

EXPLORATIONS IN BLACK JEWELRY: POLITICS

BY SEBASTIAN GRANT



AVANT-GARDE ARTIST SENG NENGUDI voiced the thoughts of many when she stated in a 2018 interview: “Being born Black in America is a Political Act.”¹ Nengudi’s assertion alludes to both the harrowing history of oppression and slavery in the US, and how Black culture must confront government-instituted laws and systemic racism as a means of survival today. Political activism and organizing efforts implemented by African Americans push towards freedom, and art is a space to highlight the close relationship between Black identity, culture, and the fight for freedom. Like other forms of political art, jewelry is part of this constellation of artistic expression.

The African Jazz-Art Society and Studio (AJASS) in Harlem, founded in 1956 by photographer Kwame Brathwaite and his brother, the activist Elombe Brath, was one of the earliest artistic groups to express modern views of Black pride. Inspired by a desire to assert a unique Black identity, and influenced by the movement of Jamaican activist Marcus Garvey, the brothers expressed Black pride through their activism, their fashion collective called the Grandassa Models, and Brathwaite’s photography. AJASS became

Sikolo Brathwaite wearing a headpiece designed by Carolee Prince. African Jazz-Art Society & Studios (AJASS), Harlem, ca. 1968

Image courtesy of Kwame Brathwaite

known for uniquely Pan-African fashions, and promoting natural hairstyles at a time when Black individuals usually conformed to white beauty standards in order to be accepted by mainstream society.

The jewelry of Carolee Prince was featured among the fashions displayed at AJASS's annual "Naturally" shows, which promoted natural Black beauty. Prince's complex African stringed beadwork in bold colors looked to African craft traditions, and was often featured in Brathwaite's photographs with the Grandassa Models adorned with her designs. Brathwaite's image of his wife features earrings and a stunning headpiece created by Prince, which helps display the pride and joy of Blackness, and connects it to African heritage. By the late 1960s, as the Black Pride movement reached more mainstream audiences, Prince gained some success, including as a designer of headpieces for Nina Simone. Unfortunately little to no significant research has been published on Prince, and further investigation is needed to properly record her life and her contributions to jewelry.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Black Arts Movement, influenced by Civil Rights activism and the Black Power Movement, combined politics and activism with unique expressions of Black culture. Throughout the period, Black artists incorporated African design aesthetics with the burgeoning styles of modern Black urbanism. Chicago-based AfriCOBRA was among the many artist collectives that popped up around the country. The group explored their African roots while creating a contemporary Black aesthetic reflective of Black experiences. Ceramic and assemblage artist Howard Mallory, invited into the group by weaver Napoleon Jones-Henderson, endeavored to create a positive force in the Black community and support Black identity. In addition to ceramics, Mallory designed jewelry. Unfortunately there is very little scholarship or visual evidence of his wearable art, which further illustrates the necessity to document these artists and their work before it becomes lost to the unforgiving nature of history.



Coreen Simpson with daughter Suzanne Simpson-Bryant, pictured with cameos. Photograph taken for a fashion show at Robert De Niro's studio in NYC, ca. 1990s. Photographer unknown. Image courtesy of Coreen Simpson

Phyllis Bowdwin

The Middle Passage—African Holocaust Brooch, 1993-96, NYC

Silver

4 x 2½ x ¾ in.

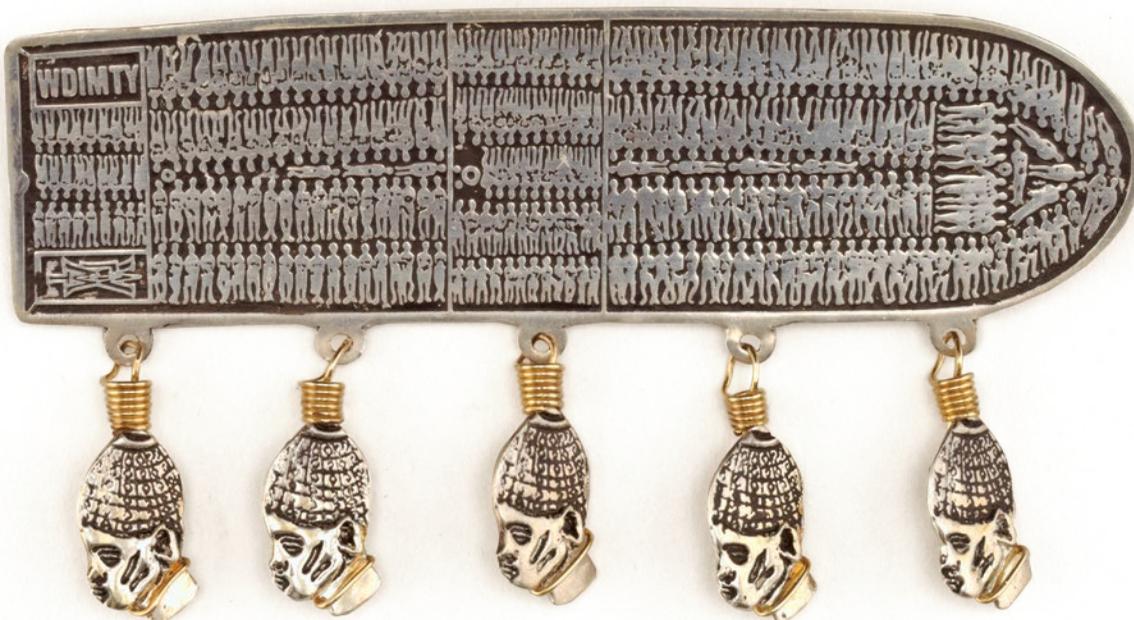
Manufactured by **Who Deserves**

It More Than You?

Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum
Museum purchase from

Monet Jewelry Fund, 1997-3-2

Photo © Smithsonian Institution

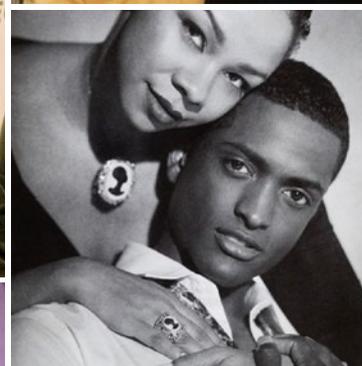
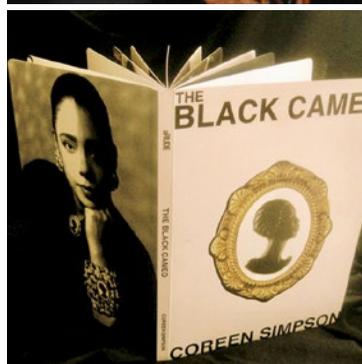


Each of artist Phyllis Bowdwin's brooches came with a poster which explained the ancestral origins of the people of Africa and the horrors they had to face in the menacing presence of the slave ship.

Coreen Simpson gave political jewelry a new focus in 1989 with her successful business The Black Cameo Collection™. Simpson began her career as a photographer working for the *Village Voice* and *Amsterdam News*, capturing scenes from Harlem's nightlife; then in Paris she covered the fashion scene, contributing to *Vogue* and *Paris Match*. Her first foray into jewelry design began while looking for a piece of jewelry to accessorize one of her shoots. When she was unsuccessful in finding a suitable piece in any local store, she decided to create it herself. "I consider myself a conceptual designer... I have an idea then I go to model makers with a sketch [...] and make it happen,"² says Simpson. She would often wear her own pieces at photo shoots, and eventually built up a clientele.

When a client requested a cameo that featured a person of color, Simpson's famous Black Cameo Collection was born. In Simpson's research into the long history of cameos, any Black examples she could find often featured racist imagery, such as exoticized Blackamoor designs and Black stereotypes with discriminatory tropes. Simpson decided to create her own set of cameos featuring individual portraits of women that highlighted the diverse and unique features of Black beauty, pieces with which people would identify. Eventually licensed by AVON, the The Black Cameo Collection™ became a great success. Notable clients include Debbie Allen, Nancy Wilson, Rosa Parks, Maya Angelou, and Rihanna. When recently reflecting on her storied career, Simpson states, "My work has kept me moving with energy. [I'm] grateful to God for giving me such a beautiful life in art."³

Phyllis Bowdwin is one of the most outspoken artists to make an engaging political statement through jewelry. Although now working as a writer and a storyteller, in the early 1990s Bowdwin's jewelry encouraged a confrontation with the uncomfortable parts of Black history that are not often the subject of wearable art. Bowdwin's interest in jewelry started in the late '60s. When trying to find an accessory to match a dress, she "came upon a spiritual revelation" that she could make it herself.⁴ With \$20 worth of jewelry materials gifted to her by her godmother, Bowdwin started creating beaded and wire jewelry. She began her career by taking classes at the 92nd Street Y and received her bachelor's at Parsons. She continued experimenting with different





Left: A selection of images that demonstrate the versatility of Coreen Simpson's Black Cameo Collection™, highlights from Simpson's career, and the collection's popularity with celebrities and public figures.

Images courtesy of Coreen Simpson



materials and techniques; however, the inspiration for her most famous work came from a radio talk show, which doubted the harsh treatment and cruelty of African Americans during slavery. Angered by the commentary, Bowdwin immediately began researching, and was struck by an image of a crowded slave ship, with its inhabitants stuffed together like sardines. Bowdwin decided to use it to create her most emotional piece: a series of six brooches entitled *The Middle Passage—African Holocaust*. Capturing the diagram in silver or brass, she adorned different versions with dangling ornaments at the bottom either with cowrie shells or disembodied heads held by nooses. The brooches garnered praise for their bold depictions, but also some criticism from members of the Black community trying to escape the past. Yet Bowdwin's intention was to confront and learn from the past in order to prevent the same mistakes in the future.

Through their deep engagement with the horrors of the past, and through their confident displays of Black Pride, these artists and designers contribute to a greater understanding and appreciation of Black identity in America, and offer a path forward to guarantee its acceptance in the fabric of American history.

1 Anna Souter, "Being Born Black in America Is a Political Act": An Interview With Senga Nengudi," *Hyperallergic*, September 26, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/462256/being-born-black-in-america-is-a-political-act-an-interview-with-senga-nengudi/>. / 2 Coreen Simpson, interview with the author, October 3, 2021. / 3 Ibid. / 4 Phyllis Bowdwin, interview with the author, November 4, 2020.