

The New York Times

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NEW YORK, MONDAY, JULY 10, 1978

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His Medium Is the Car Window

By RON ALEXANDER

The two knights on horseback, lances held high, are preparing to joust on a craggy cliff. In the background, surrounded by a forest heavy with trees, looms a fairy-tale castle. In the top right hand corner a ringed planet swirls in a starry sky.

An illustration from "When Knight-hood Was in Flower"? No, nor is it a scene from "Ivanhoe II." Actually, the situation takes place on a 1973 Chevrolet El Camino where it's permanently etched on the rear window.

The creator of the traffic-stopping medieval scene is Robb Rich, a hip 28-year-old who refers to himself as a "professional glass etcher." Although he has done etchings on such things as hanging panels, mirrors, even glass bricks, most of his work has appeared on "anything that moves," he said — cars, vans, limousines, trucks and motorcycles, in such car-congested cities as Pittsburgh, Denver and Los Angeles. In recent weeks he has been paying his annual visit to Queens, where he works out of Super Stock Per-

formance Inc., a garage on Corona Avenue in Elmhurst.

His big break, after 10 years of etching, came earlier this year when George Barris ("He's the king of customized cars in North Hollywood") hired him to etch the windows on Zsa Zsa Gabor's gold-colored Rolls-Royce. And how did he decorate the lady's jalopy? "Roses and vines frame the windshield and side windows; roses and hummingbirds swoop around the side windows," the artist said. And Miss Gabor's reaction? "She especially liked the butterfly I etched in the corner of one window. She said to me, 'It made the corner, darling.'"

Dragon Scenes a Favorite

Mr. Rich's most-requested scenes, he said, are nautical, castle, music, forest and science-fiction, which, along with "high fantasy," ranks as the artist's own favorite. Although he has etched "a lot of naked women" (second only to dragons as the most requested motif on motorcycle mirrors), he said he refused to draw anything pornographic or "sicko."

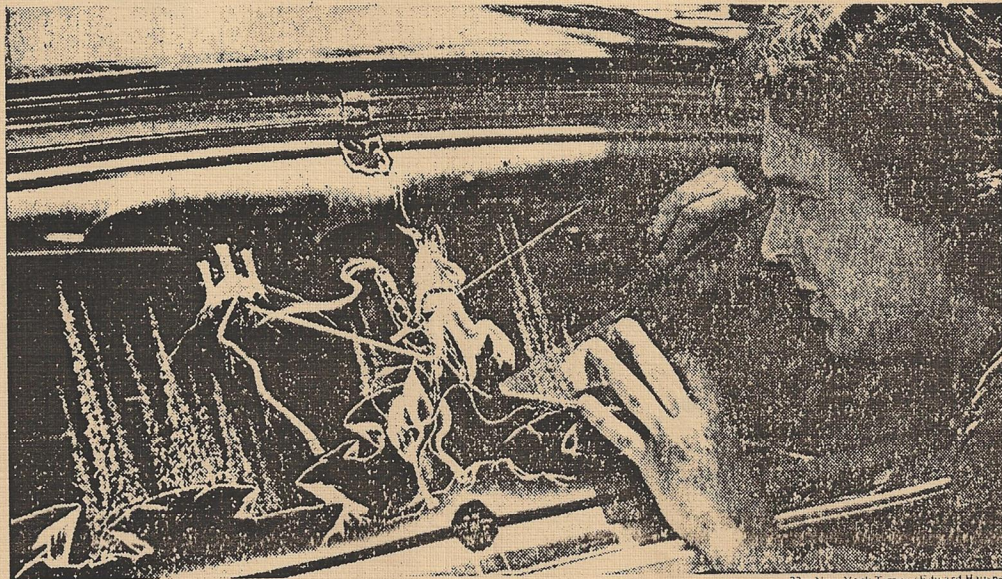
Prices depend on the amount of work

and the calculating involved. A set of vent windows, for example, can range anywhere from \$150 to \$300; the cost of doing an entire van would be around \$5,000. (In New York State, an entire vehicle would have to exclude the windshield; according to a spokesman for the State's Department of Motor Vehicles it is illegal to deface a windshield with anything that will obstruct the driver's view.)

Most of the clients are men like John Marsch, a 23-year-old Con Edison employee who said he wanted to give his 1967 Corvette "a unique kind of look" (he decided on a mélange of sailboat, birds, mermaid and clipper ship), and Tom Hill, a 25-year-old carpenter who opted for "King Neptune, mountains, the moon and a naked chick" for his 1976 Chevrolet van.

Mr. Rich says he does not intend to etch glass for the rest of his life. His burning ambition, he said, is "to open a restaurant made entirely of etched glass."

"It will be my masterpiece," he added. "Then I'll retire." He smiled.



The New York Times/Edward Hauser

Robb Rich etches a knighthood scene on a car's rear window