

THE MATURING

Contemporary Beadwork in Europe and North America

by Valerie Hector

It has been about ten years since the publication of *The New Beadwork*,¹ which brought enormous attention to a medium that relatively few artists were pursuing seriously at that time. These days, the field overflows with artists who work in a wide range of styles and techniques and exhibit their pieces in major galleries or museums. No longer the embarrassing stepchild of the textile arts, beadwork is increasingly respected as a legitimate contemporary art form. To do justice to the many developments of the last decade would require hundreds of pages and dozens of images. In this short survey, we will focus instead on four major artists and see how their work has contributed to the medium in Europe and North America. We will discuss at some length the work of longtime artists Joyce Scott and Jacqueline Lillie, then turn to newcomers Joseph Barbaccia and Natasha St. Michael. Each has a unique personal vision that we will come to understand as we engage in the comparisons and contrasts that follow.

No American beadworker has earned more recognition, or more admiration, than Joyce Scott of Baltimore, Maryland. It is fair to say that she has completely redefined the boundaries of our medium. Her achievements are worth exploring in detail here, though we will not exhaust them. Already in the 1970s she was busy depicting the human form in beads, and this was unusual at the time. Two of her early neckpieces, entitled *Collar* and *Chinese Panthers*, are two-dimensional compositions of wire or loomwork, featuring heads or full figures situated symmetrically between repeating geometric motifs.² Faint traces of emotion are discernable in the faces. Soon, Scott's work underwent a sea change of sorts, which was complete by the mid-1980s. She stopped working symmetrically and solely in two dimensions, and started working asymmetrically, often in three dimensions, making pieces of wearable art and sculpture as well. Some of these changes may have stemmed from Scott's interest in the arts of the Yoruba peoples of Nigeria, and her studies in the 1970s with Yoruba beadwork artist Jimoh Buraimoh.³ The Yoruba have an extensive beadworking tradition, focused on the production of ceremonial regalia for the various kings who govern different parts of Yorubaland, as well as the priest and diviners who



OF A MEDIUM

mediate the human and supernatural realms.⁴

Surely the most notable characteristic of traditional Yoruba beadwork is its three-dimensionality. Full or partial figures of humans and birds, representing royal ancestors or other protective spirits, project outwards from the surfaces of countless Yoruba beaded crowns, stools, and garments; this gives them a lifelike quality that is absent from most two-dimensional pieces. While Scott was definitely attracted to the sculptural and textural aspects of Yoruba beadwork at an early point in her career, she was even more impressed by the way Yoruba beadwork conveyed symbolic messages about Yoruba cosmology, socio-political structure, and religion. Yoruba beadwork could speak, and what it said was received with respect. For Scott, this was an empowering realization.

Also by the mid-1980s, Scott had begun to adopt a patchwork or collage approach to the assembly of her pieces. She would stitch together a dozen or more small pieces of beadwork seemingly at random to form a single composition. This was a radical departure from anything being done in the field at that time, in North America or elsewhere. While Yoruba beadwork manifests a distinct patchwork sensibility, with most compositions segmented into small squares, triangles or diamonds of various colors, Scott probably found more inspiration much closer to home, in the work of her mother, Elizabeth Talford Scott, a celebrated quiltmaker.⁵ As Joyce Scott explains, she was continually absorbing her



mother's work and responding to it with pieces of her own. It was almost as if they were having a kind of conversation, with bits of quilted, collaged or woven fabric carrying the meaning.⁶ At the same time, Joyce Scott was looking at the work of European masters such as Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, Paul Gauguin, and Henri Matisse, whose figurative paper collages provided more stimulation. All of these artists, it should be remembered, also

incorporated aspects of non-Western art into their aesthetic.

More of Joyce Scott's innovations must be added to the list. Unlike the Yoruba, who mainly sew beads to cloth, she began to explore peyote stitch, an ancient beadnetting technique that probably goes back to the Old Kingdom in Egypt (ca. 2649-2150 BCE).⁷ It is a versatile stitch that lends itself well to two- and three-dimensional formats.⁸ Although 17th century beadworkers in Stuart England, and 20th century native North American beadworkers, among others, had used three-dimensional peyote stitch to create human figures, they never realized its full potential; their figures were engaging, but still fairly rigid. By teaching herself how to increase and decrease the number of beads per stitch and per row, Scott was free to make fleshy, voluptuous human figures without internal armatures, and with baroque contours never before achieved by any beadworker.

Scott put these radically new beaded figures to brilliant use. In neckpieces like

Joyce Scott wearing one of her necklaces, ca. 1995. Photo: John Dean

LEFT: Joyce Scott *Buddha Supports Shiva Awakening the Races*. Glass beads, wire, fabric, 14" x 14" x 10", 1993. Collection of Ms. Elsie Michie, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Mulatto in South Africa and *'Til All Are Free, None Are Free*, and sculptures such as *Rodney King's Head Squashed Like a Watermelon*, and *Buddha Supports Shiva Awakening the Races*.⁹ Scott presents humans at moments of despair, oppression, domination, anger, confusion, wonderment, transcendence and sometimes joy, and uses them, for the first time in the history of the medium, to deliver biting social and political critiques.¹⁰ We cannot help but be disturbed at the sight of these pieces, not to mention their implications about the human condition. That is the right reaction, for Joyce is prodding us to reassess our attitudes and regain some of the humanity we seem to have lost.¹¹ In fact, if there is one overriding theme that surfaces time and again in Joyce's work, it is this: man's inhumanity to man. For Joyce, an African-American who counts among her ancestors several slaves, this theme has a deep personal relevance, one that compels her to continue forging her discourse of beaded enlightenment.

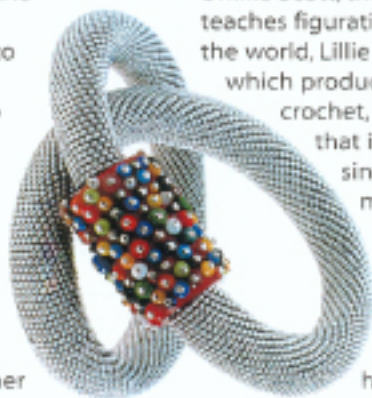
Jacqueline Lillie of Vienna, Austria, is another longtime leader in the contemporary beadwork field. Many regard her as Europe's most accomplished beadwork jeweler; her resume is long and impressive.¹² Those of us who subscribed to *Ornament* in 1982 will never forget seeing Lillie's work for the first time when it had won First Prize in the magazine's design competition. It was clear that a great artist had emerged.

Like Joyce Scott, Lillie works in both two- and three-dimensional formats, but there the similarities end. Lillie favors a quieter approach, one which unites clean contours, intricate geometric motifs, and the tiniest antique European glass beads to generate jewelry of surpassing elegance. There are no human figures; representation does not interest her. Lillie keeps her forms simple; whether spherical or cylindrical, circular or square, they manifest a cool, refined, minimalist sensibility.¹³ When it comes to colors and patterns, on the other hand, like a gifted mathematician she plays with complexity, exploring "color

sequences, pattern correspondences, and textural choreography."¹⁴ The results are often magical.

Whereas Scott is comfortable with a certain looseness of technique, Lillie is a perfectionist, pursuing a disciplined method that is an integral part of the aesthetic she cultivates. Her tiny stitches can be discerned only with the aid of a magnifying glass. They form a beaded web that completely encases the underlying forms of Perspex or sterling silver. Unlike Scott, the quintessential mentor who teaches figurative beading workshops around the world, Lillie prefers to keep her technique, which produces an appearance similar to crochet, private. She acknowledges only that it involves knotting after every single bead. In addition to being a master beadworker, Lillie is also a trained metalsmith. She accents her necklaces, earrings, and pins with harmonious findings of silver, brass, ebony, or plastic that she designs and makes or has made especially for each piece. In fact, she long ago set the standard for seamlessly integrating custom findings into high-level beadwork jewelry.

Like Joyce Scott, Jacqueline Lillie rapidly transcended the initial sources of her inspiration. A measure of early inspiration came from the beaded jewelry of the Wiener Werkstatte.¹⁵ The Wiener Werkstatte (Vienna Workshop) was formed in 1903 as a craft guild intended to promote handmade work by graduates of a local craft school. It lasted until 1933. By 1905, it numbered close to 100 professional artists, designing furniture, jewelry, clothing, metalware, costumes, and textiles marked by a straightforward geometric forms and hand-finished surfaces. Among the Werkstatte's jewelry designers were several who fashioned beautiful necklaces featuring tiny, brightly colored glass beads crocheted to form or cover spheres, teardrops, and tubes.¹⁶ By the early-to-mid 1980s, Lillie had expanded upon this limited formal vocabulary by developing beaded discs, folding ribbons, spirals, bicones, knots, and squares, and combining them in a variety of fresh ways. At the same time, she was intro-



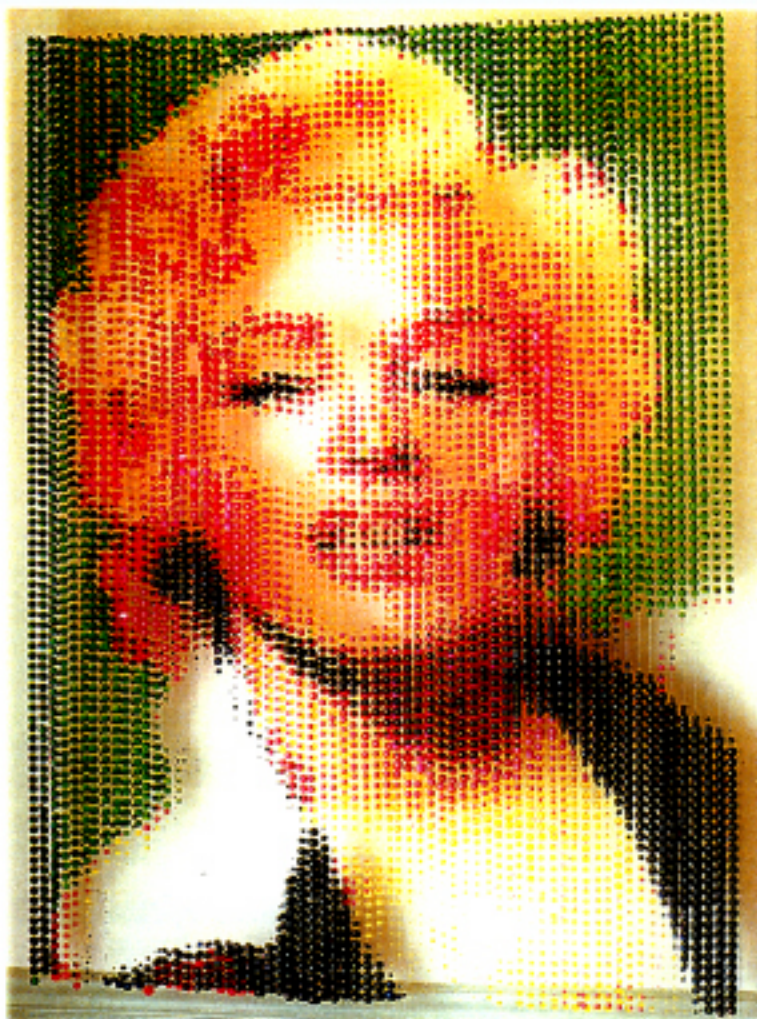
JACQUELINE LILLIE Necklace, glass and aluminum beads, sterling silver, Perspex, 20" long, 1996. Photo: Kohli & Olah.
Courtesy of Rosanne Raab & Associates, New York.

ducing the color and pattern relationships noted above, which were infinitely more complex than those used by her Wiener Werkstatte predecessors. In fact, in every way, Lillie has gone light years beyond them.

Another source of Jacqueline Lillie's inspiration is the beadwork of cultures other than her own. At one point, she began to study the beaded memory boards of the Luba peoples of Zaire, Africa. These small, hourglass-shaped, carved wooden boards are studded with glass and shell beads in formations that look random but are actually highly structured. The sizes of the beads, and the spatial relationships between them, serve to guide Luba officials during public recitations of Luba history.¹⁷ In a necklace from 1996, Lillie quotes the Luba aesthetic directly by using a small, brightly colored memory-board-like clasp to finish a voluminous silver rope. In Lillie's hands, this unlikely but effective synthesis of two disparate styles of beadwork feels effortless.

As we have suggested, most of Joyce Scott's pieces carry overt messages relating to the theme of inhumanity. In Lillie's work, on the other hand, there are no overt messages. If we insist upon looking for covert messages, we might find them in the timelessness and purity of her forms, which call to mind those of Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi, or in the subtle interplays of her colors and patterns, which recall paintings by Paul Klee, Jean Dubuffet, and Joan Miro. There is meaning as well in her love for, commitment to, and total mastery of her medium. Like Joyce Scott, Jacqueline Lillie has many admirers. Her work is widely imitated, but it seems unlikely that it will be surpassed in our lifetime, if ever.

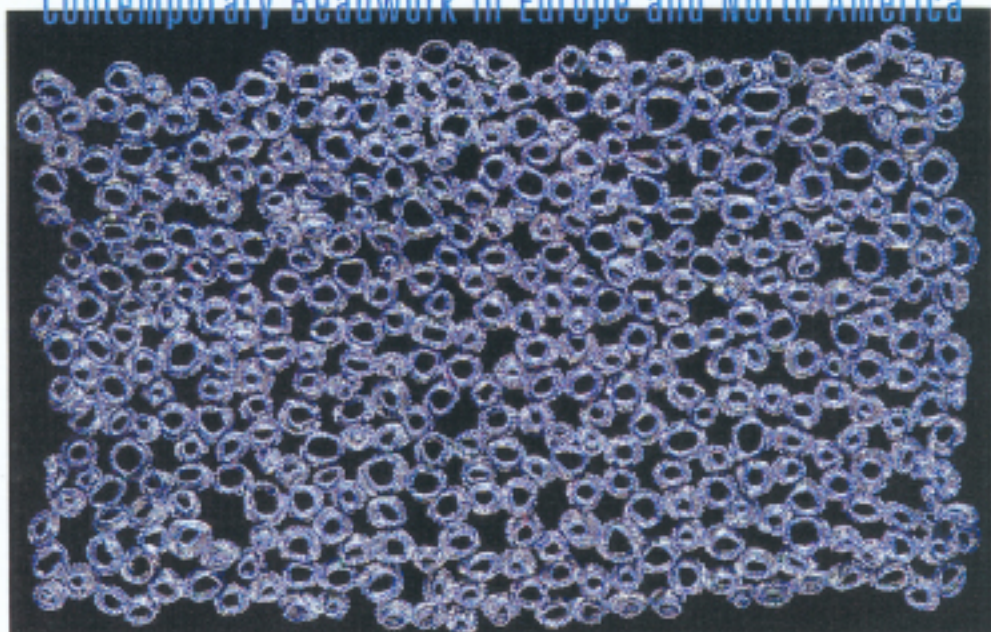
Joseph Barbaccia of Potomac Falls, Virginia, and Natasha St. Michael of Montreal, Canada, are relatively new to the art of beadwork, but already their contributions deserve serious attention. Following directly, if unintentionally, in the footsteps of Joyce Scott, Barbaccia employs figuration to make us question our attitudes about American celebrities,



JOSEPH BARBACCIA *Marilyn* Plastic beads, fishing line, wood and aluminum mounting, 52" x 48", 2002. Photo: The Artist.

the media, and perception in general. In *Marilyn*, a wallpiece, he presents an Andy Warhol-esque vision of Marilyn Monroe, emanating from a veil of neon-colored plastic fishing lure beads two layers thick. To generate this image, Barbaccia scanned a reproduction of a familiar photograph of Marilyn Monroe into his computer, then applied a halftoning filter to break the image up into its component pixels. Next, he translated the pixels into painted plastic fishing lure beads ranging in size from 3 to 14 millimeters, and figured out where to situate each bead, on which string and which layer. This is the hard part of the process; accuracy is essential if the image is to be precise and convincingly three-dimensional when viewed from

Contemporary Beadwork in Europe and North America



NATASHA ST. MICHAEL *Pervious* Glass beads, thread,
14" x 20" x .5", 2001. Photo: Jocelyn Blais.

the proper distance. Of course, outside of this ideal distance the image gradually shifts, until, like a pointillist painting up close, it fragments altogether. In a similar way, it can be difficult to get beyond our notions of Marilyn Monroe as a stereotypical blonde bombshell. If we get too close, Marilyn—the-media-darling dissolves past the point of easy understanding into a complex and imperfect human being. So much depends upon our perspective, our distance from the image being viewed, and the way the image is formatted for us.

Barbaccia's wallpieces include studies of other icons of popular culture such as Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Bozo the Clown, and La Gioconda, that mysterious smiling visage of Mona Lisa painted by Leonardo da Vinci in the early 16th century. Barbaccia has also rendered the same daguerreotype of Abraham Lincoln that is reproduced on our \$5 bills. Here, he uses only a single layer of black beads, which preserves the monochromatic austerity of the original image, but makes it seem oddly fragile—as if a gentle touch of the hand, or a slight gust of wind, would dissolve the image into individual strings of meaningless beads.

Or bullets—for that is what these dark spheres seem to suggest, given how Lincoln met his premature death.

Like Jacqueline Lillie, Natasha St. Michael of Montreal, Canada, is not concerned with changing the world, or commenting on the events of our time. Instead, with *Pervious*, she invites us to consider what lies beneath the surface-level realities of our everyday lives. St. Michael makes wallpieces that resemble large collections of cellular formations. Although they appear chaotic, these formations seem to hint at deeper levels of order, which we might be able to discern if we just had the missing formula. It seems productive to view St. Michael's work from the vantage point of chaos theory, but it has to be said that this is not what she has in mind when she makes her pieces. As chaos theory, "the mathematics of studying nonlinear, dynamic systems," suggests, "complex, dynamical systems show order, but they never repeat."¹⁷ By stitching together tiny, uniform circular glass beads to construct large, irregular circles of beads which are then stitched into still larger formations with circular negative spaces between them, St. Michael

seems to be playing with the chaos vs. order theme; the smaller elements imperfectly recapitulate the larger, and vice-versa. The haunting blue cast of the work suggests an ocean floor, teeming with silent, mysterious, ever-dividing organisms. Then again, these might be the very cells, magnified many times, that we humans are made of. Like Joyce Scott, Natasha St. Michael uses curvilinear peyote stitch and takes a patchwork approach to assembly. Yet her work is remarkably different in temperament, her vision fresh and welcome.

These are but a few of the artists whose contributions are energizing, even revolutionizing our field today. Whether pursuing figuration or abstraction, engaging the

issues of our day or favoring a more timeless approach, cultivating perfection or keeping our field loose, these artists show us how diverse our field has become. At a time when the indigenous beading traditions of many non-Western cultures are dying out or enduring the ravages of commercialization, it is reassuring to know that the ancient art of beadwork continues to evolve in utterly new and fascinating ways.

—Valerie Hector is a beadwork jeweler who has been exhibiting her work at juried American craft shows for 15 years. Her book, *The Art of Beadwork*, will be published in the Fall of 2003 by Watson-Guptill Publications.

Notes.

1. *The New Beadwork* by Kathlyn Moss and Alice Scherer. Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, New York, 1992.
2. See pages 64 and 66 in "Pin-Pricked Deities: The Art of Joyce Scott," by Keith Morrison. In *Joyce J. Scott Kicking It With the Old Masters*, ed. by Kim Carlin. The Baltimore Museum of Art and The Maryland Institute of Art, Baltimore, Maryland, 2000. Ex. cat.
3. Personal communication, Joyce Scott, Nov., 2002. Joyce also studied with Yoruba artist Twins Seven Seven; see "Acting Up and Out: Artistry in the Life of Joyce Jane Scott," by Dr. Leslie King-Hammond, in *Joyce J. Scott Kicking It With the Old Masters*, op. cit., p. 12.
4. *Beads Body and Soul: Art and Life in the Yoruba Universe*, by Henry John Drewal and John Mason. UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1998, p. 21 ff. Exhibition catalog.
5. "Acting Up and Out," op. cit., pp. 10 ff.
6. Personal communication, Joyce J. Scott, Nov., 2002.
7. *Egypt in the Age of the Pyramids*, ed. by John P. O'Neill et al. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Ex. cat.
8. *The Art and Elegance of Beadweaving*, by Carol Wilcox Wells. Lark Books, Asheville, NC, 2002, pp. 120-140.
9. For "Mulatto in South Africa," see *Joyce J. Scott Kicking It With the Old Masters*, p. 23. For *Rodney King's Head Squashed Like a Watermelon*, see p. 40.
10. See "Captured Light: Beadwork by Contemporary Artists," by Kathlyn Moss, in *The New Beadwork*, op. cit., p. 15.
11. As Joyce puts it, "I believe in messing with stereotypes, prodding the viewer to reassess." cf. *Joyce J. Scott Kicking It With the Old Masters*, op. cit. p. 42.
12. See *Perlenschmuck/Beads at Work: Jacqueline Lillie*, by Jacqueline Lillie, Vienna, Austria, 1990.
13. cf. "Captured Light: Beadwork by Contemporary Artists," op. cit., p. 14-15.
14. cf. "A Personal Appreciation," by David Revere McFadden, in *Perlenschmuck/Beads at Work* by Jacqueline Lillie, op. cit. (unpaginated).
15. *Beads at Work, An Artistic Vision*, by Jacqueline Lillie. Unpublished paper presented to the Northern California Bead Society, Oakland, CA, May 1, 2000, p. 19.
16. Cf. *Jewels of Fantasy, Costume Jewelry of the 20th Century*, ed. by Deanna Farneti Cera. Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 1992, pp. 94-5.
17. See "Audacities of Memory" by Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts in *Memory, Luba Art and the Making of History* by Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts. The Museum for African Art, New York, 1996, pp. 37-8.
18. The quotations are from *An Introduction to Chaos Theory and Fractal Geometry* by Manus J. Donohue III. Published digitally at <http://www.duke.edu/~mjd/chaos/chaos.html>.