

Birds, bees and skulls. Every day Teresa Robinson etches these delicate images and others from sheets of sterling silver. She then layers the images over stained glass to make her signature pendants, rings and earrings.

She calls her jewelry business Smallthings Designs for a reason. The largest pendant she sells measures only 5/8 by 1 5/8 inches, and the "Large Necklace" of her "Originals" line is just 1 inch square.

Each piece is Robinson's own design and is handcrafted by her personally or by her sole employee, Natalie Hunt. Each day the two of them together produce about 28 of the silver and glass adornments, which range from \$60 to \$95.

People frequently ask Robinson about the process she uses to make her unique creations. She starts by cutting a square of beautifully colored but simple stained glass. She wraps the edges of the glass in soft silver. She cuts a tiny image from a sheet of silver, by hand, using a jeweler's saw. She then solders everything together. A three-part finishing process tumbles and polishes the piece.

The result is a coolly glowing silver image silhouetted over a candy-colored or earth-toned glass background. In her "Modern Goods" line, the concept is reversed. The glass forms the prominent image, surrounded by shiny silver for contrast.

Robinson's tiny treasures are making a big splash in the fashion world. They've been featured in *Venus* and *Lucky* magazines and on *DailyCandy.com*. They are offered in more than 50 retail outlets across the country and are even sold in the United Kingdom and Canada.

And customers are becoming addicted to Smallthings. According to Robinson, Christmas

GOOD THINGS IN SMALL PACKAGES

Queer designer finds every hobby has a silver lining

by Rebecca Ragain

orders were insane in 2004. Valentine's Day was crazy, as well, with partners and spouses calling her, list in hand.

"I had so many people calling me saying: 'Please can I get this? I'll be in really big trouble if I don't get this.'"

Business has been so solid for the past year and a half that Robinson can only dream of taking a break. "I'm always saying, 'OK, probably next month things are going to really slow down.' And they just don't."

It took a while for Smallthings to build this kind of momentum. Robinson started the company in 2002 with no prior business background and only hobby-level experience with jewelry making. She was teaching at the time and getting burned out with her job. She had learned to



Images and symbols from the natural world predominate in Teresa Robinson's work.

make jewelry while studying abroad in Mexico, so she started tinkering with silver again.

For her first sales presentation, she walked into a couple of stores carrying her display case—a cigar box filled with jewelry—and asked if they wanted to sell her stuff. After she sold two pieces, she decided to quit her job and make jewelry for a living. She rented a studio and created a Web site, and she was on her way.



Looking back, Robinson admits that her haphazard business venture was like jumping off a cliff into the abyss. She's gently self-deprecating about her attitude at the time.

"I made no money at all for a year. It was foolish, really," she says. "I didn't know the difference between consignment and wholesale."

I had no idea what goes into this."

Now, only three years later, she's making 125 pieces a week, filling orders and taking press calls. Her business has grown to the point that people are asking her if she intends to go into mass production, perhaps even overseas.

"It's really appealing at times. 'Oh, I could just send it off and then everything would come back in a box.' And I would be able to sleep," she says.

But while the business may occasionally overwhelm her, Robinson doesn't really want to sit in a cushy leather chair in an office, presiding over her jewelry realm. Instead, she admires the management style of another Portland design business, Rebecca Percy's Queen Bee Creations, which has seven employees.

"I think she's done a really good job of keeping things on a good small level but still having a steady and viable successful business," says Robinson.

For Robinson, expanding Smallthings is more about adding new lines than ramping up production or hiring more employees (although she wouldn't mind having another person to help at Christmas time). She's contemplating a higher-end line of items or doing some limited editions. She may even decide to move away from glass in the future and use only silver.

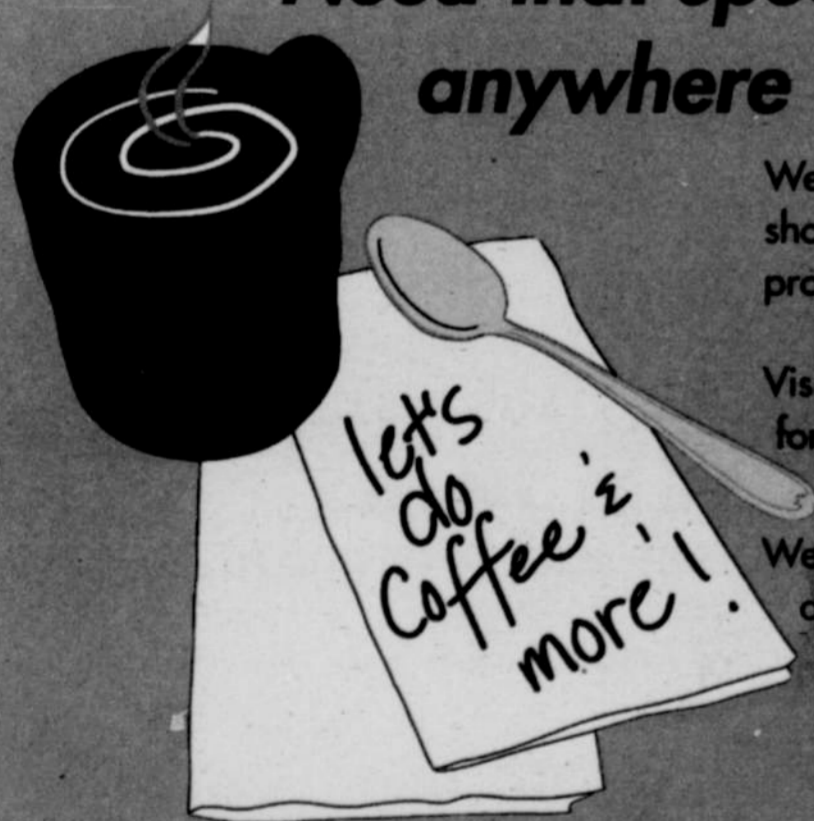
Whatever direction her new designs take, the important thing for her is to stay involved and keep it hands-on.

"I make things. It's what I do. It's totally part of who I am," she says. "So I always want to keep it on that level." □

For more information about SMALLTHINGS DESIGNS visit www.smallthingsdesigns.com.

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