

african arts

Volume XXXIX • Number 2



ment displayed a number of Akan works in the Bishop Study Center, in a readily accessible room located off of the main museum lobby. These tourist pieces, including crowns, staffs, rings, and sandals, were acquired specifically for this exhibition for elementary school tours and the public to handle and wear. A few books were also displayed to provide additional information.

It has been thirty-four years since Roy Sieber published his book *African Textiles and Decorative Arts*⁴ and inspired a revolution in the way art historians and curators view adornment as a work of art. Many exhibitions, large and small, have been designed to promote this concept. "Sense, Style, Presence" follows in these traditional footsteps and well educates the University of Florida campus and surrounding public through the addition of supporting didactic text, two videos, and an extensive educational program. Unique to this exhibit is the wealth and variety of objects displayed to exemplify as many aspects of adornment as possible in a relatively small space. Furthermore, it gives the museum an opportunity to showcase many of its newer acquisitions and its directive to continue collecting in this vein. A clearer organization of the works and perhaps more and larger photographs would have made it easier for viewers to recognize all the concepts present.

Overall, I enjoyed this exhibition. From the public's perspective, I noticed many viewers

took the time to take a second look at their favorites and read a few of the labels, almost always including the "prop" Akan umbrella. It is to Cooksey's credit that she was able to compress such an expansive scope into this educational and visually stunning exhibition. ■

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Beaded Prayers

National Center of Afro-American Artists
Boston

October 28, 2005–February 2006

reviewed by Cynthia Becker

Memory, spiritual creativity, unity, and diversity were issues conveyed by Sonya Clark in her "Beaded Prayers" exhibition at the National Center of Afro-American Artists (NCAAA) in Boston. Located in a majestic nineteenth century mansion in Roxbury, Boston's African American neighborhood, the National Center of Afro-American Artists is a private, nonprofit art space founded in 1968 with the mission to reach out to the local community and celebrate the artistic and cultural heritage of people of African descent. It is fitting that this museum was one of the many venues of "Beaded Prayers," a community-based project inspired by African amulets that embraces the

individual creativity of its diverse group of participants worldwide.

"Beaded Prayers" was created and conceived by Sonya Clark, chair of the Department of Craft/Material Studies at Virginia Commonwealth School of the Arts and formerly the Baldwin-Bascom Professor of Creative Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Clark started the project in 1999 with the support of the Edna Wiechers Arts in Wisconsin Award, a grant designed to provide the means for artists to touch communities that are not often provided artistic opportunities. Clark's "Beaded Prayers" exhibition is constantly evolving and changing, and the installation on display at the NCAAA included its latest accumulation of strikingly colorful beaded cloth packets. Individual participants from thirty-five countries, including the United States, Brazil, Ghana, India, and Australia, made the packets, filling them with small pieces of paper where they wrote their personal wishes, hopes, dreams, or prayers. The installation was striking, with more than 4500 palm-sized sealed cloth packets decorated with beads displayed on more than 120 panels 2' (.6m) square. The panels were grouped in various configurations throughout the exhibition space, resembling a vividly colored patchwork quilt.

The exhibition itself, however, was only one component of the entire experience. At the opening, Clark gave an animated discussion of the project. The following day she led a hands-



Opposite page:

Twelve of the 120 boards included in "Beaded Prayers"; as shown, 1.8m x 2.4m (6' x 8'). Mixed media beaded packets containing written messages. October 28, 2005, National Center of Afro-American Artists, Boston. Photo: Cynthia Becker.

This page:

Top: At the Beaded Prayers Workshop, artist and project coordinator Sonya Clark described how to make packets to be added to the "Beaded Prayers" exhibition. October 29, 2005, National Center of Afro-American Artists, Boston. Photo: Cynthia Becker.

Bottom: Artist and project coordinator Sonya Clark demonstrated beading techniques to the workshop participants: (l-r) the artist L'Merchie Frazier, Sondra and Barry Gaither, and Reginald Jackson, photographer and professor emeritus of Simmons College. October 29, 2005, National Center of Afro-American Artists, Boston. Photo: Cynthia Becker.

on Beaded Prayers Workshop that gave participants the opportunity to create two beaded packets or prayers, one to keep in celebration of individual creativity and the other to contribute to Clark's ever-growing exhibition. The name "beaded prayers" was due to Sonya Clark's realization that the words "bead" and "prayer" derive from the old English word *bede*. Hence participants fill their packets with written messages and at least one bead must be sewn on them. Clark has led hundreds of workshops, but the project is not reliant on Clark herself for its sustenance. Clark's highly informative website (www.beadedprayersproject.com) explains the process of creating a beaded prayer and encourages the public to lead Beaded Prayers Workshops in their own communities.

Although Clark explained that the project did not belong to her but to all of its contributors, Clark's engaging personality and her dynamic presentation of its history and current content certainly adds to the viewer's experience. Clark, a fiber artist, has a history of making interactive, community-based art projects inspired by her African heritage (Clark 1998). Clark, whose parents are from Jamaica and Trinidad, often saw Pitchy Patchy performed as a child and later made the connection between Pitchy Patchy and the Yorùbá Egungun masquerade, appreciating how cloth bound and tied people to each other and to their ancestors. Clark, who is also of Scottish heritage, found that people in the Highlands of Scotland visited sacred healing wells, called cloutie wells, where they washed their bodies with cloth and then hung the cloth in a nearby tree. The most powerful wells could be identified by the fact that they had the most cloth. Her third source of inspiration for creating a collaborative art project was the AIDS memorial quilt, where people used cloth to preserve the memories of those who passed away. In all of these examples, the accumulation of cloth is mnemonic, spiritual, and curative, and like the warp and weft of cloth, weaves people together.

In her workshop, Clark explained that in many cultures small containers filled with written text are meant to be protective. For example, Asante hunters wear cloth and leather

amulets filled with herbal medicines and written text from diverse sources, including the Qur'an and the Bible. A Jewish mezuzah, a small rectangular box containing passages from the Torah, is fixed on a doorpost as a protective symbol of moral values and faith. Many cultures used beads to focus prayers, and Clark used the examples of the Catholic rosary, Buddhist prayer beads, and Islamic beads used to

recite the ninety-nine names of Allah. Clark mentioned that the Yoruba liken children to beads, demonstrating their preciousness, and discussed how Native American women created beaded amulets in the shape of turtles and lizards to hold the umbilical cords of their children.

Clark then instructed participants on how to make several basic styles of beaded packets,

