

that's reflected in the finished product.

"The recipient of that gift knows who gave it to them, and knows they've taken the time to hunt it down," he says.

On larger projects, the budget, as much as where the customer wants to go with a job, is a driving factor.

Rich says he's blessed with an active imagination that rarely gets burned out except when multiple jobs back up. The customer's idea of an image on a mirror may grow to include an elaborate border with that image repeated, or even multiple mirrors, while a deer on a glass panel of a gun cabinet may be set off with 23-karat gold inlaid antlers.

"Perceptually, I can go on and on and on," he says. "But, first, we figure out where the customer wants to go. Then, we figure out a budget where I'll tell him, 'This will cost this much and this will cost this much and this will cost this much more.' That way, the person has a range where he can go."

### ACHIEVING WHAT THE CUSTOMER WANTS

Just as each project is based on the customer's budget, the techniques Rich uses to create the piece are based on the art itself.

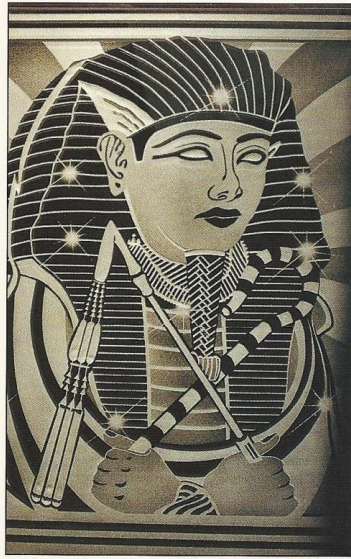
"I do mixed media, including the use of Dremel tools and every kind of etching there is to blend it all together," is how he explains it. "My goal is to achieve what the customer wants. It's not just a matter of putting down a resist and blasting. The procedure goes into every facet of it."

Even the way the spray gun hits the glass can have an impact of the look of a piece. Some of the work is so subtle Rich doesn't even wear a face shield when he's blasting.

"I keep getting shades lighter and lighter so that I'm barely touching the mirror in places," he says. "It's to get the right subtle effect, so that when you're walking past, the light has to catch it a certain way for you to see a certain thing."

Deciding which techniques to use is based on his years of experience and experimentation, he says, and one job may involve a lot of hand work, while another may be all etching except for the delicate lines of something such as a cat's whiskers.

It's here where Rich the tinkerer is probably at his best. For instance, during a trip one day to buy sand for his blaster, he saw a mason's rectangular trowel on a shelf. He now uses the curved end to



Rich does mixed media; his goal is to achieve what the customer wants. This piece was hand cut, sand blasted, and hand etched.

help create straight lines on mugs.

"I put a rubber backing on it, so it stays firm on the mug," he says.

Another option he's used over the years is a piece of venetian blind stuck to the surface with tape because it conforms to any bend while providing a steel surface against which to work.

"I have a lot of tools that are stupid little things that are lying around," Rich explains. "For instance, I have a number of different burnishers where I use the little round brass drawer knobs. I put them on a piece of wood and use them for burnishing."

Again, it goes back to what Rich says is the need to experiment, and to be willing to fail in order to succeed.

"There are things you can do if you're not afraid to use your imagination," he stresses. "Tools are very expensive as it is—the tools you have to have. You have to earmark your money for the most important things to get the job done, but the rest of it is fluff, and you can come up with other ways to get it."

### STAYING FOCUSED

In fact, sharing the insights he's developed on working with glass over his long career is one of Rich's primary goals these days. He's working on a book that

he conservatively estimates is still two or three years from being completed.

"It's going to basically be like a recipe book," he explains. "It's not going to be, 'Do this this way and that that way; buy this tool or that tool.' It's going to be the kind of book for the person who really has nothing and nowhere else to go. I want to bring the reader along to where he can start making money."

In other words, it will be the type of book Rich wishes he'd stumbled on when he started working with glass.

While that's in process, he'll continue to work on perfecting his art. He's even looked at adding computer capabilities to his shop, but after demoing some machines, Rich says he's noticed that in the time it takes to set things up, he's completed up to a dozen mugs in the same cursive script as his handwriting.

"It would never be a mainstay of my business, although it might speed certain things up," he says, not totally discounting making the step at some point.

But, he adds, its attractiveness is in doing multiples of a given design, and while he will sometimes do things like repeating a particular logo multiple times, it's not what he prefers to do.

"I'm honest with the customer," he says. "There are other people out there who do that work, and I'll say, 'If that's what you're looking for, I'll send you someplace else where you'll be happier.'"

In short, Robb Rich has found a niche where he likes to work, and he's ordered his life to be the way he wants to live it. And, as important as his work and his book are to him, his main goal is to keep on doing what he's doing now.

He says friends who knew him in his earlier days are surprised he's still working with glass, but it's all part of a larger lifestyle that works for him.

"It's tough to stay focused for a single day in this day and age, let alone 15 or 20 years," Rich says. "It's a struggle trying to live a lifestyle you know is more correct than rushing around doing all kinds of unimportant things and burning yourself out."

"I'm staying with the no-glamour, old-fashioned approach," he concludes. "Fortunately, there are people out there that remember the old days. People who come to me come because they know the work is being done by hand. They work hard for their money, and they like to know somebody's working hard to make them something." 