



Transplanted stylist weaves clients' hair into works of art

By Barbi Walker-Walsh

Photos by Andrew Lwowski

Lillian Herbert is more than just a salon business owner; she's an artist who seamlessly blends hairstyling with artistic creativity.

For decades, Herbert has transformed her clients' hair into intricate, three-dimensional art pieces.

Her unique approach has not only garnered a following but also led to the sale of one of her pieces for \$10,000, she recently told me.

Herbert's work is a testament to the power of creativity and the deep connections she's formed with her clients, one the West Chandler resident hopes to expand on in her new Arizona desert home.

In the early '90s, Herbert began collecting her clients' hair in envelopes, carefully noting the names and dates.

She said she wasn't sure what she would do with these collections at first. Then, one day, while sketching artistic designs, it dawned on her what to do with these strands she'd collected.

"Because I consider what I do as an extension of art," she said, describing her dual role as a hairdresser and artist. Creating three-dimensional art with hair seemed the perfect blend of both her roles.

Her first creations, "Wave" and "Curl," reflect the textures of African American hair and are reminiscent of African cloth and rugs. These symbolize her commitment to creating art celebrating cultural identity and personal expression.

Her signature project, "Hairstory," is more than just a series of art pieces; it's a living tribute to the relationships she has cultivated with her clients.

After relocating to Arizona, Herbert hoped to showcase her art in the Valley of the Sun, where she remains relatively unknown.

However, in Dayton, Ohio, she is well-regarded, having been commissioned in 2014 to create a piece for Bing Davis' "Visual Voices: Visions of Dayton Funk" exhibit.

Davis, a prominent African American artist and educator, is known for his work with found objects and mixed media, often reflecting African and African American textiles.

Inspired by Davis, Herbert finds artistic potential in everyday objects. Even like the palm tree bark she encountered in her Arizona apartment complex courtyard during our recent photo shoot with her.

Herbert's art deeply resonates with women, exploring themes

like the connection to hair, cultural roots, and female solidarity. From “Roots” to “Women’s Work” to my favorite piece, “Sisterhood,” each piece tells a story.

One of her most notable works, “Hair Tangle—A Mind-Blowing Decision,” was inspired by the song “Mind Blowing Decisions” by the 70s funk band Heatwave.

With its vibrant colors and intricate details, the piece required painstaking effort as Herbert manipulated strands of hair into place using gel glue, pins, and clips.

“It’s a tedious, sticky job,” Herbert said.

The intricacies of the strands bending and tucking into others make it impossible to believe it’s made from human hair, even up close and personal.

But it is easy to see how much effort and care went into making it. The result is a stunning composition. This work exemplifies the dedication and care Herbert pours into her art.

Each of Herbert's designs carries emotional depth and personal connection, including her signature, which is made from her hair. She views her hairstyling and artwork as a way to celebrate her unique bonds with her clients.

“It’s unique artwork that hasn’t been done since the 1800s,” she noted in a 2016 interview with the Dayton Daily News. Among her most poignant works is “Weave,” a piece resembling a woven rug incorporating gray strands from her mother's hair. Herbert's mother, who was blind, could feel the textures of the artwork, adding an emotional layer to this tribute. As someone who recently lost her mother, I felt deeply moved by this living homage to the ones who raised us.

Herbert’s work as an artist and hairstylist celebrates individuality and resilience.

Through her unique approach, she not only transforms hair into art but also honors the stories and identities of those she connects with.

Her art is a powerful celebration of the human experience, one strand at a time.

To learn more about Lillian Herbert's art and hairstyling, you can reach her at lillianherbert1976@gmail.com or 937-301-8232.

She can be found at her salon at 4710 E. Warner Road, Phoenix/Ahwatukee.

