BOOK REVIEWS

The Art of Beadwork: Historic Inspiration, Contemporary Design.

Valerie Hector. Watson-Guptill Publications, 770 Broadway, New York, NY 10003. 2005. 160 pp., 160 color figs., 161 b&w figs., index. $24.95 (soft cover).

All too often, publishers and beadwork writers aim their sights too low, toward beginning and intermediate beaders. The result has been an avalanche of books with much the same information, showing the same techniques, and leaning on the same kinds of beadwork as examples. I am pleased to note that Valerie Hector's new book *The Art of Beadwork* shatters the publisher bonds that hinder the dreams of most beadwork writers. *The Art of Beadwork* introduces the reader to a rich variety of beading cultures worldwide and dating back millenia, and flings wide the door for future writers—including Hector herself—to explore these cultures more fully.

Additionally, Hector uses her book project to lure other artists onto the playground with her, challenging them to create pieces based on older ethnic works, thereby rolling the design sensibilities of long-gone indigenous bead artists into new, dazzling expressions representative of the range of our current era. In so doing, *The Art of Beadwork* builds on the work of earlier books such as *The New Beadwork* and the more-recently released *500 Beaded Objects*, creating the sense of a discrete beading community within the larger arts world. In her book, Hector graciously expands this sense of community to include earlier artists of indigenous cultures, whose works have long supplied inspiration for contemporary artists.

The Art of Beadwork begins with a foreword by Lois Sherr Dubin, who astutely notes two of the most important facts about Hector: her extraordinary skills as an artist and her utterly dedicated passion to scholarly pursuits as they relate to beadwork. No other beadworker melds these two opposite passions so thoroughly and with such benefit to the field. I have long felt that what makes the best work in any art field is that both technique and design must be as near flawless as possible and completely complementary to each other, even if that means artists have to invent something new to achieve their vision. Many artists, especially beginners, focus on one to the detriment of the other. Hector's forte has been the imagining of complex works informed by a sense of that work's place in the world, coupled with a degree of perfectionism that enables the development of new construction methods in order to give her work life. Regarding her pursuits as a researcher, she has dug deeply into several ancient and diverse areas of beadwork, among them the Stuart material of the mid-17th century, ancient Egyptian pieces, and a thorough study of various beadwork cultures in Asia, culminating in an extensive overview of the subject in vol. 7 of *Beads: Journal of the Society of Bead Researchers*, published in 1997.

In her introduction, Hector emphasizes the importance of inventiveness and creativity rather than simply copying the work of others. By delving into the deepest history of beadwork and working to create definitions for the field, she helps us to understand that beadwork is not simply a weak offshoot of the fiber arts, but a rich field of its own and worthy of study.

The section Highlights of Beadwork History defines beadwork, delineates the use of various non-glass materials—such as stone, mammoth bone, and faience—to make beadworked items, and records the uses of beadwork-like materials in various funerary applications. These last include items found in the ancient tombs of China and Egypt, as well as an Ice Age archaeological site near present-day Moscow. A general discussion of the manufacturing process of glass seed beads and their distribution worldwide follows. The next chapter is the obligatory section on materials that publishers decree all beadwork writers must supply.

We then turn to the meat of the book, the part on new pieces inspired by the work of earlier cultures. This section is organized by regions of the world (Asia, Africa and the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas), then by cultural groups within those regions. Within each segment of the world, particular beadwork traditions are highlighted, often with rare and unusual pieces shown. In fact, the price of the book is worth it just for these images alone. Asia is represented by the Han (mainland China), ancient Japanese, the Kathi (Gujarat state, India), the Sa'dan Toraja (Sulawesi, Indonesia), Straits Chinese (Penang, Malaysia), Kenyah (Indonesian and Malaysian Borneo), and Ambai Island (Papua, Indonesian New Guinea). Works shown from

Africa and the Middle East include ancient Egyptian, Yoruba (Nigeria), Maasai (Kenya), Dinka (Sudan), and the Xhosa, Ndebele, and Msinga aka Zulu (all in South Africa). The European tradition of beadwork is not neglected, with 17th-century English beadwork (Stuart era), the 18th-century German bead mosaic pieces of J.M. van Selow, the Wiener Werkstatte of 1920s Austria, and 20th-century French funerary pieces highlighted. The chapter on the Americas introduces the reader to the glorious and puzzling work of the early 16th-century Taino (Greater Antilles, Caribbean), and also shows the work of tribes of the Plains and Plateau (primarily the Sioux, although the Chippewa and Upper Great Lakes groups are also mentioned), the Achomawi or Atsugewi (California), the Huichol (Mexico), and the Chimu (Peru). Some of these are described lavishly, others barely at all. As near as can be determined, choices of what to keep and what to exclude revolved around the publisher's design requirements, oftentimes how to fit material in so as to maximize coverage while keeping the page count low enough to satisfy those readers who don't like to spend over $25 for a book. Unfortunately, at times this leaves the reader puzzled by what they read. While the Chimu and the Straits Chinese are lavishly described, other groups, such as the Achomawi or Atsugewi of California, are barely referred to, leaving the reader to wonder why they were even included.

Artists who took up Hector's invitation to play include Kathryn Harris, Laura Shea, Sharon Donovan, Rachel Weiss, Biba Shutz, Carol Perrenoud and Virginia Blakelock, Mary Winters-Meyer, Joyce Scott, NanC Meinhardt, Flora Book, David Chatt, JoAnn Baumann, Karen Paust, Don Pierce, Robin Bergman, and Madelyn Ricks, among others. Hector herself also supplies several stunning pieces. In addition, the work of Mary Kanda, Jacqueline Lillie, and Marcus Amerman are shown. Accompanying most of the pieces are extensive instructions which enable the reader to duplicate aspects of the work. One of the chief pleasures of *The Art of Beadwork* is that this is truly a book for advanced beaders as well as those of lesser skills, which is almost unheard of in the world of project books. Complicated weaves and netting patterns expand beaders' skills, and also give those studying the earlier works of various cultures further knowledge regarding the creation of those pieces. Many of the techniques or variations shown have received little or no press, increasing the value of the contribution *The Art of Beadwork* makes to the field. Included are three-dimensional triangle stitch; single and multiple-thread vertical netting; tubular and pyramidal herringbone stitches; flat, double-layered and cubic right-angle weaves; flat, tubular, and pyramidal peyote stitches; double-layer scallop stitch; and tubular polygon stitch, among others.

As might be expected, with such great material to work with, the design of the book is beautiful. The accent color of the pages is a muted gold, drawn from the background of the cover, and the photographs are clear, sharp, and enticing. Sometimes, however, the titles of the sections don't seem to correspond very well to the material in that section. The phrase "Achomawi/Atsugewi Beadwork, California", on p. 134, was used for the section on loomed beadwork, but we learn next to nothing about this obscure tribal group. Apparently the original title for this section was "American Indian Beadweaving." All of p. 137 was used to show how to start the first two rows of loomed beadweaving, a technique with which most beadworkers are familiar and for which over-abundant instructions may be found elsewhere. Both illustrations and the one on p. 140, showing how to reduce the width of loomed work, would comfortably have fit on one page or could have been eliminated altogether, leaving more room for artists whose work was sadly eliminated or minimized.

To carp for a moment, Hector has a much broader definition of beadwork than I do. I find the stone plaques that make up a face on p. 10 or the shroud on p. 13 to be outside the realm of what I call beadwork, while I perceive the use of "unconventional materials" such as the Happy New Year platelets connected by wire on p. 17 to be completely outside the pale. And while I have close friends who cheerfully subscribe to the theory that "if you can put a string through it, it's a bead," I admit to having much more of a purist attitude. I like for something to have been manufactured with the intent for it to be a bead before I'm willing to call its use "beadwork." But Hector is certainly not alone in her viewpoint.

One of the things I most appreciate about Hector is that she honors and respects the native cultures which produced so much of the depicted beadwork. Beadstringers who make the sort of items that are sold en masse in pearl market shops which most of us would consider mundane are honored by having their names used and their contributions—however slight—to the world of beadwork history noted. A woman in South Africa whose livelihood consists of making beadwork for resale to tourists or exporters is given extensive coverage, illustrating the broad influence that beadwork has had on the arc of her life. Archival photographs show women making the beadwork that decades and centuries later entices us in ethnic galleries and museum shows. The world of beadwork as revealed in the pages of Hector's book is shown to be a broad, varied, and exciting one, both in the diversity and richness of earlier works and in the creativity and inventiveness of current ones. And she reminds us of the value of the beads themselves, that for many artisans, they are not simply materials one easily purchases at a local shop. They are ofttimes hard-won, whether laboriously made from animal materials, or eagerly awaited for via itinerant peddlers. Given this preciousness of material, it

is no surprise to read that so many pieces have spiritual connotations.

Hector's insistence on excellent-quality photographs helps elevate the field. Some may carp at Hector's use of "pretty pictures," but being in the pretty pictures camp myself, I find that nice photography performs a number of important functions: it consistencises the presentation so that the reader may more easily concentrate on the material; it legitimizes the work by the attention paid to it; and it enables the serious reader to more accurately understand what the writer is trying to convey by having clear, easily readable—and pleasurably viewed—pictures to examine. I once asked the Japanese bead manufacturer Mr. Katsuoka why the books he published had so many pictures and so few words and he shrugged and said, "Nobody reads." Sadly I think he is more right than not, so pictures must often bear the weight of conveying the writer's message. If that must be so, it's best that they be good, clear, and preferably in color.

Finally, Hector has instituted a practice that I hope, in this web-based era, may be taken up by authors and publishers everywhere. That is the establishment of an errata page on her website for errors found in her book and she encourages her readers to email her if they spot any. While many of those she's noted so far are editing or simple spelling errors, some are more serious and correct erroneous information, such as a reference to preparations for a funeral ceremony which are in fact preparations for a wedding ceremony, and for another photo, clarifying that the image of three sashes was upside down and so the caption identified the top and bottom pieces incorrectly. This is a valuable addition to the general field of writing. Who better to know the errors in their book than the author him or herself?

Valerie Hector may be contacted at http://www.valeriehector.com/. Add errata.html to this address to reach her errata page.

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Beads of Borneo.

Heidi Munan. Editions Didier Millet, 121 Telok Ayer Street, #03-01, Singapore 068590. 2005. 144 pp., 204 color figs., 10 b&w figs., index. $30.00 (hard cover).

Beads have occupied an important place in the culture of insular Southeast Asia. A number of significant publications have highlighted the long presence of beads and beadmaking in the Indonesian archipelago. In Borneo, one of the archipelago's largest islands, beads have played a prominent role as heirloom items, in rituals, as talismans, and as decoration for clothing. Yet, the literature on the place of beads and beadwork in the history and cultures of Borneo has been surprisingly fragmented. *Beads of Borneo* by Heidi Munan, a veteran bead researcher and the Honorary Curator of Beads at the Sarawak Museum, helps to address this issue by providing a descriptive account of contemporary functions of beads and beadwork in this country.

Munan is concerned with the way in which beads and beadwork remain meaningful and are integrated into contemporary culture in Borneo. The main focus of the book is on the stories and accounts about beads and beadwork that she has gathered from her research as Borneo moved into the 21st century. The book is abundantly illustrated and divided into seven chapters, with the first two providing a brief background for her subsequent discussions about the different functions of beadwork.

The population of Borneo consists of a number of cultural and linguistic groupings who have different uses for beads and diverse attitudes towards these objects. In her opening chapter, Munan emphasizes this heterogeneity in an accessible way for those less familiar with Borneo without trivializing its complexity. She also highlights an instance of the exchange of beadwork; for example, when Maloh beaded garments are found in Iban and Orang Ulu longhouses. Whereas bead uses may vary, the products of each culture are not necessarily isolated and this suggests that we need to be aware of the impact of interaction and exchange. In addition, Munan notes that the introduction of religions such as Christianity and Islam has encouraged the locals in some cases to re-evaluate the role of beads in their culture.

Most of the beads in Borneo were imported, and the second chapter of the book provides an overview of the main methods of beadmaking, the sources of beads, and the trade of beads. While to the bead collector and researcher, the material of which a bead is made and its origin are important in characterizing and understanding it, Munan makes a point that is very salient to appreciating bead culture—that for some local owners of beads, such information is irrelevant. What is important for them is that the beads were handed down from their mothers or grandmothers and great-grandmothers, or that beads were brought back by their ancestors from abroad. Beliefs about the origins of beads