

TWIN-BORO NEWS

DECEMBER 29, 2011

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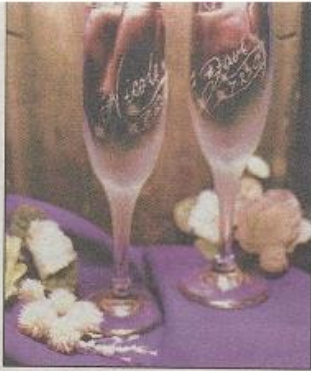
A CLEAR-CUT CALLING



STAFF PHOTO BY COLLEEN WHITE

Professional glass artist Robb Rich is proud of his special 'calling' and hopes to pass his highly developed skills onto a new generation of artisan etchers. He's seen here at work in the basement workshop of his Dumont home. **Story on Page 3.**





PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROBB RICH

Dumont glass artist Robb Rich has created a variety of specialized items.

DUMONT

Artistry in glass: A clear-cut calling

BY ALLISON SCHIFF
Special to Twin-Boro News

Professional glass artist Robb Rich of Dumont has been around the block.

He's worked with custom car legend and Batmobile designer George Barris in Hollywood.

At age 27 he etched designs, including an intricate butterfly, rose and hummingbird, onto the windows of Zsa Zsa Gabor's gold Rolls Royce before it was featured at the 1978 Auto Expo.

When windshield etching became popular in the 1970s – “Back in those days, if you had a custom van with Peter Frampton playing on the speakers, you were going to get a girlfriend,” Rich joked – he was a pioneer of the movement.

Rich and his work were written up in *The New York Times*, praised in *Car and Driver* magazine and were the subject of several television profiles in the 1970s and 1980s.

But now, at age 62, he has a new perspective to share with glass etchers of the future: Glass art and engraving is strenuous, tough work that requires patience and untold hours of practice, preparation and sacrifice.

Basically, “it’s a calling,” said Rich, one that he warns will not provide a quick path to glory or riches, but will, with diligence and dedication, develop into a unique and satisfying skill.

“I mean, I only met Zsa Zsa for five minutes; and it took two days to do her car,” said Rich, now a grandfather of three.

“If you’re going to get into this,” he said, “don’t think you’re going to have a glamorous life.”

With that disclaimer out of the way, Rich said he hopes to pass his highly developed skills onto a new generation of artisan etchers.



STAFF PHOTO BY COLLEEN WHITE

Professional glass artist Robb Rich pursues his craft in the basement workshop of his Dumont home.

To that end, he is in the process of developing an online curriculum and website in which he’ll demystify the craft and explain both the practical and mental aspects that go into it.

Rich is also planning to create a series of videos that will discuss “more than just etching,” he said.

“Sometimes when you’re etching, only about 3 percent to 5 percent of the job is actually cutting glass,” he said. “The rest of the job requires preparation, logistics and a clear methodology.”

Only ‘one chance’

“You have to get all of that right beforehand,” he said, “because you just have one chance to cut the glass.”

Etching tools, which make a buzzing sound like dentist drills, can revolve at more than 35,000 revolutions per minute, which means etchers need to be confident and decisive in their movements.

“When you first put the machine in someone’s hands, there is going to be a lot of trepidation involved,” he said.

Looking back on it now, Rich said he sees etching and graphics as a sort baseline running through his entire life.

Ever since he was a child, all roads seemed to lead him to the graphic arts.

Rich, who was born in the Bronx but moved to Dumont when he was 5, was once rooting

around his father’s basement workshop at around age 7 when he came across an engraving tool in a box.

He plugged it in, found a few pieces of scrap glass in the corner and started to experiment.

In his teens and throughout his early 20s, he created intricately designed and etched custom aquariums, which Rich said was “one of my first loves.”

Rich said he wasn’t much interested in school. He spent a year at Dumont High School and about a year at Bergen Tech, but what he really wanted was to “get out and work ... to do something,” he said.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBB RICH

Dumont glass artist Robb Rich created this glass piece of the Nanuet Fire Engine.

GLASS

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He ended up getting into graphics and offset printing as a plate-maker, a trade not far removed from glass etching, and moving to Virginia Beach, where he made good money with his craft.

He had a dog, a beautiful girlfriend and a house on the water. But his "itchy feet" led him to jump into his pickup truck with some clothes and tools and take his chances in Los Angeles.

He worked hard in Hollywood. He repaired and washed cars; he made deliveries; — and finally, after a year, he got his chance to work with George Barris, which "felt like winning an Academy Award" and was what he came to California to do.

Ultimately, Rich returned to the East Coast and opened a small hand-etched crafts shop in Dumont. It is now closed.

His "bread and butter" there were champagne glasses for weddings and other festive occasions. He also etched custom mirrors for many local restaurants.

Odd requests

But, sometimes people had some odd requests for him.

One day, he said, a guy walked into his store and tossed some tiny pieces of sea glass down on the counter.

"Can you etch on this?" he asked.

Rich raised his eyebrows. The sea glass was minuscule.

It turned out that the man wanted Rich to etch the words "Will you marry me?" onto the pieces.

He planned to take his girlfriend on a walk by the sea, distract her for a moment and then toss the glass a little farther down the beach so that she'd find it. That was his way of proposing.

Another guy went on a trip to Ireland to see where his parents were born. While there, he took a few pieces of slate from the roof of a cottage.

His friends and family made fun of him. What did he want with useless slate?

The man just smiled mysteriously and said, "You'll see."

Once home, he brought the slate to Rich, who carved a map of Ireland into its surface and inlaid the etching with 23 karat gold.

It turned out to be a beautiful, one-of-a-kind memento of the man's visit to his ancestral homeland.

Scientific approach

Rich said he takes an almost scientific approach to his creative process.

"Everything I do, I start from a little dot in the center and I take it from there, almost mechanically," Rich said. "Some people think I'm a great artist; but, I wouldn't say that. I just start with the design in mind."

A heart attack several years ago caused Rich to re-prioritize his life.

It was then that he decided to start digitizing his immense archive of photographs cataloging his pieces and posting them online with an eye to creating a curriculum to "pass what I know onto the next generation," he said.

"And I'm racing against time, when you think about it," Rich said. "I have more time behind me that I have before me now."

Learning to use a computer and build a website is an ongoing uphill battle for Rich, but he said he is rising to the challenge.

He works with a web master to help him with the more-technical bits and is continually adding more examples of his work to his site so that it's slowly beginning to fulfill his vision — to be like a school-cum-museum of the possibilities of glass etching.

But Rich reiterated that glass engraving is not a handicraft for dilettantes.

"It's not a matter of just taking a tool and cutting some glass," he said. "It's more than that."

Take, for example, the gold-inlaid glass mirror he crafted for the Nanuet Fire Company in Rockland County, N.Y., which took him several months to complete.

The final product is actually comprised of two mirrors. The second oval mirror featuring the black-and-white newspaper image

of the truck was created using a halftone process in which both a negative and positive had to be made.

If one were to look at the engine on the glass under a loupe, he or she could see the tiny dots that make up the image. Then, 23 karat gold inlay was intricately applied using a tiny circular piece of felt.

For his popular LA flutes, Rich manipulates the parallax principle to bring movement to something static.

Visual trick

Through a visual trick, Rich strategically cuts the glass so that a moon on the flute appears to sink beneath the cut horizon with quick movement of the eye or by revolving the flute slowly in one's hand.

"It took me a long time to get etching down, but the theory of 10,000 hours — I'm a proponent of that," said Rich, referencing the popular 2008 book "Outliers," in which author Malcolm Gladwell proposes that practice is the key to success in any field.

"With etching, you have to respect the time you have to put in," he said, "because it's not about instant gratification."

"It takes knowledge and perception, yes, but also a lot of practice. This is not a skill like riding a bike."

After a lifetime dedicated to glass etching, Rich says he's still enthusiastic about his life and his craft.

"And, if you can keep that, then you really have something," he said.

Rich said he is looking to pass his enthusiasm onto the next crop of glass artisans.

Once they have the requisite skill under their belts, he said he hopes they'll run with it and make the craft their own.

"It's like teaching someone guitar," Rich said. "You teach them how to play, but then they write their own songs."

For more information about Robb Rich, visit www.rjrich-cutglass.com or www.ves-selquest.com.