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# BEADWORK

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# BEADED *Blessings*

DEBORAH PULLIAM

*Beaded Blessings* is composed of over 700 beaded amulets made

An interesting bit of little known fact: the word “bead” in Old English is the same as the word for “prayer.” Sonya Clark, an assistant professor of textile design at the University of Wisconsin/Madison, began with that tiny bit of information and turned it into a project and exhibit so dynamic that it’s taken on a life of its own—and Sonya isn’t quite sure just where it will end.

*Beaded Blessings* was exhibited in Madison at the end of 2000 and in the spring of 2001, and it’s composed of over 700 beaded amulets made by participants from across the country and around the world. Plans are under way for the exhibit to travel. The amulets range in size from one to four square inches, and they consist of two layers of material with a folded piece of paper inside. Each piece of paper contains a wish, hope, dream, or prayer of the maker, and each

packet has at least one bead on the outside. Most packets are made of fabric embellished with beads, but some are made entirely of beads.

Each participant was asked to make two identical blessings, or prayers, in order to put one in the exhibited amulet and keep the other.

The project began in 1999 when Sonya received a state grant to bring art to those who don’t normally have a chance to do art. “I got the amulet idea because I’ve been researching African art for a long time,” she says. “I was inspired to make two pieces of my own, but I wasn’t quite done. The exhibition has a lot to do with protection and blessing, in a community sense.” The community aspect became more important when Sonya, using the grant money, taught workshops across Wisconsin, first discussing the importance of beadwork in amulets and prayer traditions around the world, but concentrating on Africa. Novice beaders were then given lessons in basic beadwork so they could create their own designs. Those more experienced in working with beads used their own preferred techniques. “Now people can participate by just sending in a beaded blessing, or they can come and do a workshop,” she says. “Participating in the exhibit is very multicultural, very universal.”

Although she doesn’t consider herself a beadworker in a formal sense, Sonya makes use of embellishments in her own work as well as her teaching. “I do a fair amount of beading, but I have carpal tunnel syndrome, so I can’t do as much as I’d like,” she says. “A lot of my own work is influenced by my research





on African and African-American art and my own heritage.”

The original 1999 grant ran for about a year and a half, and bought the supplies to teach beading and the means to travel the state. Sonya says that period had the same effect as a pebble tossed into a pond creating ripples that move farther and farther out from the splash. Despite the original title of *Beaded Prayers*, she says that “I don’t consider it a religious project, or even a faith-based one.” As she points out, African amulets are related to Jewish *muzuzahs* because of Muslim influences, and most Americans are familiar with Catholic rosaries made of beads.

Consisting of sixty running feet of fabric-covered panels to which the individual amulets (some 1,074 at last count) were fastened, the exhibit was first mounted at the University of Wisconsin. The second venue was an old post office, now the Madison city offices and civic center, which pleased Sonya. “Lots of people saw the exhibit who didn’t come looking for it,” she says. Not surprisingly, the many small and colorful packets create a quilt-like whole.

As for the project’s future, Sonya is undecided. “I said I’d stop when there were 1,000 amulets, but that happened much faster than I expected,” she says. “Maybe I’ll stop with 2,000? I feel strongly about the ‘teach one, reach one’ effect of every-

one passing the information on to another.” She has also thought that since the exhibit grows more unwieldy as amulets are added, that spin-offs are a way of continuing the project and helping the exhibit reach more areas.

One very important element is that none of the amulets are maker-identifiable, and Sonya is adamant about keeping it that way. A list of contributors is posted with the exhibit, but only as a group. “The individuality of each piece is not so important as the message on the inside!” she says. “I think of the amulets as a communal piece that can’t be taken apart.”

Like most things involving beads, the whole is far greater than the sum of its individual parts. ❁

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*Deborah Pulliam works as a historian and writer on the coast of Maine. Her beaded blessing was made from handspun, handwoven wool squares, embellished with two handmade Fimo beads.*



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SONYA CLARK

by participants from across the country and around the world.

