

Linda Fifield cloaks lathe-turned vessels in woven beads to create objects of startling beauty.

BY LYNDA McDANIEL

A New Spin on Kentucky Crafts

If Darwin got it right, then we are all moving together through time on a never-ending continuum. Each of our journeys begins on our unique ancestral foundation, from which we can explore new directions and increasingly complex dimensions.

Linda Fifield lives her life in rhythm with this flow. She refers often to her own "creative evolution," the different stages of her development that led her from embroidery and quilting as a girl, to leather work embellished with beads, to only beads, hundreds of thousands of them hugging original wooden vessels.





Fife's *Heaven & Earth* series (opposite page) uses green and blue beads to represent the Earth and sky, while the *Earth & Fire* series (above) introduces bright reds that engulf the brown, green, and blue beads. (*Earth & Fire* vessel, 5" x 3", from the Hason collection.)

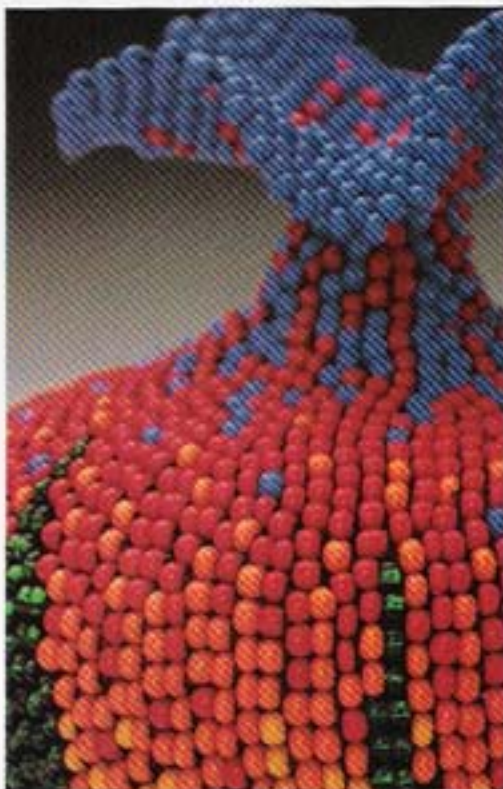
Over time, her work has garnered international recognition, and yet, through it all, she remains deeply grounded in the southeastern Kentucky traditions of nature and craft, family and home, gently moving forward with thoughtful acknowledgment of both her collective heritage and individual destiny.

"Unlike my earlier Appalachian ancestors, who often created out of necessity, I am able to create for the enrichment of my daily life," Fifield says, her voice soft yet deliberate. "In my childhood home, there were always works in progress, from quilts and rugs to crocheted lace and embroidered linens. Now, in my adult home, the making of things is also an everyday process."

For more than 25 years, Fifield has worked to perfect the netting stitch she uses to link Czechoslovakian glass seed beads in remarkably intricate patterns. With needle and thread and beads, she weaves a beaded skin that follows the contours of hollow wooden vessels she turns on a lathe. Her designs are inspired by nature, by rocks and fossils, blooming moss and cardinal flower, salamanders and rattlesnakes, all of which she has spent a lifetime getting to know. "I've learned to be comfortable with who my neighbors are," she says, "and I appreciate and respect them, whether they're lizards or butterflies or rattlesnakes." She often works six days a week, sometimes long hours,

but always as close to nature as possible, no farther away than in her living room, by the window for natural light, looking out at the woods.

There's little doubt that beads were her destiny. With the clarity of hindsight, we can look back at each turn in her life and see how, like the creeks on her 250-acre homeland, one thing flowed into the next, the currents leading her to a specific destination.



GRANNY COLLINS. It all started with her maternal grandmother. Fifield sat by her side, threading needles when aging eyes began to falter, watching with fascination the smooth, steady rhythm of talented, time-worn hands. Four decades later, Fifield still smiles through tears at the memory.

"Granny Collins was the most influential person in my life and a fine craftsman in her own right," Fifield says. "She was a mountain woman and a healer. She never had a telephone, and she never drove. We walked together along the roads, sometimes in the hills, and that was a very valuable experience for me. I became aware of plants by the road, of things in bloom, of the seasons. We spent time slowly, not in the fast lane. That is an experience I would wish for everyone."

In 1975, she took a trip to Chicago and the Field Museum, a semi-

Earth & Fire vessels in detail (above) and as a group (right). Fifield designs her patterns on graph paper, then painstakingly weaves a beaded skin to fit over the hollow wooden vessels that she turns on a lathe.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Linda Fifield and her husband, Jack, collaborate on some pieces, such as this *Shaman's Rattle*, 10" x 12" x 5". For a piece such as this, Jack will do the wood turning, and Linda will create the beadwork.



nal experience that left her spellbound by the perfect precision and beauty of tightly coiled Native American baskets. "Baskets are my favorite things," she says. "I had set my goal to be a basket maker, but when I saw bead work and basketry at the same time at that museum, those two ideas came together for me. Each minuscule stitch was as perfectly formed as a bead." What followed was what Fifield refers to as "a trial-and-error process that continued to be my personal creative evolution," during which she created tiny, basketlike vessels of stitched glass beads and glass-bead designs on leather bags and belts.

Early in the '80s, still focusing on combining beads and leather, Fifield switched direction, a decision that seemed spur-of-the-moment but actually had been long in the making. She was exhibiting at an outdoor show of the Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen, where she had been paid to demonstrate leatherwork — but she decided to demonstrate beadwork instead. "I didn't have a design in mind, but sitting in the woods, I just looked around and said to myself, 'Be guided by what you're surrounded by.' That was the forest floor and the green trees and the blue sky. I just started using those colors and putting them together in a relationship that seemed to fit," Fifield recalls. "Sure enough, I have stayed with that same idea now for almost 20 years."

Her *Heaven and Earth* series uses green and blue beads to portray the earth and sky, while the *Earth and Fire* introduces fiery colors that engulf the brown, green, and blue beads. Lizards, vines, and wildflowers are also favorite motifs.

From then on, things evolved steadily. In 1989, she had her own retail shop in nearby Berea. In 1992, she joined two other craftspeople and opened a gallery while continuing to do local shows. A year later, she received a copy of the book *The New Beadwork* by Alice Scherer and Kathryn Moss. For the first time, she realized she had soulmates out in the world, artists who shared her passion for beads.

"I'd never even met another beader," she says. "I'd never used bead graph paper. Seeing the work of others both excited and humbled me. That motivated me to be a part of the growing bead craft movement." She has since hosted Scherer at her home and smiles as she remembers how much it meant when Scherer assured her that had she and Moss known about her work at the time they were writing the book, it would have been included.

Designing patterns on bead graph paper was a real revelation for Fifield. She began by designing repeating geometric shapes and experimenting with colors that worked together. Spirals work naturally for her twill-weave stitch, and geometric patterns that followed the diagonal spiral became her trademark.

Her early beaded vessels used glass bottles for their form; later, she used clay pots that friends made for her. But Fifield worried that the clay vessels were too fragile. The answer came from an unexpected source — close enough to be initially overlooked.

TURN, TURN, TURN. In 1994, Fifield purchased a lathe as a 20th anniversary present for her husband, Jack, who had expressed an interest in wood turning. "Jack fell in love with the process," she says. "He would come back from the workshop and say, 'I think you're really going to like this, you should come to the shop.' But I was always so busy with beadwork that I kept putting it off. Then, on Christmas Day, which made it very memorable for me, he finally got me down to the shop. It was magical. I was amazed that this new process was

immediately something that I would fall in love with too. And it still fascinates me."

Fifield appreciates the way she can now control production of the vessel, which has added new dimensions to her work and allowed form to take on greater importance. Lovely woods from her land — cedar, maple, and apple, among others — lie beneath beaded vestments, supporting actors to the star attractions.

That same year, 1994, Fifield decided to "step out into the national craft scene." Almost immediately, she was accepted into the prestigious Smithsonian Craft Show and Philadelphia Museum Craft Show. As she built a national and international reputation, many of her pieces found homes in special collections and museums.

"It's encouraging to have these works appreciated," Fifield says. "And our lives have been rewarded with many new friendships with patrons." Patrons such as Jane and Arthur Mason, who recently donated 120 of their pieces to the Mint Museum in Charlotte, North Carolina; Fleur and Charlie Bresler, known for their wood-turned collection; and George and Dorothy Saxe, who have loaned part of their collection to the Renwick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C. Fifield chuckles as she recalls her first year at the Smithsonian Craft Show when George Saxe asked if she would ship a piece to him.

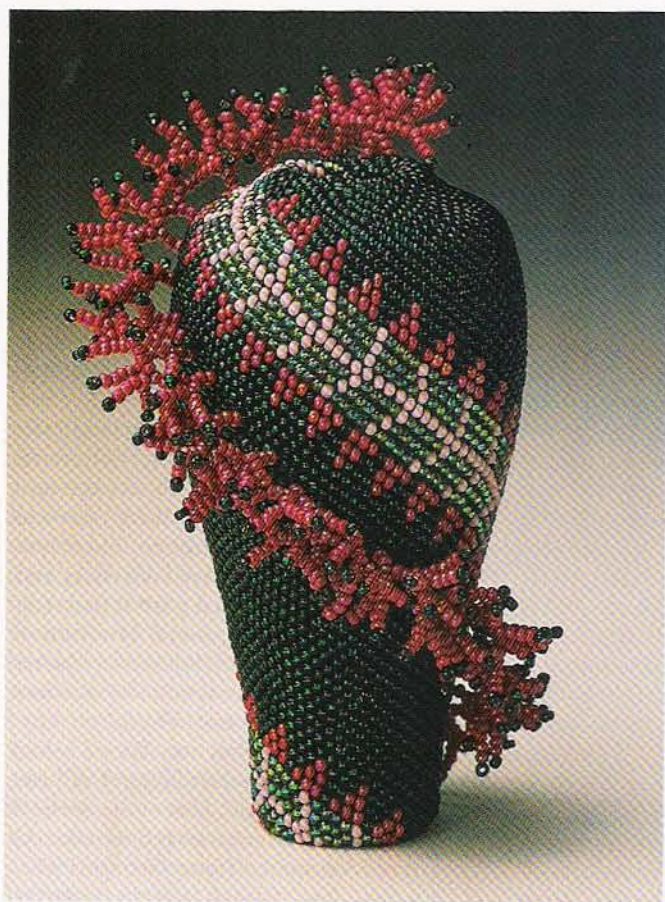
"I said sure, I'd be happy to work that out. Then I asked him for his name and address. That's when he kind of hesitated. I felt like I was supposed to know him — he seemed like an important man — but I had no idea who he was. As he walked away, I heard people saying 'Hello, George. Hello, George.' A woman with the Renwick came in and told me he was one of the biggest collectors in the country and that I should be very honored. And I am."

Fifield continues to experiment, to grow as a person and an artist. Times have changed considerably since Granny Collins' day, but Fifield, too, chooses to have no telephone or television and only listens to the radio occasionally. She prefers her quietude.

"As a child, my playground was the hillsides and creeks. I will forever be held captive to the wonders of Mother Earth. My works result from my love of nature as my way of expressing gratitude and praise. I always feel humbled by the grand creations of this Earth. Sometimes when people have asked me where does inspiration come from, I think, where does breath come from? I'm really not sure, but it never stops, thank goodness, and it just keeps flowing."

And so creation continues. Recent works have evolved to include colorful, faceted gemstones. Soon, she plans to work more free-form, easing away from the classic forms of her current style and creat-





Allowing her designs to be guided by what surrounds her, Fifield creates pieces such as this *Raspberry Bramble* vessel, 5" x 3".

ing pieces in which the beads stand on their own. She still wants to work in wood and is visualizing a design in which a wooden base flows into a soft, curving middle section that comes up into a wooden top.

The more textured her pieces become, the more people seem to want to touch them. And that's fine with her. For this naturally grounded woman, saying "Don't touch" would be like telling people not to smell the honeysuckle or taste the wild blackberries growing in a tangle along the creek banks.

"I think touch is a very important part of enjoying the work completely, so I encourage people to feel free to touch. People say 'Oh, I was just wondering if I could,' or they keep their hands behind their back. Oftentimes, as soon as they do touch them, their faces light up."

Over the past five years, Jack has developed his own wood turning to a level that earned him his own acceptance at the 1999 Smithsonian Craft Show. He now works only half time at his first profession, dentistry. "How wonderful that Jack's kind assistance would be rewarded with his discovery of wood turning, a craft that gives him great joy," Fifield says in a tone she uses just for Jack. "I feel blessed to share my life with such a wonderful, creative man. Together we have built traditions of our own craft family. We definitely are a team, what we're doing means a lot to me because it does continue a family's tradition."

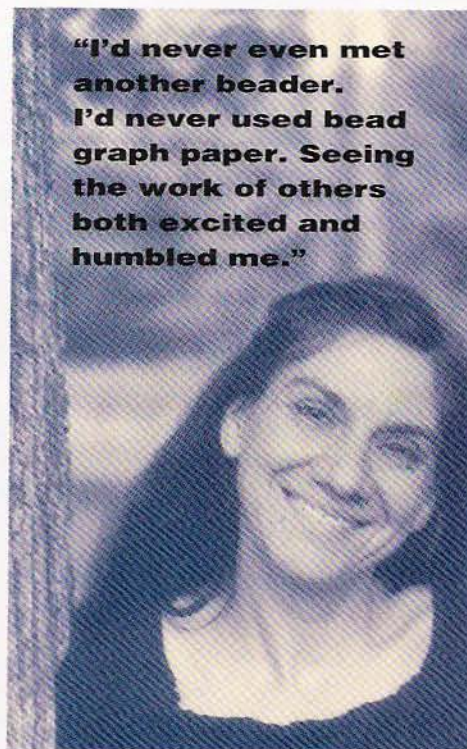
They have collaborated on special projects — wood-turned and beaded cremation urns, wine goblets, water foun-

tains, candlesticks, and boxes. The idea for the cremation urns stemmed from an invitation to exhibit at a show entitled *Ritual Objects* at the Kentucky Arts and Crafts Foundation in Louisville. One year before that show, religious leaders from six religions presented a workshop to introduce artists and craftspeople to objects they use in their ceremonies. Her need to know more about the urns coaxed Fifield onto the Internet, her first visit into cyberspace, using a friend's computer. Since then, she has considered buying a computer for design purposes that would allow her to create more complex combinations. She currently uses colored pencils, and if she doesn't like the way the colors look, she has to start over again. A computer also would come in handy writing the bead book she hopes to publish — a book that would focus on the maker rather than just the processes, in order to celebrate the bead artist as well as the art.

SOLID FOUNDATION. Even with the occasional nod toward modernization, though, Fifield has never faltered on the real foundation of her work. What motivated her ancestors to make their quilts and rugs and lace also motivates her; she likes to cite a favorite paragraph from *Three Magic Words* by U.S. Andersen, a book published in 1954, the same year she was born.

"The essence of creativeness is love of life, for such love guides a man to do something better or bigger or more enlightening than has ever been done before. Such love catches a man in the great vanity and the great purpose, and he instinctively perceives the direction in which life moves, becomes one with its efforts, contributes and creates."

After meeting Linda Fifield, it is difficult not to wonder how true one's own life has been, how much love has motivated its journey. Oftentimes, evolutionary change — what we call "progress" — seems to come at the great price of leaving something behind. But maybe it doesn't have to be that way. The word evolution, after all, is derived from the Latin word for "opening," and Linda Fifield's life is proof that it can work this way. For her, evolution is not a cycle of losses and gains but rather a more gentle flow. She moves slowly and embraces that from which she came at the same time she moves forward, consciously



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cherishing the old *and* the new, arms clasped around both with warmth and grace.

"I feel my family's tradition has provided a link between generations and allowed a continuity of attitudes and efforts," she says. "The personal challenge of beading provides me with a focus that results in peace and contentment." ♦

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