



THE STRENGTH OF BEAUTY

BEADED ELEMENTS IN GENEVIEVE DION'S MULTI-DIMENSIONAL WORK

by Elaine Lipson

In Genevieve Dion's sculptural approach to garments and evening bags, beads become integral elements that affect the weight, movement, and dimensionality of each piece. Never frivolous or extraneous, Dion's beaded fringe and tassels are exquisitely crafted details that add gravity and elegance to the form without sacrificing sophistication.

Dion's use of beads reflects her interest in historical and vintage references interpreted for the modern world, as well as her ability to integrate a broad vocabulary of techniques in her work. Always, though, Dion's beadwork is characterized by restraint. Beaded elements are used purposefully, adding shape, and often functionality as they act to help a garment hang properly and stay in place. There is no lack of color or beauty in the work, but wherever beads are used, they form carefully constructed elements that sparkle with an understated richness—a whisper rather than a shout.

Substance, construction and form have always interested Dion. Born in Quebec, she learned leatherwork as a child and went on to study shoemaking with acclaimed sculptor Gaza Bowen in Santa Cruz, California. From Dion's sculptural perspective, textiles seemed "flat," she says, until a shibori class taught by Yoshiko Wada at San Francisco State University brought fabric to life as a three-dimensional medium. "When I took the shibori class, it was incredibly inspiring," Dion says. "Everything is three-dimensional and sculptural in order to do the dyes, and that was the aspect that really seduced me. The process was so beautiful." Today, she says, shibori is "the mainstay of the work," and she uses no other gathering or dyeing technique.

BOTTOM LEFT: GENEVIEVE DION Velvet evening bag with antique purse frame, hand-beaded tassel with rayon fringe.

TOP LEFT: GENEVIEVE DION Evening bag with antique purse frame and hand-beaded fringe. Gunma silk "White Shadow" was used as the starting material.

TOP RIGHT: GENEVIEVE DION Velvet evening bag with antique purse frame.

MIDDLE RIGHT: GENEVIEVE DION Evening bag with antique purse frame, hand-beaded tassel with rayon fringe. Gunma silk "white Shadow" was used as the starting material.

BOTTOM RIGHT: GENEVIEVE DION Evening bag with antique purse frame, hand-beaded tassel with rayon fringe. Gunma silk "White Shadow" was used as the starting material.

Meanwhile, Dion also learned basic beading techniques from fashion designer Kenneth King, a friend who, she says, gave her a wonderful starting point for beadwork. Again, it was the dimensionality and sculptural qualities of *passementerie* (braid and tassel making) that fascinated Dion and became an essential part of her repertoire.

In her extraordinarily beautiful and jewel-like evening bags, Dion draws on and synthesizes all of these somewhat disparate facets of her training and exploration. She begins with a vintage purse frame as both foundation and inspiration for the evolution of the bag. The container is generated from a single piece of shibori-dyed silk or velvet (in her bags and garments alike, Dion introduces shape through the shibori process, rather than by using seams, whenever possible), using appropriate boning, buckram, and other stiffening methods learned as a shoemaker to shape and develop the vessel.

Beaded fringe and tassels add more shape and intention to the design, and their movement, flowing in opposite direction to the bag's movement, give the bag life, Dion says. Dense bronze fringe, uniform in length, follows the geometric lines of a square frame with red and gold velvet dyed in an organic, textural grid. Airy, netted fringe graces a corseted purple silk "butterfly" bag inspired by the curve of the Victorian frame. A gloriously thick tassel of rayon and beaded fringe is netted with beads to bring a voluptuously curved and pleated silk bag to an elegant point.

Dion's attention to fine detail extends to the interior and even the case of each bag. Traditional flower-ribbon trim enhances the bag lining, and a small pocket completes the construction. Dion builds a custom case for each bag, for protection and, she says, "as a place for them to live." And within each beaded tassel, Dion incorporates a secret strand that cannot be seen from the outside: a reference point, a central weight that changes the movement, and a lovely, clandestine confidence shared between the artist and the wearer.

Dion's bags are awesome in their self-contained elegance and beauty, but they are not fragile. Layers of careful construction and engineering provide even the most delicate materials

with substance and purpose. One bag's circular accordion frame even opens to reveal tiny beads anchoring the frame to the fabric.

Dion's shibori-dyed velvet coats and wraps are similarly functional and constructed for longevity and wearability. Beaded tassels often act as weights for these closureless garments, helping them to "stay put" and subtly reflecting the weight and shimmer of the dyed velvet as well.

Though she was once able to make as many as fifteen evening bags each year, the diminishing availability of high-quality vintage purse frames now limits Dion's production to just one or two bags annually. Today, Dion's experimentation often involves silk garments. She frequently uses a recently available silk from the Gunma Prefecture in Japan. As part of a revival of the Japanese sericulture tradition, a number of artists were given Gunma silk yardage for exploration; in return, each was asked to donate a piece to the collection of the Gunma Museum.

Dion discovered that she was able to create permanent texture and pleating in this exceptional silk, allowing her to further perfect her techniques of sculpting refined shape into garments without unnecessary piecing or seams. These sensuous, sophisticated pieces are highly packable, washable, and durable, and no less than stunning on the body.

The silk garments are, so far, bead-free. "I'm basically responding to what the fabric wants to do," Dion says. "The silk is really beautiful if it can be left to float, and with the pleating it's bouncy and floaty, and looks denser than it is. Those [pieces] are weightless." Yet she has no intention of abandoning her exquisite beaded details for long. "Beads are a huge part of my vocabulary, and I love that part and it's not gone forever," she says. "Some of the silk will have some beading as well, but I just don't know yet how that will go. Some design will come to where it wants to have beads."

Genevieve Dion's work is in the permanent collection of the Nippon Silk Museum in Japan and has been featured in exhibitions around the world. To learn more, visit her website: www.gdion.com.

—Elaine Lipson is a Colorado-based writer, editor, and artist.