



The outside of American Glass Artist, Dumont, N.J., is landscaped with plenty of flowers and designed to look like a little country store.

“Old-Fashioned” Engraver focuses on Customers, Quality Art

by K. Schipper

ROBERT RICH USES WORDS SUCH AS, “old-fashioned,” “dinosaur” and, “not in the 20th century,” to describe his business. However, it’s doubtful his customers take them in anything but the most positive sense.

After a youth spent crisscrossing the country free-lance engraving mainly vehicle glass, Rich settled 10 years ago in the New York suburb of Dumont, N.J., where his American Glass Artist is the antithesis of the mass production gift shops.

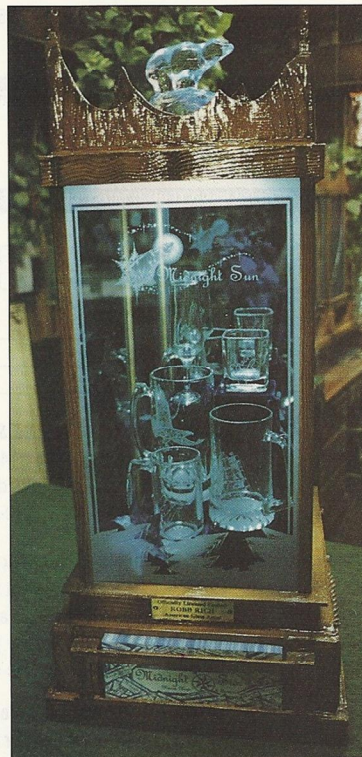
That’s not to say he won’t do a one-day turnaround on a job for a customer on a tight time schedule. However, his preference is to nurture both his clients and the glass he works by utilizing just the right technique to get the look he wants.

Or, as he puts it, “If I’m rushing, I’m going to compromise the quality.”

STARTING OUT

A self-described “tinkerer,” Rich got into the engraving business more than a quarter century ago quite by accident. And, he adds, he’s still tinkering around, experimenting with the best tools and methods to achieve the effects he creates.

Originally from the Bronx, Rich moved with his family to Dumont while still a small child. After getting married at the age of 18, he began working for a printing company doing offset lithography and, to make extra money, he ran a custom aquarium business on the side.



A handmade display for mugs. Each project is based on the customer’s budget, and the techniques Rich uses to create the piece are based on the art itself.

It was in that context that he was first exposed to decorating glass.

“I had to have something on the background of an aquarium,” he explains. “It was just basically some rocks and leaves and stuff. It was just a small part of a big job, but I ended up getting into it.”

Back in the early 1970s, getting into the type of work Rich wanted to do was no easy task.

“I just winged it,” he says, adding that many of his early efforts ended up in the trash. “When you’re starting out, you don’t know all these procedures are available to you, except through experimenting. In the beginning, you have to have the courage to experiment because you have to maintain the courage to fail. You’re not going to succeed unless you fail; success is made up of a large percentage of failures.”

Eventually, Rich began having more successes than failures as he moved away from aquariums, first with glass-topped coffee tables on driftwood bases, and later with what he calls, “the whole van thing.”

For several years, Rich was, as he puts it, “an itinerant glass artist,” spending time in the New York area; Norfolk and Virginia Beach, Va.; St. Louis; Pittsburgh and the West Coast, including a year in Hollywood where he worked for George Barris.

That, and his growing skill, earned him a fair amount of publicity, but the constant travel and time spent at car shows also took its toll.