The Majestic Artistry of the Mardi Gras Indians

On Super Sunday, a 250-year-old Black Indian tradition celebrating craftsmanship is put on display in New Orleans' streets with suits made of delicate beads and billowing ostrich feathers.

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By Shannon Sims · Photos by Erika Nash
March 11, 2026

On a recent afternoon in the Gentilly neighborhood of New Orleans, Demond Melancon sat at his dining room table doing what he does most days of the year: sewing.

Beads covered the shelves in small plastic trays. Ostrich feathers were stacked in bundles on the couch. Two hot glue gun bread sticks were plugged into the wall. Melancon pulled a sequined fabric stretched taut across a frame, where he spent all year pushing a needle through thousands of tiny glass beads.

It had been nearly a month since Mardi Gras, when he debuted his newest suit as a Black Mardi Gras Indian. But his hands, swollen and filled with puncture wounds, were still healing after months of sewing.

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In Paris, the prestigious "Verses and Reverries: The Poetry of Gabrielle Chanel" exhibition, curated by Chanel and the Bibliothèque-Musée Nationale, guides visitors through a rich tapestry of poetry, literature and fashion, exploring the exhibition, running until March 29, 2026.
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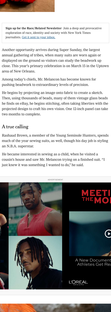
In past years, Mr. Melancon's designs have drawn from across the Black Mardi Gras Indian tradition, from the Mardi Gras Indians, the loads the Young Seminole Hunters, one of the city's roughly 30 active tribes of Black Masking Indians, more commonly referred to as Mardi Gras Indians. Each tribe has its own distinctive tradition in which glass beads, feathers and fabric are transformed into some of the most intricate handmade regalia in American folk culture.

Despite the name, Mardi Gras Indians are neither Native Americans nor limited to Mardi Gras.

The "Indian" identity dates to the late 19th century, when Black Orleanians who had intermarried with Choctaw and other Indigenous communities to honor Indigenous groups who had helped shelter escaped enslaved people in the region's bayous and forests. Mr. Melancon and some families, like his, shared both heritages. "Some of us mixed in the bayou," he said.

Then towering suits, which can be multitons of ceremonial masking regalia, began appearing on the streets revealed on Mardi Gras morning. At daybreak, tribes gather at meeting points around the city and move through neighborhoods on foot, searching for rival tribes.



Demond Melancon, the big chief of the Young Seminole Hunters, in his workshop with a partial suit for his tribe. See it in full gloriousness on the cover and in Instagram.

Demond Melancon, the big chief of the Young Seminole Hunters, spends much of the year sewing suits, as well, though his day job is styling on N.A.A. superstar.

He became interested in sewing as a child, when he visited a neighbor who was making a suit. "I thought it looked cool," he recalled said. "I just knew it was something I wanted to do," he said.

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Another opportunity arrives during Super Sunday, the largest annual gathering of tribes, when many suits are more apart or displayed on the ground so visitors can study the beadwork up close. This year's primary celebration is on March 15 in the Uptown area of New Orleans.

Among today's chefs, Mr. Melancon has become known for putting beadwork to extraordinary levels of precision.

He begins by projecting an image onto fabric to create a sketch. Then, using thousands of beads, many of them vintage glass beads he has found at flea markets, he fills in the design. Sometimes he uses projected design to craft his own vision. One 12-inch panel can take two months to complete.

A true calling

Rashaad Brown, a member of the Young Seminole Hunters, spends much of the year sewing suits, as well, though his day job is styling on N.A.A. superstar.

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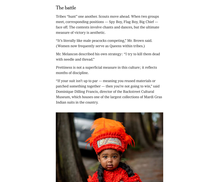


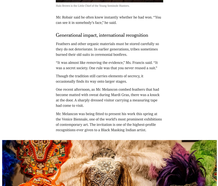
Rashaad Brown, a Young Seminole Hunter, fitting his 5-year-old son, Ryan, into the suit he made especially for him.

This year, Mr. Brown, 28, sewed a miniature suit for his 5-year-old son, Ryan, who masks as the tribe's Little Chief. (Not every tribe has a little chief, while others have more than one.)

"I like to sew," Mr. Brown said, but he marvels at the amount of time Mr. Melancon dedicates to making his suit. "It is just on another level."

He said Mr. Melancon brewed especially tiny beads that required specialized needles. "He's like a Picasso," he said. "You can tell it's his calling."

Many Black Masking Indians describe the practice as a "calling" because the time and money involved often defy practical explanation. "I know guys who mask and don't even have a vehicle to drive to the parade," said Demond Melancon, who is the big chief (diplomat dialect, a veteran chief of the Ninth Ward Black Hawkers tribe who goes by Dewee).



Mr. Brown (left) and his 5-year-old son, Ryan, in the suit crafting for the latter. "Some of us masks out of trouble, and for me, it's been the same thing."

For his Instructal-themed suit, Mr. Melancon said he spent about $2,000 on beads, $1,000 on rhinestones and roughly $7,000 on feathers. And then, after months of labor, a suit might appear publicly only a handful of times.

On Mardi Gras morning, and again in the evening on Saint Joseph's Day, on March 19, tribes wander through neighborhoods looking for rivals. These encounters unfold without a fixed route, unlike the parade circuits familiar to tourists.

The battle

Tribes "hunt" one another. Scouts move ahead. When two groups meet, corresponding positions — Spy Boy, Flag Boy, Big Chief — face off. The contests involve chants and dances, but the ultimate measure of victory is aesthetic.

"It's literally like male peacocks competing," Mr. Brown said. (Women are frequently serve as queens within tribes.)

Mr. Melancon described his own strategy: "I try to kill them dead with needle and thread."

Positioned is not a superficial measure in this culture; it reflects craftsmanship.

"If your suit isn't up to par — meaning you reused materials or patched something together — then you're not going to win," said Dominique Dilling Francis, director of the Backstreet Cultural Museum, which houses one of the largest collections of Mardi Gras Indian suits in the country.

Rashaad Brown, the Little Chief of the Young Seminole Hunters.

Mr. Rabaut said he often knew instantly whether he had won. "You can see it in somebody's face," he said.

Generational impact, international recognition

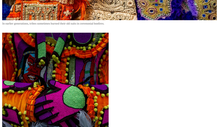
Feathers and other organic materials must be stored carefully as they do not deteriorate. In earlier generations, tribes sometimes buried their old suits in ceremonial bonfires.

"It was almost like removing the evidence," Ms. Francis said. "It was a secret society. One rule was that you never reveal a suit."

Today, preservation efforts are underway, if occasionally finds its way onto larger stages.

One recent afternoon, at Mr. Melancon's cerebral trailers that had become matted with sweat during Mardi Gras, there was a knock at the door. A sharply dressed visitor carrying a measuring tape had come to visit.

Mr. Melancon was being hired to present his work this spring at the Venice Biennale, one of the world's most prestigious exhibitions of contemporary art. The invitation is one of the highest profile recognitions ever given to a Black Masking Indian artist.



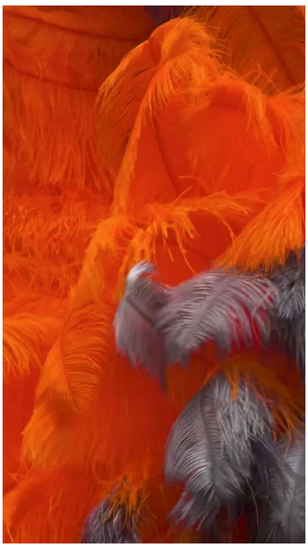
Mr. Melancon seems comfortable with the attention.

“I used to pour concrete, and cook lobster in a restaurant,” he said. But now he supports himself entirely through art. When he is not working on suits, he creates intricate beaded portraits that hang in museums and galleries — including one on the same street where he once worked construction.

Mr. Brown said he had seen the positive impact of Black Masking Indian traditions in his own life. “It taught me discipline, to have to sit down and work,” he said. “It forces you to be quiet and kind of meditate.”

Mr. Brown’s work on Mardi Gras Indian suits led to him receiving a full scholarship to an arts high school in New Orleans, which allowed him to pursue his passion for tailoring.

Mr. Robair said he had seen many young people have their lives transformed by Black Masking traditions. “I feel like what we do is important,” he said. “With everything going on in the world, all the violence, it’s something beautiful that we can compete like this.”



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