

EARLY 20th CENTURY BEAD CATALOGS

ROBERT K. LIU, Ph.D.

We are all aware how difficult it is to date beads, even those from fairly recent times. Bead catalogs and bead sample cards, especially if dated, may be of help in this process. A brief description of one such catalog was provided by the Casadys¹. Alastair Lamb has discussed the utility of bead catalogs and trade cards (sample cards) as possible aids in the classification and chronology of European beads in West Africa². However, even if a bead type is shown in a dated catalog or sample card, we can only state with certainty that the particular type was made at that time, but nothing about whether it was being made prior to or after that time. A bead type may also be manufactured on a discontinuous basis, being produced only when a demand existed. Despite such drawbacks, bead catalogs can still provide useful information about fashions and decorative accessories, styles of necklaces, costs, types of clasps and findings.

Source material for this article came from the "Allen book of beads", a 32 page booklet issued by Allen's Boston Bead Store (loaned by Caroline and Gary Kent) and "Beads and beadwork supplies", a 12 page booklet issued by the Imperial Bead Co. of New York City (gift of the Morleys, Brandon, Fla.). According to

Dorian J. Morley, the New York firm went out of business in the 1920's; judging from the similarity of the two catalogs, I believe they are probably contemporaneous. A selected contents listing from the catalogs include: necklace designs (primarily chokers in Allen's), with completed necklaces ranging from \$3. to 5.; instruction books for beadwork, especially beaded purses and bags; frames or tops and patterns for bags; beads for portieres, door and window drapes and pulls (including instructions on how to make macrame pulls, using both Chinese and Czech glass ring pulls); hot dish mats (see Bead Journal, Winter, 1975: 28, fig. 38); beadlooms; large offerings of beads, especially Allen's, with prices of individual beads ranging from \$.05 to .25, a few large beads selling for as much as \$.50. The Allen catalog is the much better produced publication, with numerous, excellent photographs of beads, pages of instructions, brief section on bead-making, a story on the "Most beautiful lullaby in the English language", all for \$.10!

The following brief description of bead-making is reprinted from the Allen catalog:

Descriptive Talk on Venetian, Bohemian and Florentine Beads

We are illustrating two pages of these remarkable and beautiful beads, and we think it may be interesting to our customers of past years to learn how they are made. They are all hand work, none being made by any kind of machine process. The most of the work is done in the homes of both men and women who follow the making of beads and similar glass ware all their lives, and the same thing has been done by their fathers and grandfathers.

The glass which forms the bead comes in bars or rods (sometimes called glass "canes"), approximately the diameter of the bead to be made. The bars are placed in a small furnace over an open fire, until the end becomes sufficiently soft. With a pair of iron pliers, a piece is pinched off large enough to form one bead. The bead, being now in a semi-fluid state, is pierced with a long wire or needle and is then turned and twisted over the hot flame till it can be shaped into either a round, lozenge shape, square, octagonal or olive shape. The workman then takes a number of fine sticks of colored glass, the thickness of the lead in a pencil, heats them in the flame till they soften, and then draws the design on the still soft bead, very much like a baker tracing a name on the icing of a birthday cake. This is called raised work, or more properly filigree work.

An interesting bead with a history is a gold bronze bead (third from top in first row and eighth from top in second row). It is said to be a secret process. Many manufacturers have tried in vain to produce these beautiful beads. So far as we can find out, the basis is a dark Amber or Topaz colored glass into which copper shavings are strewn. These copper shavings have a tendency to adhere or "cluster." It is therefore very necessary to have the shavings evenly distributed through the entire glass so that the beads will receive and retain their peculiar brilliancy. Their general effect is a medium shade of gold bronze, somewhat darker than gold bronze paint.

The gold band which is often found around beads is formed by melting and

applying a stick of glass which comes in the form of a narrow ribbon. The bead is then cooled off by sticking the needle on which it is held into a board, and when cool the bead is pulled off the needle. The secret of good work is that it has to be timed so accurately that the bead stays soft while it is being formed, shaped and decorated, but it also must not become too soft so that the glass "runs," drops off the needle or loses its shape. On beads where the design is not raised or filigree work done, but seems to be sunk into the beads, the bead is, while still soft, rolled between two boards in much the same manner that butter balls are made. This presses a design of another color into the soft glass of the bead, making it a 2-, 3- or 4-color bead.

Not all beads are a success, many having to be thrown away or the glass melted and used over again. While most of this work is done in the homes, there is one factory having in its employ a number of young women. In this factory gold and silver filigree is used, as, on account of the high cost of the raw materials, it is not practicable to send such valuable stock to the homes. In this factory a 5-arm Bunsen burner is used with a flame 40% air and 60% gas, which makes a very hot blast that will melt the glass easily.

It will surprise you to know that there are at least 5,000 patterns of Venetian beads, but when it comes to stating the number of beads to be had of all kinds, there are European bead commission houses that have made beads for years and years, that can easily show a collection of over 100,000, *all different*. A sample is kept of every bead made, and it frequently happens that a bead is wanted that was popular forty years ago, and they can be made again from the sample which has been preserved.

One of the prize exhibits in a famous European collection contains a glass rod about three-quarters of an inch in diameter. The original length of this rod was ten feet and it was made by one of the greatest artisans in the Murano near Venice *on a dare*. It contains an elaborate picture of George Washington in colors. The picture runs through the entire length of the rod, and at any place you break a piece off the rod you would find the picture of the first President of the United States, and it is easily recognizable.

As for the usefulness of these two catalogs in dating material, I have noted similarity between the molded black glass beads in both catalogs (fig. 1) and those from Guatemala, described by Johnson (Bead Journal, Summer, 1975: 22, fig. 7) as jet or azabache beads; the molded and wound glass beads in the left-hand column, fig. 1, are similar to some in Johnson's previously mentioned article (p. 21, fig. 6) and to some in Jenkins' article in the same issue (p. 25, fig. 4); recently still available polychrome beads, purportedly from old stocks, resemble beads illustrated in both catalogs (fig. 2, 3, 4). While looking at some antique strands of amber, I noted a number had cylindrical clasps, similar to those offered by both of the bead firms. Although no firm age determinations have resulted from

studying this limited sample of bead catalogs, it has at least made me much more aware of beads from 50 years ago. If all of us conscientiously date and save the present large crop of catalogs, the task of those studying beads and other perforated artifacts 50 years hence may be a little easier.

References:

- ¹Richard & Dorothea Casady, 1974 A sample book of Venetian beads from 1704. Bead Journal 1(1): 19-21.
- ²Alastair Lamb, 1970 Some observations on glass beads in Ghana, West Africa. Ann. du 5^e Congres de L'Assoc. Internat. pour L'Histoire du Verre, Prague 6-11 Juillet: 247-250.

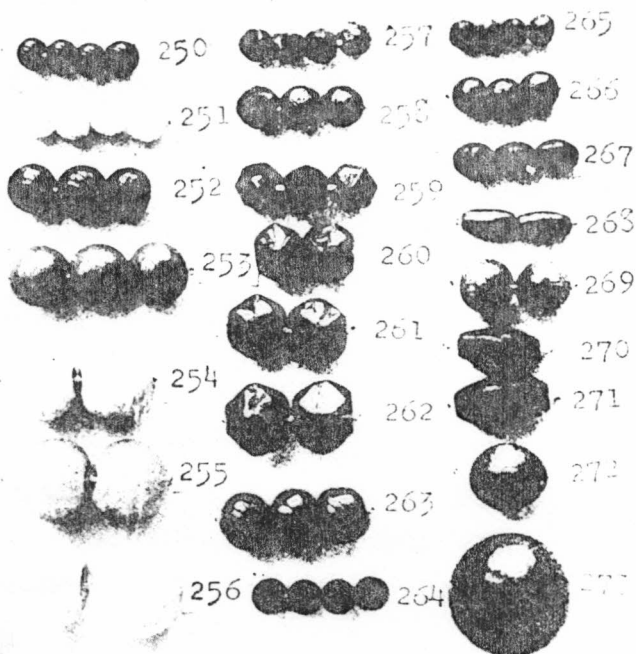


FIG. 1

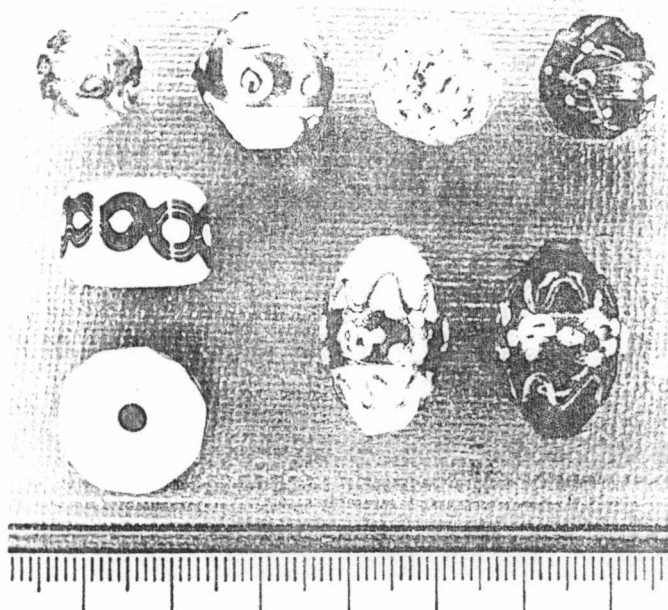


FIG. 2

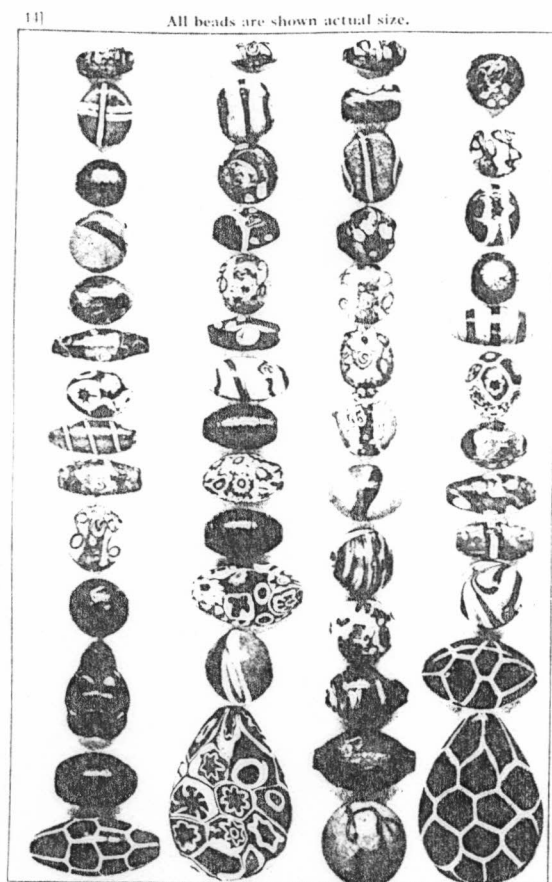


FIG. 3

Do not cut this leaf. Order by number.



FIG. 4

Do not cut this leaf. Order by number.

Fig. 1. Molded and wound glass beads, wooden beads from Imperial Bead Co. catalog: nos. 250-256, "Agate beads," nos. 257-262, "Cut crystal beads," nos. 263-264, "Portiere beads," nos. 265-273, "Wooden beads."

Fig. 2. Venetian polychrome beads (except lower left-hand white beads with impressed loop designs), from old stock. All with raised or filigree work; all except one decorated to some degree with copper shavings. Resemble many beads in following illustrations. Courtesy of Lisa Wataghani, The African Shop.

Fig. 3. Assorted polychrome, mosaic and molded glass beads, from Allen book of beads. 1st column, 5th bead = "Peacock eye," 7th bead = "Florentine bead," 12th bead = "Billiken"; 2nd column, 9th, 11th & 13th bead = "Florentine beads"; 4th

column, 4th bead = "Peacock eye," 6th, 11th & 12th bead = "Florentine beads." Most beads were \$.05. Peacock eyes \$.10. Florentine beads \$.15-.50 each, with the possible exception of the Billiken bead, all are Venetian. In the catalog, beads were shown actual size, but here they are reproduced at reduced size.

Fig. 4. Assorted polychrome, molded and carved beads, also from Allen book of beads. Is eleven beads in each of the 5 column Venetian polychromes, at \$.05 each. 12th row, Chinese and Japanese beads: 1st, 3rd & 5th bead carved wood, 2nd polychrome glass, 4th molded glass?, all \$.10 each. Last row: 1st bead called Venetian, but it appears more likely that this bead, as well as the 3rd, 5th bead are all molded Czech beads; 2nd bead carved Chinese, \$.33 each.