



BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITY

A little shop in New York City celebrates the glory of the lightbulb in the waning days of incandescence

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ILLUMINATED: In the window display of David Brooks's third-generation lighting store, strips of ice-blue LEDs flash beside lantern lights and amber-toned carbon bulbs. The LEDs are the same kind of lights that hang from the maple trees across the street from Macy's famous Manhattan department store around Christmastime. "The light drips from one bulb to the next in a random pattern," simulating rain or falling snow, Brooks explains. "It just looks neat."



YOU HAVE SYLVANIAS!” David Brooks hoots when a customer plucks from a briefcase two slender glass tubes, long and clouded like fluorescent lamps. They’re incandescent Lumiline bulbs, Brooks says, “very popular in the 1930s.” He appraises them fondly, like a wine connoisseur regarding a bottle of 1961 Lafite-Rothschild. “Sylvania hasn’t made them in maybe 20 years.”

A trim, angular man with a thick salt-and-pepper goatee and a brisk stride, Brooks is the proprietor of Just Bulbs, the brightest bulb shop in New York City. Here inside his shop, the simple 19th-century technology—just a resistive filament encased in an evacuated glass globe—is displayed in all its sundry dazzling forms. There are rainbow-striped disco bulbs, frosted flame-tipped holiday bulbs, flickering chandelier bulbs, and full-spectrum-daylight bulbs. White vanity bulbs crowd the shelves, and funnel-shaped halogens spill out into the aisles. Across the ceiling, Brooks has strung strands of party lights in every theme imaginable—flowers, bumblebees, cowboy hats, New York Yankee-logged baseballs, and Budweiser beer cans. He’s got bulbs for microscopes and vacuum cleaners and slide projectors and

BELOVED BULBS: Star bulbs [bottom left] are a big hit at Just Bulbs. “They’re very popular with old-fashioned Sputnik fixtures—you know, the ones that look like the old satellites the Soviets flew into space in the 1960s, with lots of little arms coming out of a silver globe? They look really special with our little stars on the ends,” Brooks says. Also popular are flickering electric chandelier lights [bottom center], which Brooks installed in Gracie Mansion, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the now-shuttered Tavern on the Green. His favorites are the antique carbon bulbs [bottom right and top]. They’re reproductions of 1890 and 1910 bulbs, with elaborately coiled amber filaments and names like “Squirrel Cage” and “Pig’s Tail.”

refrigerators, bulbs that glow like old gas lamps and ones that purport to make you more virile. In total, Brooks has crammed about 45 000 different types of bulbs into his 93-square-meter shop.

Brooks, formerly a lawyer, has sold lightbulbs for 27 years and has seen a lot of lighting fads come and go. But he hasn’t seen anything quite like what’s happening now: In 2007, the United States passed a law banning the manufacture of common incandescent lamps—notorious energy wasters—starting with 100-watt bulbs in 2012. “These plain old bulbs, they won’t

IN STOCK: David Brooks estimates that his New York City lighting shop carries about 45 000 different types of bulbs—not to mention lighting fixtures, sockets, and other parts.



THE PRICE YOU PAY: Among the most expensive bulbs Brooks sells are obsolete projector bulbs [left and far left], which run US \$200 to \$300. “Typically they go in old movie cameras, old 8-mm theater projectors, old strobe lights, that sort of thing,” Brooks says. “These were all handmade. The glass is handblown, and you can see they’ve got incredibly elaborate guts.”



exist much longer,” he remarks as he bags up a two-pack box of frosted Bulbrite Long Life lamps.

Elsewhere, the incandescent phaseout has already begun. In the European Union, for instance, it is illegal (as of September 2009) for shops to buy incandescent lamps of the frosted or 100-W variety. In Australia, shops are prohibited from importing tungsten bulbs, low-voltage halogen bulbs, and most other bulbs that radiate less than about 15 lumens per watt. Cuba is the only country that has altogether purged itself of lighting inefficiency, stopping the import and sale of incandescent bulbs in 2005 and sending social workers to Cubans’ homes to replace their old-style lamps with watt-saving compact fluorescent ones.

“What’s pretty funny is people hate the fact that lightbulbs are going,” Brooks says, though he doesn’t personally get nostalgic about them. Already he has begun to stock his store with energy-efficient stand-ins: curly compact fluorescents and light-emitting diodes of all shapes and sizes. But many of his customers aren’t as compliant about the switchover. “What they’re doing is they’re stocking up a lifetime supply,” he says. “We just had a lady in Tennessee who used to buy, all the time in her supermarket, soft pink lightbulbs, because they make you look good. Old ladies love pink lightbulbs. But you can barely get them anywhere anymore.”

Brooks sold the woman 1000 pink bulbs. “Apparently, she’s

selling them now to all her neighbors and old lady friends,” Brooks speculates. “And when her daughter gets married, she’s going to give them to her for a present.” Lightbulbs for a wedding present? “It’s the perfect present!” he insists.

You might say that bulbs are in Brooks’s blood. His grandfather, Augustine Brooks, was a light peddler, selling bulbs door to door throughout Manhattan. Brooks claims that Augustine used to replace the lights in the Empire State Building, one by one, “working his way down from the top.” Augustine opened Just Bulbs in 1942, in the middle of World War II, when incandescent lamps, like sugar and silk stockings, were scarce.

And they will soon be again. But you can bet that whatever bulb can be had, Brooks will have it. He keeps a list of antique shops, warehouses, and hardware stores that never bother to clear out old stock. So when he’s hunting for a rare bulb, he makes his way down the list, top to bottom, calling numbers in the same manner his grandfather once knocked on doors in the Empire State Building. Recently, he even convinced a Chinese bulb manufacturer to make the tubular Lumilines that every other manufacturer has stopped producing.

“How much to replace these, then?” inquired the owner of the obsolete Sylvania brand bulbs.

“A fortune,” Brooks sighed. □

IN THE MOOD: Even the lightbulb business goes through fads. “Last year for Halloween and Christmas, everyone bought blue,” Brooks observes. “Right now, we’re finding that a lot of people are buying the mood lightbulbs. They’re supposed to make you feel a certain way.” For instance, he’s got a bluish-turquoise one called “Serenity,” which is supposed to induce calmness. There’s also a variation on yellow that’s called “Happy.”



FULL SPECTRUM: “Did you know there are 35 different shades of white?” Brooks will ask if he catches you gawking at his spectral display [above]. “And every one of them has a different purpose. We just redid a pizzeria down the street, and the owners were convinced they wanted natural daylight. That kind of light makes diamonds look great. It makes fur look fantastic. It makes pizza look kind of gray. But that’s what they bought. Now, it’s really good pizza, so I don’t care.”