

NOTES FROM A BEAD BUYING TRIP TO EUROPE

EDWARD E. JOHNSON*

While most of the articles in *The Bead Journal* have dealt with the identification and history of beads made some time ago, I think it would be equally interesting for the reader to become acquainted with the kinds of beads being made today, as indeed I have become as buyer for a Canadian bead import company.

Although we obtain most of our beads from the Orient, we find that European contacts are necessary for the old "standbys" — seed beads, Italian mosaics, Venetian glass beads. And, because Europeans are more difficult to deal with by mail than the Japanese, who are constantly advising us of new styles, we find it necessary to make periodic trips to Europe to re-establish personal contacts.

On this last trip I found that the Italians were being hard pressed for large-holed beads by the surge of interest in macrame in Canada and the United States. Previously, I could never understand why the bead factories of Venice and Murano could not entertain a simple order for the same bead they currently were producing, only with a larger hole. This time I found out why. As I am always asked, I should briefly explain how the mosaic bead is made. The method is the same for today's beads as well as the "Goulimine" or African trading beads of yesterday.

If you examine one of these beads closely, you will note that a basic pattern is reproduced several or many times all over the bead. In poorly-made examples, you can even see the physical boundaries of these patterns. The pattern may be a red star surrounded in white, which in turn is surrounded in dark blue. This pattern was part of a long rod, perhaps measuring several feet, that was cut into cross sectional slices, each end bearing the described pattern. The rod, then, determines what the cross section will look like. The technique of manufacture used to produce these multicoloured rods is a closely guarded secret in Italy. Only one company makes the rods.

The bead-maker works with many of these cut discs in front of him as he first applies a thin coating of, say, black opaque glass, onto a hand-held rotating wire in a flame. With the wire thus coated in a small area, he can touch the hot glass to the discs lying before him and arrange them close together, all the time keeping the temperature with the flame just hot enough to make the glass flow but not too hot to damage the colour.

The bead, if it is to be round, is shaped by a small half-circle mold. When the artisan is satisfied with its smoothness, he removes it from the flame and lets it cool slowly in an insulating material, such as asbestos or sand. When cool the bead and the wire on which it was made are placed in nitric acid which in time will dissolve the wire and leave the hole free. Some bead makers of other countries prefer to coat the wire first with chalk so that the bead will slide off when cool.

In either case, it is simply the diameter of the wire that governs the hole size. The thicker the wire, the longer it takes for the acid to dissolve it. Therefore, with hole diameters of 3mm and up, it is more common to use a tubing instead of wire, as it takes less time for the acid to work. Copper tubing in these small diameters is almost unavailable to the bead makers in Venice. Only two companies I visited were experimenting with it in trying to copy the old African trading bead designs, or make new designs. I am happy to report that this effort at the reproduction of these museum pieces has resulted in beads very bright in colour, almost garish, and of a quality of workmanship nowhere near to what used to be produced.

I am certain that the African trading beads were at one time produced in Italy. Several companies have them on old sample cards, but no longer produce them. Either the workers do not exist for such fine work, or the workers for the rods no longer exist to reproduce the old designs. One manufacturer of beads said he last made them in the 1920's. In any case, the cost of the new models is easily double that of the current cost of the African cousins.

Another bead that is very popular in Canada is a ceramic bead gaily decorated with paisley designs, in round or cylinder shapes. This one is interesting from the point of view of the ingenuity of the bead market to supply something entirely new to the trade. In Greece, where these particular beads are made, the ceramic bead forms the core of its very popular "folk jewellery". In actuality, what looks like hand-painting, upon close inspection, turns out to be a decal design which has been applied after the bead was glazed and fired. The decal design is either lacquered on, which is less permanent, or oven-baked on a conveyor belt, as is the case in Japan. Almost any design is therefore possible, so it may be some time before this novelty is fully exploited.

It is not surprising, however, that this type of bead has met with such a response from the general public, since truly handworked beads are becoming a thing of the past as prices rise and old artisans retire — for experience counts for as much of a bead's beauty as it does for any other work of art.

Most European factories have cut production of more expensive types of beads because of the high cost in their production or because it is impossible to find someone with the talent and interest to study it. Bead-makers are well paid but lack the public recognition that other equally paid jobs receive. Japanese companies, on the other hand, are constantly improving their techniques so that someday they might produce a bead such as the mosaic that has made Italy famous for the past ten centuries or more.

*Victoria, B.C., Canada