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TRADE BEADS

COLORFUL LINK

BY KATHERINE RAFF

he simple glass bead, stringing its way through the life of the North American Indian, has become an anthropological and historical link with the past. Manufactured in Europe and brought to North America by white men, glass beads were absorbed into the neolithic culture of the Indian. Thus they came to represent the last of the old way of life, as well as the beginning of the contact period with the white man's civilization.

Beads were not, of course, the only articles offered to the Indians. The term "trade goods" is used loosely to describe all of the guns, kettles, blankets, buttons, combs, looking glasses and other items given to the Indians by white men in exchange for fur pelts, safety or good will. But beads were the most popular trade item and, although the Indians' preferences for other articles varied throughout the four centuries of contact, their desire for beads remained constant. Columbus, Captain Cook and Lewis and Clark all carried glass beads; they would not have considered setting out without them. In fact, beads were used so prolifically, that they are still being found in fairly large numbers, particularly along the Columbia River and on the West Coast of Vancouver Island.

Tastes varied in the style of beads from one tribe to another and from one year to the next. Efforts to supply the most popular type of beads led to the manufacturer of an almost limitless variety, thus encouraging faddism amongst the Indians, who accepted only what they wanted once they learned the basic economics involved. They also learned quickly to place high prices on animal pelts which were often slaughtered—in the case of the sea otter, nearly to extinction—to satisfy the white man's acquisitive nature. By the 18th century, large fur trading companies and entrepreneurs were buying beads in large quantity by the barrelful, by weight or by strung length.

All trade beads, from the large, translucent, faceted "chief beads" described by Lewis and Clark, to flowered beads formed from inlays of glass tubing, to tiny seed beads less than 1/32" in diameter, have a common origin in the glass factories of Europe, particularly from near Venice at Murano. The method of manufacture has changed little during the history of beadmaking.

The simplest beads are made by extending a bubble of molten glass into a long, thin tube, until it has cooled to the point of no longer being tractable. This process requires two men pulling in opposite directions. When the tube has cooled, it is broken into short lengths. The addition of another color layer to the bubble of molten glass produces a bead with two colors, one over the other. Attaching rods of another color to the molten bubble produces stripes, and the tube can be twisted, as well, before it has cooled. Another bead-making method is to twist a fine thread of molten glass around a wire, which is later pulled out. These simple methods allow for almost unlimited variety and elaboration.

While beads were being exported for North American Indian trading, they were also being sent to other parts of the world, notably Africa. Beads which are erroneously thought to be African in origin are today being exported to the United States from Africa. They are no different from the beads brought to North America three centuries ago by explorers and fur traders. Certain beads have come to be called "Russian" beads because they were sent from Europe to the Russian-American Company (a fur trading company based on Kodiak Island in the late 18th century) and thence found their way into the hands of the West Coast Indians. Similarly, "China" beads are probably beads of European origin stored for periods of time in warehouses in



The Yakima Indian headdress pictured above is on display at the Univer sity of European-made trade beads which are joined by long sections of den talium.

China by the British, who maintained large mercantile firms in the Orient.

While fur-bearing animals were being slaughtered, the number of Indians themselves was also decreasing, due in part to the advanced methods of killing one another introduced by the white man, along with his diseases. A vast amount of material wealth was thus being acquired by some Indians. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, certain large blue or amber faceted beads fell into use as currency by the tribes of the North Coast of Vancouver Island and were used as part of an ostentatious display of wealth at potlatches.

Names have been given to trade beads which are helpful to collectors but not always etymologically accurate. Thus, the "Russian" and "China" beads already mentioned will probably continue to be called by those names, regardless of origin. Other beads have also become known by distinguishing names: Cornaline d'Aleppo, a two-colored bead which has a reddish-brown exterior and a translucent dark green interior, derived its name from the Near East city of Aleppo, which was tied to Italy commercially in the 19th century. Chevron, one of the earliest beads manufactured (in use before 1500 and still being manufactured in the 20th century), is also called the "star" or "paternoster". The chevron is made of concentric layers of colored glass, the interior layers drawn into the shape of a star when viewed from the end. Other names, such as bugle and flowered, are equally imprecise, of value only to the collector who has no other reliable terminology.

History books often refer to trade beads synonymously as "wampum". Wampum was a bead made by East Coast Indians from the shell of the quahog, a large clam. Wampum beads were

sity of Washington's Burke Museum. The headdress is composed of talium. Chinese coins are used to decorate the edges. Photo by Joy Spurr

scarce because they were difficult to make — they had to be drilled and turned and were often broken in the process. Although they were highly valued, they were not, contrary to popular belief, used as currency. They lost all value after some enterprising Dutch settlers began manufacturing them in large quantity, using lathes, and glutted the market. Although not of European origin, the Dutch-made wampum served the same purpose as trade beads. And, not unlike modern times, the novelty was carried a step further by some early settlers who attempted to imitate wampum in glass beads. (Locally, a flat disk-shaped shell bead used by the plateau tribes of the Columbia in Eastern Washington was also called wampum, and it, also, was not used as currency.)

North American Indians had been using beads for personal adornment for thousands of years before the appearance of the white man, employing materials such as stone, shell or bone. Archaeological evidence shows that beads were actively traded among Indians in pre-contact times; beads have been found made of materials which were available only a great distance from the discovery site.

A popular early bead material, the dentalium shell, continued in use after the introduction of glass trade beads and was commonly used together with the trade beads. Dentalium, a long $(1\frac{1}{2}"$ average), very thin, slightly tapered and curved cylindrical shell, is a crustacean found mainly off the coast of Vancouver Island. It, too, is distinguished by European attempts to approximate it in glass. In addition to beads and dentalia, Indian costumes occasionally included thimbles, which were used as small bells, coins (particularly pierced Chinese coins), and buttons—all trade goods. Tiny glass seed beads by the thousands were painstakingly sewn into patterned bags and clothing.

Although trade beads are potentially of great value to the archaeologist, they are nearly useless without supporting information such as dates and documents, because they were manufactured over such a long period of time without enough technical variance to allow an identification by period. A classification system recently proposed by Kenneth E. and Martha Ann Kidd, Canadian' archaeologists, promises to aid in describing types of beads. The system is based on the processes of manufacture and physical characteristics, such as shape, size, color, translucency and opacity. But even with this information, the archaeological value of beads is questionable without a regional chronology of dated beads from known sites. For this to happen in the Northwest would require the unlikely event of a new discovery of a group of caches (burial sites, campsites, etc.) which can be definitely documented by such evidence as dated material from fur trading companies or references by Lewis and Clark. In such caches, the dates of the beads would be known, and subsequently similar beads in other similar caches could be dated. Without this typological control, however, there is little way of learning definite dates. And thus trade beads continue to be more ornamental than practical.



NYHE THEFT PAST



Indeed, if the example of civilized life did not completely vindicate their choice, we might wonder at their infatuated attachment to a bauble in itself so worthless. Yet these beads are, perhaps, quite as reasonable objects of research as the precious metals, since they are at once beautiful ornaments for the person and the great circulating medium of trade with all the nations on the Columbia. Meriwether Lewis

(COLOUR)

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