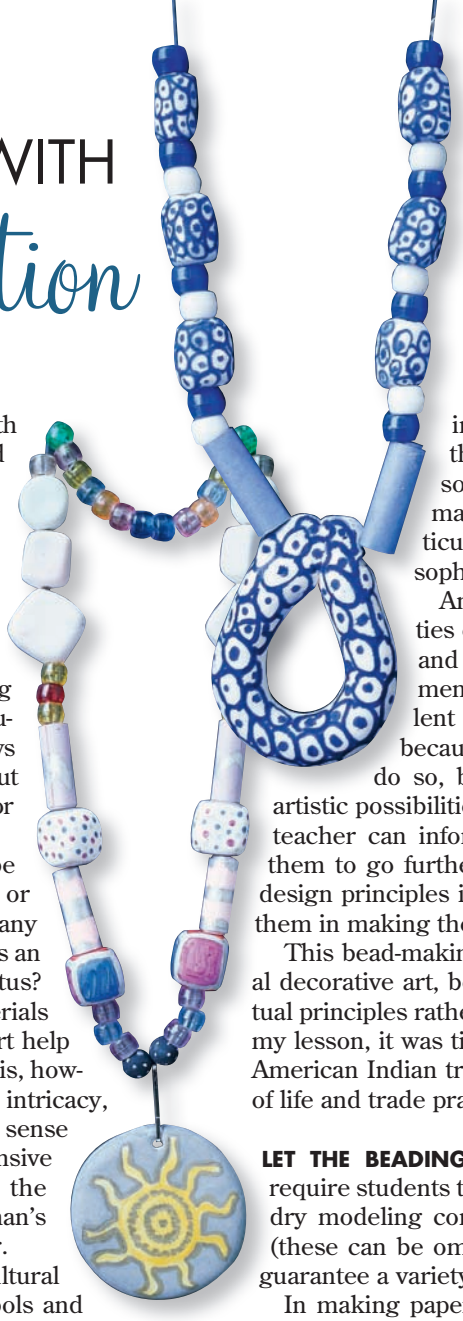
BEAD-MAKING WITH *Sophistication*

by Nanyoung Kim



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Middle-school students will ...

- gain appreciation of decorative arts in various cultures.
- learn to apply design principles to their artworks.
- gain dexterity by manipulating paper strips and modeling compound.
- produce a wearable necklace with formal sophistication.

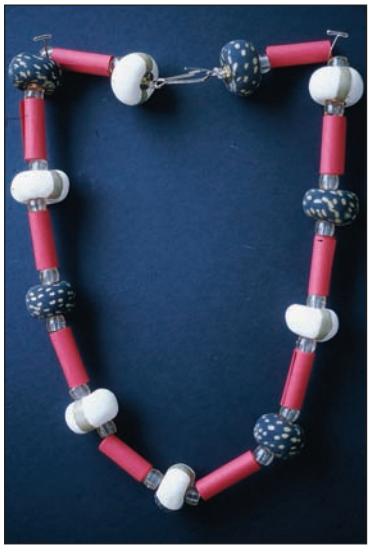
The history of adorning ourselves with precious or colorful materials is as old as the history of human culture itself. It is also so universal that there is no culture in the world that does not have this practice. Nevertheless, modernism and its derivative creative self-expression movement in art education have made this age-old human practice seem outmoded and uncreative, thereby driving pattern making and decorative design out of the art curriculum. Discipline-Based Art Education allows for pattern making in the art curriculum, but it is often treated only as an exercise for understanding design concepts.

Decorative art objects should not be considered to be purely status symbols or embodiments of cultural meaning, as many postmodernists claim they are. Why does an art object become a symbol of social status? Certainly the preciousness of the materials and the effort and cost to produce the art help make it a status symbol. Even without this, however, the purely formal aspects, such as intricacy, complexity and variety, produce in us a sense of beauty, delight and awe. This intensive feeling can be easily transferred to the owner of the art object, due to the human's resilient cognitive capacity for metaphor.

Especially when we deal with multicultural art projects, it is easy to focus on symbols and meanings. Even though these can be legitimately included in the study of art, focusing solely on these aspects renders a lesson more like a sociological investigation rather than art-making, and makes so many children's multicultural art products wanting in quality and sophistication.

An appreciation of excellent formal qualities connects art objects of past and present, and connects children to artists and craftsmen. While children can appreciate an excellent form, they cannot easily produce it, because not only do they not have the skills to do so, but they also lack an understanding of artistic possibilities. To aid children in this aspect, the art teacher can inform them of those possibilities, require them to go further than they normally would, and teach design principles in simple terms so they can actually use them in making their own artworks.

This bead-making project can be tied to any multicultural decorative art, because it derives from universal perceptual principles rather than socially determined meanings. In my lesson, it was tied to the decorative artworks of various American Indian tribes—artworks that reveal ancient ways of life and trade practices with Western settlers.



This lesson helps students appreciate decorative arts in various cultures.

MATERIALS

- Assorted colored construction paper strips
- Toothpicks (or shish kebab sticks for younger students—be sure to cut off the sharp points)
- Glue pens or white glue with a brush
- Black and white air-dry modeling compound (we used Model Magic®)
- Permanent color markers with various colors and various tip widths
- Silver and gold metallic markers (or a metallic marker set)
- Commercial beads for children
- Thin wire or 0.05 or 0.1 mm elastic cord

LET THE BEADING BEGIN In this bead-making project I require students to use three kinds of materials: paper, air-dry modeling compound and commercially made beads (these can be omitted if financially unfeasible). This will guarantee a variety in texture.

In making paper and modeling-compound beads, there are infinite possibilities in design. First is the choice of *color*: I provide construction-paper strips of as many colors as possible, but typically limit the color of the modeling compound to black and white.

Second, there is a choice in the *form* of the beads. A long rectangular paper strip will make a cylindrical bead when rolled, and a long tapered paper strip will make a diamond-shaped bead. The air-dry modeling compound provides even more possible variations in form than paper does. The most universal and attractive form is a sphere, because of its all-around symmetry.

There is also the variable of *size*. A long, wide strip of paper makes a fat, long paper bead. It is easier to manipulate the size of modeling-compound beads than that of paper beads, but it usually turns out that making many beads of the same size is more difficult and yet more crucial for a good design than making beads of different sizes. The modeling-compound beads can be made first because the material needs at least an hour to dry before it can be decorated with markers.

The next step is to make a pattern on each bead using markers. Repetition in marks, lines or simple geometric shapes

see **BEADS** *on page 50*

BEADS

continued from page 26

works best, as it is the definition of pattern, after all. I sometimes provide a worksheet for students to practice different patterns on, or have older students look for various patterns in professional art magazines or multicultural pattern books. In this way they are exposed to professional artworks with complexity and sophistication.

There is even another variable: the choice of color of marker in relation to the background color of the beads. I recommend that students use either a very similar color to achieve *unity* (analogous, monochromatic or warm/cool color scheme) or a very different color for *contrast* (complementary color scheme). Metallic markers work fabulously on black beads because of the value contrast, especially silver on black. Sometimes alternation of unpatterned beads with patterned beads provides contrast, which adds more variety to the piece.

The next step is to string the beads together. I find that commercial elastic cords with a cotton surface work the best. Unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise, I recommend that students use a symmetrical design, with possibly a centerpiece/center of focus made of air-dry modeling compound, such as a pendant. Our body and face are symmetrical, so an asymmetrical necklace looks unnatural.

I also encourage students to experiment with arrangements until they get a satisfactory design, and to make more beads before stringing them together, if their design requires them. At this stage students will add commercial beads to "sparkle" the design. Because there are so many levels of design choices, as described above, it is very helpful to make a poster with illustrations or to show and explain teacher-made samples.

Because of the awareness of design possibilities this project teaches, and because the materials comprise such varied colors and textures, the students, whether they are artistic or not, invariably make a professional-looking decorative art object. And, to the delight of the students, the beads are actually wearable even though they are made of inexpensive materials! ■

Nanyoung Kim is Associate Professor in Art Education at the Jenkins Fine Arts Center in the School of Art and Design at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina.