

THE ART OF PERSONAL ADORNMENT

# ORNAMENT

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*Gele o dun bi ka mo o we,  
ka mo o we, ka dabi ko ye ni.*

*Translation from Yoruba*

*The head wrap is only  
good when it fits.*



*First know who  
you are then adorn  
yourself accordingly.*

*Epictetus*

*Greek Stoic Philosopher*



*One cannot  
be neutral in the  
presence of a hat.*

*Patricia Underwood*

*Hat Designer*

# SCULPTURAL HEADRESSES

Sonya Clark

My work comes from a very personal place. It is a place I am constantly rediscovering in the same way that the scientist, Niels Bohr, rediscovered the atom. It was always there. At some level he knew it was there. Perhaps that is why he began his search in the first place.

Books, teachers and experience have opened my head to ideas I always knew but had forgotten or was not aware that I knew. Sometimes I make an object and then I learn from it—a reminder that often art is made through me not by me. I am a vessel. A vessel for what? Perhaps it is cultural heritage or a spiritual force that is asserting itself through my head to my hands, using me to teach myself and others about its existence and the connections of people to one another.

As a first generation American, I see this country through the eyes of an American and the eyes of a West Indian. As a person who grew up attending predominantly white schools and living in a predominantly black neighborhood I have access to two worlds, one of European influence and one of African influence. This nexus is both bridge and burden, both double vision and double consciousness.

Despite the suppression of African traditional religious beliefs in the West, transplanted Africans actively held on to their craft traditions. Objects visually and functionally associated with traditional African religions were banned. However, everyday, functional objects were deemed acceptable because they were useful without having “paganistic tendencies.” Often the formal aesthetics and techniques were preserved while the religious and symbolic meanings were submerged or lost. The sweet grass basket tradition in South Carolina and Georgia, with its direct link to the basket traditions of Sierra Leone and Senegal, is an example of preservation of culture through craft.<sup>1</sup>

*Opposite Page Upper Left:* SYNCRÉSIF Indigo-dyed cloth, cotton, pennies, wire, embroidery, 10 x 8 x 8 inches, 1994. This title comes from the words syncretism and sift. Syncretism describes the fusion of two different beliefs into one, while one of the definitions of the word sift is to “examine or sort carefully.” This piece symbolizes both actions, unifying and sorting. African American people have historically gone through both processes in an attempt to redefine ourselves, our heritage and our history. *Upper Right:* OUR GLASS Silk, burlap, embroidery, 12 x 8 x 8 inches, 1994. In its shape this piece is a metaphor for the cultural influences and information funneled into our collective cultural head. The title is a pun on “hour glass” and refers to the passage of time yet the continuity of cultural heritage. *Lower Left:* CYCLOTINCTURE Silk, velvet, copper, copper lead, paint, 10 x 8 x 8 inches, 1996. I made this piece using copper as a third eye that casts a red glow on whatever is in its line of vision. The red glow, like blood, is indicative of life force and vitality. It rejuvenates those that it sees by giving them a healthy tan. It was not until months after finishing this piece that I became aware of its relationship in form and material to the botolo chief hats of the Ekonda region of Zaire. The title of the piece literally means “single eye that colors.” *Lower Right:* IN THE SWEETGRASS TRADITION Dyed cotton, wire, thread, 13 x 10 x 10, 1994. Despite the suppression of African traditional religious beliefs in the Western Hemisphere by European slave traders, transplanted enslaved Africans actively held on to their craft traditions and were encouraged to do so. Objects visually and functionally associated with traditional African religions were banned. However, everyday, functional objects were deemed acceptable because they were useful without having “paganistic tendencies.” Often the formal aesthetics and techniques were preserved while the religious and symbolic meanings were submerged or lost. This piece was made in honor of the craft legacy and the hardship and endurance that it represents. *Captions provided by Sonya Clark. Photographs by Judi Ross.*



Above: BENIN COIL Copper refrigerator tubing, raised copper and copper wire, 12 x 8 x 8 inches, 1995. The form for this piece was derived directly from the bronze memorial head of the Queen Mother of the

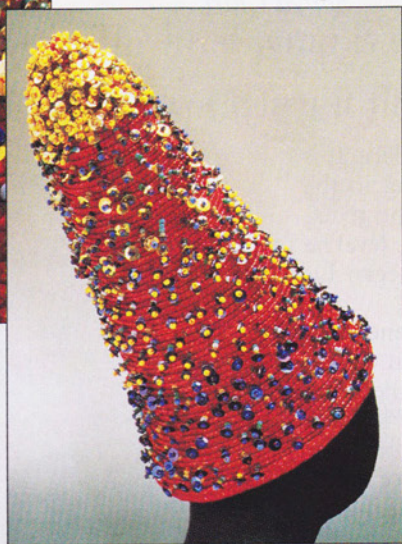
kingdom of Benin in what is now Nigeria. Copper was used to honor the modern-day Queen Mothers; it is a symbol of women’s power and strength, and continuity of life.

*Left:* EXTROVERT Wire, silk, crocheted cotton, copper tacks, 13 x 8 x 8 inches, 1995. The copper tacks symbolize wealth and history because of their material, and pain and struggle because of their form. By pointing outward the tacks threaten to hurt a person other than the wearer. This hat was made for the African American persona that does not hold back painful or political language, the person that boldly asserts African American culture. *Both photographs by Bill Saunders.*

Although I was exposed to other retentions of African aesthetics in African American crafts, the fiber techniques were the ones that most piqued my interest. Perhaps, it was in my blood, as my grandmother was a tailor by profession and was also the first person to put



ADE VODUN Hand-stitched toyo braid, beads, sequins, 14 x 8 x 8 inches, 1996. "Ade Vodun" echoes the shape of the most sacred Yoruba crowns, the *ade*. It is created from toyo braid which is often used for Western straw hats and embellished with the sequins and beads that dominate the ritual garments and altars of Haitian Vodun and Cuban Santería. The piece acknowledges the melding of traditional African belief with Christianity in the Western Hemisphere, which resulted in syncretized religions practiced throughout the Caribbean and South America. Photographs by J. Nedresky.



a needle and thread in my hands. Perhaps it was just fate. Or, as painter Sam Gilliam said of the importance of the medium to African Americans, "Others look to a monument, we look to a piece of cloth."<sup>2</sup> Perhaps, then, it is cultural legacy.

In 1989, I took a trip to Cote d'Ivoire to learn how to construct the objects I had been studying in the traditional setting, using traditional tools. I wove on a strip loom and learned to tie dye, batik and make baskets from traditional African artists. When I returned from that trip I knew that I had to continue making art. Moreover, I knew that fiber was the most appropriate medium for me. Through fiber I could reclaim and strengthen a cultural tie to Africa and speak as cloth speaks of issues of identity, syncretism, hybridization of culture and double consciousness.

The physical body is a metaphor for the larger social body. As in English, the Bamana people of Mali use the word *kun* to mean head, leader, source, highest and superior.<sup>3</sup> The head is not only the seat of intelligence but also the seat of the soul of many belief systems (including that of the author). The head is closest to the heavens. It connects the person to life and death. It is the site of our dream and rational activity, the place between.

Adornment of the head signifies gender, status, politics, religious affiliation, ethnicity, occupation, fashion or mood. It serves as material language. Head adornment lets the outside world know who we are or what we wish to project about ourselves.

Hats command attention. They frame our faces and therefore our identity. Humans have an inborn

ability to recognize slight differences in facial structure as a way of differentiating one person from the next or one mood from another.<sup>4</sup> Hats can heighten or obscure these features. They also embellish the site of spiritual connection and the place where the senses meet, where the physical and the meta-physical merge, where double consciousness, double vision and hybridization of culture, as I have previously described them, come together.

As an artist I make hats as symbols of African American culture, a culture in between reclamation and hybridization. As art critic Thomas McEvilley says of art, "One of the social functions of art has been its role in reshaping and sustaining a sense of identity (and hence changing it)."<sup>5</sup> The same is true of my hats.

In ancient Greece there were sumptuary laws forbidding slaves to wear hats. A freed slave was given a *capere pileum* to wear signifying his freedom. Interestingly, these Phrygian caps came into fashion around the time of the French and American Revolutions as symbols of liberty.<sup>6</sup> Similar to the sumptuary laws of Rome, in the seventeenth century there was the Christian convention of "hat honor"<sup>7</sup> requiring that a man bare his head to his moral and social superior.

Drawing my source material primarily from African hats and headdresses, I see myself as acknowledging the freedom of African Americans. More than just a recognition of physical freedom, I also am addressing a mental, spiritual and intellectual freedom. I am giving status back to the wearer through his or her own heritage. Using the head as a place between, I appropriate African form and technique both to teach and to reawaken and reconnect the African spiritual and cultural presence in the wearer. Likewise, I refer to American and Western culture to acknowledge their influence and role in African American identity.

How the head is adorned indicates many things about the wearer. The response to that adornment indicates many things about the culture. While sumptuary laws are not part of our American culture, how one dresses is still subject to the dominant culture's dictates.

In January of 1988, the nation's capital came face to face with the politics of cultural adornment. Pamela Mitchell, an employee at the Marriott hotel in Washington, D. C., was informed that her job was at stake if she did not get rid of her corn-rowed hairstyle. The hotel claimed that they had grooming rules and her hair simply did not comply. Eventually the Marriott backed down from their stance and Ms. Mitchell was permitted to keep both her hairstyle and her job.<sup>8</sup>

The underlying issue was not one of neatness but of cultural acceptance. The Marriott corporation had come to accept African American women wearing hairstyles that imitated European American hairstyles but not those that were connected to their own heritage. This fits into the pattern set by dominant culture—a rejection of African culture because it is

seen as rebellious and anti-American that is tied to the history of slavery.

One questions how much the suppression of African culture has changed in the past two hundred years. If revering and acknowledging that which is African is anti-American than the very title by which Americans of African descent are presently called, African American, is a contradiction in terms. We are, by title, both anti-American and American. Again, testimony to the duality and perhaps the schizophrenia of identity of our existence in this culture.

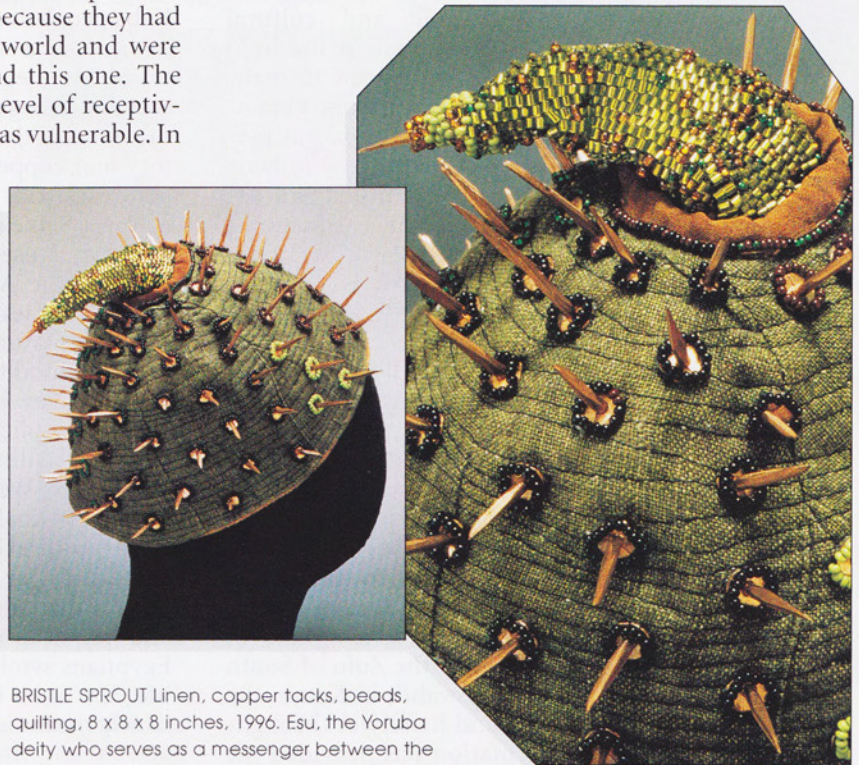
Babies are born with a soft spot on the top of the head. I was raised believing this was because they had most recently arrived from the spirit world and were more receptive to both that world and this one. The spiritual goal is to return to the same level of receptivity as the baby without making oneself as vulnerable. In this metaphor, the body becomes a vessel for two worlds with the top of the head as the opening. The opening must not only be protected by a head covering but the person must learn to balance between the two worlds with grace.

For me, this has obvious reference to the sociological balance an African American must achieve when faced with issues of double consciousness and the empowerment of double vision. The ability to physically and metaphysically balance between two places, to be both individual and part of a collective identity, and to be African American in both the African American and European American worlds, is the balance that must be struck. Visually, I relate the balance to the image of women carrying vessels on their heads and the poise required to do it well. Viscerally, I make hats that require the wearer to be body aware. The hats require poise and balance. The body immediately becomes aligned with the axis of the spine when wearing a hat of the appropriate weight, height and structure.

The Yoruba belief system has effected the way in which I think about my work and the form it takes. Before I enter into specifics about Yoruba philosophy, permit me to digress a moment and exercise some syncretic behavior to demonstrate why it is not my choice to make hats but perhaps my destiny or *ori*.

Shango is the Yoruba *orisha* (deity) associated with the ram. My astrological sign is Aries, also associated with the ram. Shango is a hot-tempered warrior. Aries is associated with Ares, the Greek god of war. Aries is a fire sign and people born under that sign are said to be hot-tempered. Shango is known as the fire deity, associated with lightning. Finally, the sign Aries is associated with the head. Which brings me to my next point. On staff heads, devotees of Shango are depicted

with a double axe head supported on the head. This image speaks to the ability of the devotee to balance the hot temperedness of Shango with balance, coolness, and even temperedness. A devotee that is being "ridden" by Shango often carries a vessel with flaming materials on top of the head but remains cool as water and balanced. The Yoruba word for these collective qualities is *itutu*. Itutu is the correct way to present yourself to another person. A Yoruba might greet someone by saying, "When I saw you, I opened my cap. It is itutu answering past itutu you made to me." As a child



**BRISTLE SPROUT** Linen, copper tacks, beads, quilting, 8 x 8 x 8 inches, 1996. Esu, the Yoruba deity who serves as a messenger between the deities and mankind, is known for his phallic headdress that points toward the earth. "Bristle Sprout" was inspired by Esu's headdress, his need to be appeased, and his ability as a messenger to help man's desires come to fruition. The piece also makes reference to the potential in a freshly sprouted plant. The head then becomes both a seed for the growth of ideas and a symbol of the connection between the heavens and the earth, life and death, and the cycles of nature. Photographs by J. Nedresky.

of a mother who is Jamaican and Aries and a father who is Trinidadian and Aquarius, the water bearer, I am a physical manifestation of the two. Once again, I find myself at the nexus, a place of balance and duality, a rhythm of two beats. To stay in this place requires both itutu and intelligence. And, so I am named Sonya, a derivative of Sophia which means wisdom.

Yoruba belief is centered around the worship of the head (*ori*). As implied previously, *ori* translates as both "head" and "personal destiny." There is a Yoruba saying that one's head is the envelope for one's secrets.<sup>10</sup> Which implies that one need only to open one's own head to find personal destiny. In other words, if like the baby, we develop the soft spot connection we will find our places in the world, our correct destiny. The Yoruba believe that each person possesses two heads, an inner one (*ori inu*) and an outer one (*ori ode*). The



Photograph by V. Bogren-Swift

SONYA CLARK

ori inu is the spiritual head, one's true nature, one's soul. The ori ode is the outer manifestation of identity, the mask of the soul. A person is said to be "walking straight" if one's ori inu is ruling the ori ode.

My spiritual, artistic and cultural interest in the head has led me to many things from obtaining a degree in psychology to studying religion and philosophy

to doing research at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art. In my attempt to recapitulate what had been culturally decapitated, that is, to reconnect with African culture, I needed specific information on specific head adornments and specific information on cultural treatments of the head. I did not want to simply borrow a form without knowing how it functioned within its social context. I feel the need to be responsible to the images from which I derive my work in order to tether the work and thereby the wearer or owner of the work not generally but specifically to African culture.

I have studied a great range of head treatments and traditional hats including that of Yoruba culture (i.e., Shango devotee staff heads), *ashetu* hats of Bamum, Cameroon, the *isicholo* of the Zulu of South Africa, the *kofia ya kuia* of the Swahili in Kenya, the *gele* head ties of West Africa, and hairstyles throughout Africa. All of this information has provided me with a rich resource to tap into, an opportunity to both open my head and involve my hands in the process of reconnecting.

My interest is piqued when I see the places in which headdresses have influenced other cultures and been reinterpreted. A wonderful example of this is the influence of the European powdered wig in Africa and the Caribbean as a sign of political authority. In Nigeria it gets reinterpreted through materials as a white beaded hat that has the form of the powdered wig. First, there was the adoption of that which is considered majestic in European culture. Then there was the adaptation through the traditional beading technique.

This residue of crosspollenization between cultures is exciting to me. In a single object one can trace cultural influence. I strive to make my work have the same impact. To this end, I have drawn from African and American sources in form, color symbolism, cultural use and technique.

The first time I used pennies in my work was in a piece called "Coppertone Covet." I was interested in the European mind, the place between the social stigma of being of African descent and the desire to be a darker color through the process of suntanning. I used pennies

because of their color and its relationship to skin color, the portrait of Lincoln as a symbol of African American history, and their status as the lowest form of tender. In my work, pennies have become symbols of African American status, history and economics.

I was also attracted to pennies because of the metal from which they are made. I discovered the importance of copper throughout the African continent. The red tone of the metal made it more highly valued than gold. The redness referred to blood, life and thus prosperity. In contrast to the way in which copper currency is used in this country as the lowest form of tender, among the Kuba peoples of Zaire, "Copper... symbolizes the refusal to become a subject."<sup>11</sup> Copper was, in pre-colonial times, the metal of the kings. I have reclaimed it as a material, using it and its cultural power to speak both of the status of the penny as icon of African American history and copper as the metal for African royalty. The material stands in an interesting threshold between two cultures: value and worthlessness.

When I use pennies as embellishment I think of them as the African American equivalent of cowry shells. Cowries were traditional currency. Their shape related to women's genitalia and as such referred to lifeline, blood ties and the wealth of having many offspring. Likewise, the red color of pennies holds the same symbolic weight. The connection of copper to life and fertility is further exemplified by its association in the West with Venus, the Roman goddess of love and sexuality.

In mystical belief mirrors are said to "trap the souls of the living or detain the souls of the dead."<sup>12</sup> They are objects that stand in the portal between the spiritual and physical worlds, between life and death. The Egyptians symbol of the ankh means both mirror and life. The ankh is related in form to the sign of Venus, which meant copper in alchemy as it was the metal

**FREED SEED** Dyed silk, lotus pod, pennies, shisha stitch and quilting, 10 x 8 x 8 inches, 1996. The lotus is an Asian symbol that represents the spirituality of being in the world but free from the world. "Freed Seed" was inspired by a lotus pod, a symbol of potential transformation. In my work the top of the head becomes the threshold between spirit and matter. The lotus pod is placed on



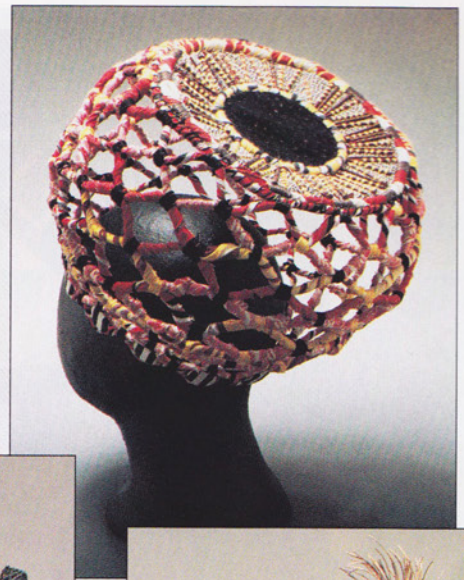
the top of the head as a symbol of potential spiritual freedom. The pennies that embellish the headdress refer to the seeds in the lotus pod while making reference to the freedom and potential spiritual freedom of African American people. Photograph by J. Nedresky.

*Right: DENDRITE* Crocheted cotton, copper lead, 12 x 12 x 12 inches, 1996. A dendrite is a nerve cell that carries information into the center of a cell. "Dendrite" becomes an enlarged manifestation of this physiological occurrence. The piece also refers to coral in its shape. The references to coral and its copper patina are used as symbols of wealth and spiritual prowess. Traditionally, copper and coral because of their redness related to blood, lineage and therefore a connection to one's ancestors in the spirit world. Dendrite, its shape, crocheted structure and copper color serves as a spiritual and cultural membrane for the head. It allows spiritual energy to be absorbed, retained and emanated.

*Center: EKO Cloth*, wire, nails, eyelet stitch, 13 x 13 x 13 inches, 1996. Hairstyles reflect culture. In Lagos, Nigeria a bridge named Eko was built. This bridge became the inspiration for a hairstyle of the same name. This piece was inspired by that hairstyle and what a bridge represents, a connection between two places. The top of the piece refers to Swahili style *kofia ya kiuu* hats that are made of small eyelet holes embroidered in cloth. These small holes become a membrane into the head. The top of "Eko" also refers to the drum which was used as a mode of communication in Africa.

*Lower Right: FOUNT* Fiberglass screening, hair-pins, copper wire, 12 x 8 x 8 inches, 1996. The idea of the flux of spiritual energy dominates this piece. The head becomes a fountain of energy (outflow), while the fiberglass screening and opening at the top also provide for an inflow of energy. This piece uses hair implements, copper hairpins, as hair. Hair, since it grows from the head, contains the spiritual energy of a person. The overall shape of the piece was inspired initially by the way thatched roofs are constructed and becomes a roof for the spiritual head.

Photographs by J. Nedresky.



associated with the goddess, further indication that the mirror-like women are assisted with the passage between the living and the spirit world.

Mirrors also interest me on psycho-philosophical level. To know oneself is one thing. To also be constantly aware of how one is being perceived from the outside is another. Mirrors are devices that I use in my work to speak of double consciousness and double vision. Mirrors not only capture the image of what is before them, they also project light. It is the quality of projection and reflection that makes them function conceptually for me as reflection on self versus projection of other onto self. The concepts in my work focus on the nexus, the place between, so it follows that the work itself falls into the same situation. Since most of the work I make is wearable with an emphasis on the handmade, it easily fits into the categories of fashion and craft. Because it is spiritual it could also become part of a religious ritual. Three dimensional form, color and texture are all important to me and so the work can ease into the place of sculpture as well. Ultimately, I would like to have them be instructive bridges between craft, sculpture, fashion and spirituality, to blur the edges of where one begins and the other ends. Conceptually, I want the work to be the bridge between lost heritage and current experience and to serve as educational tools or artful artifacts.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Regenia Perry, "African Art and African American Folk Art", p. 36.
- 2 Author's interview with Sam Gilliam, December 20, 1993 at the artist's home in Washington, D.C.
- 3 Mary Jo Arnoldi and Christine Kreamer, *Crowning Achievements: African Arts of Dressing the Head* (Los Angeles: UCLA Press, 1995) p. 9.
- 4 Psychological studies show that cross-culturally newborn infants are attracted to matrix of the face, indicating a predisposition to facial recognition.
- 5 Thomas McEvilley, "The Selfhood and the Other," *Africa Explores*, ed. Susan Vogel (Munich: Center for African Art, 1991), p. 274.
- 6 Madeleine Ginsburg, *The Hat: Trends and Traditions* (New York: Barron's, 1990) p. 12.
- 7 Robert Brain, *The Decorated Body* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979) p. 12.
- 8 Lynne Duke, *The Washington Post*, (Section B, p. 8) "Worker Files Complaint With City Over Corn Rows," January 6, 1988.
- 9 Rowland Abiodun, Henry Drewal and John Pemberton III, *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought* (New York: Center for African Art, 1989), p. 13.
- 10 Mary Jo Arnoldi and Christine Kreamer, *Crowning Achievements: African Arts of Dressing the Head* (Los Angeles: UCLA Press, 1995) p. 145.
- 11 Eugenic Herbert, *Red Gold of Africa: Copper in Pre-colonial History and Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984) p. 246.
- 12 Edward Clodd, *Magic in Names and Other Things* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1920) p. 33-34.

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