

A Cut Above
By
Brandon Brown

To the unstrained eye, it's easy to pass off all stained glass work as indistinguishable. It's so prevalent that we often don't notice it. But a second glance at the creations of the Art Glass Works Studio will make even the hastiest passerby stop in awe.

Nestled in a modest brick building in the heart of Cornelius, North Carolina, the art studio boasts dozens of pieces for sale, ranging from colorful lampshades to massive, 3-D works of art.

That's what Alan and Lisa Coyle want people to see.

The glass they meticulously cut and arrange layer-by-layer can't be passed off as some run-of-the-mill, county fair job.

This is art.

"You can ask any student who's ever been with me. Do I push detail? Yeah, I do," Alan said. "I think there's beauty in it."

His engineer mindset is ultimately the reason for his success. Most of his business comes from clients who have a general idea of what they want done. Coyle takes that idea and sketches out the dimensions with an engineer's precision.

The Coyles refuse to use rebar as a structure support. Instead, Alan will painstakingly formulate the design so that 500 pieces of glass can be supported by a handful.

"Our work is designed to last 100 years," Alan said.

He stands by his craftsmanship and won't hesitate to prove his work's strength by shaking it forcefully – something he dares his rivals to do with their stained glass.

"I try to design all of our stuff so the flexion is very minimal," Alan said. "We use putty and fiber as a medium to strengthen the piece."

As far as materials go, Alan and Lisa only want to use the best.

They said the better the glass the greater the effects when the piece is exposed to sunlight.

The quality of the pieces is unmatched in the eyes of the creators, but quite possibly the most salient feature of their work is the detail.

The show room floor is something of a museum, with pieces ranging from Christmas ornament-sized decorations to four-foot murals.

It's easy to become overwhelmed, as the colors and shapes seem to nearly reach incarnation.

Wine bottles, 3-D dragonflies and trademark mascots are incorporated into stained glass in innovative ways.

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Alan is capable of transforming a photograph into detailed etching- so detailed that you can count the hairs on Dale Earnhardt's chin.

Although there are dozens of pre-made artwork to choose from, most of their business comes from people wanting a unique, meaningful piece.

"I'll never make the same piece twice," Alan said. "I will always change something."

Alan has designed and restored stained glass for churches and created doorframes for restaurants.

His work can be found throughout the United States, Europe and the Far East.

The combination of accuracy and imagination is what sets the Art Glass Works studio apart from the competition.

"It's amazing someone who is so articulate with that mathematical side of the brain can be so creative," said Jeanette Tye, who has had three stained glass pieces built by the Coyles.

Alan and Lisa are proud to spread the art form to curious students. They hold weekly classes where novices can tap the creative genius of the humble artist.

"[Stained glass] is a dying art," Alan said. "Real, true glass artists are hard to find."

In the meantime, the Coyles will try to pass along the craft, as they continue to enjoy life with every piece of glass.