

Chapter One



Beads in Our Time

Given the early hominid's love affair with the bead, you might reasonably conclude that *my* beading instincts—the ones that provoked me to buy a bundle of fabulous Swarovski crystals in lieu of making my credit card payment—are the result of 40 millennia of evolution, as much a product of my DNA as my hair color (before it was highlighted, that is). Whether this is in fact true remains to be seen, but it certainly sounds adequately scientific to hold water in the event my spouse questions my “excessive” beading-related purchases. In case you find yourself being cross-examined about your beading, this chapter contains enough historical information to snow any jury.

The Fashion-Conscious Neanderthal

Beads have existed for at least 40,000 years—possibly 100,000 or more. Heck, they're almost as old as Dick Clark! Some early examples of beads, composed of grooved teeth and bones, were discovered in France, thus demonstrating that the French have *always* been fashion forward. In ensuing eons, beads took prehistoric civilization by storm, sweeping beyond the borders of Europe to such diverse regions as Australia, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, each wee ornament reflecting its wearer's social circumstances and knack for accessorizing.

As human-ish types matured from hunting and gathering to farming and settling, they discovered that not having to travel so much for work meant they had more time for hobbies, like beading. Moreover, this new-and-improved societal model allowed these knuckle-draggers to turn their attention from such mundane matters as outwitting carnivores in order to survive to a far more critical issue: fashion.

Suddenly, using teeth and bones as beads was *so* last era, not to mention sort of creepy. Everyone who was anyone started wearing jewelry composed of shells and semi-precious stones such as carnelian, lapis lazuli, agate, turquoise, serpentine, and amber.

Glass Warfare

Look, no one's saying that the beads worn by early hominids weren't pretty and all. It's just that, well, not everyone could afford them. Enter the Harappan Civilization in the Indus Valley (that's Pakistan and western India to you and me) and the Egyptians. Independently from each other, these crafty folks developed and mass-produced a material called *faience* circa 4000 BC. Craftsmen used this finely glazed, quartz-based ceramic material, now seen as a forerunner to glass, to simulate precious stones such as turquoise and lapis. Even better fakes became available with the advent of actual glass some 1,700 years later; by 1350 BC, the glassmaking process having been perfected, even the humblest of folk boasted a bit of bling.

Upon Egypt's decline, which coincided with the fall of the New Kingdom in 1085 BC, the seafaring Phoenicians—who had long traded Egypt's beads abroad—cut out the middleman by leaping into the glassmaking fray themselves. They are credited with discovering a technique that yielded transparent, rather than opaque, glass, a development that eyeglass wearers of today particularly appreciate. When Phoenicia went the way of Egypt, Rome became the flat world's glassmaking hub. Indeed, thanks to advances in techniques and technology, outposts of the Roman Empire—namely, the areas now known as Syria, Egypt, Italy, Switzerland, the Rhineland, France, and England—produced more glass beads in the first century AD than had been turned out in all previous 500 years.

The Roman Empire might have won the glassmaking games in the short term, but India, which began manufacturing fake gemstones from glass as early as the fourth century BC, proved victorious over the long haul. One port town, Arikamedu, enjoyed nearly uninterrupted bead production until the 1600s AD. And these beads weren't sold just locally; by the first century AD, beads manufactured in India had migrated as far as Taiwan, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

Unfortunately, like many good things—baths come to mind—beading in Europe fell out of favor among the rank and file citizenry after the fall of Rome in AD 476 (although archaeological evidence does suggest that beading remained a cottage industry during the Middle Ages). No doubt, this decline was in part because the Catholic Church deemed it impious—nay, *flamboyant*—to wear beads, although beads, in the form of rosaries, were permitted for prayer and meditation.

Interestingly, even as Catholic leaders snubbed beads, followers of Islam, who inhabited the desert lands that envelop the Red Sea, heartily embraced them. Indeed, the Koran describes stars as “beads of the sky.” Between AD 700 and AD 1400, Muslims wore strands of prayer beads, and also wore beads to convey their social status. Islamic beads from this period bear distinctive decorations resulting from such techniques as trailing, feathering, dragging, and folding. Unfortunately, the AD 1401 invasion of the Mongols, coupled with the fall of Constantinople in 1453, put the kibosh on the creation of these Islamic beads.

Venice II Society

Eventually, Catholic Church officials, supported by the aristocracy, decided flamboyance wasn't so bad after all—which may at least partially explain how it came to pass that glassmaking was revived in Europe circa AD 1200, in Venice. A more powerful driver, however, was the dramatic increase in merchant trade. Simply put, small and shiny as they were, beads made great currency—exchangeable for such goodies as silk, porcelain, spices, ivory, and pelts. (Beads were also traded for slaves, but because that is evil and depressing, I shan't discuss it further.)

The Venetians weren't messing around. Master craftsmen and their assistants put in 12-hour shifts, day and night, dousing their furnaces only for repairs and holidays. Through experimentation, Venetian glassmakers hit upon just the right formula of silica, salts, lime, and other minerals to make glass of varying types and colors, as well as a technique to strengthen it. To protect Venice proper from the fire hazards posed by their furnaces, and to ensure that their trade secrets remained safe, Venetian glassmakers relocated their factories across the bog to the island of Murano. Vigilante-style governance by the Committee of Ten, charged with policing the glassmakers, further protected the trade; thanks to them, anyone who revealed glassmaking secrets to outsiders got whacked.

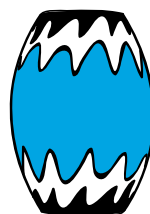
Although some Venetian glassmakers specialized in plates, others in vases, yada yada yada, beads were the cash crop. The colorful millefiori and chevron beads were especially prized. By 1606, the greater Venice metropolitan area boasted more than 250 bead producers. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, these craftsmen churned out between 175,000 and 280,000 pounds of beads each year—comparable to *seven* Kirstie Alleys (pre-Jenny Craig)—all bound for locales near and far. Eager to get their piece of the pie, bead-making enterprises ramped up across Europe, most notably in Bohemia and the Netherlands.

A Snitch in Time

Because the Committee of Ten has long since dissolved, I feel I can safely inform you that Venetian glassmakers typically manufactured beads using one of two techniques: the wound lampwork technique; or the drawn method. Wound lampwork involved torching glass cane—sticks of glass that look like those old-fashioned candy sticks that were really pretty but didn't always taste all that great—until it went molten, and then wrapping the molten glass around a metal rod to form a shape. Several layers of glass in varying colors were often used, all to create one single freaking bead. The more efficient—albeit less artful—technique was the drawn method, which involved blowing molten glass into a bubble, attaching metal plates to the bubble, and then pulling in opposite directions to create a hollow cane. (Amazingly, skilled glassmakers could create canes upward of 300 feet long—that's a football field to you and me.) Once the cane hardened, it could then be sliced and diced into a gazillion little beads.



An example of a millefiori bead.



Chevron beads like this one were also prized.

Out of Africa

Well before European traders docked in Africa, even before the arrival of the Phoenicians and then the Arabs, African cultures engaged in their own form of bead making. Archaeologists estimate that the earliest known examples of African beads—disk-shaped and composed of ostrich eggshells—date back some 12,000 years. By the fourth century AD, glass beads, generally considered the most common feature of traditional African adornment, had found their way to the continent. When the Portuguese arrived in the 15th and 16th centuries, and the Dutch, British, French, Belgians, and Germans thereafter, they continued to supply beads to an existing market. And a thriving market it was—some African kings donned beaded regalia that was so heavy, they needed helpers to support them when moving about. Sort of like Liberace.

Code Breaker

For members of many African tribes, beads were—and, in many cases, remain—more than just ornaments or status symbols. They were, you might say, among the earliest forms of instant messaging. Take the Zulus of South Africa. The types and colors of beads they wore, the patterns and shapes in which those beads were presented, and the background upon which they appeared conveyed to others the wearer's marital or dating status, an emotion the wearer was feeling, details of a past event, even love letters. Just to confuse things, the use of certain colors meant that the *opposite* of what you read in the pattern was true—think passive-aggressive beading.

Abacus Cadabucus

Those early peoples who, like me, ran into trouble when dealing with numbers higher than 20—i.e., when they ran out of fingers and toes to count on—welcomed the invention of the abacus with open arms. Developed by the Chinese circa 1200, abacuses—or is it abaci?—featured beads strung on wires, which themselves were mounted on a rectangular frame. Each bead on the abacus might represent a one, a five, a ten, or what have you, making the process of calculating large numbers a breeze. Not surprisingly, abacuses in various forms became all the rage wherever people counted, added, subtracted, or divided. Indeed, the abacus didn't fall out of favor until the 20th century, when students discovered that electronic calculators tend to be quieter, and therefore more suitable for cheating.

East of Beadin'

The far east—namely, China, Korea, and Japan—had its own beading tradition, distinct and independent from the one that developed in the west. The oldest beads found in the region, which were made from the bones of deer toes and unearthed in a cave in Turobong, Korea, date back 20,000 years. Early examples of Chinese beads, dated at 16,000 BC, are made from stone, with subsequent styles using ostrich eggshells and even fossilized dinosaur eggshells. Later, Chinese societies prized jade beads, which entered the scene around 1500 BC; indeed, the Chinese written character for “bead” is identical to the character for “jade” (as are the characters in Korean and Japanese). Thanks to the Silk Road routes, China, Korea, and Japan enjoyed a steady supply of this material—along with coral, lapis, glass, turquoise, and amber—over a 1,200 year period beginning in 200 BC. Glass, too, became a favored bead ingredient; during a 300-year period beginning in the fourth century BC, the Chinese created their own glass beads, called “eye beads,” which are still regarded as among the loveliest beads ever fabricated. Not to be overlooked are the peoples of Southeast Asia, who, at least as early as 2500 BC, used beads for such diverse purposes as personal adornment, protection, status symbols, sacred altar objects, even dowries.

New World Beader

Okay, so the European explorers made it a habit to decimate the native populations of the New World either by force or by flu. Case in point: during the period between 1519 and 1533, a measly 24 years, Spanish conquistadors effectively destroyed both the Aztec and the Inca civilizations. I'll give you that. But at least they tried to soften the blow for these doomed people by doling out some Venetian glass beads along the way. I mean, they weren't *totally* insensitive.

Unfortunately, I'm guessing the beads, pretty though they may have been, offered little consolation, especially to the civilizations that called modern-day South and Central America home; after all, it wasn't like these indigenous people had never seen a bead before. Snail-shell

beads unearthed in southern Mexico date back nearly 10,000 years. And the Aztecs produced a variety of gorgeous beads, the most prized of them made of jade and gold, for adornment and ceremonial purposes. Likewise, the tribes that roamed North America had their own beading traditions, having worn and traded beads composed of shell, pearl, bone, teeth, stone, and fossils some 8,000 years before Columbus plowed his *Niña*, *Pinta*, and *Santa Maria* into theretofore unblemished shores. Later, artisans crafted beads from such materials as gold, jade, and turquoise. (Actually, if you want to get all technical about it, glass beads were actually introduced to native North Americans by the Vikings, but they didn't really take root. It wasn't until Columbus's arrival in 1492 that Native Americans embraced the glass bead.)

You're So Money, Baby

The Native Americans along the Eastern seaboard didn't just wear beads; they sometimes used them as cash. Specifically, they used beads made from shells as currency—usually white shells, but sometimes the more rare (and hence more desirable) purple. The Narragansett tribe called these beads *wampumpeag*, for “white shell beads.” European settlers, who couldn't waste precious time pronouncing *wampumpeag*, shortened it to *wampum*.

Because the beads used as wampum were difficult to make, it made for stable currency; indeed, due to shortages in coin money, even the white settlers used wampum as legal tender for a time, both with the native population and among themselves. In fact, students at Harvard, established in 1636, could pay their tuition in wampum. And as white settlers shoved further and further into the interior, they used wampum to buy land, furs, and services.

Eventually, however, the settlers figured out how to mass-produce passable facsimiles of both the white and the purple varieties of wampum, sometimes using other, more abundant materials. By the 1700s, Dutch factories manufactured vast quantities of faux wampum. Thus, the factors that had long kept the wampum economy stable—the time-intensive practice of creating beads from shells and the rarity of the purple shells in particular—were removed. Because settlers could produce wampum at a comparatively blistering rate, the wampum-based economy destabilized, and wampum itself became devalued.

The mass production of wampum disrupted the wampum-based economy, which was bad. On the plus side, the glut of wampum allowed Native Americans to divert the shells used to create it to more artful purposes—namely, belts, bracelets, necklaces, and collars. The belts, in particular, served a dual purpose: 1) to minimize figure flaws, obviously, and 2) to conduct diplomatic

Manhattan Transfer

If you're like me, you were told by well-meaning teachers that Dutch settlers bought Manhattan with a string of beads. As compelling as this story might be—especially to someone like me, who could realistically be suckered into just such a real-estate transaction, especially if the beads were rully rully sparkly—it's short on what Stephen Colbert calls “truthiness.” Recent scholarship indicates that there is no evidence to support the notion that beads were part of the deal.

relations with other tribes. As to the latter, Native Americans wove wampum into designs that communicated declarations of war, offers of peace, or invitations to the next social mixer.

We Got Spirits, Yes We Do!

It wasn't just that beads were pretty, although, of course, they *totally* are. And it wasn't just that they could be used as currency or to communicate with others. Beads have also served a spiritual purpose since the Flintstone era. Our early forebears believed that beads gave hunters an edge over their prey, brought good luck, and could protect them from harm. In fact, the English word "bead" derives from the Anglo-Saxon "bede," meaning "prayer." As modern organized religions took root, beads became instrumental in prayer; if, like two-thirds of the world's population, you call yourself Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, or Christian, you likely employ prayer beads when asking your deity for health, happiness, or prosperity, or for the Chicago Cubs to finally win a freaking pennant.

Lighten Up, It's Just Fashion

As anyone who watches *Project Runway* can tell you, the fashion cycle involves six distinct phases: innovation, rise, acceleration, general acceptance, decline, and obsolescence. During, say, the Upper Paleolithic, the fashion cycle lasted eons. Literally. As civilizations developed and later intertwined through trade, this cycle contracted, but remained hostage to the inherently slow schedule of the hand-craftsman. The Industrial Revolution, however, which occurred in England between 1750 and 1830, put fashion cycles—including those related to jewelry—in hyper drive. Where the creation of jewelry, beaded bags, and the like formerly required the patience, skill, and care of a craftsman, a machine could now do the job in nothing flat. Moreover, the Industrial Revolution also yielded the machinery necessary to automate some aspects of mining, which led to an avalanche of available gemstones. As a result, the burgeoning middle class enjoyed a new-found ability to wear jewelry that went beyond the simple strand of glass beads; indeed, they could wear pieces that looked quite like those belonging to their betters. It's no surprise, then, that to some degree, beads, especially of the glass variety, fell out of favor.

And the Bead Goes On...

Of course, the fashion cycle wasn't dictated only by advancements in the field of manufacturing. The tide of world events also determined the rise and fall of fashion trends. Here are but a few examples:

- ◆ When British Queen Victoria's beloved husband, Albert, succumbed to typhoid fever in 1861, Victoria entered a period of mourning—for 40 *freaking* years. As the queen's personal style shifted to a palette that Spiñal Tap's Nigel Tufnel would undoubtedly describe as "none more black," so, too, did the entire nation's.

The Agony of Effete

Not everyone embraced the changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution. Just as rich people today will gladly spend \$197 for a hand-painted T-shirt in SoHo but would rather be caught dead than wear a \$4.92 Wal-Mart knock-off, the cultural elite of the day viewed mass-produced items with some degree of disdain. It wasn't just that the uniformity of these objects screamed soullessness (which, of course, they did); mainly, it was the simple fact that working types could afford goodies like mass-produced jewelry that made that jewelry anathema to the upper crust. This attitude gave rise to several anti-bling movements, most notably the Aesthetes, who eschewed ostentation on all fronts, as well as the Arts and Crafts movement, also called the Liberty Style, led by John Ruskin and William Morris, which focused on hand-crafted pieces. England's Arts and Crafts movement was closely associated with other movements across the globe: Art Nouveau in France's café society, Jugendstil in Germany, Modernismo in Spain, Secessionstil in Austria, and Stile Liberty in Italy. Indeed, the sensibilities of the Arts and Crafts movement even spread as far as Russia, as evidenced by the magnificent designs of Carl Fabergé, and the United States, where Tiffany's led the charge. Characterized by florid, fanciful motifs that celebrated the mysteries of nature and the sensuality of the female form, the style horrified the mainstream of the day—which, I suspect, was precisely the point.

- ◆ The drab fare of Victoria's day fell out of favor when Victoria's son Edward assumed the throne after her death in 1901. British fashion whiplashed back to a more lively style—one that reflected the nation's prosperity, status, and confidence.
- ◆ The *Titanic*, en route from Southampton to New York, nullified claims of its unsinkability by plowing into a North Atlantic iceberg in 1912, thereby killing Leonardo DiCaprio and 1,499 other passengers. As if that wasn't enough of a buzzkill, some Serbian nut job triggered World War I 2 years later by offing Franz Ferdinand (the archduke of Austro-Hungary, not the band) and his wife as they paraded through Sarajevo. Ensuing years saw some nine million souls extinguished by the war; the onset of the Russian Revolution in 1917; a global influenza epidemic in 1918; and Prohibition in America in 1919. Not surprisingly, fashion turned glum once again, favoring drab palettes.
- ◆ The 1920s brought a respite from the grim realities of war—at least for the victors. Scrimping and saving was *so* last decade; frivolity was the order of the day. Fashion became less formal, less restrictive. Women, who had enjoyed their first taste of freedom while their men were at war, ditched their corsets, bobbed their hair, powdered their noses, and showed a bit of leg. Indeed, hemlines rose scandalously high during this period, stopping just above the knee. This era also witnessed the resurgence of beads—in particular, to embellish garments, and for costume jewelry. The predominant style was Art Deco, which featured a wide range of motifs and drew from such disparate influences as Egyptian, African, Asian, and Native American art.

- ◆ The stock market crash of 1929, which ushered in the Great Depression, put the kibosh on the fun of the Roaring 20s. As the economies of the United States and Europe collapsed, the most sought-after accessory was the caloric.
- ◆ The advent of yet another world war, largely the result of Adolph Hitler's successful marketing of a new and improved brand of evil, drove the urge to adorn yet further underground. Nonetheless, although many of the materials formerly used to manufacture jewelry were requisitioned for the war effort, designers used whatever they had in stock to create new pieces that not only pleased the eye but also commented on world events. A prime example was the House of Cartier's Bird in the Cage and Freed Bird lines, meant as a slam on France's pro-Nazi Vichy regime.
- ◆ Victory by the Allies swung the pendulum of fashion away from the necessarily austere look of the war years to a lusher, more feminine sensibility. Fashion designer Christian Dior launched his "New Look," characterized by longer lengths and fuller skirts. Likewise, jewelers designed fresh, pretty baubles to reflect the peace.
- ◆ In the late 1960s, beads made a triumphant comeback, with handmade beaded necklaces—called *love beads*—symbolizing brotherly love and acceptance, catch words of the Civil Rights era. If you were looking to piss off your parents, love beads—plus, of course, flea-infested hair, bell-bottoms, a tie-dyed shirt, and an ample supply of mind-altering drugs—were the way to go.
- ◆ Fashion swung the opposite direction in the 1980s. The sloppy styles of the late 1960s and 1970s gave way to a "greed is good" sensibility, one that was equal parts *Dynasty*, *Dallas*, *Wall Street*, and Dame Edna Everage.
- ◆ In retaliation of the excesses of the 1980s, the 1990s brought *grunge*, characterized by flannel shirts, dirty jeans, Doc Martens, and greasy hair; a punk revival followed close on its heels. Jewelry styles tended toward the industrial.
- ◆ In the years since 2000, we've seen jewelry styles ranging from chokers to pearls with ribbons for clasps to granny brooches to Liberace-size cocktail rings to chandelier earrings to . . . pretty much *anything*.

All right, look. Here's my point: If the fashion cycle is going to continue to change every 7 seconds (and there's little to indicate that it won't), and if you're going to keep apace (which, genetically speaking, seems to go without saying), you're either going to need to win the lottery or learn how to make some pieces for yourself (preferably both). And that, *mes amies*, is where I come in. In this book, I'll show you how to break the beading code to make your own dazzling pieces. As for the lottery, you're on your own.

Next!

In the next chapter, you'll find out the most critical part of any undertaking: what you get to buy.