

A REAL GLASS ACT

*Sebastian Romo took the long way around to develop
a business that sparkles with success*

-by Joan Tucker & Paul Papanek | photos by Paul Papanek-

Few people fail upwards as successfully as Sebastian Romo (and we mean that in only the best possible way). As a young man from La Paz, with a degree in metallurgical engineering and a master's degree in computer programming earned in Mexico City, he moved to Cabo in the early 1980's to start a business that would supply computer systems to the growing number of hotels being built throughout the area. It turned out, however, that none of the hotels had computers, nor did many of the people know how to use them. He immediately changed the sign on his business to read "Computer Lessons," and in time, was able to finally supply the newly educated hotel staffs with the first hotel computer systems in Cabo.

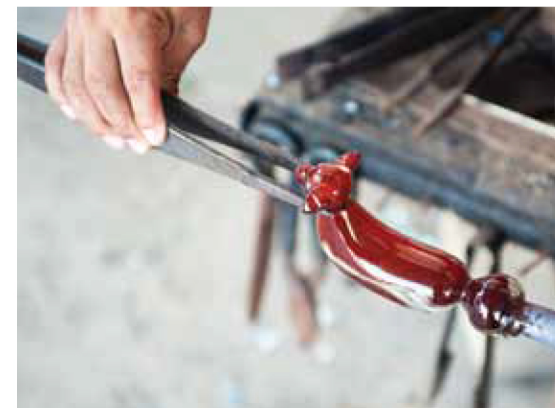
Thinking that the hotels must have other needs, in 1987, he built the first glass factory in Cabo to supply them with glassware. On one of his first sales calls, he learned that the hotels, being in remote (at the time) Cabo, bought three year's worth of glassware in advance. They had no immediate need for what he was selling. Back at the glass factory, he revisited his poorly researched

business plan and, instead of cutting his losses and just closing, he carefully looked at his options. The hotels didn't have a need for his glassware, but he made a bet that the growing number of tourists filling up those hotels would, and he was right.

Researching the traditions of glass blowing in Mexico, as well as studying 400 year-old Italian glass blowing techniques,

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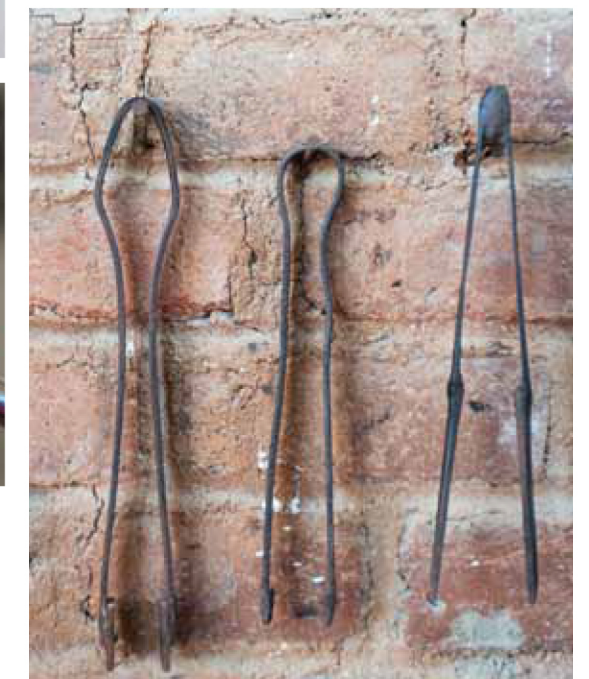
Sr. Romo assembled a group of artisan glass blowers to begin realizing his vision: hand-made, richly colored, unique, functional and decorative art glass. That vision put the factory, and Sr. Romo's designs, at the forefront of what we now know as Mexican glassware. His artisans invented the ubiquitous blue-rimmed drinking glasses, as well as the cactus-stemmed margarita glass.

And it was among these, and literally thousands of beautiful vases, red hearts, multi-colored flowers, bowls, blue marlins,

ornaments and chili peppers, that we found ourselves talking to Sr. Romo as the sounds of his factory swirled around us. After 26 years in business, he still exudes the wonderment of a child as he describes the glass that's made here and the artists who make it. "All the glass you see here," he said as he began to show us around, "has a human part inside." And indeed, the "factory" is devoid of any machines. Everything is made entirely by the breath and hand of the artists.

He was eager to take us on a tour, and we all walked to the back of the building - a wide-open space occupied by two large brick 2200-degree furnaces. These white-hot ovens are where the artists heat and reheat the glass as they're working on a design. Another oven sits just beyond those two and, at the cooler temperature of about 900 degrees, is where the pieces are cured and hardened.

In addition to the regular production that happens all day, Sr. Romo has opened his factory to the public so everyone can share in

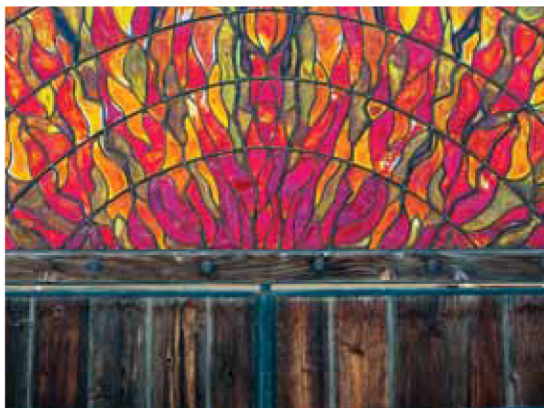
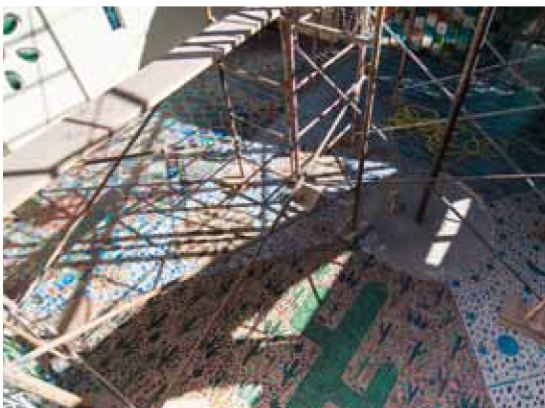


the magic. We found ourselves, along with a group of tourists, mesmerized by the delicate choreography of the artisans. Taking requests from the audience, they started working on a penguin (A penguin in Cabo? Well - why not?). The lead glass blower chose from the kaleidoscopic raw colored glass nuggets, and proceeded to dazzle everyone as he worked the glowing hot blob of glass into a shape - blowing through the rod or rolling it on a steel table. As if reading each other's minds, other artists would appear to add another piece of molten glass, or to cut, push, pull, flatten and pinch - continually adding and subtracting until the piece was completed. We found ourselves gasping like kids at a birthday party as they presented the finished penguin to the little girl who had requested it. It was pretty safe to say that she had never

seen a penguin adorned with such a splash of colors before. She was then invited to try her luck at blowing a simple shape, and her excitement and delight was written all over her face. Sr. Romo's smile told a bigger story - that he's as big a kid as we all are. Our tour continued out back, where the raw glass was waiting to be transformed into any number of beautiful objects. When he first opened, he was making glass from sand that he and his workers collected on the beach. As the factory's popularity and production grew, that soon became unpractical, and he began looking for other sources of material. What we were looking at, behind the factory, was the result of that

(FAR LEFT AND ABOVE) | After a few trials, Sebastian Romo arrived at a business idea that not only yields success but also brings out the kid in him. Recycled glass is the raw material that is heated in the brick furnaces. In addition to glasses, bowls and the like, sculptures are also made, including a colorful penguin. A young guest even gets the chance to participate in glass blowing. Various tools of the trade are omnipresent in the shop.

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(ABOVE) | Romo assembled a group of skilled artisan glass blowers, putting his factory at the forefront of Mexican glassware. A nearby glass chapel is currently under construction, and, along with the showroom, displays the amazing output of this factory.

search: A huge mountain of wine, beer, and soda bottles, collected on a continual schedule from the multitude of hotels and restaurants from Cabo to San José. Always ahead of the curve, Sr. Romo was one of the first people in Baja to realize the potential benefits of recycling. And in a completely unintentional twist, it turns out that the people who are buying his glassware are the very same people who are providing him the raw material: Tourists. The glassworkers melt down the recycled glass as needed, adding different combinations of minerals

to achieve their unique and always-changing color combinations.

Sr. Romo likes to think big. Well-known for the large and intricate mosaic glass murals that adorn the exterior factory walls, he's thrilled by his newest project – a glass chapel just off of the showroom that he can't wait for us to see. Currently under construction, he considers it his crowning achievement. The cupola, while framed, is still opened to the sky while the artists are painstakingly working on the mosaic panels that will eventually be put into place. The floor is almost complete – four quadrants that symbolize, in richly colored glass patterns and designs, the four elements of earth, water, air and fire. We have never seen anything quite like it before. It's like an intricately designed tile floor, but made of beautiful translucent colored glass. The

attention to detail and the quality of the workmanship justifies the obvious pride that Sr. Romo takes in this amazing piece of art.

We had a wonderful day with Sr. Romo. He's truly a unique man, and for all that he's accomplished, both at the glass factory and in his other businesses, he remains self-effacing, generous, and sincere. Each piece of glass that comes out of the factory is a reflection of the deep respect he has for the people who work for him. He has created an environment that encourages everyone to be the best that they can be. It's something you feel as soon as you walk through the door.

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El Fin!