

Glass Etching: Growing Art Form at Beach

By MELINDA FORBES
Beacon Staff Writer

VIRGINIA BEACH — When Rob Rich scratches someone's glass-topped coffee table, no one minds.

It is something he is being paid to do.

Rob is a glass etcher and scratching designs on tabletops, mirrors, windows, desk tops and car vents is the way he makes his living.

A three-year resident of the city, Rob said

glass etching is something he just happened to hit on.

A former aquarium toy designer with several patents to his credit, Rob happened on his etching idea when he was experimenting with a glass-topped driftwood table he had constructed.

He toyed with that sort of etching for a while, he said and then someone came up with a van window to do and he was in business.

Since that time, he has worked on his techniques and now has what he calls a complicat-

ed system for decorating glass that makes use of a variety of specialized tools.

Always on the lookout for innovations to make his work easier, Rob designs and builds his own implements for etching.

Hunched over his homemade work table in the garage of his home at the north end of the beach, Rob etches everything from flowers to sailing ships to pirate maps to stars and space scenes for his clients.

The art of his work, he said, is not in the actual glass etching, but rather in the pattern designing on paper.

"Everything to do with the glass is mechanical."

Patterns come from library books and customer's ideas and sketches.

At the present time, much of Rob's work can be seen on van windows in the city.

A New Jersey native, the 26-year-old said since his is a new technique in the art medium, he sometimes has trouble explaining what he does.

"You just can't get the picture of what he

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Glass-Etching Popularity Increasing



Beacon Photos by Melinda Forbes

Etching Class

Debbie Rice, one of Rob's etching students, at worktable

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is talking about until you see it," said Debbie Bills.

She and her husband met Rob at a recent van show and seeing samples of his work decided to have the rear windows of their yellow van decorated.

The vehicle is a conversation getter. "People are always stopping to look," laughed Debbie as a couple walked past her van then backstepped for a second look at her windows. "It is something not everyone has yet."

Customized painting and interiors have been the "thing" for vans for the past few years, said Rob. Now he thinks etched windows will be joining those ranks.

Using a combination of carbides and abrasive stones, he works with a range of tools to get

the effect he is looking for on hand worked designs. Different pieces give different textures.

No one theme is more popular than others, he said, although he does do a large number of sea and space scenes.

The work is not without its difficulties.

"It can take from a few days to even weeks to do the windows in one van," he said.

"And," he added, "if you work with enough pieces of glass long enough, eventually something is going to break."

While etching tiny roses in the corners of a van windshield recently, the glass cracked and the cost of replacing it, he admitted, ate up his profits from the job. Even now after years at it he still gets nervous.

The process, he noted, does not affect the driver's vision. "As a matter of fact," he add-

ed, "it cuts down on glare."

The "big jobs" he said are his favorites. By big jobs, he means decorating bar mirrors, picture windows or room dividers.

As he operates now, Rob's process is time consuming work.

"You can't pump the stuff out."

"It takes a lot of time." He has worked four days on the door of a small van refrigerator and is still not finished.

To help speed up production, he is now teaching his techniques to a group and hopes to set up an office before too long.

His eventual hope, he admitted, is to get out of the small work and into the larger jobs such as working with contractors and architects.

"Everyone keeps telling me this is the coming thing."



Debbie Bills admires the work on her rear windows