

African Beadwork at the Harn Museum: Developing Interpretative Materials Through Cross –Disciplinary Collaboration

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In October of 2008, an exhibition I curated, “Between the Beads: Reading African Beadwork,” opened at the Harn Museum of Art. The exhibition was a collaborative effort between the museum, faculty and students from the Center for African Studies, School of Art and Art History, UF Special Collections, and the Digital Library Center, in addition to collectors and scholars outside the university.

The Harn invited Professor Frank Jolles, of Natal University to the Museum as a consultant on South African objects in the collection in 2007. Later that year, the Harn acquired a portion of Jolles’ collection of Zulu beadwork panels and photographs of individuals wearing beadwork that shows a progression from symbolic imagery in the 1940s to use of text in the 1960s, and the decline of beaded personal adornment in the late 20th century. Jolles’ fascination with transformations of Zulu beadwork is reflected in his collection of prints and negatives from the commercial portrait photographer Richard Ndimande, whose studio in Greytown was active until the late 1990s. Ndimande’s portraits are primarily of women dressed in beadwork that he supplied as props in his studio, as many women no longer owned beadwork but still recognized its value in communicating social and marital status. The Zulu beaded panels and photographs of Zulu women from Jolles’ collection formed a key thematic section of the exhibition. The exhibition included 107 beaded objects—garments, masks, jewelry and other items for personal adornment—from the Harn collection and private collections in the US.

Dr. Victoria Rovine, assistant professor of African Art History & African Studies, incorporated research for the exhibition into the curriculum for her course on African Textiles and Clothing in Fall 2007. Students produced interpretive labels for the exhibition which were incorporated into the didactics in the gallery and also were featured on a website linked to the exhibition. The Dr. Madelyn M. Lockhart Faculty Exhibition Endowment supported this collaborative component of the exhibition. Dr. Jonathan Walz, a recent Ph.D. from UF’s Department



of Anthropology, provided further historical contextualization by lending excavated and surface samples of beads from his fieldwork in northeastern Tanzania.

Developing a website in conjunction with the exhibition was the brainchild of Dwight Bailey, Director of Museum Technology at the Harn, and Eric Kesse, the former Director of the Digital Library Center (DLC). DLC staff took digital images of 86 objects in the Harn’s collection, many of which were included in the exhibition. Three-dimensional beaded objects were photographed from 108 angles as they were rotated, and the images were then processed into a video file to replicate the experience of viewing them in the round. The images were loaded onto the University of Florida’s Digital Collections website, and then onto the *Between the Beads: Reading African Beadwork* website which was designed by Katherine McGonigle (M.A. 2008), a student of Digital Media Professor

Katerie Gladdys. The exhibition website is an interactive and dynamic resource instigated by the exhibition that has exposed the Harn collections to wider audiences while linking it to other scholarly materials housed in the University’s Special Collections Library. It is the first time an interactive website has accompanied an exhibition at the Harn, and participants at the Florida Association of Museums conference in 2008 hailed it as a highly innovative project for a state art museum.

Although the exhibition will close in October 2009, the website will continue as a resource and will encourage scholarship on African beadwork well into the future. The exhibition website address is <http://www.harn.ufl.edu/beadwork/index.php>.

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