

Phoebe Lasoi | Kitengela Women
Olmakau Cooperative | Kenya |
Apparel/Jewelry

Maasai beading goes beyond jewelry into sandals and handbags



Maasai men and women have always worn beaded jewelry, both for special occasions and for everyday use. The Kitengela Women Olmakau Cooperative community of artisans lives in Kitengela, just south of the Nairobi National Park in Kenya. Traditionally, the women meet at a home or manyatta (Maasai homestead) on a given day and work together, on individual designs. Ideas and techniques are exchanged and one person's work influences another's. In particular, most work uses traditional colors of red, white, blue, green, black, orange, and yellow.

This synthesis of colors and designs shows up not just on jewelry, but also on goods as varied as baskets and sandals. A merging of old and new styles presents an optically dazzling treat for customers. A single necklace, for instance, might contain many strands of technicolor glass beads, arranged in patterns as intricate as they are eye-catching. Earrings, too, represent a special opportunity to make a statement. Contrasting colored beads are woven in geometric shapes

or else formed into brightly colored, dangling shapes.

Though Kitengela's work has historical and contemporary precedents, it's nevertheless singularly recognizable. In Tanzania, for instance, most Maasai beadwork is white with just a few colors, but Kenya—and Kitengela's—work is always more colorful. Glass beads first arrived in Africa in the first millennium A.D., but the Maasai did not develop an interest in them for quite some time. Beading is now an enduring artistic and cultural passion – and it is now employed in the making of sandals and handbags, as well as jewelry.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST