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The Cover: These beads are representative of the types now imported from Africa. They are fully described in the Cover Story.

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A SAMPLE BOOK OF VENETIAN BEADS FROM 1704

Richard and Dorothea Casady¹

Among the fascinations and frustrations of collecting trade beads is the difficulty of establishing their age and origin. Many beads appear to look very old because of hard usage or burial in the ground, while very old but cherished beads may look newer. One would think that the journals and account books of traders or the manifests of trading vessels would give clues to the dating of beads, but they rarely indicated more than the poundage, colors, and sometimes place of origin. So to hear about a big book with pages of sample beads made in Venice in the early 1700's was very exciting. This came about in conversation with Catherine White, a collector of note, whose African art collection has been exhibited recently in the Los Angeles County Art Museum and is at this writing on exhibit in the new UCLA art galleries. She mentioned that she had seen such a book in the British Museum, and that it could be seen by scholars on request.

Being in London last June we were fortunate to be able to set aside a day to spend at the museum with the book. A letter to Dr. William Fagg, Deputy Director of the British Museum, brought a prompt reply with permission and an appointment to spend time with the book and other material in the Museum of Man, 6 Burlington Drive, Picadilly.

We found the Big Book of Beads to consist of tray-like pages one inch deep, to which were sewn samples of glass beads made in Venice in the early 1700's. A small card was attached, inscribed: "According to H.J. Braunholtz this book had a label saying that the beads were Venetian, 1704." The beads are all numbered and are displayed across the pages according to style, color, and graduated sizes.

Many of the beads are decorated with gold. (Was this gold or aventurine, which was thought not to be in use before 1850, according to van der Sleen.²)

Informative as the big book is however, it leaves many questions unanswered, perpetuating the age-old mysteries of the glass industry. How long before and after 1704 were these beads in production? This question is harder to answer for beads than for other arts and crafts which have been responsive to shorter periods of popularity. An instance of this has been the eye-bead which has known continuous popularity since the twelfth century B.C.

The Museum generously made available to us another interesting sample case of beads from the Wellcomme collection. It contained beads traded for palm oil, ivory, and gold. There were also many small packets of beads brought back from Africa by travelers and government officials. These last contain tantalizing bits of information such as one with label affixed by the donor inscribed, "Rare graduated currency beads called aggary (aggrey) presented to me by the head chief at Sokoto as of very great value, 1898." This referred to rather large-sized layered blue, white and red beads now frequently called chevron beads. We found a number of similarities with beads we had brought along with us for purposes of identification. A few of the notes we made from the book will give an idea of its value in identifying beads. These are given in the legend accompanying Fig. 1.

Notes and references:

¹ Illustrations were done by Dorothea Casady.

² van der Sleen, W.G.N. 1973. A handbook on beads. Liege, Librairie Halbert: 142 p.

Legend for Fig. 1:

1. A white core covered 1/16 inch thick with a semi-transparent rose-red layer. The ends of the core are also covered. (The same bead with uncovered ends also was seen.)
2. Same bead as No. 1 but with white spots in check-row pattern.
3. Again a rose-red outer layer on a white core, decorated with a spiral floral design formed by combing white and yellow threads laid on alternately. Pink or green dots are added to each white petal.
4. Ball-shaped wound bead of rose-red over white core.
5. Uncolored transparent glass with raised leaf decoration of gold, red and light opaque blue laid on.
6. Four-sided melon bead offered in transparent, opaque white, black, rose-red, purple, turquoise, light blue, dark blue, transparent green, green-black and opalescent white.
7. Small oval beads offered in three sizes, and in the same colors as No. 6, as well as in opaque green and gold lustre.
8. Barrel-shaped wound bead with combed leaf decoration, offered in black, red, blue, green, yellow, white, white with blue decoration, and blue with gold decoration.
- 9a,b,c,d. Round beads offered in same colors as No. 7.
- 10a. Spiral-formed bead offered in copper lustre.
- 10b. Cone-shaped faceted bead offered in copper lustre.
- 10c. Spiral-formed four-sided bead offered in copper lustre.
- 10d. Oval bead offered in copper lustre.
11. Round bead with combed leaf decoration offered in opaque white, clear, black, rose-red, purple, turquoise, opaque light blue, dark blue, transparent green, dark green and opalescent white.

12. Long, faceted bead offered in several sizes and colors: black, milk-white, opaque light blue, black and white painted with gold, and black only, painted with gold.
13. Milky-white tubular bead with raised decoration offered in several pastel colors.
14. Large tubular bead constructed of eight-layer blue chevron millefiore over a black core. Chevron millefiore placed in 3 alternating rows with striped rod in between.
15. Black bead, barrel-shaped and flattened on 2 sides, each one decorated with combed wreath design of white.
16. Ball-shaped wound black bead decorated with alternating combed design in white with broad areas of aventurine.

(It appears from this report that aventurine was used as a substitute for gold-foil in Venetian beads prior to 1850, contra to van der Sleen. — The Editor)

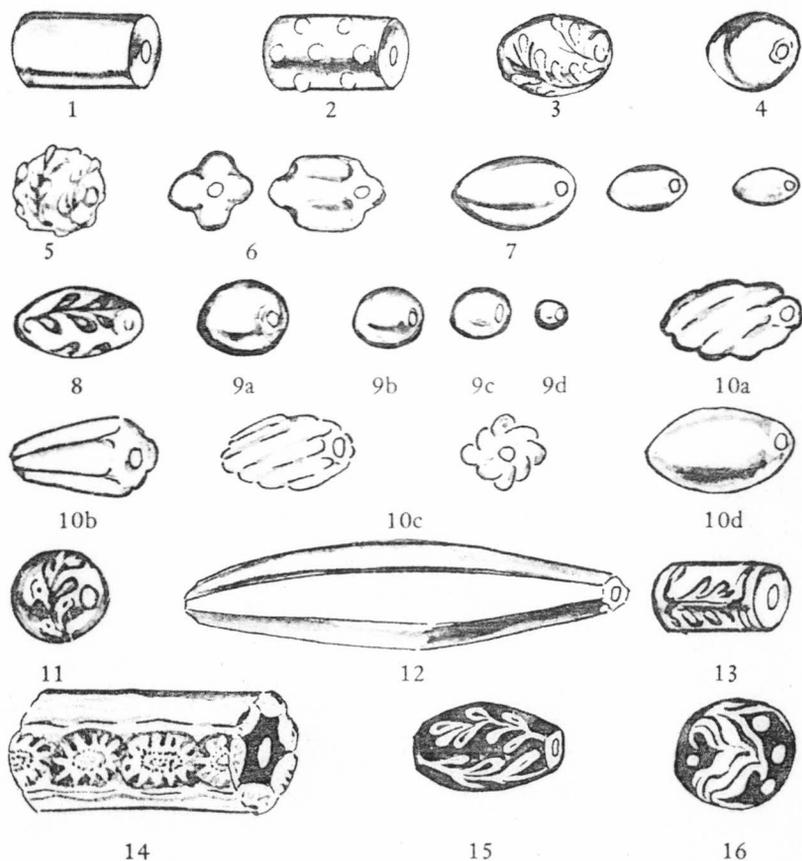


Fig. 1 Venetian glass beads from a 1704 sample book, shown approximate size.