



# Transformations: From the Mundane to the Magnificent

*Diane Fitzgerald*

A businessman and a nurse beading objects like roller skates, waffle irons, and scooters. It just goes to show you that beads can mesmerize anyone who lets them.



PHOTOS COURTESY THE WEGMANS

Tom and Kathy Wegman glue strings of brightly colored beads to almost anything—from roller skates to cameras, from waffle irons to vacuum cleaners—and in the process they transform the object in surprising and sometimes humorous ways. “I’ll bead anything that has a surface,” says Tom.

Tom begins his creations in his home workshop with a palette of 450 colors of seed beads arranged by

shade. With these, he makes elaborate patterns on the surface of various familiar objects, often with quotes or sayings worked into the design. The bright colors catch the eye, then the light-hearted or comical message comes through. The words, “So is the telephone truly magic or can it be explained?” adorn a telephone while one of his irons offers, “This iron would never do anything if I could work it out.” Tom sells his work at high-end craft shows and his prices range from \$35–\$5,000 depending on the length of time required to cover the object.

Whether his income from beading comes easily is a matter for debate. Tom works long hours in his home workshop, but they are filled with pleasure.

“It’s a labor of love,” he says. “It’s a great deal of fun to get a castaway object from a secondhand store and turn it into something people can chuckle at or be intrigued by because the object takes on such a different character. I like getting started on a new piece because you don’t quite know what the object is going to look like. When you’re eighty percent finished, you almost want to put it aside because by then you know.”

### How Tom Does It

Tom begins by selecting an object and deciding if there will be a saying on it. If he decides to add a saying, it goes on first, then the background is filled in. To begin, he lays down a line of Aleene's Tacky Glue just wide enough for the first string of beads and then positions the string of beads in the glue. In about two to three minutes, the glue is set and he's ready to do the next strand. He then lays in one strand at a time, usually leaving the string in the beads. Most of the beads he uses are silver-lined seed beads that he and Kathy now buy by the half-kilo, both strung and unstrung, and rhinestone chain that comes in six-foot lengths. If the beads are not strung, Tom uses a Bead Spinner to string them ("It's been a lifesaver," he says). The first color he uses is whatever happens to appeal to him and he selects subsequent colors to contrast with the previous color. His tools are simple: a knitting needle with a straight pin on the end to position the bead strings, scissors, pliers, and a syringe to place the glue exactly where he wants it. The syringe is a seven-inch Monoject 412 that his dentist obtained for him. Tom buys his glue by the gallon and prefers Aleene's Tacky Glue because it is nontoxic, dries quickly, and holds well.

He has at least two or three projects underway at any time so that he can go from one to another if a large area of glue has to dry. Tom gets some help from Kathy who works half-time as a recovery-room nurse. She tackles some of the smaller projects and occasionally helps him with the big ones.

Like many of us, Tom and Kathy were sidetracked by careers that enabled them to pay the mortgage and keep food on the table before they got into beads. Tom operated a gift shop, Things & Things & Things,



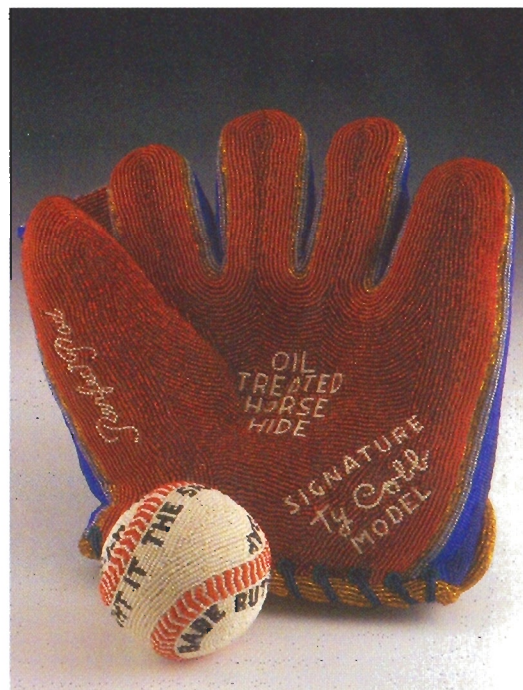
Tom in his studio.

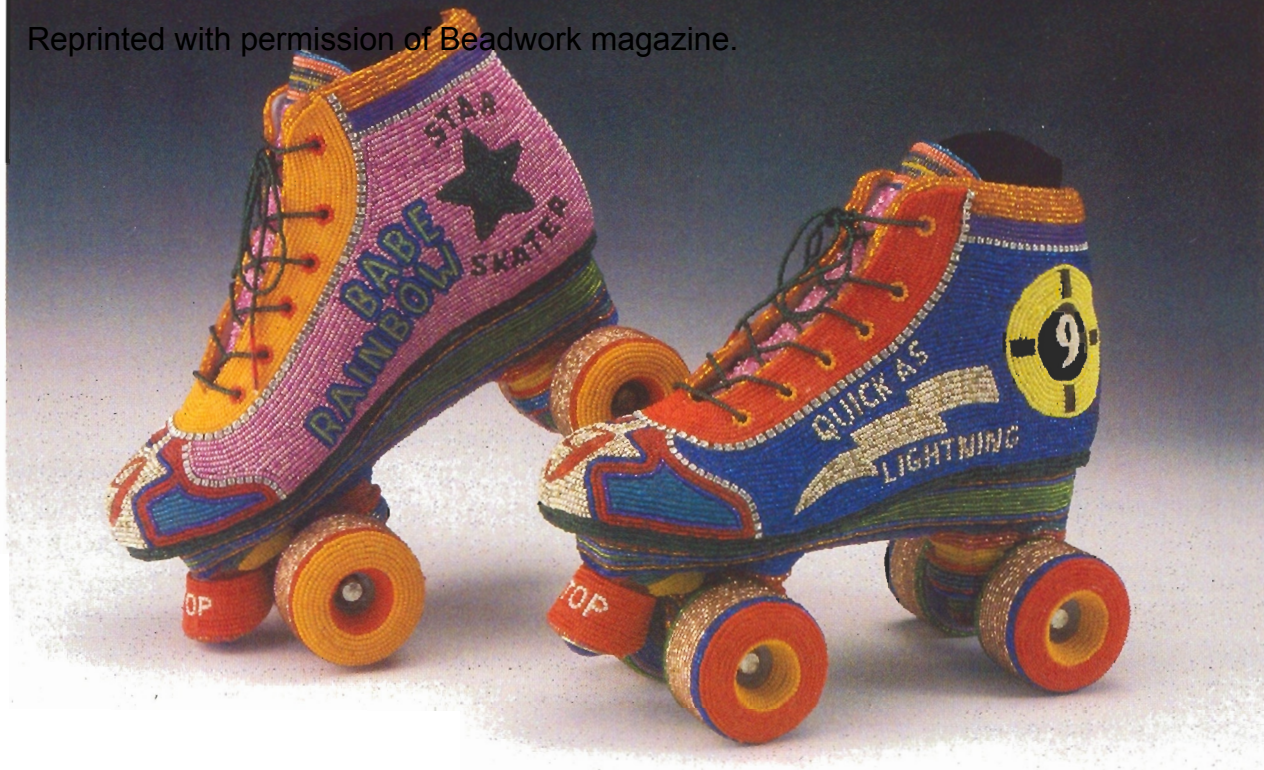
in Iowa City, Iowa, from 1961 until 1995 when the need to bead gripped him full-time. This evolution, though, may not be so surprising. Tom's predilection toward art can be traced back to fine arts training at





the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Iowa where he obtained a master of fine arts degree and to his passion for collecting antiques which formed the stock of their gift shop when it opened. Keeping the store stocked with unusual objects took him on buying trips all over the country and gave him the opportunity to see a wealth of arts and crafts objects that would later inspire him.





The transition to working with beads began when American Indian beadwork caught his attention. He began to bead reproductions of Native American work when he could not afford to buy the real thing.



Attending a show of beadwork, he came across a book of contemporary beading and saw the work of a woman who had covered a taxidermy form of a deer head with beads. Tom tried the technique on a real deer skull, antlers and all, but it was the roller skates that cinched his desire to pursue his beaded object passion. "When I saw those roller skates in the shop window, I just had to have them. I could see how they would look covered with beads," says Tom. He beaded the roller skates and was soon on to toasters, and even the vacuum cleaner.

Of the 300-plus objects that Tom has beaded, his favorite pieces are a chair patterned with 1930s to 1950s tattoo designs and a tricycle. Tom and Kathy are both frequently invited to juried shows and are recipients of several awards, including the Award of Merit at the Smithsonian Craft Show in Washington, D.C.

So . . . do you see what can happen to any of us if we just let it bead? ☺

Diane Fitzgerald recently received the "Book of the Decade Award" from the Textile Center of Minnesota for her book, *Beading with Brick Stitch*, and was voted one of the top five beadwork teachers in *Beadwork's* recent survey. She may be reached via her website [www.dianefitzgerald.com](http://www.dianefitzgerald.com).