

Waist Beads & Patterns by Willi Smith

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Why do people make things by hand? Many people practice “DIY” to make their creations more personal. They are able to work with their hands and enjoy the empowering feeling of creating something on their own. Being able to express yourself through clothing and accessories is what makes us *unique* as individuals. The waist beads and design patterns by Willi Smith are both created with the intention of being feminine and using your own hands to create something for yourself, making both of these objects accessible to everyone.

How are waist beads unique to us? Waist beads originated in Africa, and are worn by young women. These shiny glass beads come in different shapes and colors. Each color represents something different. Some waist beads include charms such as crystals, shells, and other decorative stones. By using waist beads black women are given the opportunity to embrace their femininity and heritage. Some women use it for spiritual well-being as it protects their bodies from bad omens, bringing peace and good luck instead. You can wear as many as you want; how you wear your waist beads is all up to you and your preference – high, low, or in the middle of your waist.

I created my own waist beads by using materials I chose myself. Using a one millimeter elastic band, and small brown, yellow, orange, and gold smooth glass beads, I created my new favorite accessory. According to African culture, brown represents earth and stability; yellow represents wisdom, clarity, awareness, energy, and joy; orange represents courage, self confidence, and vitality; and gold represents good health, power, and wealth. It loops around twice on my waist and it shines when light is reflected off of it. After continuously seeing black women on social media wearing theirs, I was inspired to create my own because I found it very pretty and spiritual. As a spiritual person that admires waist beads, when I wear my waist beads it provides a sense of comfort. Almost as if I had a companion guiding me with good fortune.

Although the process to make one without a machine might seem tedious, it was all worth it to see the finalized project.

How might my process of making waist beads relate to Willi Smith's clothing patterns? Smith was known as one of the most successful African American fashion designers. He created clothing patterns because he wanted to use his designs as a way to break free from stereotypes, and make his designs accessible so that people would be able to wear the same designs as others, regardless of their class. His goal was to unify the community and spread his influence among African American culture. On the front of the package there is a drawing of a joyful and confident lady who wears the clothes created by the patterns. I believe Smith wanted other women to experience the confidence of those women. With prices ranging from one to three dollars, these patterns would have been very affordable for even lower class people, which only emphasizes his goal to unify and expand the fashion community through his clothing. Inside the package we are given step by step instructions on how to sew the fabric together, making it very easy to understand. On the back of the package, there is a short description of how the clothes should fit. A lot of imagery is used to enable women to envision themselves in these outfits. The mini drawings on the side showing each piece of the outfit, along with more measurements of multiple sizes, make the patterns very inclusive for women of all shapes and sizes.

Clothes and accessories are very personal to us as individuals. Waist beads are something unique to each individual and cannot be handed down unless made out of elastic. On the other hand, Smith's clothing patterns may be reused for multiple types of designs and different sizes. Additionally, waist beads are a type of jewelry while clothing is textile. Despite originating from different diasporas and time periods (waist beads originating from the Yoruba tribes in the 15th

century, and the pattern designs in the late 70's by the African American designer Willi Smith) both objects are created by women and worn on the body as a way to express ourselves.

When looking at a person the first thing you might notice would be their outfit. Our clothes can give others insight about us as people. Both my waist beads and Smith's patterns do excellent jobs of sharing who we are and what we value. For instance, when looking at a waist bead on a woman, the first thing that might catch your eye is how pretty it is and what colors she used, similar to how you might react if you saw someone wearing a nice outfit. You might wonder where they got it from because it is something you find eye-catching. Being proud of your own creation is very fulfilling, especially when it is something used for yourself. Together these objects are used to embrace femininity, strengthen our heritage, and sense of belonging.