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Rag On: Aminah Robinson's Buttoned, Beaded and Bound Books

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'Mama', Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson. *Women in Poindexter Village, Button Beaded Book,* 1989. Buttons, beads, thread, ink, paint, and fabric.

How long does it take to make a book? A few months, perhaps? A year if it is a big one? Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson sometimes worked on a single volume for decades, adding beads and buttons to the cover as the years passed and the stories inside grew longer.

FORT GANSEVOORT



Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson. *Roll Books with Cord, Button Beaded Books,* date unknown. Buttons, beads, thread, and fabric.

Robinson was born in Columbus, Ohio, in 1940 and lived there until her death in 2015. From the 1980s she spent nearly thirty years making handmade books, which places her among the earliest recognised African American women to produce artist's books. This month, Fort Gansevoort in New York opens Beaded and Bound, its second solo show of her work. Twenty-five books, textile pieces and dolls will be on view from 20 November to 16 January 2027.



Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson. *Atrium Diary,* 1987. Buttons, beads, thread, stamps, paint, fabric, parchment.

Some of her books unfold in several directions at once, releasing collage, paint, three-dimensional elements and even miniature books tucked inside bigger ones. A few carry no words at all, while others are crowded with handwriting. The covers are encrusted with beads and stitching until they become sculptures in their own right.



Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson. *Women in Poindexter Village, Button Beaded Book,* 1989. Buttons, beads, thread, ink, paint, and fabric.

Take *Women in Poindexter Village, Button Beaded Book* (1989), a fabric accordion that pays tribute to the women of the Columbus housing development where Robinson grew up. Each one appears as a hand-stitched appliqué portrait, and the cover is thick with buttons. Tucked inside is a loose cloth portrait that opens out to reveal finer drawn detail. It is inscribed with a single word, “Mama.”



Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson. Untitled [RagGonNon], date unknown. Buttons, wood, found objects, fabric, and hogmawg.

Robinson had a name for her larger textile works: RagGonNon. She saw them as unfinished by design, their meaning growing each time a viewer stood in front of them and made up their own mind. The idea was that the stories would “rag on” long after she had put down her needle. In *A Holy Place: The Elijah Pierce Barbershop* (1983), her mentor Pierce snips at a customer’s hair with comically oversized scissors, and soft sculptural elements and stitched annotations keep the scene cheerful. She called barbershops like this holy, because of what they meant to Black communities across America as places to gather.



Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson. Left to right: *Untitled [Man on horse], date unknown. Beads, bells, wood, hair, found objects, thread, fabric, and hogmawg / Button Beaded Doll with Music Box and Poncho, c. 1988. Beads, buttons, thread, fabric, and music box / Button Beaded Doll, c. 1988. Buttons, beads, thread, and fabric / Button Beaded Doll, c. 1988. Buttons, beads, cowrie shells, thread, fabric, and music box.*

Her dolls follow the same logic on a smaller scale. Beaded, buttoned and dressed in found objects, they recall storybook characters and the toys we once carried everywhere. Robinson believed a doll could stretch a child’s imagination and teach tenderness, which says plenty about her as both a mother and an artist.

If you keep a tin of odd buttons or a drawer of offcuts you cannot bring yourself to bin, Robinson would have understood. She saw every scrap as a story waiting for its place, and she gave them one.