



# bead

With irrepressible energy and restless creativity, bead artist Stephanie Sersich is a human dynamo. BY ILENE STERNBERG

# soup



**Top:** A perfect example of Sersich's theory that less is just less is her *Tempress* necklace, combining handmade glass beads, horn, glass, and turquoise beads, waxed linen and floss.

**Above, left to right:** three examples of Sersich's lampworked beads, what she calls her *Hippi Doodle* bead, *Warty Spiral* bead, and her variation on a traditional form, her *Warring States Interpretation* bead.



**Fresh out of college** and already Stephanie Sersich has her work displayed at numerous galleries and in as many shows, all over New England and the mid-Atlantic states. Any time I call her, she's off doing another one. She's a human dynamo.

I'm trying to grasp the key to her success. I don't want to pry it from her talented little fingers; I just want to see if I can learn how she's able to turn out such a prodigious body of work in such a short time, do it so well, and never seem to run out of steam. I know she's 24 years old, but that whole "Youth" excuse only goes so far. When I was her age, I was wandering around the mall trying to "find myself." All right, all right, so we didn't have malls back then. But you get the picture.

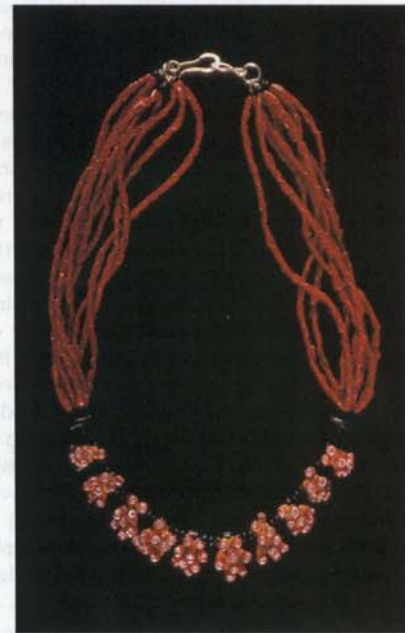
When I first met her, with her wares by far outshining those of other sellers at a bead show in Philadelphia, she mentioned she was still in school and assembled her intricate bracelets and neckpieces on her lap in the car on the lo-o-ong ride from her home in Portland, Maine, to Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. I was aghast, even though she assured me she wasn't in the driver's seat at the time. I could only picture beads spilling into every nook and cranny of the upholstery, a Thomas's English muffin on wheels. The fact that her beads are interwoven, artistically clustered, and neatly macraméd with fine cords make it even more difficult to imagine. Now, meeting her again, I asked her to repeat the story.

"I'd drive out, sometimes with my father in the orange '86 Blazer that I still have, sometimes with an old boyfriend, beading like mad along Interstate 90,

seeing that I could make money just by riding shotgun with my project. I'd have the board with the project propped up on my knees and the little box-top of beads at my side (a nightmare when the dog's in the car). I didn't want to have to keep rifling around in the trunk to get stuff, so I'd plan a 'monster necklace' that would take the whole 24 hours. I hated when I'd have to drive for a while." So what's her idea of a "monster necklace?" (I'm almost afraid to ask.) "These are those pieces where I just go all out — you know, when less is less." A perfect example is her *Tempress* necklace, an amazing cluster of glass, horn, and turquoise beads, all intertwined with waxed linen and floss. The idea of doing this necklace in a hermetically sealed environment is mind-boggling, let alone carrying it off in a moving car with a dog in the back seat.



**STUDIO SETTING.** Having graduated from both college and mobile beading, Sersich now works in a studio in the Old State Theatre building in downtown Portland, diagonally across from the Portland Museum of Art. The walls are covered with colorful photos, letters, postcards and, of course, necklaces and strands of beads, more than you might find in most bead stores. Loose beads, ribbon, floss, and bolts of linen are



Sersich doesn't use her own lampworked beads in most of her finished jewelry, instead preferring a less obvious integration of new and antique materials.

**Above left: Pearly Queen's Collar**, of abalone and pearl beads, shells, floss, and waxed linen.

**Above: Ocean Spray at Midnight** necklace of glass and coral beads with sterling findings. Photos: Peter Lee.

Stephanie Sersich shows readers how to make a "Two-Strand Tickling Necklace" in *Jewelry Journal*, page 47.

Photos by Robert Diamante unless otherwise noted.

stored in big wooden bins, just like at the general store. Luna, her "magical black wolf" (a husky-shepherd mix) is at her feet, where she apparently spends every day. It's her job.

There are two lampworking stations in front of the windows that overlook the main drag of Portland's Arts District. "I have to be careful not to burn myself when I have to check out whatever 'strange ranger' happens to be passing below," she says. There's a desk where she does her paperwork, another where she strings beads. "I just can't tell you how much I love this space, though it's not much," she says. "It is very important to me that these tables stay clean. All things in my studio have a place. I can only work if it's neat, which I know is a unique quality in an artist. I'm a bit high-strung. What can I say?"

She had mentioned that she's inspired by magical things — griffins, witches, and fairies. And, wouldn't you know it — the sorcerer has an apprentice! At one lampworking station, Igor (actually, Liam Morrisroe, blond and fair, wearing green corduroy trousers with red stars he sewed down the leg and a butterfly-collar shirt) works at making beads. He and Sersich take rather reckless turns at the torch, using lots of propane, occasionally burning themselves with the thick, bushy flame, and dementedly cheering each other on when that happens. Sersich learned her lampworking from master bead makers Sage and Tom Holland (see "Here's Looking at You," August 1999, and "Bead Buff," May 2000), and Liam will soon be their scholarship student in Arizona. He's already mastered Sersich's knotting skills, she tells me, a key element in what makes her jewelry exceptional. Is the world ready for Dynamo II?

"My bead making really took off after school when I took a workshop with the Hollands in the Ozarks. Tom & Sage have more knowledge of bead history and bead making techniques than anyone. In just five days, my beads went from ordinary to a source of pride. My beads 'got soul' there. I did a second workshop with them, and would like to do one a year, if possible. Now, I consider them my buddies as well as my gurus."

I don't see her own lampworked beads in most of the collage jewelry she makes, and ask her about it. "When I use my handmade beads in a piece, I make those beads especially for that necklace," she explained. "My challenge is to synthesize the old and the new. I love old beads and I want to continue to use them. A lot of bead makers feature only lampwork in a piece. I don't think I could give up the old beads and shells and such. I enjoy working with artifacts, I feel attached to the talismanic character they give my work. But it's tricky to work the glossy lampwork in with the crusty, pitted old beads."

The studio is crowded with items and images, all displayed in her own purposefully random way of assembling. "This is the way I create. I love to assemble, paste, bind, sew,

or tie. Mostly, I work through an idea in my head, and then just make it. I like to do a necklace over a two- or three-day stretch, maybe in three or four blocks of time." Sometimes, if she's doing a series, or a project that evolves over a week or more, she does preliminary sketches. That sounds focused and intentional. "Mostly, though," she says, "I make 'bead soup.' I put all the beads, strings, buttons, glass rods, etc., for a project in a box and then sit, and just look at it. I'll take some beads out, add some in. I know what I like . . . I rarely start over."

Many of us bead that way, but somehow the results aren't always as successful. For someone who rarely starts over, she churns out an astonishing quantity and variety of lampwork beads and finished pieces of exceptional quality. (Bead soup? I'm reheating a can of Campbell's, and she's Wolfgang Puck.) I guess the finished product rests on the skill and creativity of the cook.



**NATURE OR NURTURE?** Sersich credits her mother, Annie Lenox (no, not the Eurhythmic singer), as being the most important personal influence to her creative nature. An interior designer by profession, Lenox is also a gifted knitter, costumer, instrument-maker, quilter, seamstress, packaging artist (Sersich says her mother wraps a mean gift), and beader who collects ethnic clothing and jewelry and makes wild costumes, ritual instruments, and talismanic objects. "Nothing she makes is close to ordinary," Sersich says. "She ties feathers and driftwood and pearls to rocks and makes extraordinary fetishes for our mantle . . . like Mother Earth meets Martha Stewart. She has taste, self-expressiveness, and eccentricity. She makes all things beautiful and lives creatively, in every way." So *that's* it. It's genetic. (I'm doomed.)

Nature or nurture? Sersich has clear memories of growing up in an atmosphere of constant creativity. "At my house, we had a ribbon drawer, a tissue-paper drawer, another with feathers, glitter, and sea glass." She's inspired by, aside from mystical things, clothing and textiles, especially the work of William Morris. "And I don't think we should even mention clothes, Ilene," she says, blushing. (So, of course, I'm mentioning it.) "I'm so inspired by fashion. I am a clothes fiend. I sew some for myself, but mostly I buy . . . and I'm very naughty. Recently I've been into the cowboy look. Just got some new red boots. No matter what 'look' I happen to be into, I find that the color scheme of my outfit subconsciously turns up in my bead combinations throughout the day."

And, let's not overlook Dad's influence. Jim Sersich goes to almost every show with his daughter. He makes all her displays. He also owns his own business and helps her handle all the paperwork. "He's a great salesman, too . . . while I'm horrible," she concedes. "I cannot put pressure on to sell



**Above:** Knotted bracelets using assorted glass, ceramic, stone and wooden beads and buttons, floss, and waxed linen.

**Opposite page:** An almost religious devotion to sumptuousness — A *Libertine's Rosary*, of glass, ceramic, carnelian, and sterling beads and bells, shells, floss and waxed linen. Photo: Peter Lee.

something. And he doesn't have to. He just talks about how proud he is of me, the silly guy." (I experienced this highly effective sales technique first hand at one show where I encountered the Dynamic Duo — I ended up buying a beautiful summery chartreuse-, turquoise-, and coral-beaded neck ring with a cloisonné butterfly pendant, a festive autumn bracelet, and several of Sersich's irresistible lampwork beads. My friend was roped in, too.)

"And he knows tons about beads," Sersich continues. "When I read the books that I love, Liu's *Collectible Beads*, or Dubin's *The History of Beads*, I mostly look at the pictures. My dad, on the other hand, reads it all. He'll say to my client, 'That's a *pumtek* bead. It's from India and it's made from opalized wood. *Pumtek* means buried thunderbolt,' and he'll go on and on about where that name came from. It's very sweet." (It's also very effective. We added several pairs of earrings to our purchases, which innocent-looking Sersich custom-made to our specifications and later mailed to us. It's tough to defy the combination of her talent and Dad's salesmanship.)



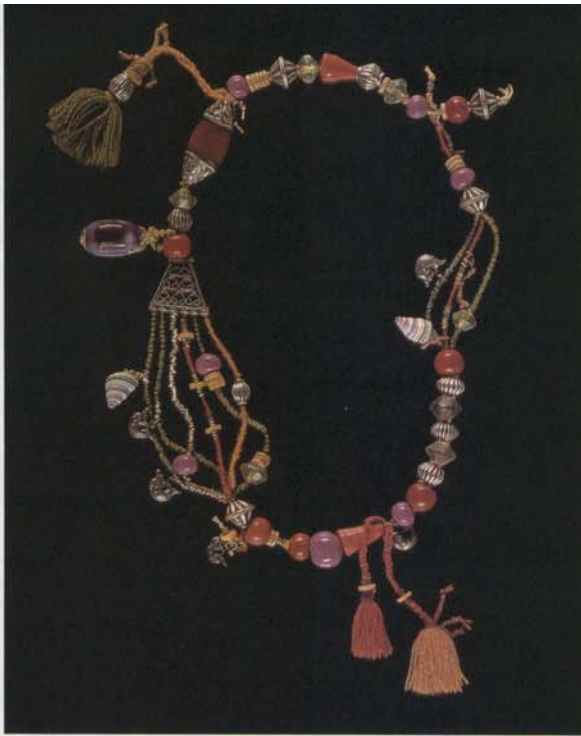
**CHEF'S SECRETS.** I ply her with more questions, hoping to get the essence of her soup recipe. She's more than willing to share her chef's secrets. "I use every kind of bead, except small ones. I especially love old silver, white hearts, trade beads, and chunky gemstones.

And I'm really on a vintage German kick right now. I love the ugly chartreuse greens and the funky, dangly shapes. In general, I like beads that are dangly or spiny." So . . . chunky soup.

And colorful, too. Nothing somber or subdued for this energetic gal. "I aim for a color scheme with a little bit of dissonance and a texture that's lush. I tend to like certain motifs: dots, stripes, stars, and swirls, some organic forms — but I'm not so much into flowery stuff. Mostly, I concentrate on color. I love color. *Man*, I love color! I like red with green, pink with orange, and of course, a lot of other combos." It's gazpacho all the way.

Back in school, Sersich had considered being a music major until she found herself spending more and more time drawing and painting with watercolors. "Even now, I draw and paint almost daily. This keeps the creativity in balance, and forces my shapes and colors to evolve." But music is still something she finds inspiring, in addition to the fairies and fashion. "I listen to Joni Mitchell and Laura Nyro. I sing constantly and always have, and I'm extremely emotional, like the singers I love. I always listen to music while I work — some days it's funk, some days it's Celtic. I love that both music and jewelry make women feel happy and expressive."

Sersich feels that getting a liberal arts education was a wise move. "I think that knowing a variety of disciplines and



perspectives creates more possibilities in one's life, and therefore in one's work." Carleton's Art Department was tiny, but she says the extraordinary professors and a high faculty-to-student ratio gave her leeway to explore her interest in jewelry, even in photography class, where she put together a necklace of photos, or in ceramics, where she made all sorts of beads.

Even before she left school, she began hanging around bead shops in the tiny town of Northfield, spending all her spare time and money. "I met fabulous women who bought my first pitiful lampwork beads. I started teaching macramé to kids, excited just to see my name on the store's schedule of classes. And, Cathy Colli-

son, owner of the Glassgarden, was so supportive, selling my beads and jewelry, taking a chance letting me teach. She encouraged me to explore beads as an art."

For her comps (thesis-ish final comprehensive project in one's major), Sersich made 15 necklaces, three associated with each of the five elements — Earth, Air, Water, Fire, and Spirit. "I did a ton of research on the history of the beads and other materials that I used in each piece, my goal being to explore other cultures' use of adornment in ritual, and combine beads and materials that reference the associated elements. The three necklaces I made for the element of Fire," she explains, "were made of bells and other celebrational beads. The necklaces that were my studies of the element of Earth were made of wood, clay, ambers, and gemstones. When I look back at that project now, it was my way to buck those folks who see adornment as a 'craft,' rather than as 'art.'" (Sounds like a heck of a science project, too.)

Well, you can take the bead girl out of the car, but you can't take the car out of the . . . all right, all right, the analogy only goes so far, but Sersich still can't resist continuing to bead in unconventional venues. "I assemble necklaces everywhere. I love to watch baseball and bead. But, recently, I put my TV in the closet when I acquired my piano. I also like to bead while at the perfect-height desk, on my favorite stool, and while I'm listening to the Red Sox." And I'm wearing red socks, but I don't think that's bringing me any closer to Sersich's restless creativity. I'm exhausted. Time for a nap. That's the only time I have that kind of energy — in my dreams. ♦

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