



Trashmagination Podcast #71 – Plastic Mardi Gras Beads

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown.

In today's episode, we'll talk about the colorful plastic beads that people throw as part of Mardi Gras celebrations.

Tuesday, March 5 is Mardi Gras this year. Here's some info on Mardi Gras.

The words "Mardi Gras" means Fat Tuesday in French which relates to the celebration of Lent. People used to eat up all their animal fat on Fat Tuesday because they would not eat it during the 40 days of Lent. Nowadays some people eat pancakes. In New Orleans, Mardi Gras is the last day of a whole season of celebrations that started back in January. There are parades with floats and people throwing colorful beaded necklaces to the crowds. These are called "throws." They are often purple, green and gold. Purple represents justice, green represents faith and gold represents power.

This tradition of throwing items started in 1870. They were mostly candies or bonbons. In 1909, some participants started throwing gold-colored walnuts, coconuts and later, beads¹. Back then, you were lucky if you caught a throw. It was much more rare. The fanciest ones were made from glass beads. But in the 1960s, krewes started to throw plastic beads. This changed the value of throws from quality to quantity. People expected to catch large quantities of throws instead of cherishing a few really nice ones².

Unfortunately, there are big environmental impacts caused by these plastic bag throws. The first impact is obvious – it creates a lot of litter. Every year, 20 million pounds of plastic beads are shipped to the U.S., primarily from China, with 75 percent of them going to Louisiana³. In 2018, the New Orleans sanitation department picked up 1,200 tons of litter after Mardi Gras and a lot of it was throws. They scoop them off the street with front loaders similar to what you see removing snow after a snow storm. These clog local waterways.

And if that was not bad enough, there is a lot of evidence that just handling these throws is bad for your health. Many of these beads contain lead at levels that are concerning to anyone, but especially if handled by children⁴. They also contain high levels of bromine, which can cause birth defects, and antimony, which can cause stomach distress. High levels of lead have been found in the areas near Mardi Gras celebrations.

If you have ever given these beads to kids, you know that they put them in their mouth. They also handle them with their hands and then eat without washing their hands. I have seen these necklaces given to children as pirate's booty at museums or to hold name tags. These necklaces can also often be found around food. I have seen displays of food for Mardi Gras parties where the beads are laying over cupcakes or around the straws of cocktails.

There is also the question of how these beads are made. A documentary called *Mardi Gras: Made in China* shows the working conditions of the people making these beads [<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0436569/>]. If you watch this documentary, you will never want to wear those beads again.

¹ <https://www.mardigrasneworleans.com/history/>

² <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/02/rethink-mardi-gras-without-plastic-beads/>

³ <https://storyofstuff.org/blog/where-do-all-the-plastic-mardi-gras-beads-go/>

⁴ https://www.fox10tv.com/news/mardi-gras-beads-could-be-hazardous-to-kids-fox-news/article_acd694ab-e463-5043-ae3c-57e20a415088.html

<iframe src="https://player.vimeo.com/video/143373618" width="640" height="480" frameborder="0" webkitallowfullscreen mozallowfullscreen allowfullscreen></iframe>

<p>Mardi Gras Made in China (20 minutes) from David Redmon on Vimeo.</p>

When I first thought about doing a podcast episode on this topic, I was excited about all the craft ideas to make with these beads. But now I am concerned about suggesting them at all because I would not want to encourage you to touch them. This is actually a really good point about creative reuse overall. We need to research the materials we are collecting to ensure they are safe to handle, especially if you are going to collect these materials in large quantities for a big creative reuse project, or if you are going to use them in crafts that you do with children.

So while you will see some craft ideas on my Pinterest board for Mardi Gras beads, I hope you will get inspired to NOT purchase or creatively reuse the plastic beads that are most commonly thrown. Instead, I hope you will get inspired to make your own Mardi Gras beads from non-toxic materials. Also, I want to tell you about a bunch of people who are trying to change the culture around these plastic beads so Mardi Gras can still be a lot of fun without putting the environment and children in danger.

Non-Toxic Mardi Gras Beads

My favorite non-toxic Mardi Gras bead designs involve rolling newspaper or magazine strips into beads and then painting them. You can buy beads made in this way from Atlas Beads [<https://www.atlasbeads.com/>]. These beads are made by women in Uganda. Obviously these beads are much more expensive than plastic throws. The owner of Atlas Beads is part of a Mardi Gras krewe that picks up trash during Mardi Gras. They are called the Trashformers and they ride bikes with shopping carts attached, painted green⁵. There is also a company called Our Place Promotions which makes a line of paper beads called Throw Me Something Green⁶.

If you want to make your own Mardi Gras beads from paper, I'll link to a tutorial on Alpha Mom [<https://alphamom.com/family-fun/holidays/mardi-gras-beads/>].

Another way to make non-toxic throws is by sewing pasta necklaces. You can change the color of pasta by soaking it in vinegar and food coloring – I'll link to a tutorial [<http://www.hellobee.com/2012/02/27/diy-colored-pasta/>]. Other people made Mardi Gras beads by cutting up colorful straws – hopefully not new ones.

Now I'll share the design for Mardi Gras beads that I created with items in my creative reuse collections. I noticed that my mesh produce bags were purple, green and orange, so they might be a great option to creatively reuse into throws. I found that the produce bags stretch into a big loop which is about the size of a necklace, but it didn't have any heft like a typical throw.

I remembered a necklace-making technique by Natalie Chanin which is featured in a course on CreativeBug [<https://www.creativebug.com/classseries/single/knotted-necklace>]. Natalie is an incredible designer who has revitalized her community in Alabama by making a slow fashion business hiring local people with her beautiful hand-sewn clothing designs. So Natalie's course is called the knotted necklace and she makes it from recycled strips of t-shirt material. She ties the strips into many knot which look like beads.

I tried doing this with my mesh bags, but they didn't have as much heft as t-shirt fabric. So that's when I decided to take some colorful plastic table clothe and cut them into little squares which I folded up into little balls. I then would wrap the tablecloth balls in the produce mesh nice and tight so it made a little ball, and then I tied a knot to keep it from moving. I have lots of colorful plastic table cloths because when I attend community events, they are often thrown away after the event. I scoop them up and usually I weave them on my loom.

⁵ <https://thelensnola.org/2019/02/13/trashforming-carnival-from-a-mountain-of-waste-into-a-recycling-bonanza/>

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/GreenMardiGrasBeads/>

My first one looks a little rough but I could improve it over time. So if you collect plastic produce bags and can get your hands on matching colorful plastic table cloths or bags, you could do this craft as well. You could do a similar craft with plastic beads that you embed inside the produce bag mesh if you already have those.

If you have some Mardi Gras beads already, there are quite a few crafts on my Pinterest board that you could make [<https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/mardi-gras-beads/>]. I would just encourage you not to make these with children or to give them to children. But at this point, incorporating them into mosaics or wreaths might be the best option for creative reuse.

People Working to Reduce the Impact of Mardi Gras Beads

If you live in New Orleans or other cities in the south where they have Mardi Gras, another option is to purchase beads secondhand. There are some organizations that collect the beads after each year's celebration, clean them up and repackages them for resale. One organization is called Arc and it provides employment to people with intellectual disabilities [<https://www.arcgnobeads.org/>]. Arc sells these creatively reused beads in many places in Florida, Alabama and Louisiana. In the New Orleans area, the Krispy Kreme stores collect beads after Mardi Gras for Arc, and schools get involved as well.

<https://www.facebook.com/watchstitch/videos/1650763675009141/>

There is a professor at Louisiana State University who is working on a Mardi Gras bead that is non-toxic. His name is Naohiro Kato. He was inspired after talking with the documentary film maker David Redmon who made that film Mardi Gras: Made in China. He is a plant scientist and is now working biodegradable plastic beads made from microalgae⁷. Currently his beads cost 10 times more to make than the plastic beads, but he's going to produce 3,000 necklaces in 2020, and hopefully enough Mardi Gras enthusiasts are willing to pay more for a sustainable Mardi Gras necklace.

There is also an organization called Verdi Gras that is working with many people to make Mardi Gras a more environmentally friendly event.

Mardi Gras and Creative Reuse

There are aspects of Mardi Gras that are very much about creative reuse. There is an event held on Mardi Gras called the Courir de Mardi Gras or the Mardi Gras Run where people dress up in costumes made from all sorts of recycled materials [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Courir_de_Mardi_Gras]. These costumes are similar to what people where in the province where I was born, which is Newfoundland, when we do our mummering traditions. These traditions involve dressing up with whatever you can find to the point where your friends and family cannot recognize you.

The original spirit of Mardi Gras or Fat Tuesday was not to waste animal fat, but eat it all up before Lent. So the original spirit of the event is actually totally in line with Trashmagination.

Thank you!

Thank you for listening! I would love to hear how you creatively reuse materials to make your Mardi Gras beads at trashmagination@gmail.com. Until next time – may you see opportunities for creative reuse during Mardi Gras!

⁷ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/made-from-microalgae-these-mardi-gras-beads-are-biodegradable-180971578/>