

**Doll**  
crafter &  
costuming

# Doll crafter & costuming

March 2010

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artist  
profile

# BEAD INSPIRATIONS

By Sharon Verbeten

Intricate Details Set  
NiniMomo Dolls Apart



Miss Poland  
2009



Miss Alaska 2009



artist profile

You may not be able to judge a book by its cover, but you can certainly judge a NiniMomo doll by its beads. After all, the intricate and delicate beadwork on every creation has become the company's hallmark. The New York company specializes in one-of-a-kind doll designs, usually starting with a Mattel "Barbie" as its blank slate. From there, the dolls morph into cutting-edge fashionistas dressed in elaborately detailed couture gowns, each painstakingly embellished with hand-beaded details. To be sure, it's a craft tough on the nerves and on the eyes, but that precision forms the very fiber of NiniMomo and its highly desired pageant dolls.

#### From Hobby to Career

Nik Moronese and Marie LeBreton—the names behind NiniMomo—both hail from Long Island. And while they've certainly made a name for themselves in the doll

world today, neither took a conventional path to becoming doll artists.

"If you're creative and you love fashion, it just falls into place," said Moronese, a former fashion photographer. (He's the "Nini" in the company's name—a nod to his childhood nickname. "Momo" is LeBreton. The two met in college.)

Collectively, the artists have degrees in photography, biology and health care management—yet it was their shared interest in artistry, fashion and pageants that combined to create NiniMomo more than a decade ago. In the mid-1990s, as Moronese and LeBreton attended Barbie shows, they noticed other designers creating OOAK dolls. Admiring the work of others, the duo thought they'd try their hand and share their skills. With Moronese's art degree and LeBreton's skill at sewing, "We thought maybe it was something we could play with," LeBreton said.



Miss Vietnam 2009

At the time, both were employed in other careers, so they tried their creative touch as a hobby. The timing was ideal. LeBreton was leaving her job in social services, and Moronese was looking for something new. "We both had time off," Moronese said. "I was a fashion photographer and wasn't making the money I wanted to make."

"We never imagined that anything would ever amount to this," said Moronese. "We started this for fun."

"We taught ourselves everything. We basically learned how to operate a company as we got going."

And, like most business, they had to learn the ropes...sometimes the hard way. Among some of their earliest "failures" were boiling doll hair in the microwave and using Rit dye to change the color of vinyl—which resulted in what Moronese called "a Frankenstein project." Still after all the trial and error, they smoothed out and perfected their processes. "After a couple months, we kind of got it down," Moronese said.

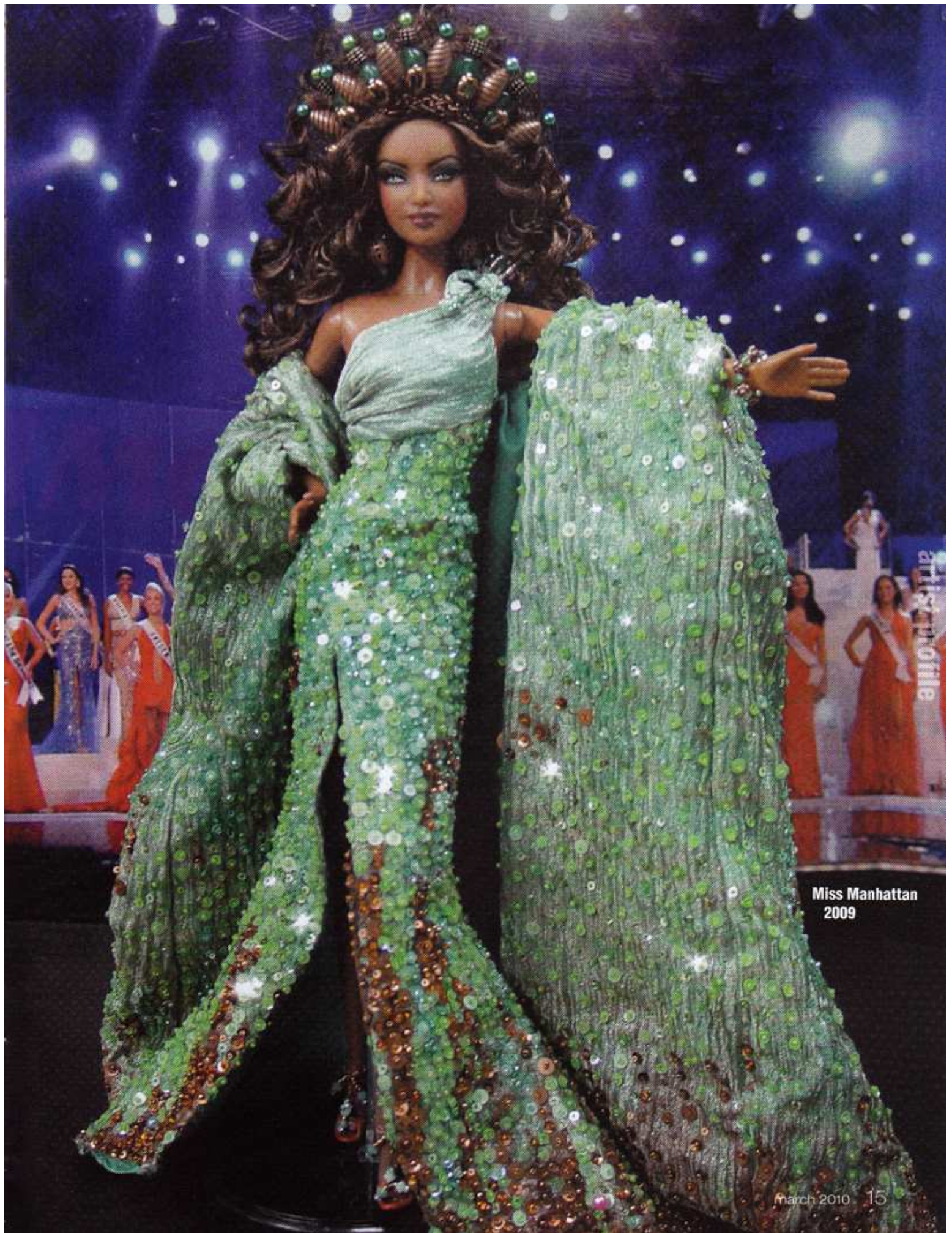
In 1996, NiniMomo made its first Ooak designs for Barbie. Mattel's muse was the doll they felt best fit their ideas.

And while in their early days, the duo still felt they were creating the dolls as a hobby, their company really took off with the dawn of the Internet; Moronese credits the incremental growth of the company "100 percent" to their exposure on the Worldwide Web. "We did everything we could via the Internet to get our name out there," said Moronese. That included links, Web rings and networking with the Miss Universe organization.

Prior to that, NiniMomo relied on advertising in print publications and creating detailed and costly print catalogs to tout their wares. But the Internet definitely took NiniMomo global; today, Moronese estimates about 30 to 35 percent of their business is with international customers.

#### Pageant Perfect

While inspiration can hit from many sources, Moronese and LeBreton decided they needed something to distinguish their Ooak dolls. "We wanted to have a cool theme to set us apart," Moronese said. And choosing that theme seemed to be a no-brainer. The duo both



Miss Manhattan  
2009

had longtime associations with pageants. "I always had an interest in pageants," said Moronese. "I grew up watching them with my family."

Moronese coached LeBreton as a contestant in the 1992 Miss New York USA pageant (LeBreton even designed her own gown), and at the time, the two were involved in pageant judging and coaching for pageants under Donald Trump's Miss Universe umbrella (which includes Miss USA and Miss Teen USA).

Their OoAK creations are part of what NiniMomo calls its pageant collection—dolls represent the 50 states and nations around the globe. Choosing Barbie as the blank palette for their work is ideal, they said. "What I love so much about Barbie now, as opposed to the 1970s, is there's such a variety of skin tones and face molds. I choose the doll depending on what country we're doing," Moronese said.

Working from a studio in Moronese's home, they select a Barbie—anything

from pink box dolls to more costly collector dolls—to best represent their vision. They then remove the face paint, repaint the face, reroot the eyelashes and reroot and restyle the hair. The bodies remain "as is," but they are then dressed in NiniMomo's custom-made, ornate and opulent couture. "We don't take any shortcuts," said Moronese.

Many of NiniMomo's designs are of their own creation; some are recreations based on the works of fashion designers, including Christian Dior and Christian LaCroix. Where do they get their ideas—which can range from a tropical silk evening gown to the arctic silver dress and cape worn by "Miss Greenland 2008?" Inspiration, they said, comes from many places. "It's just everywhere," LeBreton admitted. It could come from travel, a shopping trip to buy fabric, even a glorious sunset. "You're just constantly inspired," Moronese agreed.

### Bring on the Beads

Painstaking detail and handwork is a cornerstone of the NiniMomo collection. "What really sets us apart is we really focus on hand-sewn beadwork," Moronese said. "It's very tedious."

"You get bleary-eyed," admitted LeBreton. "It's so labor intensive." It could take 12 hours—or up to two weeks "stopping and starting"—to complete one fashion. "You need to get perspective on what you're doing...and step back a bit," she added.

"When you start doing it [beading], you get into your zone," Moronese added. "We taught ourselves. At the beginning, we were doing less beadwork. But we realized that the customers were so in love with it."

"It reminds them of fashion, glamour...red carpet scenes," said LeBreton. "I think the customers that we have love fashion as well as love their dolls and want to see that reflected in their fashion."





NiniMomo uses a huge array of seed beads, paillettes, rhinestone florets, sequins, art glass discs and Swarovski crystals—many which are sourced from the Internet.

Of course, intricate beadwork notches up the quality—and cost—of the OOK dolls. Most NiniMomo originals range from \$450 to \$850. “The beadwork and detailing of each outfit reflects what the price is,” Moronese said. “I’m proud of the fact that we’re putting out such high-caliber dolls.”

“Our dolls appeal to a lot of people for a lot of reasons,” LeBreton said. “Some customers started out collecting dolls from countries that they visited or [based on] their heritage.”

“We didn’t want our dolls to look like any others,” said Moronese.

Obviously, they’ve succeeded. Fourteen years ago, Moronese and LeBreton might still be working in jobs they found unfulfilling had it not been for that spark of inspiration hitting at one fateful show. Today, their inspiration continues to stretch their creativity and inspire pageant dreams in others. And they love that every day brings something new. “I like the challenge of something I’ve never done before,” said LeBreton. The fact that our dolls are OOK keeps that fresh.”

For more information on NiniMomo, call (631) 382-9386 or visit [www.ninimomo.com](http://www.ninimomo.com).



Miss Greenland 2008

artist profile

## Rock On!

### NiniMomo to Make Barbie Convention Doll

How did the designers at NiniMomo feel when they were selected to create the souvenir doll for the 2010 National Barbie Convention in Cleveland?

“We were stunned,” said NiniMomo co-founder and designer Marie LeBreton. “It just came out of the blue. We wanted to do this, but we had no idea of the whole process.”

The summer convention will celebrate the 25th anniversary of Mattel’s “Barbie and the Rockers” line. NiniMomo has never received this honor before, but the designers said the co-chairs of the convention chose them after following NiniMomo’s pageant dolls.

LeBreton and partner Nik Moronese were thrilled to put their spin on the rock and roll theme. “They wanted to see our influence, see our work come through it as well,” said LeBreton. The duo created three prototypes before Mattel approved what will eventually be made into limited quantities—about 1,200 to 1,300—for the convention.

“It [the doll] was a great marriage of what they liked about us and the theme,” said LeBreton. “We incorporated what makes NiniMomo NiniMomo and gave it a rocker feel,” Moronese added.

But don’t expect any sneak peeks or even any clues as to what the doll will look like until it is unveiled at the convention! Strict confidentiality agreements prevent NiniMomo from releasing additional details.

# All about the *Bling!*

By Marie LeBreton of NiniMomo

## A Beaded Handbag Tutorial

One of the quickest ways to accessorize an outfit is to add a handbag. It can add a touch of glamour to something simple. Hand-sewn beadwork is the way we embellish our dresses and accessories and we're going to show you how to do this yourself.



### Materials

- Fabric of choice
- Lining of choice
- Interfacing (if needed)
- Thread
- Sewing Needle
- Beading Needle
- Nylon Thread (for beading)
- Sequins
- Seed Beads
- 2 Swarovski Crystal Rhinestone Rondelles
- 4 Swarovski Crystal Bi-Cones
- Sterling Silver Chain
- Ruler



### Making the Basic Handbag

First things first, pick the fabric—almost anything can be used. We chose a cadet blue taffeta. Keep in mind that if the selected fabric stretches, interfacing will need to be used to stabilize it first—this will make it a lot easier to sew. A sterling silver chain is also being added for a shoulder strap. The strap is optional, as without it, the handbag can be used as a clutch. In addition to the outer fabric, another piece of fabric will be used to line the handbag. The liner will allow clean edges—you will not see any of the seams on the inside of the handbag. Use fairly thin fabric—you do not want to add bulk to the bag.



In the example, we're making a simple bag, when finished it will be  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches wide and  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch high. Cut the fabric and lining so enough sewing allowance has been included—we gave it a  $\frac{3}{8}$ -seam allowance.

**Step 1** Cut a  $2\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-wide-by- $2\frac{3}{4}$ -inch long rectangle out of both the outer fabric and the lining fabric.

**Step 2** Sew the two long sides and one short side. The remaining short side will be the edge of the bag's front flap. This seam will be closed last.

**Step 3** Once the three edges are sewn, trim them.

**Step 4** Press the open edge forming a crease and turn out this piece—like a pillow case.

**Step 5** Measure  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch from the closed short end and fold.

**Step 6** Blind-stitch the sides together and press.

**Step 7** Press the front flap down and blind stitch the opening closed.





### Beading the Handbag

In the example, the front flap is covered with silver sequins and crystal seed beads. If you don't know how to sew with sequins, here's a quick lesson:

**Step 8** Thread a beading needle with nylon thread. Make a good knot and pass the needle through the fabric.

**Step 9** Pick up a sequin with the beading needle, going through the hole of the sequin. Pick up a seed bead in the same way, going through the hole of the bead. The bead should rest on top of the sequin. Pass the needle back through the hole of the sequin—skip the bead, and go through the fabric. As the needle is pulled through, the bead will stay on top of the sequin and keep it anchored to the fabric. Now, go to the next spot where a sequin will be placed. In this case, the needle will be positioned right next to the first sequin and beads and sequins will continue to be added until the desired area is covered.

**Step 10** Further accent the bag by adding a row of hand-sewn crystal seed-bead fringe along the bottom. To do this, stitch through the edge of the fabric and pass through several beads—the number depends on the desired length of the fringe. To make a single strand of the fringe, take the needle—skipping the last bead and pass through the just-strung beads—all the way back to the first bead strung and through the fabric. Position the needle right next to the just-created fringe and make the next strand. Continue on until all the desired fringe is added.



**Step 11** Adding a shoulder strap is very easy when using a chain. We went a step further by including decorative touches with Swarovski crystal rondelles and bi-cones. These items have holes in the centers, and are attached just like seed beads. Sew through the point where one end of

the strap will be positioned, and pass the needle through one bi-cone, then through a rondelle and finally, through a bi-cone.

**Step 12** With the needle, go through the last link of the chain strap and go back through the bi-cone/rondelle/bi-cone group. Go through the fabric at the

point you first came through and secure the thread with a knot.

**Step 13** Repeat steps 11 and 12 at the other end of the chain. Your bag now has a strap! →

*Our finished product is modeled on page 18 by NiniMomo's "Miss Latvia 2009."*

