Studio Artist Bob Benson

I first traveled to Micronesia in 1980, staying in a small remote village for about a month. In 1982 I returned and put in a running water system for the village of about 300 people. When I was leaving the village after this trip, the village Chief gave me a bag full of palm seeds and told me, “This is the only place in the world these trees grow. They are Ivory Nuts.”

Since 1982 I have been working on the nut, and teaching the villagers how to harvest it properly and build drying sheds to air dry the seeds.

In 1986 I started importing large shipments of about 1,000 pounds. With these larger shipments I devoted more time to turn it into an art form. Since the nut was naturally bowl shaped, I made bowls. Many craft items came to me quite naturally, like goblets, lidded containers, salt and pepper shakers, pepper grinders, etc.

In the early 1990s, I had a girlfriend who made glass beads and was quite successful, so I started making beads and quite by accident, buttons. These were hard to make in any quantity.

At this time I also began attending wood-turning trade shows. I met a person who was importing Indonesian carving and other products from Bali. He knew of some old ivory carvers who were unemployed and seeking work. I began sending the nuts to Bali about 2004. We now have three families devoted to carving on this nut only.

It was at a carving show in California that someone came to my table and asked if I had any buttons. I had a view left from a few years earlier and sold them. The next year, at the same show, two people came by and asked if I had any more buttons. They even brought out the two buttons I sold them the year before. In fact, I did have a few more buttons, and they said that their local button club would be interested in purchasing 100 buttons.

On the way home from that show, it came to me how to make buttons in a more productive manner. Since May 2006 I have been making buttons and learning about the button world. I have explored including unusual embellishments. Of all my shows over the years, it is nice to be around a group of people who already know about vegetable ivory.

Since the Micronesian variety of seed produces the largest nut of any vegetable ivory palm in the world, I can make a large button upwards of two-and-one-half inches in diameter.

My most popular buttons are with embellishments of bone carved moon faces, mother of pearl moon faces (carved n Bali), ammonite fossil, dichroic glass, feathers under a watch crystal face, jade, turquoise, tiger’s eye, abalone shell, mother of pearl, and paua shell. Now, on occasion I still make plain buttons.

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