

# Between the Beads

Reading African Beadwork



Harn Museum of Art

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Small and beautiful, beads are one of the most versatile and expressive art mediums. For thousands of years across the continent of Africa, beads were prestigious trade items that were used in masquerades, shrines and royal regalia and as adornment for the body. In each of these contexts, beads have had a primary role in communicating complex ideas about religion, aesthetics, and social and political status. This exhibition focuses on the many ways that beaded objects communicate meaning within a variety of historical and cultural contexts and explores the transformation of meanings throughout time and across cultures.

The most extensive evidence of early bead production and use has been found in Africa. The oldest beads that have been discovered on the continent are drilled ostrich egg shells from southern Africa that have been dated to the Middle Stone Age (280,000 to 45,000 years ago) and perforated shells from northern Africa that are 80,000 years old. In addition to ancient beads, prehistoric paintings of humans wearing elaborate beadwork adornments have been discovered on cave walls in southern Africa and the Sahara Desert. Among the earliest items used for domestic and religious purposes and body adornment, beads are some of the first material signs of symbolic thought, an indicator of modern human behavior. Although we have no way of knowing the full meaning of these ancient beads, we may conjecture that they were not only a means of adorning the human form but also an expression of social identity or religious practices.

Ndebele people, South Africa, c. 1960, *Gala Blanket (Nguba)*  
Commercial blanket, cotton, glass beads, 5 ft. 2 in. x 5 ft. 2 in. (157.5 x 157.5 cm.)  
Gift of William D. and Norma Canelas Roth, 2005.47.4



Later, locally produced beads were made of bone, shell, wood, reed, ceramic, ivory, glass, semi-precious stone, and horn and metal. Through early trade routes from Asia and the Mediterranean, other kinds of materials and beads were imported, expanding the bead workers' palettes to include amber from the Baltic; ceramic glazed beads from China; agate and carnelian from India; and glass beads from Rome. Brass, imported from Europe beginning in the fifteenth century, is a precious metal used in bead production that has continued for centuries in West Africa. By the sixteenth century, wound, drawn and molded glass beads from the famous Murano glassworks in Venice found their way to Africa. In the nineteenth century, beads from Moravia and Bohemia, now the Czech Republic, flooded the western, central and southern African markets. These kinds of imported beads were acquired at great cost and regarded as

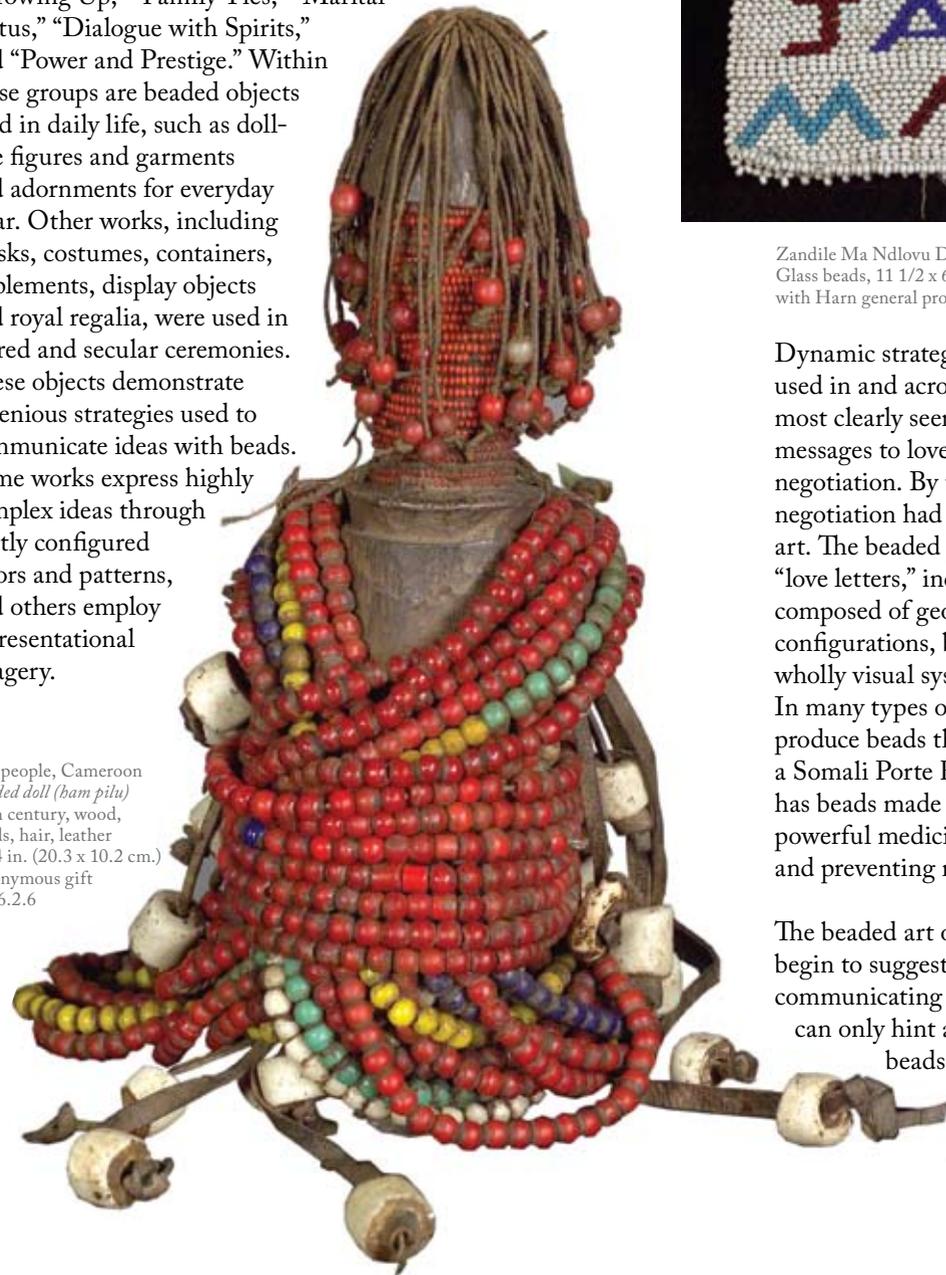
Left  
Mfengu people, South Africa, *Young Matron's Dress*, late 19th-early 20th century  
Cloth, leather, beads, metal, rubber  
On mount, from crown of hat to bottom of skirt: 5 ft. 3 in. (160 cm.)  
Museum purchase, funds provided by the Caroline Julier and James G. Richardson Art Acquisition Fund  
2003.35

Top  
Xhosa people, South Africa, *Forked Apron (iinkciya)*, 19th century  
Glass beads, sinew, leather, 14 x 6 3/4 in. (35.6 x 17.1 cm.)  
On loan from Daniel and Dori Rootenberg

signifiers of wealth and prestige. In the exhibition, Yoruba beaded crowns and South African ceremonial garments illuminate the use of imported beads to convey the links between economic status and social, religious and political status.

Objects presented in the exhibition are drawn from the Harn Museum's collection and private collections. They are organized in groups according to the most important ideas that they communicate, including "Desire for Children," "Growing Up," "Family Ties," "Marital Status," "Dialogue with Spirits," and "Power and Prestige." Within these groups are beaded objects used in daily life, such as doll-like figures and garments and adornments for everyday wear. Other works, including masks, costumes, containers, implements, display objects and royal regalia, were used in sacred and secular ceremonies. These objects demonstrate ingenious strategies used to communicate ideas with beads. Some works express highly complex ideas through subtly configured colors and patterns, and others employ representational imagery.

Fali people, Cameroon  
Beaded doll (*ham pilu*)  
20th century, wood,  
beads, hair, leather  
8 x 4 in. (20.3 x 10.2 cm.)  
Anonymous gift  
2006.2.6



Zandile Ma Ndlovu Dube, South African, *Beaded panel (isibebe)*, 1969  
Glass beads, 11 1/2 x 6 1/2 x 1/4 in. (29.2 x 16.5 x .6 cm.), museum purchase  
with Harn general programs endowment funds, 2007.27.14

Dynamic strategies of beadwork communication used in and across cultures are traceable. This is most clearly seen in Zulu beadwork used to convey messages to lovers as an important form of marriage negotiation. By the nineteenth century, this form of negotiation had developed into a highly sophisticated art. The beaded panels, commonly known today as "love letters," included messages that were originally composed of geometric abstract shapes in various configurations, but by the mid-twentieth century, this wholly visual system gave way to using written text. In many types of beadwork, it is the material used to produce beads that conveys meaning. This is seen in a Somali Porte Koran necklace in the exhibition that has beads made of amber and agate, both regarded as powerful medicines for healing and preventing maladies.

The beaded art objects in this exhibition can only begin to suggest the versatility of beadwork in communicating cultural and personal meaning and can only hint at the length of the time span that beads have been one of the most prevalent African art forms used to further various modes of social and political discourse.



Bamileke peoples, Cameroon, n.d., *Elephant Mask for Kuosi Society*, cloth, beads and fur, 32 x 46 in. (81.3 x 116.8 cm.), gift of Dr. and Mrs. Arlan Rosenbloom, T-78-1-A,B

## Acknowledgements

Interpretive text for the exhibition, available throughout the gallery, was supplied in part by the students in Dr. Victoria Rovine's fall 2007 Clothing and Textiles in Africa class. Their text will be featured on the exhibition Web site, [www.harn.ufl.edu/beadwork](http://www.harn.ufl.edu/beadwork). This effort was made possible by technical support from the Digital Library Center at the University of Florida. Additional images of African beadwork can be found on the center's Web site at [www.uflib.ufl.edu/spec/africana/](http://www.uflib.ufl.edu/spec/africana/). Staff from the UF Digital Library Center who assisted in the development of the exhibition Web site include Katerie Gladdys, assistant professor of digital media; Lourdes Santamaria-Wheeler, digital production supervisor; and Katherine McGonigle, digital media graduate student and Harn Museum of Art intern. The exhibition and their participation was made possible by a gift from a generous donor with additional support from the Dr. Madelyn M. Lockhart Endowment for Focus Exhibitions.

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Yoruba people, Nigeria  
20th century  
*Divination Tapper (iroke ifia)*  
Glass beads, ivory, fabric, leather  
Gift of Rod McGalliard  
8 7/8 x 1 1/4 x 1 3/4 in. (22.5 x 3.2 x 4.4 cm.)  
1995.28.22

Cover  
Yoruba people, Nigeria  
20th century  
*Beaded Crown (adenla)*  
Glass seed beads, fabric  
Gift of Rod McGalliard  
39 7/8 x 7 5/8 x 7 5/8 in. (101.3 x 19.4 x 19.4 cm.)  
2002.39.1