

Prestige Belt, North Americas, 21st century

Leather, glass seed beads, thread & found objects: shell, pearls, cork, deer antler, light bulb, cathode ray tube, lock, keys, lenticular plastic, pen nibs, silk sari fabric, spool, terminal, brass tag; beadwork assemblage

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The artist's words:

Inspired by the beadwork and ritual of the Kuba region, my Prestige Belt also explores status. Status by event, boundary, or possession become personal representations and opportunities for technical renderings.

The Kuba region is in central Africa. According to the Minneapolis Art Institute's website:

Every Kuba man or woman had the right to wear specific costume elements reflecting their status and enabling others to identify their title and prestige. But only the king, his immediate family, and a few very high-level titleholders could wear a belt holding multiple small pendants covered with beads and cowries.

This prestige belt is a strip of leather with its ends tied together by thread so that it forms a circle with a 12" diameter. Seventeen beaded fobs or ornaments of differing sizes, shapes and colors hang from the belt. Since the belt is laying on a flat surface, the fobs are also laying flat and radiate out from the circle like the petals on a daisy. Unlike a daisy, there are spaces between each of the fobs and they can be seen clearly.

The light brown leather belt is 1/2" and is made of two strips of leather that have been sewn one on top of the other. It has tiny machine stitches along the outer edge. The inside is hand stitched with dark brown thread. From the top, the stitches look like a string of connected V's. The dark brown thread that was used in the stitching extends beyond each end of the belt and is tied together to form the circle. On the inside edge of the belt, to the right of where it is knotted, are 9 colorful beads. Imagine the knot is at 6 o'clock. The beads are scattered between 11 and 6 o'clock.

Again, beginning at 6 o'clock, let's move clockwise to explore the individual fobs. They are spaced equally apart. They run in length anywhere from 4" to 11" long. Each fob or ornament hangs from a loop and consists of tiny glass seed beads framing or otherwise embellishing a found object. Some of the loops are of red silk and are 1/2" across. Other loops are beaded. Some of the found objects are easy to recognize. Others are not either because of their size, the amount of embellishment or general unfamiliarity.

To the immediate left of the knot is a silver metal badge with an incised capital I. It is surrounded by a pointed arch shaped frame of green, pink and silver beads and hangs from a red silk loop. It is about 6" long.

Next is an 11" long tassel made from strands of red thread strung with shiny gold beads and strips of lustrous gold silk. Red and pink beads are sewn along the edges of the gold fabric. Slender silver tubular pen nibs hang amidst the ribbons of silk, their sharp and pointy nibs point upwards toward the belt and nestle out of sight.

A skinny skeleton key hangs from loop of red and chartreuse seed beads. Two more loops of pink and light blue emerge from the bottom of the loop and through the oval opening at the top of the key. The surface of the key is grey and dirty with age. A narrow collar of seven rows of the tiny beads (silvery blue on top and bottom flanking a wider band of pink) circles the shaft of the key just above the notched rectangle at its bottom.

A wine cork hangs from a V-shaped double loop. The blue beaded loop separates at the top (by the belt) into four strands. At the top of the cork, the beading of the loops continue around the cork and encase it. There are two narrow horizontal openings in the beading, one near the top of the cork and the other near the bottom. In these small windows we can see through to the cork with its stamped lettering.

A long narrow black plastic rectangle hangs from two loops that go through two small holes its top. The loops are of light tan rawhide. The black rectangle is boxy and has five segments stacked on atop the other. Rows of silver beads fill the segment at the top, closest to the loops. Below that are two silvery screws side by side on a narrow piece of silvery metal. Rows of yellow green beads fill the next segment, followed by two more screws in the next. Rows of pale purple/lilac beads fill the bottom segment. At the base of the rectangle, strands of silver, chartreuse and pale lilac beads form a thick tassel.

A very tiny light bulb is encased in two long strands of red and chartreuse or yellow green beads that wrap longitudinally around its clear glass orb, crisscrossing at the top of the bulb that hangs downward from the belt. Its gold base emerges from a circle of greeny-yellow beads and rests within a red beaded loop.

A tapered piece of antler, curved like a fang or claw, hangs from a metallic beaded loop formed of two circles. A larger circle hangs from the leather belt, a smaller one runs through a hole drilled at the wider end of the antler. Just below the holes, a wide collar (about 10 rows wide) of the same tiny metallic beads girds the creamy white antler.

A tiny silvery padlock hangs from a long chartreuse beaded loop punctuated with balls of tiny blue beads. Only the top curve of the lock's hasp is exposed as the rest of the lock is covered with rows of tiny blue beads, like a little sweater.