

RICH TAPESTRIES

Helen Banes



Diane Fitzgerald

A passion and appreciation for beads, folk textiles and other artifacts are apparent throughout Helen Banes' home. Acquired by extensive travels to Central and South America, Europe and the Middle East with her husband Dr. Daniel Banes, a consultant for the Pan American Health Organization, her collections spill over to the studio where an amazing array of glass, metal, ceramic beads and other rare collectibles stock the work area. Her most prized beads, more than two thousand years old, come from an archaeological excavation in Israel. "I feel connected to the past when I hold them," she says.

The beads are complemented by an equally astonishing range of fibers protected in the basement from the sun's fading rays. Thread of wonderfully wild colors and hues, and of varying textures line the walls in clear plastic boxes. Unlike painters who can mix their colors, a fiber artist must amass thread in a complete gamut of colors or dye it as needed. Preferring to rely on commercially available thread and delighting in each year's new selection, Banes uses many fibers including silk, linen, cotton, rayon, acrylics and metallic thread. Wool is avoided because "often my neckpieces are worn directly on the skin, and many women are allergic to wool."

Helen Banes' neckpieces are created by a technique called tapestry needleweaving. Although needleweaving itself is a venerable craft, she has developed a method of combining beads and fiber that is truly original; beads, precious artifacts and other perforated items are added to her woven neckware by stringing them on the warp threads rather than by attachment as ornamentation after the weaving is completed. "The beads then become

an integral part of the piece," Banes explains. For the warp, an eighteen gauge, three-ply waxed linen carpet thread imported from Ireland is used.

Her neckpieces are produced on a small, handheld loom made simply of a board with pins placed in it to hold the warp threads. Beads are slid onto a pair of warp threads, and thread is woven around the beads with a needle. "This is a wonderful way to express one's creativity in combining both fibers and beads in new and unusual ways. You can use it to interpret the designs



MEMORIES OF MEXICO neckpiece detail. Pendant is museum replica from Mexico; Afghanistan chains and dangles; beads: Mexican serpentine melon beads, African brass disc beads, wood and glass beads. Tapestry: sixteen inches long by three and one-half inches wide. **Opposite: TURQUOISE SKY, CORAL SUN** neckpiece. Pendants are Afghanistan silver; including glass turquoise and blue Czech beads; and perle cotton, linen, metallic, viscose fibers. Tapestry: nineteen inches long by fourteen inches wide. All photographs: Richard Rodriguez.

of other cultures or artists, or you can create your own designs. With this weaving technique, you can enhance just a few precious beads and make them really important," she suggests.

Training in dance taught her about form, movement, drama,

and the importance of body embellishment to convey meaning and beauty. After high school, Banes earned an art degree and began graduate work in painting at the University of Maryland. One teacher, Sidney Gross, a colorist and translator of Joseph Alber's *Interaction of Color*, inspired her by his ability to interpret color. "It wasn't just an abstract course on color," she points out. "He analyzed every painting, talking about the colors and how and why they worked together. I could express anything in paint because I understood color theory and felt confident using any combination of colors from hot magentas, oranges and yellows to muted gray, taupe and dusty rose."

But one of life's more creative turns occurred by chance in an off-loom weaving course. "That class was just right for me," she recalls. "I could translate my color ability into fiber. I was so excited by the new element of texture it gave my work; I was able to express what I wanted in a three-dimensional form and use the beads and fiber which I loved."

Never a conventional weaver and unlike many who learn on a floor loom, she began by creating wall hangings with off-loom techniques so that her work would not be limited to a rigid form; she could determine the outer shape of each piece to suit an overall design rather than by relying on a simple rectangle. "To me a conventional loom seemed limiting," she discloses. "One gets caught up in this solid woven surface. My own approach was so different and I looked at the process like a painting, working on a piece from all directions. When I painted, I never used an easel. I would lay the canvas on the floor and almost dance around it, like Jackson Pollock."

Ornament, Summer, 1991

After experimenting with needlewoven jewelry for nearly two years before refining the technique, her learning curve included the difficulty of integrating the beads into the weaving itself rather than simply sewing them to the surface after the weaving was finished. "I don't recall how I actually made the

Down-scaling from wall hangings to neckpieces presented another design challenge. Walls present a huge flat area on which to display one's work in contrast to the human body which offers only a few square feet of contoured surface where jewelry can be displayed; in addition, the proportions of the body and face

Her warm, sharing personality and personal and professional involvement with fiber and beads led her to help establish The Fiberworks Gallery in Alexandria, Virginia sixteen years ago and the Bead Society of Greater Washington, a group which has grown to over seven hundred members. The Bead Society, which recently



HYMN TO THE SUN, detail of neckpiece. Silver elements are from Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and India; beads are Venetian glass and African glass; threads are hand-dyed cotton, silk, perle cotton. Tapestry: twelve inches long by fourteen inches wide. Banes has developed an original method of combining beads and fiber; beads, precious artifacts and other perforated items are added to her woven neckware by stringing them on the warp threads rather than by attachment as ornamentation after the weaving is completed.

transition to stringing the beads up from the bottom on a pair of warp threads. I suppose I had started a piece and was well into the weaving when I decided to add more beads. I was beyond the point where I could undo the warp and all the weaving. Somehow this leap just came naturally."

Once the beads were attached, a way needed to be found to keep them from slipping off when they were at the edge of the neckpiece. "I solved this by attaching a disc bead to the warp thread with a lark's head or sales tag knot."

must be considered. But this and more is taken into account as Helen Banes meticulously composes her distinctive neckpieces in a variety of styles. "Inspiration comes from many sources. I can look at an Art Deco vase and use it as a starting point in creating a new design." Many series have resulted which interpret African, Indian, Native American, pre-columbian and oriental motifs. Beads, colors and textures characteristic of the culture are selected, then shapes are woven into the neckpiece which reflect the art of that period.

hosted a highly successful Second International Bead Conference, has regular monthly meetings, bead swaps and bazaars, a newsletter, lectures and other events, and is part of a national network of bead societies.

She also teaches; one advanced class through the Smithsonian Institution delves into the textiles and jewelry of a particular culture. Students interpret these designs in a neckpiece of their own as part of the class and leave with a richer understanding of cultures other than their own. "It's the contrast in people that makes

teaching so much fun and gives me so much pleasure," she says. "You can't help but get caught in a certain mold yourself, so teaching refreshes your view of your own work." Design and technique are emphasized in her classes and Banes encourages students to explore new directions; some students are now teaching her technique and several others exhibit their work.

After twenty years of making needlewoven neckpieces and teaching more than a thousand students throughout the United States, Helen Banes is still as committed to fiber jewelry as when she first began. Experimenting with new techniques such as twill weaves, weaving with unusual fibers, creating her own beads with polymer clay and incorporating unusual elements, is a challenging means of stimulating new work. This is an artist who creates jewelry with beads and thread the way a painter applies oils to canvas. These wonderful articles of adornment are truly the result of the breadth of her personal experiences and a unique ability to translate them into unified, aesthetically lovely compositions. ■

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Her jewelry may be found at Beadazzled, 1522 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036; telephone (202) 265-BEAD.

□ *Diane Fitzgerald, a bead artist and owner of Beautiful Beads, located in Minneapolis, Minnesota, teaches a variety of classes including fiber jewelry, beadwork, necklace and earring design.*

HELEN BANES wearing 'Clarisse Cliff's Collar.' "This is a wonderful way to express one's creativity in combining both fibers and beads in new and unusual ways." **CLARISSE CLIFF'S COLLAR.** Tapestry is twelve inches long by eight inches wide. Beads are Czech glass and the thread is silk, rayon and linen.

