

"The Last Supper in Beads" by Mary DeGuvvara, Chippewa-Ottawa Indian. She is pictured in her tribe's traditional doe skin beaded dress with her husband, Sylvester, her son, Joseph and her niece, Carmaline DeGennaro who helped her in the mammoth beadwork work of art. There are 1,788,761 beads in 121 different shades. She was offered over a million dollars for it but she declined, as money is not the object of her works of art.



Masterpiece of Indian Beadwork

By Mary-Eunice

I FIRST MET MARY, a Chippewa-Ottawa Indian, at the dedication of a new statue of Kateri Tekakwitha at Indian River Shrine in Michigan. She and her good friend, Mary Dearhouse, a Caughnawaga, Canadian Mohawk Indian, represented the Indians upon invitation from Rev. Thomas Dominiak, director of the Shrine. The three of us were given the honor of being present when this huge new piece of sculpture in honor of Venerable Kateri Tekakwitha by Gerald Bonnette, a Mohawk Indian, was unveiled.

Later, as I stood beside Mary De Guvvara, dressed in her beautiful doe skin beaded dress, she said that it would be nice if our party of friends would visit her home.

"Please do come, Mary-Eunice. I want to show you my beaded art work. If you don't I'll think you are afraid of Indians!"

The following day several of us drove to her home in Petoskey, Michigan. It is a small well built cottage near the lake. Her husband, Sylvester, and son, Joseph, were on hand to greet us. They escorted their visitors from kitchen to dining room where Mary happily embraced us.

"See, I knew you were not afraid of Chippewa Indians!" She led us to another room. Our eyes literally feasted on a most unbelievable sight. There was her work of art. . . . THE LAST SUPPER . . .

complete in bead work as only the Indian can accomplish in their silent meditative ways. It was brilliant with bright colors. The length is 11 ft., 6½ inches, height, 5½ ft. The weight of the beadwork is 43 pounds and 5 ounces. In making this tapestry Mary used 200 beading needles, 10 ounces of beeswax, 10½ miles of nylon thread plus reinforcement of going through each bead 4 times with a nylon thread, 121 different shades of seed beads and over 1,788,761 beads. Mr. De Guvvara made the huge wooden loom to start the beading. Mary and son, Joseph did the actual beading. Her niece, Carmaline DeGennaro, helped her with the task of drawing the pattern. The length of time to complete THE LAST SUPPER was from November 1966 to March 1968.

Mary is one of the Indians that keeps to the skills taught to her by her mother and father. She does most intricate work such as wallets, belts, jewelry and purses. Still, with all this she felt she must do something else . . . a special work of art for God. . . . but what? She gave the idea much thought. As a child she loved the story of the last supper of Jesus. It was a favorite. Her parents had told her this story time and again. Indeed, she, too, often dramatized the story for her friends. This would be her special work of art.

Mrs. De Guvvara told us that to do bead

work was a blessing. As a young girl her hands were infected with a skin disease and to do bead work at that time was not easy. Her hands were often wrapped in bandages. She wanted to contribute her share of money to help the family, but found it impossible because of her sore, tender hands. She felt she must leave home, leave Petoskey. So with courage and thirty-one cents in her pocket she took a bus out of town. She walked the streets looking for work but was not successful until she saw the Sacred Heart Seminary in the distance. She went there hoping they would hire her for some type of manual work. She held out her hands to the Supervisor, explaining the bandages. He wondered if she could do ironing wearing gloves. She said she could and so she was hired at the Sacred Heart Seminary. The people there did their utmost to make her comfortable.

It was at this Seminary that she met her husband, Sylvester, who was the caretaker. Eventually they married and went back to Petoskey, Michigan so she might be near her family. Sometime later when she saw her hands healing she decided to do something for "Jesus" using her God-given talents. She would do her favorite Gospel story.

As she proceeded with the work she noticed her hands did not shake. They were steady. Before long her skin clear-

ed up with applications of butter helping the healing. She noticed too, as did other people, that with all her close detailed work she did not need eye glasses. It seemed her eyes were made even keener by her work.

Doing such a large piece required many and special kinds of beads. She found certain color beads difficult to get. Once she took a bus to New York City. Only she knew the exact type of bead needed. I wonder what the clerks must have thought when she asked for several thousand beads. As soon as she secured them, off she went on the bus back to Petoskey, Michigan.

Beads are expensive, especially those used for this type of huge art work. Mary went on the STRIKE IT RICH PROGRAM. Many people asked for money, but not Mary. Her request was simply . . . "beads." Through this special program she received barrels of beads of every type and size. You can see some of these barrels if you visit her.

There was much rejoicing when THE LAST SUPPER was finished. Neighbors, relatives and strangers came from miles to see it. What a special day that was! The family speaks of it with special fondness.

Mary enjoys telling the story of her masterpiece, which she does most dramatically, saying it should be on exhibit because it is Indian culture. "Several art galleries in New York City want to put it on exhibit, but it will not go unless I'm allowed to go with it." She knows that if it is not properly handled it might be damaged.

Once she was offered over a million dollars for it. She thought it over carefully, also how her skin condition changed and her eyes became better.

"No, I can't part with it! It is part of me!" Is there any artist that doesn't feel the same way? After they have spent time, energy and love on a piece of art it is part of them . . . part of their very life. Mary could use the money. But her wants are simple, which is the way she prefers to live. Her hope is that maybe someday an art gallery of renown will ask to have it on the premises and allow her family to be with it! To all of us it seems appropriate since this is the special "era" of the American Indian. The De Guvara family invites all those in the area, including tourists to visit and see this amazing work of art, an Indian masterpiece, the beaded LAST SUPPER. Their address: 1212 Curtis Ave., East Bayview, Petoskey, Mich.