

Seneca Iroquois Beads

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Part II: Glass Trade Beads

By Charles Wray

(Ed. note: Charles Wray, Fellow of the Rochester Museum and Science Center and co-donor of the Museum's Rock Foundation Collection of important Iroquois material, continues our series on Iroquois artifacts.

When Columbus set sail for India and accidentally found the New World in 1492, Murano, Italy, was the glass center of the world. Many of these glass laborers were prisoners conscripted for the job with the promise of future freedom. This monopoly in glass manufacture lasted for several generations with families jealously guarding secret formulas and techniques.

Other areas in the world, including Jamestown, Virginia, tried vainly to compete in making glass beads for the Indian trade. After futile attempts, most gave it up.

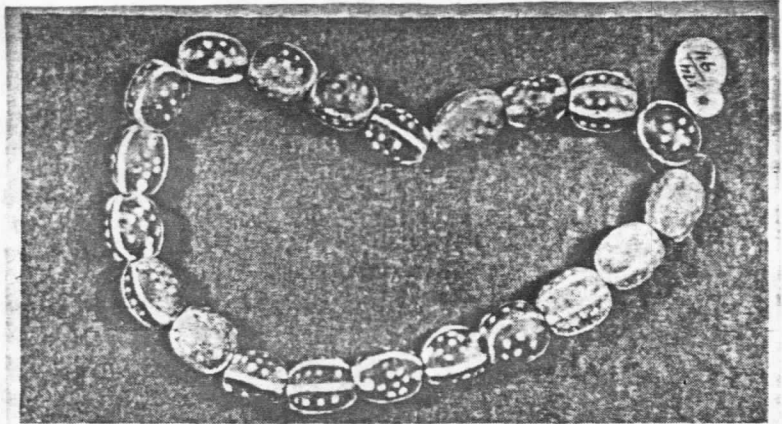
By the early 1600's, the Dutch were trading all over the world and they wanted to increase profits by setting up their own glass factories. They did this by enticing some of the Italian craftsmen, by hook or crook, to come to Holland and help the Dutch get started in the area around Amsterdam. These Dutch beads, along with those from Murano, were traded all over the world, especially in the New World, the Dutch East Indies, and Africa.

After the Dutch success, glass manufacturing spread to China and Czechoslovakia. (Most of these areas still are actively producing glass today).

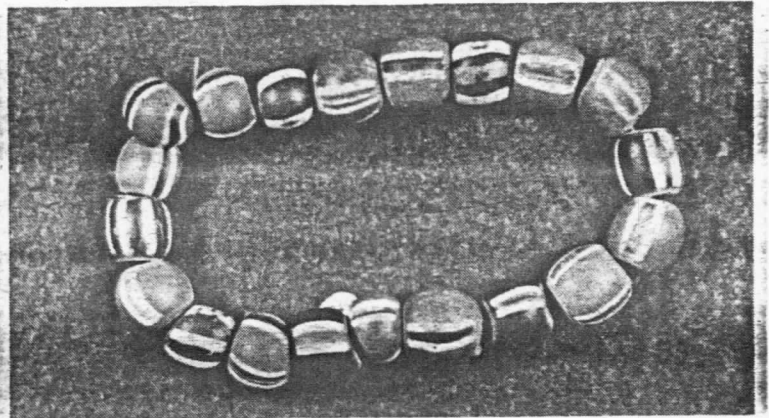
Early Manufacturing Methods

Early glass beads were made basically by two different manufacturing techniques.

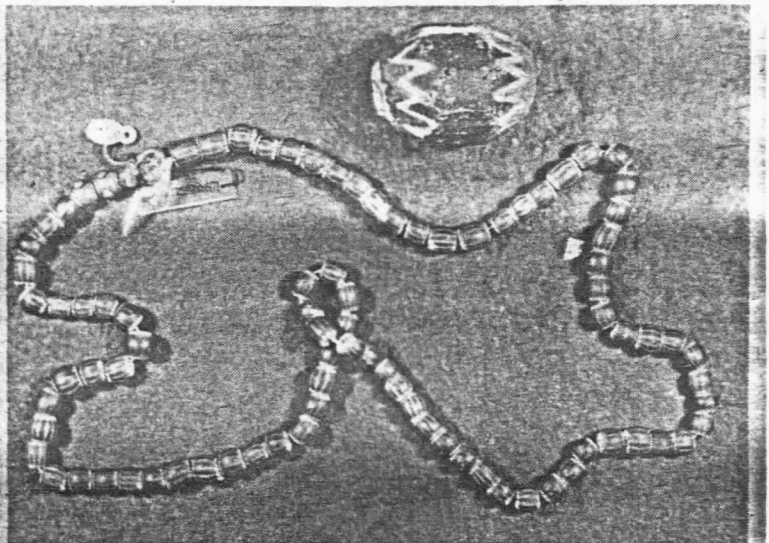
The most common was the cane method. Rods or canes of different colored glass were fused together to make layered or striped beads in the glass blower's furnace. A bubble of air was blown into the center of this fused glass blob and then it was stretched out by pulling the blob of glass



HAND-PAINTED CERAMIC trade beads from Livingston Co., N.Y. Early Historic stage, ca. A.D. 1550-1575. (All photographs are from the Rock Foundation Collection at the Rochester Museum and Science Center, Rochester, N.Y.)



POLYCHROME round cane glass trade beads from Ontario Co., N.Y. Early Historic stage, ca. A.D. 1590-1615.



CHEVRON or "star" glass trade bead necklace with giant chevron bead from Livingston Co., N.Y. Early Historic stage, ca. A.D. 1590-1615.

into a long thin tube. These tubes were then broken or cut into sections to make tubular beads of the desired length. If round beads were required, the still hot tubular beads were tumbled in a drum of sawdust to make them round.

The second method of manufacture was to wind a syrupy string of molten glass around an iron nail rod; the size of the bead's hole being determined by the diameter of the nail rod and the size of the bead by the number of windings of glass around the rod. The shape of these beads could be altered by pressing in an iron mold or by hand-shaping them with a flat tool. These beads are known as supialume or more picturesquely as wire-wound beads.

The final product of both these different methods of manufacture could be enhanced by skilled craftsmen by altering their shape during manufacturing or by hand painting or appliqueing a design in glass and by pressing in colored bits of glass. This last method produced a design called a "flush-eye" because of its resemblance to an eye.

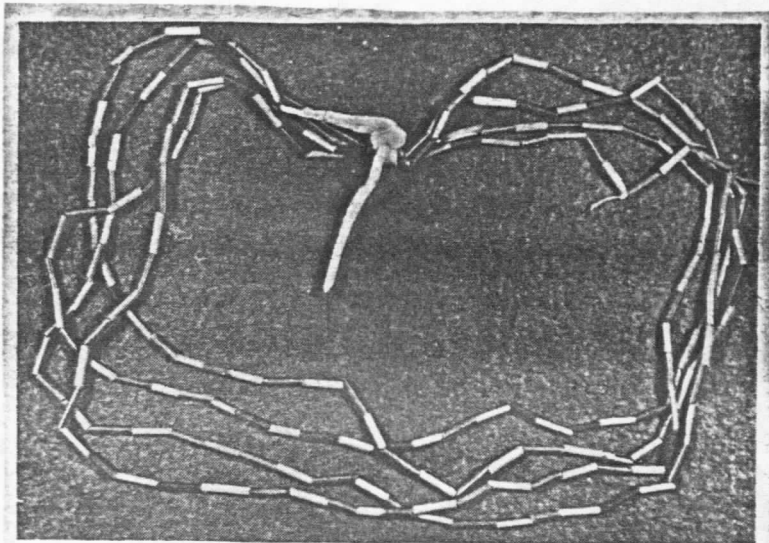
The variety of bead design was nearly endless. Styles and fads were numerous and changed constantly even as they do today.

Every boat setting out from European ports to explore or trade with primitive people around the world carried its cargo of trade goods -- beads, axes, knives, and blankets, etc. Beads became the most popular trade item. They were easy to store and transport, and were hungrily snapped up by primitive people around the world.

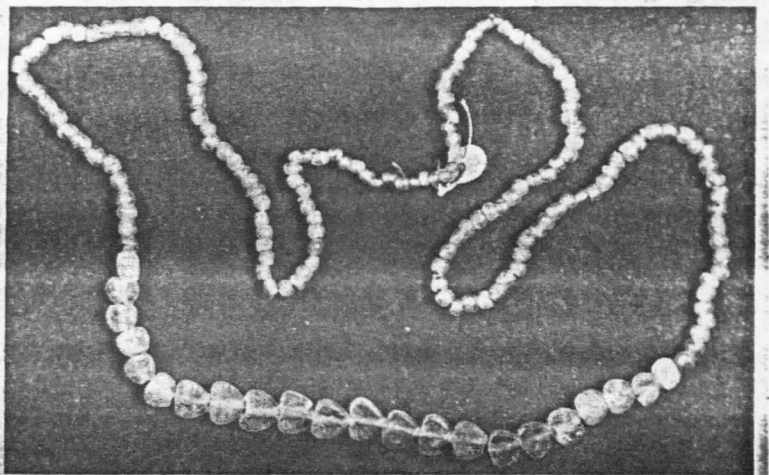
New World Arrival

Atlantic Coast Indians were first to receive these valued and pretty beads which were exchanged for food and animal furs. These coastal Indians in turn, acting as middle men, traded a few beads to the Indians further inland at a higher price for more pelts to trade to the Europeans.

Between 1525 and 1550, the first few glass beads had been traded from hand to hand and finally reached the Seneca in Western New York State. Imagine the excitement of everyone in a village when the first brightly colored glass beads were proudly displayed by a returning warrior, hunter, or traveler.



RED AND BLUE TUBULAR glass cane beads from Livingston Co., N.Y. Middle Historic stage, ca. A.D. 1645-1660.



YELLOW GLASS "corn" cane bead necklace from Livingston Co., N.Y. Middle Historic stage, ca. A.D. 1645-1660.

These first trade beads acquired by the Seneca were so scarce and valuable that the finest necklaces of the time might contain only half a dozen or less of the glass beads strung along with native-made bone or shell beads.

These early trade beads were predominantly of the cane type. Round blue glass beads were the most common. A few exotic varieties were among the early trade beads. These included round white and blue "flush-eyes," large tubular varieties blue, green and red in color and square in cross section, and smaller tubular beads creamy white in color, sometimes with blue stripes.

These first few beads and other trade items completely changed the Senecas' way of life. Diplomacy and wars of conquest were fostered by the desire and need to acquire or control better hunting grounds, and to make a direct contact with the European traders along the Atlantic Coast. Indeed, it may have been this spark that generated the League of the Iroquois and set the course of history in the New World.

Dutch Glass Beads

With the establishment of New Amsterdam in the present Long Island and New York City area, the Dutch became major suppliers of beads. The volume of glass trade beads increased rapidly and

by 1590 to 1600, the Seneca were acquiring thousands of beads, many in the form of complete necklaces. Up to 1600 or 1620, practically all of these beads came from Murano, Italy. By 1640, the Dutch were supplying many of their own beads made near Amsterdam, Holland.

The trade beads of the 1590 to 1620 period contained some of the most beautiful beads acquired by the Seneca. These were cane beads, predominantly round in shape and multicolored.

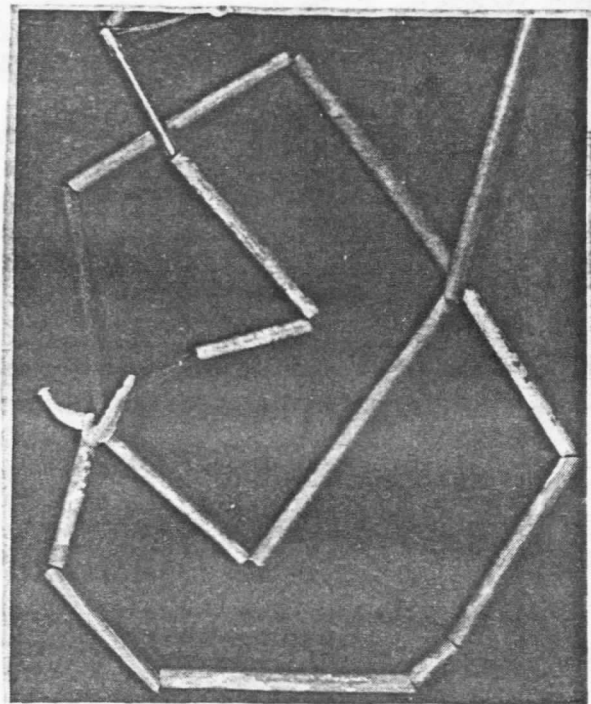
These striped polychrome types included the red, white, and blue chevron or "star" bead—the most fabulous and popular bead ever made. In cross section, the chevron bead is star-shaped in design. The ends of the bead were often ground down to show this star effect. The size of the chevron bead graded from pea to marble size and very rarely was produced in a giant size, two inches in length and diameter.

The chevron or "star bead" was produced and traded to the Seneca from 1590 to 1620 after which it disappeared from trade. It was later traded to Africa in a cheaper version and was produced right up to modern times. The later chevron beads had an opaque white core with five alternating layers of different colored glass. The earlier chevrons had a clear glass core and seven layers of glass.

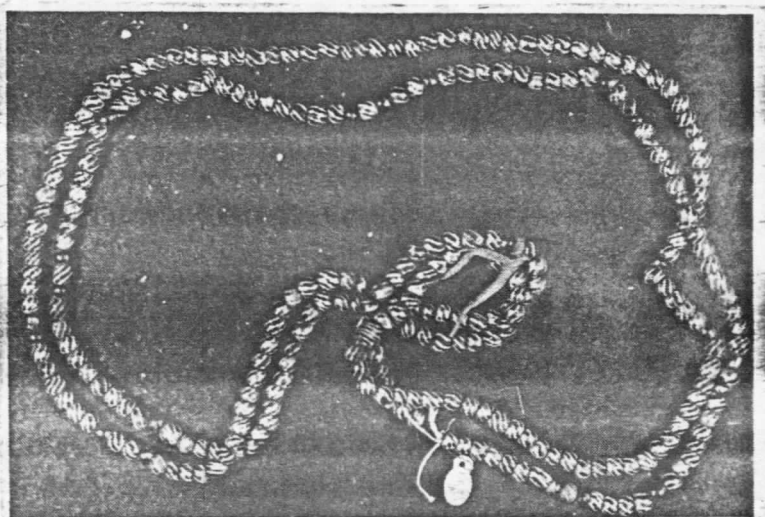
From 1610 to 1675, the Seneca were receiving predominantly tubular cane beads of red and blue color. Polychrome varieties of these tubular beads became increasingly dominant from 1635 to 1670. Many Dutch-made beads were included in this period, especially marble-sized round polychrome cane beads. One fascinating bead of this period was the corn bead, copied from Indian maize by the glass craftsmen and traded back to the Seneca.

Style Changes

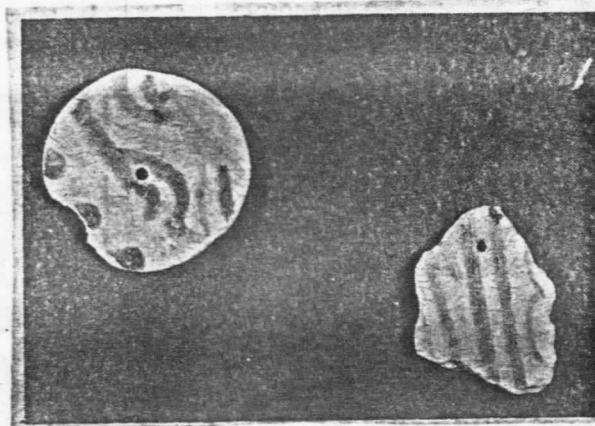
From 1670 to 1700, bead styles and shapes changed again. Tubular cane beads were replaced by round pea-size solid red or black cane beads. Round "seed" beads of the same colors were also arriving in Seneca villages in quantities.



TUBULAR CANE "bugle" glass bead necklace from Monroe Co., N.Y. Middle Historic stage, ca. A.D. 1660-1675.



ROUND CANE WITH SPIRAL STRIPE "Roman" glass bead necklace from Monroe Co., N.Y. Middle Historic stage, ca. A.D. 1660-1675.



DELFT-WARE pendants made from broken Dutch chinaware from Livingston Co., N.Y. Middle Historic stage, ca. A.D. 1645-1660.

After 1700, another drastic change took place. Cane beads, so predominant from 1550 to 1700, were quite suddenly replaced with Dutch-made large marble-size round "wire-wound" beads of amber, white, and blue in color. Many of these were pressed in a mold to give them a faceted appearance.

One of the rarest beads used in the Indian trade was a blue wire-wound bead that had been flattened and hand painted in white paint with a "man in the moon" and star design. A few short necklaces of these beads were acquired by the Seneca around 1720.

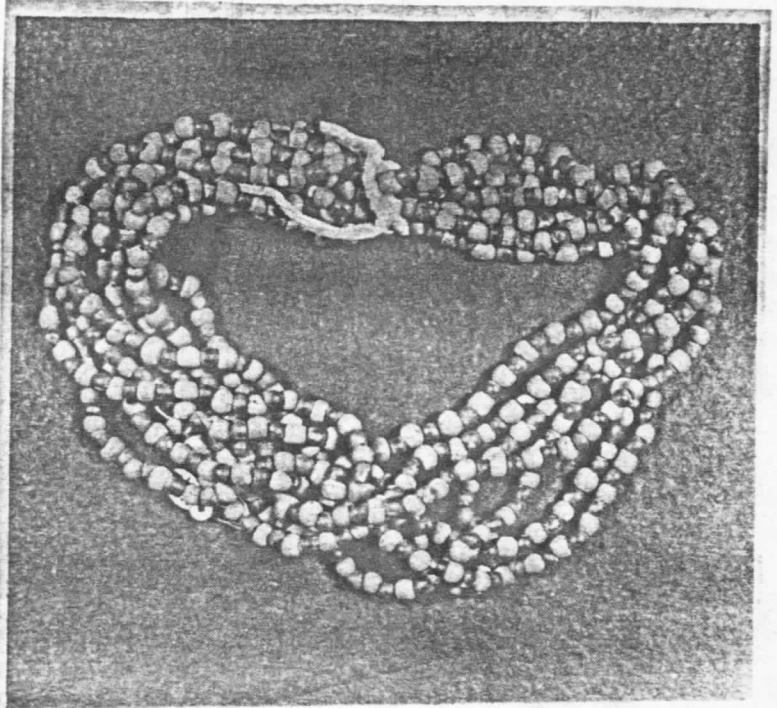
By 1750, these Dutch-made round wire-wound beads were gone and were replaced with the smaller seed beads used in embroidery work on the Iroquois clothing. By 1800, these "seed" beads had become so tiny that they had to be prestrung on fine thread in Europe before exporting to America. Necklace beads became increasingly scarce after 1750, being replaced by the seed beads used in embroidery work.

Beads for Belts

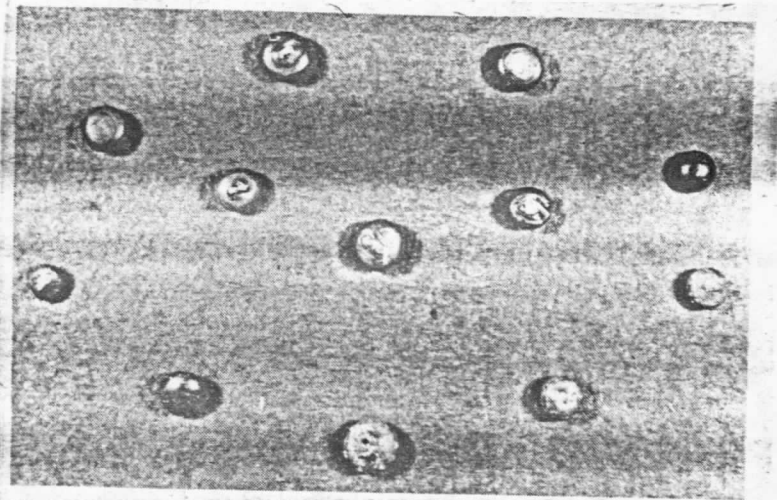
Glass beads were also used in belt manufacture by the Seneca. By 1650, a few colorful belts were made using tubular red, yellow, and black glass cane beads. Sometimes these were used with wampum beads making a belt of mixed wampum and glass beads.

By the time of the American Revolution, wampum beads had become scarcer and were being replaced by the cheaper tubular white and black glass beads in belt making.

Trade beads are important time markers for the archeologist and historian. Glass beads are relatively numerous and nearly indestructible in the ground. The rapidly changing bead styles resulted in recognizable types for nearly all time periods.

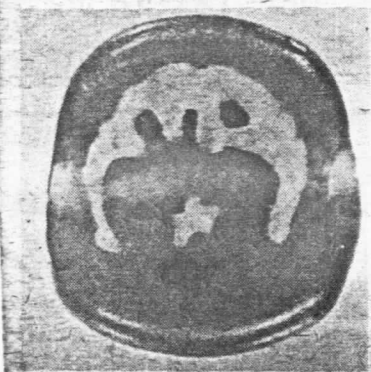


ROUND RED AND BLACK glass cane bead necklace from Monroe Co., N.Y. Middle Historic stage, ca. A.D. 1675-1687.

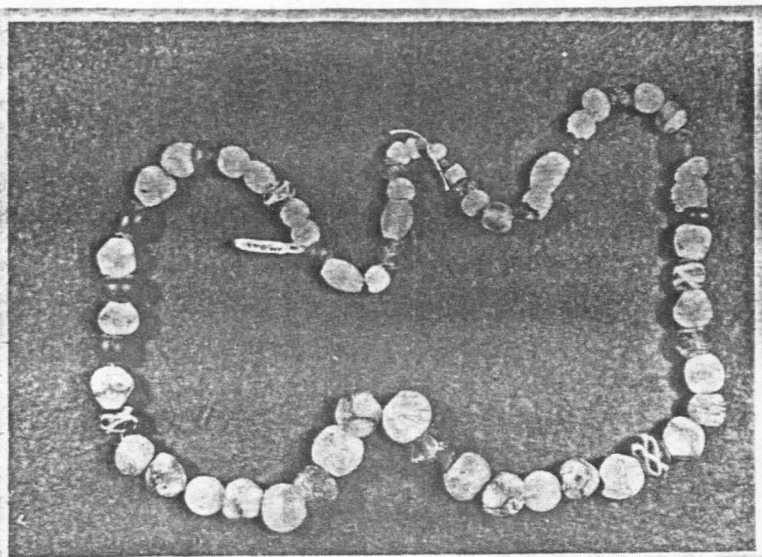


BLACK GLASS buttons—so-called Jesuit or cossack buttons—from Monroe Co., N.Y. Middle Historic stage, ca. A.D. 1675-1687.

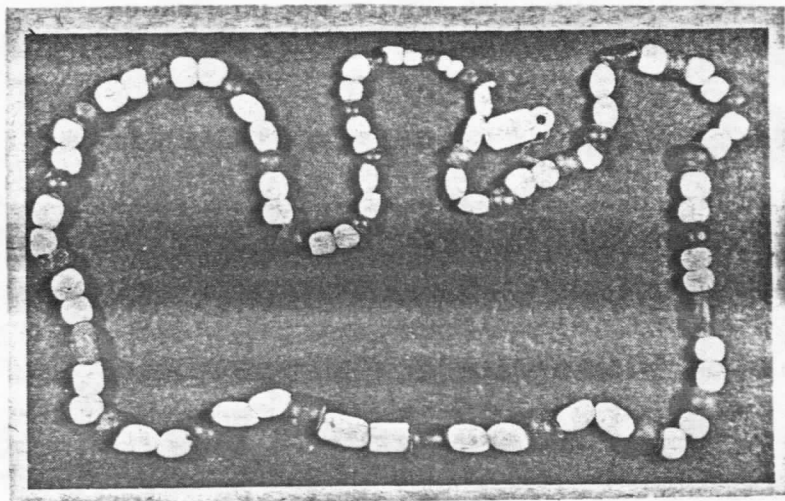
Bead collecting is today one of the fastest growing hobbies. Many collectors are just as excited about acquiring a new bead type as the Seneca were three and four hundred years ago.



"MAN IN THE MOON" wire-wound blue glass trade bead, hand-painted in white. One of the rarest trade beads. From Ontario Co., N.Y. Late Historic Stage, ca. A.D. 1720-1730. (Photo: Robert Eaton.)



round wire-wound Dutch glass bead necklace from Ontario Co., N.Y. Late Historic stage. (All photos, unless otherwise noted, by Kurt Dreas.)



ABOVE, ROUND AND OVAL wire-wound Dutch glass bead necklace from Ontario Co., N.Y. Late Historic stage, A.D. 1700-1730.