

Paul Amponsah – Brass bead maker, Ghana

Why I am proud to be a brass bead maker

I am Paul Amponsah and a brass beadmaker from Kumasi, the second capital of Ghana, and I live at Kumlom, a village in Kumasi. My family are the hereditary gold and brass casters for the Kings of Ashanti, and Kumlom is the only village now doing traditional lost wax brass casting in Ghana, one of a handful across West Africa. This craft has been dated to the 9th century AD in Nigeria, and attained its most famous development with the Benin bronzes, some now in the British Museum.

In Ghana all people from diverse tribes use beads for personal decoration and as ornaments for their houses and hotels. Our women use the smaller beads around their waist for them to have the best of human shapes. They wear bracelets for daily wear and necklaces for festivals and special occasions. Children wear beads round their waists, which helps their mother see that they are growing. Beads are now used all over the world especially during fashion shows because of exquisite designs.

Beads portray my country's culture. I am proud of myself because I am a brass caster and beadmaker and wherever I see

people wearing beads it encourages me even more to pass on this great historic culture of ours to my junior ones and also anyone else who is interested in learning it as a vocation. Beads – Ghanaian elegance at its best!

Processes involved in brass bead production

- The primary materials needed for the production of beads are cow dung, sieved charcoal and watery clay mixed together.



Fig 1 Detail of one of Paul's openwork brass beads showing where the intricately crossed beaded threads have been replaced by brass.

- Make the form or internal shape for the bead or pendant you want with this mixture and leave it to dry in the sun (Figs 2-3).
- Make a wax thread by kneading and shaping the wax, or with a wax thread machine a syringe or icing nozzle can be used to produce a thread, if the wax is hot and soft. The size of the wax thread depends on the size of what you are making.
- Cover what you have made with the wax thread by winding it over and around the form in your chosen pattern, remembering to leave holes at both ends so you can remove the charcoal centre. Make several (same or different) as they will be brought together in one mould (Fig 4).
- Coating: pound and sieve well some charcoal, mix it with watery clay and with the mixture coat your form which has been covered in wax thread. This is the first coat, but you can choose to coat again.
- Remember the first coat should be smoother, with the finest ground charcoal, while the second coat is a little rougher.
- Bring several of the coated pieces

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4 Fig 2 Making wire designs

5 Fig 3 Pendant designs with suspension loops, all made of brass.



6 Fig 6 Paul is here of the kiln. On the ground around him are crucibles, moulds, and completed assemblies ready to fire.



together – it depends on the size how many can be put in one mould. The bigger the design, the less can be gathered together in one mould (and vice versa).

- Expose one end of each of the designs located pieces using a brush to scrape away the charcoal layer (Fig 4).
- Join a wire thread (sprue) to each of the designs at the exposed point – these wire threads must be much bigger than the ones used to make the designs, typically 2-3 mm diameter. Join all the free ends together (Fig 5).
- Completely seal the joined designs in one mould gradually using the second coat type charcoal (coarser grade) and leave the whole assembly to dry (Fig 6).
- Cover the mould with clay that has been mixed with palm fibre and allow it to dry (Fig 6).
- Put a crucible with brass inside it with its opening face down over the top of the mould, cover it and the join with clay and allow it to dry (Figs 6-7).
- Cast in a furnace (Fig 8). First the cast is placed brass end down, and when the brass is melted, as we can see by the colour of the flame from the furnace,



the cast is inverted to allow the brass to flow into the spaces in the clay (the wax around the designs and the spaces will evaporate and the space they leave will be filled with the molten brass which flows from the crucible into the mould).

- Remove the designs from the mould and clean away the original wax using mixture (which has now burnt to become charcoal) through the holes which were left during the design phase (Figs 7 & 10).

- Polish the brass beads with lemon juice, and the Ghanaian beads are ready for market (Fig 11).



There is a video of the brass casting process at <http://www.fema.com/brass.htm>

For order enquiries, contact Paul at ponaugh@yahoo.com or Paula Handcraft, PO Box 305 11502, Kumasi, Ghana



Fig 4 Wax designs pecked in charcoal with the exposed ends showing. On the table are loose wax threads.



Fig 5 Wax spruce added to the exposed ends of designs in a mould, the free ends pulled together into one



Fig 8 Tending to the skin - repairing cracks in the skin walls



Fig 7 A mould before casting opened to show the wax original and charcoal around them (left) and a mould surrounded by an inverted double (right)

Fig 11 A selection of Fouty brass/bead designs. Note that each casting is unique as the moulds cannot be reused

Fig 9 Taking moulds out of the skin

Fig 10 Break the mould and remove the beads and waste brass



Photo: Neil Armstrong, Jane Page, Graham Lee

