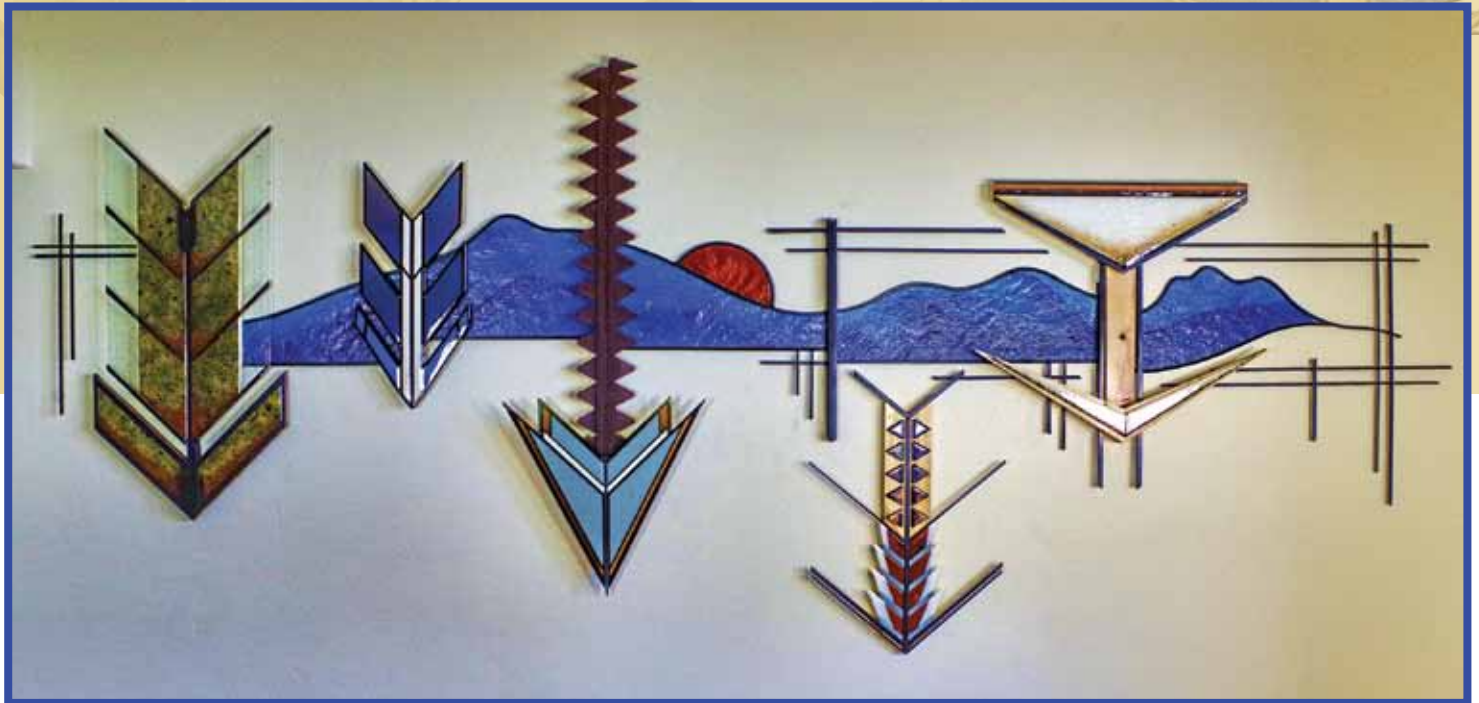


# The Art of Commissions



*Gil Reynolds, Angelscape, 12' x 15'*  
(approximate dimensions), 2013.

by Gil Reynolds

A lot of people don't like doing commission work. They don't like dealing with the client's vision, and they fear rejection if the client doesn't like the piece. I, on the other hand, thrive on every aspect of the process, and believe me, it *is* a process.

Creating custom artwork is like solving a puzzle. The more pieces of information I have, the better my solution. I think the key to doing commission work is perception. How much relevant information can I perceive to help me design a site-specific piece? I really try to take the time to study all of the aspects involved in viewing the final piece of art before I even start designing. Here is the mental checklist I go through when researching a site.

- What kind of lighting do I have? Is it transmitted or reflective light or both? Is it natural daylight or artificial, incandescent or florescent? At what angle will the light be striking the art?
- What is the viewing distance? Is it viewed up close or far away? Are there multiple key viewing locations and angles?
- What are the established motifs, textures, colors, and surfaces? What do the existing visual elements need to round out a finished environment?
- What do the clients believe will satisfy their needs? How much freedom do I have? What are my budget and timeline considerations?

The list goes on and on and it can be slightly different for each commission.

I recently finished a project for a private residence in Central Oregon entitled *Angelscape*. It was a very challenging commission that pushed me into some new skill sets. Here is how I got from point A to point B.

## A Serendipitous Meeting

The project started when a couple came to my studio one Saturday in August 2013. We are not usually open on Saturdays, but I happened to be there working on a project. They wanted to know if I was the artist who made the glass wall sculpture for the Jory Restaurant at the Allison Hotel and Spa. "Yes, that's me." They liked that piece of art, and they were wondering what would it cost and if I would be interested in making something for a large vacant wall in their new home. "How large?" I asked. They said it was about 15 feet wide by 12 feet tall. That's a big wall for a home.

I showed them samples from the Allison project to get a feel for what in particular they liked about it. Was it the warm colors, the free-form shapes, the heavily textured surfaces, or the invisible display system that makes it seem as if the pieces are floating in space? As we talked, they shared what worked and didn't work for them, and I started to get the feeling that this would be a great couple to have as clients. They were articulate and smart, and they seemed to understand my aesthetic. I threw out some ballpark figures, which seemed fine to them, so I agreed to drive over and look at their site.



*Gil Reynolds, Endless Flight, wall sculpture for the Jory Restaurant at the Allison Hotel and Spa.*



*Established motifs found in the clients' Prairie School-style home provided inspiration, including the interior and exterior stonework, front door insets and transom, and an abundant use of pine.*

## Viewing the Site

The three-hour drive from the Willamette Valley where I live over the Cascade mountain range is unbelievably beautiful. There are incredible vistas with lakes, snow covered peaks, and the seemingly endless forests transitioning from tall Douglas firs to rangeland with stands of lodgepole and ponderosa pines. Central Oregon is the high desert with the dry smell of juniper in the air. By the time I arrived at their home, I was already getting used to the openness of the area. This is big cattle county and it has a long history, first with the Native Americans who flourished in the area, then with the ranchers and farmers who settled there.

The couple's home is on a hillside with a spectacular view to the east. They can watch the sun rise each morning over the distant Willowa Mountains. The approach to the house has a lot of native stonework, which is a dominant visual element as you walk up the front steps. The house itself incorporates a lot of Prairie School elements. In fact, the front door and sidelight inserts have very strong geometric Frank Lloyd Wright-style designs.

The interior flooring and kitchen cabinets are local pine, and the same stone used on the exterior is also used in the fireplace located across from "the wall." The interior walls are painted with a matte-finished light amber color, and there are large picture windows to the right.

Eastern light is my favorite light source for glass, because it is so balanced. It isn't as cool as northern light, which is ideal for work spaces and isn't as hot as light from the west or the south. When viewed in eastern light, cool colors tend to pop, while the warmer hues tend to soften a bit. In the center of the ceiling is a hanging Prairie-style fixture with incandescent bulbs for the evening, which I also like because that light is warm without being too harsh.

The wall is a focal point for the living room and can also be viewed from most of the adjacent kitchen area. It is a big wall with a high ceiling and an open entryway around the corner to the left. This is a very spacious, wide-open area that basically felt empty.



*The initially intimidating blank wall that provided a wide variety of possibilities.*

The clients said they love to watch the sun, sometimes bright red, coming up over the distant mountains in the morning, so they requested that the sun and mountains be part of the design. They also really liked the unusual textured surfaces I used on the Allison job and indicated that they were open to suggestions for the color scheme.

There was a lot to take in, but I believed that I had a good feeling for the space. We struck a deal, signed contracts, I got a deposit, and I headed home.



## The Design Stage

Back when I was still in art school, I became fascinated by the concepts of the Prairie School. It grew out of the Arts and Crafts movement in the 1890s and, much like Art Nouveau, it was a counter reaction to the industrial revolution and mass production. But where Art Nouveau emphasized the organic, curvy lines of nature, the Prairie School was all about simplified geometry and straight lines. The incorporation and integration of those two schools of thought have been dominating features in my work since the early 1970s. I love the visual tension and balance that is created when strong geometric elements are superimposed over curvy, organic forms.

Frank Lloyd Wright was often involved in every aspect of a building. He referred to his designs as “T-square art,” because they were images he could compose on the drafting table. He designed dining room tables and chairs, lighting fixtures, fireplace screens, and stained/leaded glass windows. Once when the roof of a church he designed started leaking, he even designed special buckets to catch the rain water. He was also a master at letting repeating lines and borders become a primary design element. I researched some of his different adornments and was pleased to find so many examples using triangles and the downward-pointing arrowhead motif.

I had taken about 50 pictures while I was at the site and started going over them looking for inspiration. I was stuck, so I printed out several copies of a frontal shot of the wall and started drawing on them. I kept playing with different ideas but nothing was really working. Then it came to me. I love landscapes for many different reasons, and maybe this is because I take so many life drawing classes, but I really see a lot of human forms in landscapes. I decided to incorporate a nude into a blue mountain range that would run through the entire piece. I hired one of the models from drawing class to do a photo shoot and was able to get the right angle, proportions, and shading for a reclining nude.

My biggest kiln will only take a 3-by-4-foot piece of glass, so I needed to come up with a way to break the landscape into small sections that wouldn't be obvious to the viewer. I found myself going back to the downward arrow motif that was in the front door and sidelight inserts.

While sketching different medallions over the landscape, I noticed that they had a strong compositional pull. I prefer compositions that move the eye, ones that encourage the viewer to look around the whole artwork rather than causing attention to be focused on just one spot. The arrows made me look down, then the mountain peaks pulled my eye back up to the top of the image, so my eyes were scrolling down and around in a loop.

I pulled out the old drafting board, T-square, and triangles and drew up several different designs using various sized geometric medallions. I got really excited about this approach. From a func-

tional standpoint, putting those shapes in front of the landscape hid my seams, so the mountain range appeared to be one long form. I gave the arrows a Native American feel to reference the character of the area and make a central Oregon connection. Drawing upon the Prairie School influence, I mimicked some of the Frank Lloyd Wright style of lines and borders while giving them all my own twist. I found that as I worked on the medallions, they started to take on their own personalities. Each one was a separate work of art, yet they were all interconnected to the larger composition. I was having fun.



*Reynolds capturing the forms and shapes he discovered while contemplating the vista from the clients' home (top) in the design plan.*

The clients liked the proposed design. It was not a direction they had previously considered, but it worked for them. The piece was maybe a little busy with all of the lines, but they liked the medallions and the nude in the mountains—like a reclining angel. I think the client came up with the title *Angelscape*, and I liked it. I got the green light, but now I had to figure out how to build the piece. It was a good thing that I had a stud finder with me. I used it to make a chart with the location of all the studs in the wall.

## Building the Art

Everyone works differently. I can't just blow up an image to its large size and start building. I use the enlarging process as an added design opportunity and make changes and modifications as I'm sketching out the image. I also need to be able to step back to see the full size as I'm working on it, so I built a plywood wall to scale. I hung up pieces of butcher paper and used charcoal—bold looking yet easy to erase—and started drawing the landscape. Having the photo of the model really helped me with the drawing. A grid on both the photo and the large wall showing intersecting points helped me to get my proportions.

I used some large slabs of stone as molds and made a high-temperature casting to use in the kiln, then started making different glass test pieces. I was after a blue that was translucent and thick enough to have a bit of an inner glow in reflection. System 96 has some of the most beautiful blue cathedral colors around, so I made about a dozen test pieces out of different combinations layered together. I fired them face down on the textured stone mold, and I loved the resulting surface.

Another consideration was figuring out how to mount these pieces to the wall. I got some square 1/2-inch steel rods and started making a frame. Here I ran into a problem. Cutting straight pieces of steel and welding them into a frame worked for the bottom edge of the mountains, but I really needed a frame that could also follow the contours along the top of the mountains.

I took an old glory hole for glassblowing and cut a hole in the back, hooked up a propane tank, and . . . Presto! I had a metal forge. I stuck a metal bar inside, let it get red hot, and tried to bend it into shape. Okay, that was harder than I thought it would be, so I went on YouTube, found a few blacksmithing videos, and basically taught myself some forging techniques.

That was fun, but I needed more metal. A trip to the scrap yard netted some more metal bars, funny looking cutouts, a very cool gear that later became the frame for the sun, and a wheat-cutting blade from a harvester. Now I was armed and dangerous.

Having the wall was great. I tried lots of different shapes and patterns to see how they would all interrelate, then made some cardboard medallions and hung them on the wall. The way the pine was used in the clients' home was very appealing, so I asked them for some of the same wood and made a wood-and-metal medallion, then added pieces of glass. I was on my way to figuring this out.

Photoshop is one of my new favorite tools, and I used it to make modifications. I would take a photo of the wall and use Photoshop to shrink, enlarge, and move my medallions. This really helped me fine-tune and dial in the composition. Each time I would commit to the placement of a particular component, I would take a picture and adjust the other elements.

All of the medallions needed to be in front of the landscape, so I made different mounting systems, each of which would be hidden from the viewer. I ended up using primarily panel clips on the back of a piece of wood, with the glass elements attached to the front of the board. If it was just bare glass, like the blue crackled component, I used Hang Your Glass standoffs.



*Slabs of stone working as models for making high-temperature castings to use in the kiln.*



*Pieces of blue glass fired face down on the molds to add texture and eliminate the glossy surface.*



*Building a full-scale wall to replicate the final location using cardboard, tape, and chalk to "test" the different design elements for balance before cutting them from glass.*



## Experimenting with Different Designs

So that each medallion would be very different, I began experimenting with different looks. One is made out of 1/4-inch float glass textured over fiber paper and colored with Fuse Master LO Enamels. Another is blue System 96 frit that was crackled, then layered over amber so that light bouncing off of the back wall will shine through. The metal teeth of the harvester blade made a great repetitive triangular pattern, so I cut the blade in half and incorporated it into the design. The glass below the blade was an exercise in precision cutting. I wanted each of the thin, dark border lines to be one piece rather than several shorter pieces butted together. That meant cutting strips that were 1/4-inch wide by 20 inches long. Once I got the feel, it went quickly.

To make the landscapes, all of the individual frames were welded and the outside was used as the pattern to cut layers of sheet glass that served as the base. Then working on a flat table, I put the frames on top of the base glass and started adding layers of frit. I made up three frit blends, each with a different mix of colors and particle sizes, then sprayed the base with Fuse Master Fusing Solution and sprinkled on a layer of frit. I kept adding more Fusing Solution and frit until the 3/8-inch metal frames were filled to the top. The Fusing Solution held everything in place much better than hair spray, and I was able to remove the frames and fire each tile face up. When they were cool, I used a grinder to remove approximately 3/8 inch of excess glass around each piece. Once they would precisely fit inside their individual frames, I fired them face down on the stone mold to give them a textured front.

I left my original butcher paper up and used it as a pattern, putting all of the pieces on the wall and marking the location of each element and screw hole on the paper. Then I made packing crates for each piece, rolled up my pattern, grabbed some tools, and headed over the mountain.

The paper pattern was a lifesaver. I taped it to the wall and, with the help of my cousin Mike, we drilled each hole, took down the paper, and mounted all of the pieces in about two hours. Whew!

Everyone seemed pleased with the results. The clients were a bit blown away by the transformation from the drawing to an actual piece of art. Even a good sketch can't capture how something will look in real life. It was fun seeing their delight as they discovered all of the subtleties of the piece. It activates the wall and relates to the site on numerous levels. I am extremely grateful for this commission and feel blessed that I was able to work with such fascinating and challenging puzzles.

GA



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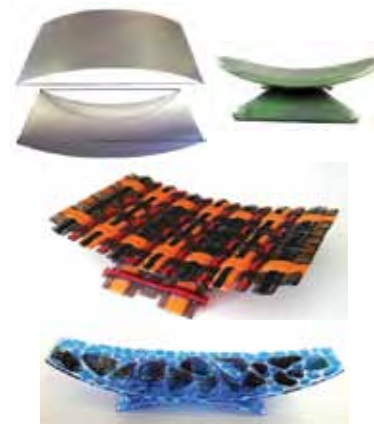


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