

Melanie Christie



Artist Melanie Christie produces absolutely stunning beaded creatures, tackling the scaly, furry and fluffy with equal precision and panache. These aren't caricatures or cartoons, but intensely lifelike beasts, down to the hair on a rhino's ears or the delicate antennae on a grasshopper.

She lives in California with her husband and two sons. After spending 12 years running the visual arts program at her local elementary school, she now spends most of her time creating beaded sculptures in every beader's dream, her own home studio.

"I have always been an artist in one form or another. Beginning in my mother's studio, my love of making art started very early in life. As a teenager I found beads and started making and selling beaded jewellery. I studied costume design in college and was a scenic artist for many years before going on to become a decorative painter working with interior decorators to paint murals, trompe l'oeil (creating the illusion of a 3D object or scene in a 2D medium) and faux finishes. Then, when my kids were in grade school, I returned to college to study fine art. Most recently I found mosaic and fell totally in love with the medium. As I explored the world of mosaic, the desire to use very small pieces lead me back to beads. I love bead stores and always found it hard to resist buying beads even when I wasn't making jewellery. Over the years my collection grew, and I knew that someday I would use them. So, when I realized I could use beads in mosaic, I was really excited - I could finally dip into my stash. I quickly realized I didn't have nearly enough and now buying beads is a very different exercise. I feel like I am working in the medium I was always destined for and I'm loving it!"

Melanie has been exhibiting her art since 2010 and in recent years has been winning awards left and right for her beadwork. Her pieces are crammed with beads, no space is wasted, but at the same time nothing is superfluous. Her Rhino, Grand Prize Winner in Interweave's Bead Arts Awards at Beadfest 2022, is a blend of iridescent silver and golds, but even then, the diamond shaped crystals and fire-polished stones only enhance the curve of its mouth and hood of its eyes. Her Blue Fish is a blend of electric blues and golds, each bead meticulously placed, whether in bugle bead fins or a dagger bead tail.

"I use any kind of bead I can find, as well as rhinestones, crystals, metal stampings, buttons, rhinestone chain, ball chain, jewellery chain, wire, and found objects. My substrates are sometimes carved by me out of polyurethane foam, but I also purchase substrates made of resin or ceramic. If it is one I have purchased, I often pull it or break it apart and reattach the pieces into unique postures. Then I use Apoxie Sculpt clay and glue to attach the beads."



She learned a lot of her techniques from her very gifted mentors, whose names you may also recognise: Jan Huling, Betsy Youngquist and Nancy Josephson, who are all uniquely talented bead artists in their own right. Melanie still approaches beading from a painter's perspective, bringing colour theory and texture mixing from her fine arts background.

Having grown up loving stories like Peter Rabbit, Winnie the Pooh and The Wind in the Willows, a lot of her animals have human traits or wear clothing. Despite not allowing herself to get bogged down in hyperrealism, she often refers to online resources to find how fur or feathers turn on the curves or sit in certain positions. This blend of reality and fantasy makes her creatures all the more endearing; where animal figures in museums



can appear unsettling, Melanie's creatures have a sense of humour and personality. She also looks to rich fabric patterns like brocade for inspiration and has lately become enamoured with the work of fashion designer Guo Pei. She's in awe of her fearlessness and imagination (see page 6 for an opportunity to explore Guo Pei's work yourself).

We couldn't speak to Melanie without asking her about her Museum of Beadwork 'Wings and Stings' Challenge winning piece, OGG (the Old Green Grasshopper). From his legs to his wings and his little waistcoat, OGG is a beautiful use of beads to revive a well-loved toy. Every curve and shape of the base has been thought about and was taken into account when the beads were placed. The wings are divided into two portions, one green, one an almost-salmon pink, with a brilliant use of different bead types and shades to add shadow and depth. OGG's eyes are bright blue beads which catch the light, trimmed with shaped beads that draw you in. Even the wheels are embellished with beads, so nothing looks out of place.

"I found a vintage grasshopper-shaped ride-on toy and decided that that would be my substrate for my submission to the Wings & Stings show. The piece measures 38"x 36"x 18" and is covered completely with beads. Because the competition was sponsored by Miyuki Beads and Caravan Beads, 40% of the beads used had to be made by Miyuki. So, I spent a lot of money buying the beads needed for this piece. It took me about three months to finish, but in the end it paid off - my piece won the Juror's Choice Award. We are still waiting for the official opening of the museum, they ran into delays due to the pandemic and construction issues, but hopefully they will open soon and I can visit OGG at the Grand Opening."

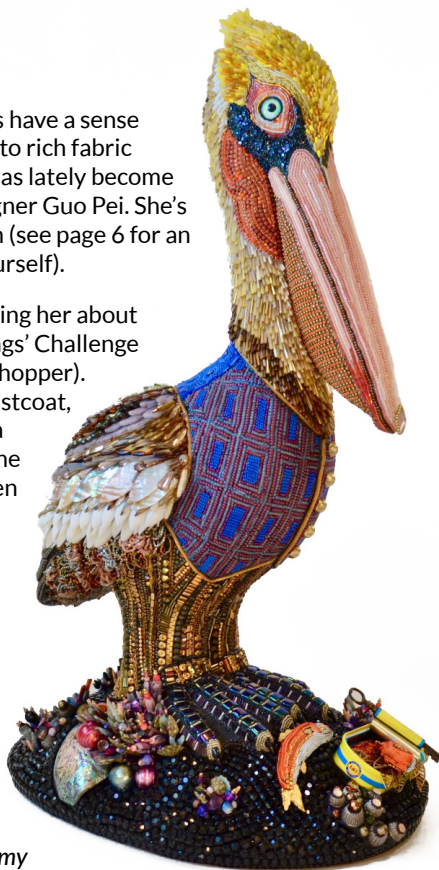
So, after a very busy past few years, what's next on the horizon for Melanie?
"I am working on several pieces in my studio at the moment. I have had success with my Covid Preserves series (which are beaded fish in sardine cans), so I'm making more of those. I'm also working on a piece with the theme of seeing the different sides of oneself and accepting all of them - featuring a bird. Finally, I'm about to start on a rabbit that will have somewhat of a reference to my childhood."

MELANIE'S THREE TOP TIPS FOR BEADWORKERS

- 1** *Don't be timid - just go for it. Sometimes we can feel like each bead is so precious that we don't want to waste them. You have to get over that, especially if you are glueing beads or sticking them into Apoxie Sculpt clay.*
- 2** *There are lots of great instructional videos on YouTube - watch them and then develop techniques that work for you. Or, take an in-person workshop with Betsy Youngquist and Nancy Josephson, they hold workshops about once a year and they always find unique and fun locations.*
- 3** *Buy beads in every size, shape and colour - you never know what you're going to need or want when you are working on a piece. It's imperative to have a great stash!*

There you go beaders, a gift-wrapped excuse to buy more beads!

FEATURED BEADER



You can find more of Melanie's work online via her website www.melaniechristie.com and her Etsy shop, Flying Glass Art. You can also see OGG (her Old Green Grasshopper) at the Museum of Beadwork in Portland, Maine (USA).