Peranakan beadwork and Czech glass seed beads: introducing Angeline Kong

Small glass seed beads, elaborate patterns and hours of patient work. Angeline Kong, a Singaporean beadwork artisan and founder of Nyonya Needlework & Crafts, has devoted almost three decades to the art of traditional Peranakan beadwork. She is dedicated to preserving Peranakan cultural heritage through the delicate art of seed bead embroidery. Her work features mainly Preciosa glass beads, alongside other Czech glass beads and vintage beads.

The art of seed bead embroidery

At around six years of age, Angeline Kong was fascinated by her grand-aunty's beaded shoes, which are now approximately a century years old. These shoes were passed down to Angeline, making her the third generation in her family to inherit them. They are now being passed on to the fourth generation, preserving them as a treasured heirloom. Little did she know that these intricate beadwork patterns would eventually lead her to a craft that would become an important part of her life.

Angeline is a sixth-generation Peranakan from Singapore. Peranakan culture, shaped by the blending of Chinese and local Southeast Asian traditions, has its own distinctive clothing, customs and crafts. Among its most distinctive traditional crafts is Peranakan beadwork, an intricate art form that uses tiny glass seed beads to decorate footwear, clothing and other objects.

An important part of this tradition involves *kasut manek (beaded shoes),* which are decorated with elaborate seed bead patterns and worn with traditional attire known as the sarong kebaya. Flowers, birds, butterflies and other motifs are created through the gradual addition of tiny colourful glass beads. Each bead has its place, and the resulting design depends on the dexterity of the artisan, the careful selection of colours and meticulous craftsmanship.

Peranakan beadwork and embroidery reflect Chinese, Malay, Indian and European influences. Chinese auspicious motifs, regional textile traditions and European needlework patterns were adapted to local tastes, while imported European glass beads helped give Peranakan beadwork its distinctive colour and sparkle.

Peranakan beadwork flourished in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in communities across the region, including Singapore, Melaka and Penang. Nyonyas traditionally learnt these skills from their mothers and grandmothers, using tiny glass beads to decorate shoes, accessories and wedding furnishings. Auspicious flowers, birds and other motifs expressed wishes for happiness and good fortune.

Over time, changing lifestyles and the availability of factory-made footwear contributed to the decline of this traditional art, with fewer families passing down these painstaking skills. This placed the craft at risk of being lost. Today, artisans, teachers and learners are helping to revive it, keeping both its techniques and cultural stories alive.

For Angeline, beadwork is a meaningful connection to Peranakan culture and heritage. Each piece carries family memories, traditional motifs and stories passed down through generations. Through her work and teaching, she hopes to share both the skills and the cultural meaning behind them, encouraging others to appreciate this heritage and carry it forward.

From wedding shoes to a lifelong passion

Angeline didn't begin studying this seed bead embroidery until adulthood. In 1997, when preparing for her own wedding, she began to take a more intensive interest in traditional Peranakan clothing and *kasut manek* beaded shoes. She decided to learn the technique that had so attracted her since childhood.

She attended courses led by Bebe Seet, an expert in Peranakan fashion and traditional seed bead creations. This opened up a path towards what gradually transformed into a long-term passion.

For many years, Angeline devoted herself to this craft alongside her employment. Seed bead embroidery requires concentration, precision and patience: even a seemingly simple motif can mean hours of work. After retiring, she was able to devote more time to beadworking and she started offering her experience to others who were interested.

Her grandmother, whom she called *Mahmah*, also played an important role in her relationship to her own culture. She often reminded her, "Never forget that you're a Peranakan."

For Angeline, these words are more than just a reminder of her family. They also reflect her efforts to keep her cultural heritage alive and accessible to people who are only just getting to know it.

Two techniques, one feeling for detail

Peranakan beadwork incorporates several techniques, among which *bead embroidery* and *bead weaving* have a significant place.

In bead embroidery, the small glass seed beads are sewn onto a base so that decorative patterns are gradually created. Historically, velvet was used for this purpose. Today, Angeline stitches beads onto counted fabric to create panels for *kasut manek*.

On the other hand, bead weaving enables a structure to be created from interconnected seed beads without a classic textile base. This was often used in Peranakan beadwork during the production of decorative tassels and wedding decorations, amongst other things.

Both techniques combine an emphasis on precision, regularity and the harmony of colours. The selection of the material is also important: the size, shape, surface and colour of the seed beads not only influence the appearance of the resulting piece, but also the options when working it.

Why Czech glass seed beads?

Angeline Kong has been practising Peranakan beadwork since 1997 and uses Czech glass seed beads in her work, including Preciosa Charlotte beads in size 13/0. Her work also includes size 15/0 beads and smaller vintage beads.

"I prefer Preciosa Charlotte Beads in the 13/0 size for our Peranakan beadwork. The cut seed beads have 1-2 small facets that create delicate reflections that give the embroidery its characteristic sparkle. These cut seed beads help me achieve the sparkle I associate with traditional Peranakan beadwork. I most appreciate their quality, uniformity and the wide range of beautiful colours, thanks to which the details and precision of each piece of embroidery stand out," explained Angeline Kong.

Czech glassmaking has a long tradition in the area of glass seed bead production. European glass seed beads found their way to Southeast Asia in previous centuries along trade routes from Europe. They gradually became part of the local craft traditions and their use has shown how materials and techniques can be naturally combined across cultures.

As such, Angeline does not only use Czech seed beads when creating her own works, but also when teaching. They are part of the materials that her students work with at courses and workshops.

A tradition that is finding a new audience

Angeline now conducts workshops, lectures and demonstrations on traditional beadwork techniques, both in Singapore and abroad, in person and online. She has also prepared her own beadwork kits to help

interested participants discover this craft and try it for themselves. Her activities also include teaching courses, selling selected materials and creating custom-made beadwork in the traditional Peranakan style.

For Angeline, passing on the craft constitutes a fundamental part of her mission. Her main goal is to help revive and preserve this beautiful heritage art form which is part of the Peranakan cultural heritage. She wants to pass on her skills and tradition to a new generation and acquaint more people with beadworking.

She has noticed a growing interest in Peranakan beadwork, with the craft gradually finding a place beyond its original cultural context. One notable example is the seed-beaded helmet created for Formula 1 driver Oscar Piastri for the Singapore Grand Prix. This offered an opportunity to introduce traditional Peranakan beadwork to a wider international audience through the world of Formula 1.

For Angeline, however, passing on the craft and the stories behind it remain fundamental. Every workshop, every new student and every carefully completed work helps maintain a tradition, whose value extends well beyond mere decoration.

The path on which family memories, cultural identity and glass seed beads from the other side of the world are combined leads from childhood memories of her great-aunt's beaded shoes to today's teaching and international gatherings.

Through these efforts, Angeline hopes to share her appreciation of this traditional craft and encourage more people to discover its beauty. Traditions can continue to evolve, inspire new generations and live on, one seed bead at a time.

Sources:

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