

Bead-Making

In Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam

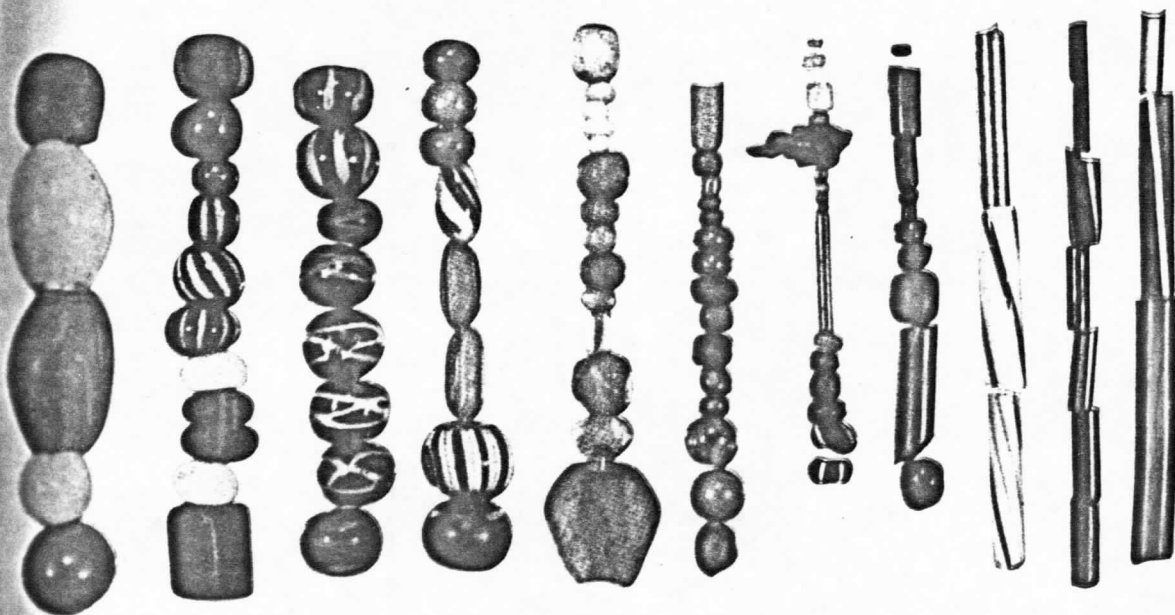
By W. G. N. VAN DER SLEEN

MOST AMERICANS KNOW that in the middle of the seventeenth century the Indians sold Manhattan Island to Peter Stuyvesant, the Dutch governor, for a few commonplace trinkets, including two strings of blue beads. But few people are interested in what kind of beads these must have been! I found the answer to this question in the beautiful forest planted 350 years ago in what are now choice residential towns, Hilversum and Bussum, some twenty miles from Amsterdam. This find answered so many other questions too that I think it worthwhile to publish here the result of my investigations. And as it may be interesting to know how I came to my conclusions, I will tell you the whole history as it happened.

At the end of the sixteenth century Amsterdam was no longer a small fishing village, but was growing fast and becoming a busy, rich town. Large houses had to be built for the merchants who sent out ships under the flag of the Dutch East India Company and saw them come back with the riches of the Far East. Amsterdam was not built on rock, however, but on peat—moist, grassy land where heavy objects used to sink, not quite in bottomless depths, but in moors and swamps. Houses were built on wooden poles or stilts, or sand had to be brought in to make streets along the canals. This sand was shipped from the low hills in an area east of the city. The VIP's of those days—Tromp, our famous admiral, Hooft the historian, Huygens the physicist, Rembrandt the painter, Vondel the poet—nearly all the great figures of our Golden Age—wanted to build hunting lodges or summer houses for their wives and children in the healthy surroundings of the heather and pinewoods where the sand had come from. But it is difficult to make a nice garden in sand, and so very soon the ships that at first had come empty to fetch sand from the hills were used to bring the waste and refuse of the town, which was already known to be good fertilizer. But, sad to say, the Dutch, if they want to get rid of something, just throw it in the canal! So with the mud from the canals,

which was good fertilizer, there came into the suburban gardens and the forest lanes everything that a rich mediaeval town wanted to get rid of—bits of Chinese porcelain, broken jugs of German stoneware, pipe stems and pipe bowls—some of these so small that it seems they must have been used when tobacco was very scarce and expensive. All these things can be dated. We have tobacco pipes made in 1610, while the last of the small ones were made around 1650. Stoneware is often dated, showing the dates 1630 or 1640 around the Amsterdam coat of arms. Some young scientists found broken and malformed glass beads and a lot of small glass tubes of all colors, the material which beads are made from. They came to me, as I had just published some notes about beads from South Africa and from the Indian Ocean, and that is how I found a new field of investigation right outside my door.

It is a well known fact that glass, in the form of bottles, wine glasses, beer glasses, etc., was manufactured in the Netherlands as early as the sixteenth century in Middelburg and later in many other towns. But museums and private collections do not show the specialties of a few factories, particularly in Amsterdam, that is, glass beads. They are mentioned, however, in Professor F. W. Hudig's book, *Das Glas* (Vienna, 1923), where he points out that Hendrik Carelsz and Soop made what was called *paternosterwerke*, meaning differently colored beads used, for example, for rosaries, but perhaps more specially for trade and barter with uncivilized peoples. Happily, such beads and the refuse from their manufacture were found not only near Hilversum but also around Hoorn, Velzen, Haarlem and many old towns and, last but not least, in the heart of Amsterdam. Here, in excavating for foundations of new buildings at Keizergracht 292, not only were remains of glass from bead manufacture found but even part of furnaces! Quantities of old beads were found, wherever polders dried out and where vegetable gardens required cultivation



(COLOUR)

Glass beads and the tubes from which they are made, all actual size, collected from fields in 's Graveland, near Naarden-Bussum, southeast of Amsterdam. First row on left shows large wound beads in blue and white, probably the oldest of the series. Second row has five wound beads—the first a pentagonal cylinder, an old form—then six drawn beads with colored stripes, which may show Venetian influence. In third row are wound, handmade, beads with wavy lines and stripes. Fourth row has drawn beads of different types; fifth row, handmade wound beads, including pentagons. Remaining five rows are composed of drawn beads and tubes, mostly striped.

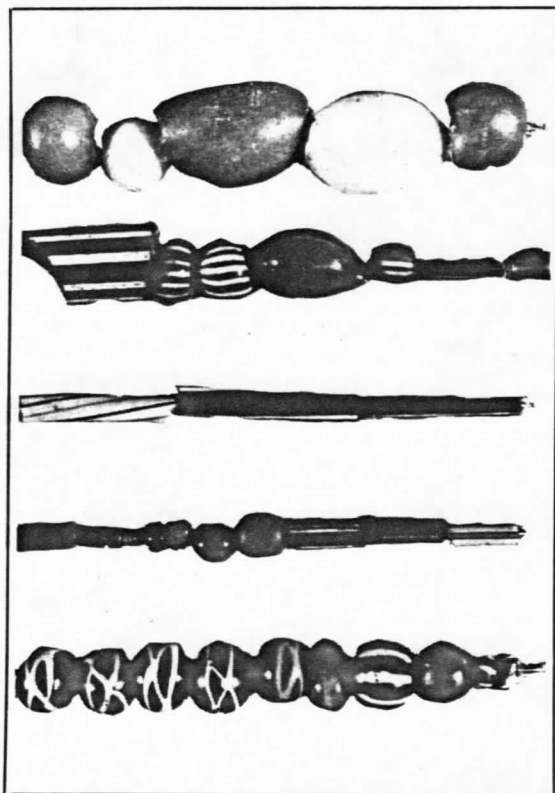
—around Amsterdam one farmer, during forty years' work, collected several hundred beads and hundreds of small, short tubes in all colors, remnants of bead manufacture. A very interesting collection was gathered on one of our North Sea islands, Ameland. Every Dutch child knows that many an old captain of our merchant fleet, when he retired from active service, built a small house on the island where he was born. In the gardens and vicinity of these "Commanders' houses" some hundred old beads were gathered and can now be seen in the Fries Museum at Leeuwarden.

When I first published facts about the Amsterdam beads in *Panorama* (March 1960), a Dutch periodical, I received an interesting response from one of the Antilles, the small island of St. Eustatius. There hundreds of old blue glass beads have been found in a spot where in the eighteenth century stood warehouses of the Dutch West India Company. These warehouses were destroyed by the sea, but the beads still show the place where they stood. Blue beads of rather large size, often nearly an inch long, oval or pentagonal cylinders, these are exactly the same as those often found in Holland where the refuse of Amsterdam was used as fertilizer, or where people probably wore them themselves.

But you need not come so far to find collections of

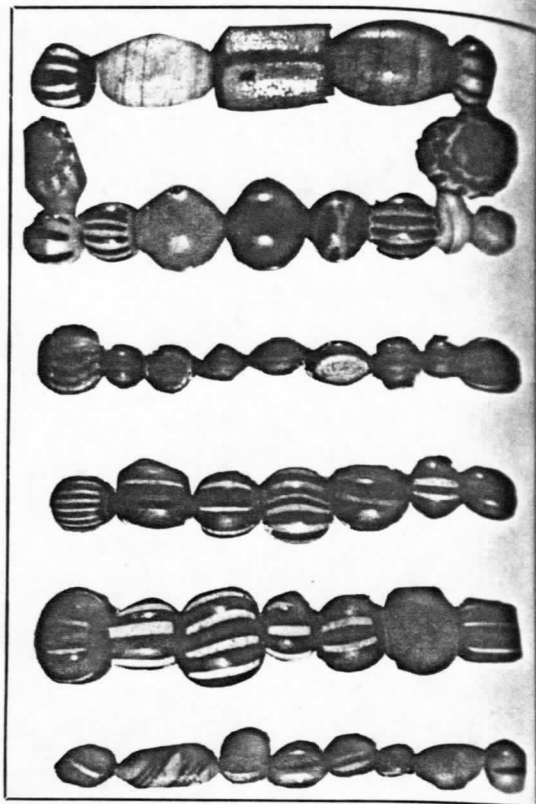
old Dutch beads. Visit some day the Fort Stanwix Museum at Rome, New York, or the National Museum in Toronto—they have beads which came from Indian graves. And that is what they were made for, for trade or barter with the Indians. The Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, in New York has published *Beads and Beadwork*, by W. C. Orchard. On page 85 the reader will find a photograph of the pentagonal cylinders of St. Eustatius, but I do not think they were brought there by Columbus himself but somewhat later by the Dutch. Figure 84 of the same book shows more beads that may be Dutch (except the upper row). The beads in color plate XIII are certainly not Dutch but most probably of Czechoslovakian make from Gablonz, while the famous star, or chevron, or Rosetta beads could be Venetian as well as Dutch. Even small splinters of these beads might tell us where they came from, for the Venetian beads are nearly always made of soda glass, while the Amsterdam factory worked with wood ash and so made potash glass. Some Amsterdam beads contain up to twenty-three per cent of potash as K_2O .

Probably the oldest beads of the Amsterdam series were large globular, oval and pentagonal cylinders. As early as 1613, however, Mr. Soop writes in a petition to the Mayor of Amsterdam that with immense cost



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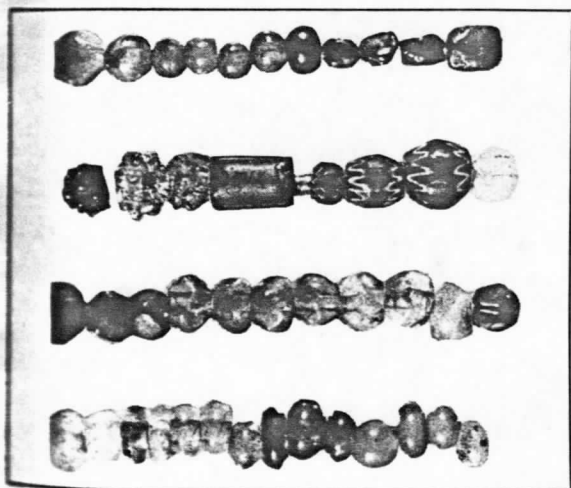
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(Opposite page) Amsterdam beads. 1. Top and bottom rows: handmade wound beads, quite primitive. The rest are drawn beads and tubes. 2. First bead at left in top row is a pentagonal cylinder; the rest are drawn beads except first four beads in fourth row, which are pentagon beads, and bottom row. 3. Beads found in market gardens near Amsterdam. The three middle beads in the two upper rows are older, wound beads; the rest are drawn beads of Venetian style. 4. Some striped beads and tubes.

(Below) Beads from Indonesian island of Flores, described by H. C. Beck (*Archaeologia* 77 [1928]) as Romano-Egyptian, but all made in Amsterdam except carnelian beads in first row. In second row: three mulberry beads, one gilt glass bead and three chevron beads; in third, pentagon beads of clear, amber or brown glass; in fourth, glass oblates, clear, amber or blue.



Pipes and pipe bowls, of types known to have been made between 1610 and 1650, found in the same fields as the Amsterdam beads.

Bead-Making continued

he has succeeded in bringing to Amsterdam several of the best glass masters from the Venetian factories with all their tools and implements, and that for many years he has employed eighty families in his factory. These Venetian artisans must have changed the entire production, for while the first beads are just blue and white and a few wound brown beads, the later beads are mostly drawn in beautiful colors, striped, and with much more intricate patterns than the old ones.

The Amsterdam beads brought me still another surprise. When I began my study of glass beads, only one study was available—"Classification and Nomenclature of Beads and Pendants," by Horace C. Beck (*Archaeologia* 77 [1928]). Beck gives a lot of figures showing beads and where they came from. So, when one day I received a large packet of beads from the Indonesian isle of Flores, containing some extraordinary forms, I tried to find them in Beck's book. And there they were: chevron beads, mulberry beads, twisted

square beads, which I prefer to call pentagon beads, and gilt glass beads. Beck calls all four types Romano-Egyptian. Does that not sound improbable? Sir Mortimer Wheeler, excavating at Arikamedu near Pondicherry in India, called the place an Indian-Roman trading station. Then why should not the traders of the Indian Ocean have brought these beautiful glass beads another four thousand miles farther east? I was just about to believe it, when a large quantity of Amsterdam beads reached my desk—and here were my four extraordinary beads from Flores, all made in Amsterdam in the seventeenth century!

It certainly is no astonishing fact that Amsterdam beads came quite early to the Indonesian archipelago. I have found them on Bali, Java and Sumatra as well as on Flores and Timor. And I will be very glad to hear about other finds, wherever they may be.

THE AUTHOR, a Doctor of Chemistry (Amsterdam), is a man of broad interests and has traveled extensively in most parts of the world. Since 1951 his special interest has been the study of ancient glass beads, on which he has written a book and several articles.