



Europeans brought beads to the American Indian both as presents and for trade beginning with Columbus' first voyage. This engraving from T. de Bry's AMERICA, Part xiii (1634), shows Englishmen trading knives, beads and other goods.

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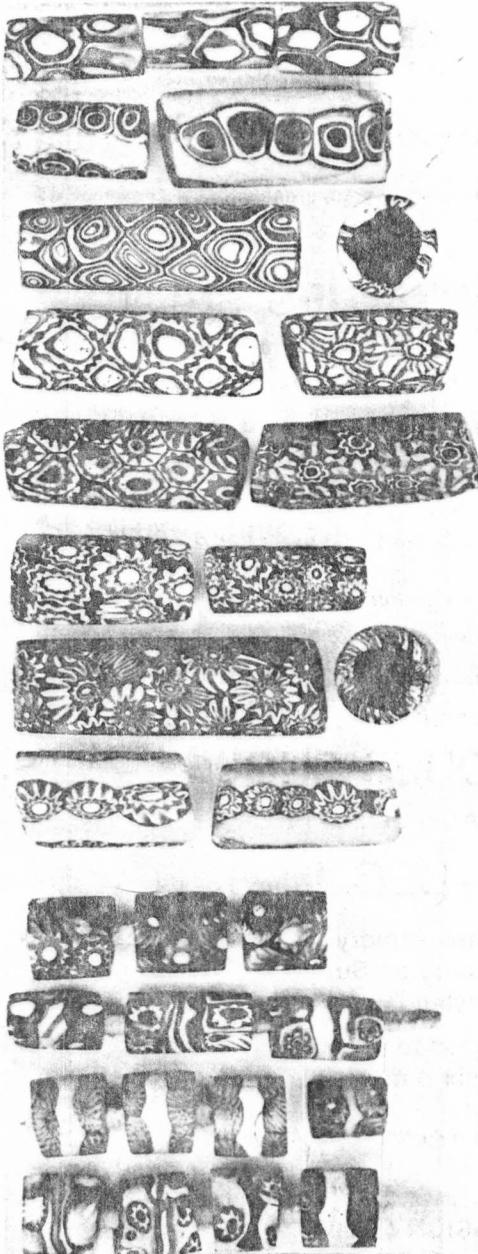
# Spinning Wheel, Vol 30, No. 9

# TRADE BEADS TODAY

by GEORGE SHUMWAY

*George Shumway, who brings us this fascinating introduction to old trade beads is fully conversant with his subject. In the past two years he has imported more than 4,000 strings of them from Africa. He has sorted them, studied them, photographed them, talked about them with other importers, and read everything he could find about them. Little enough has appeared in print. Outside of scattered gleanings from archaeological writings, he has found only two small books which have paid them specific attention—W. G. N. van der Sleen's Handbook of Beads and Joan M. Erickson's The Universal Bead, both currently in print.*

*A sincere enthusiast, Mr. Shumway feels trade beads deserve serious attention from art lovers and collectors—he's yet to find an antiques shop which carries them. Commenting from experience, he says, "Trade beads are pleasant to look at; fun to collect, sort, and work with; attractive to wear; of certain artistry; and a sound financial investment at today's prices."*



Typical millefiori-type beads are shown here. Mosaic patterns at the top grade into millefiori patterns in the center rows; these are all continuous-pattern beads. The bottom four rows are unit-pattern beads.

THE TERM "trade bead" calls up mental images of fur traders in canoes, stopping at remote Indian villages to exchange trinkets and necessities for beaver pelts, and of far-away traders on African coasts, securing gold, ivory, even slaves, in exchange for manufactured goods from Europe. Among primitive peoples on both continents, beads were universally appreciated units of exchange.

In the past two or three years, vast quantities of old trade beads from Africa have been brought into the United States. At first they attracted college students and other young people in the "mod" set, but soon discriminating men and women of all ages were wearing them, department stores were featuring them, and art-conscious collectors were "discovering" them. They are equally popular in western Europe; Venetians particularly are busily buying back beads made in Venice long ago.

Though America is temporarily well-supplied with trade beads from Africa, new importers are daily entering the field as interest continues to grow; already supplies from African sources are beginning to dwindle and prices to rise.

Discounting exceptions, "trade beads" may be described as glass beads manufactured from the 16th through the 19th centuries in Western Europe, Africa, the Near East, and Southern Asia, and intended for trade

in far-off places with primitive people. They are usually pierced with holes large enough to accept a stout string, a leather thong, or twisted plant fibers. This may have been the result of the techniques used in making them by hand as well as an accommodation for the intended user. Modern machine-made beads usually have rather small holes.

Trade beads never included costume jewelry beads of 20th century manufacture, cultured pearls, finely-made beads of glass and precious stones, or ancient beads handmade by primitive people for their own adornment.

The story of trade beads centers in the ancient Mediterranean city of Venice. The glass industry, begun there in the 9th century, so developed and expanded the art of glassworking, including beadmaking, that by the 1400s, Venice had a monopoly on the trade in the western world. They maintained for centuries this monopoly by keeping secret their glassmaking procedures. Trained workers were confined to certain areas, with death the penalty to the worker who defected (or tried to), and imprisonment for his family.

The age of exploration and subsequent colonization that began in the 15th century saw Venetian beads carried to the far corners of the world. Columbus took beads along on his first voyage as gifts for whatever strange people he might encounter. The many other ships of

discovery and trade that connected Western Europe with West Africa and the Americas carried beads in quantity. In later years when colonial trading was well-established, beads were sometimes carried in bulk as ship's ballast.

Other countries cast envious eyes on the Venice bead business. In the 17th century, a number of glassworkers slipped through Venetian security and reached Amsterdam where a small rival factory was set up; it continued to serve Dutch traders for more than a century. In 1840, a factory at Briare, France, began making trade beads for Africa. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, Venetian-type beads were made in the Bohemian region north of Venice. Later still, handmade trade beads were manufactured in Gablonz, Czechoslovakia, apparently in cooperation with Venice. The Czechoslovakian handmade beads are difficult to distinguish from Venetian originals.

Despite scattered competition, Venetian near-monopoly held for some 700 years. When World War II interrupted normal trade patterns, the raised costs of hand-labor brought large-scale Venetian beadmaking to an end.

During the four centuries trade beads were in use in the North American fur trade, and the even longer time they were used in African trade, thousands of bead types and patterns were made. Some were used on both continents; others were used only in one or the other.

For the fur trade with the North American Indians, where transportation over hundreds of miles of upstream canoeing and portaging was difficult, small beads of simple construction were the rule. Beads that went to West Africa were generally large in size and complex in construction and design—the Africans had early developed sophisticated taste in beads.

In the tons of trade beads brought to the United States from Africa in the past few years, there are thousands of different patterns, styles, shapes, and sizes. Some types are abundant, some are scarce. The major portion are of Venetian manufacture, but there are some early beads from Holland, distinctive beads made by Africans themselves, and a few from other sources. Most are of glass, but there are a sprinkling of beads in other materials such as amber, brass, silver, stone, shell and wood. Within the past two decades, plastic beads have been used in African trade—a limited barter practice still continues.

Little is presently known as to the dates when the different designs were introduced, but the beads can be put into categories useful to the collector, even though they cannot be dated.

**Millefiori-type Beads, Cylindrical Shape**—The trade beads coming from Africa today in greatest abundance are the millefioris, handmade in Venice during the 19th and 20th centuries. Production in almost all of the old patterns ended with World War II. (Related beads are being

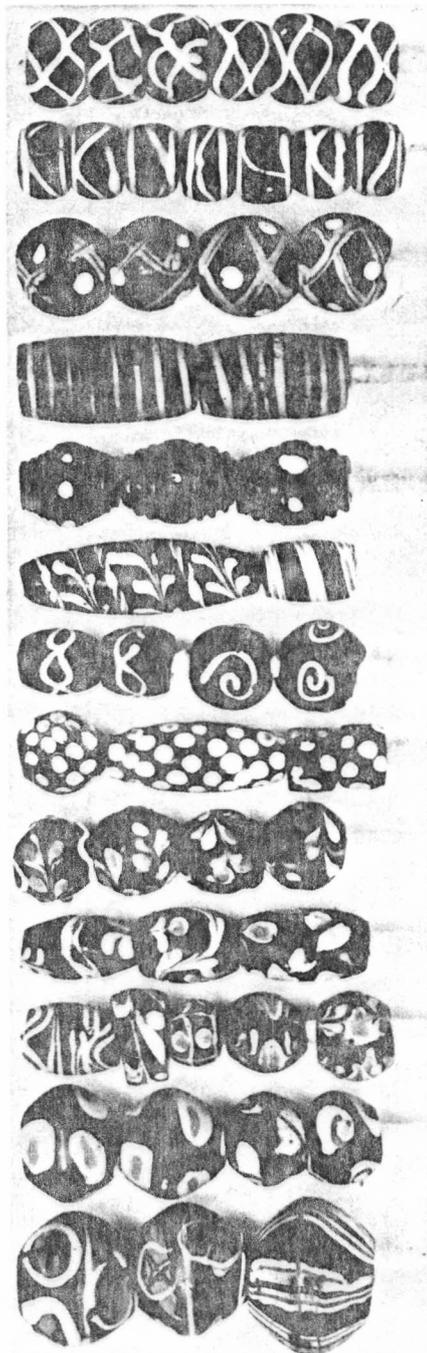
turned out in Venice today, but the patterns seem distinctively different.) *Millefiori*, translated "thousand flowers", refers specifically to those beads with flower-like patterns; those with mosaic patterns are called mosaics. Together with similar beads they are considered "millefiori-type."

Millefiori-type beads are made entirely of glass, generally cylindrical in shape. Starting with a blob (or gather) of glass on the end of a blow-pipe, the beadworker blows a



Millefiori-type beads typically are cylindrical in shape but they were made in other shapes, too. A string of oval millefioris here surround some elbow beads, some beads of square cross-section, and two large flattened beads.

cavity in the soft glass. A second worker attaches a rod to the opposite end of the soft glass and walks away, pulling the material out into a tube ten or twelve feet long. When this cools sufficiently, it is cut into shorter lengths, and bright colored glass is fused to the outside of the core tubes to form the mosaic or millefiori pattern. The irregular outer surface is then smoothed and ground to cylindrical shape and broken into



Some very distinctive trade beads were made with black glass as a base. Beads of the type shown in the top row apparently are of Dutch manufacture and date to the 17th century. Specimens are known from many American Indian sites, but the examples shown here have come from Africa.

beads of the desired length, usually  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch to 2 inches. In diameter they are typically  $\frac{3}{8}$  to  $\frac{5}{8}$  inches.

Such beads, cut from a long cylinder of a continuous pattern are called "continuous pattern" beads. Another type holds a single design unit within its length, each end of the bead displaying the same design, separated by a central belt of contrasting color or design.

Hundreds of different patterns exist, though few designs are unique. In a supply of mixed beads gathered by African traders from the marketplaces of a dozen or more different countries, several of the same pattern will be found, some in considerable quantity. Since beads of similar pattern can be brought together after a century or more of random travels, they must have been made in vast quantities to begin with.

**Millefiori-type beads, Special Shapes**—Though millefiori-type beads are mostly cylindrical in shape, there are also elongated beads of square cross-section and of oval and semi-oval profile. Relatively large millefioris flattened on two sides and round or oval in plan are known, though they are not common. The special elbow bead is essentially a long cylinder millefiori formed into a curve. It is generally between  $1\frac{1}{2}$  to  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches long, though some are less than one inch in length.

**Striped Beads**—Striped beads were made in other beadmaking centers as well as Venice. Some of them go far back in time; American Indian sites dating from the 1500s have yielded quantities of them. Certain patterns seem to have been made continuously from the 16th century through the 20th. Those available today are from the Victorian period or early 1900s, though beads from earlier centuries may be mixed in with them.

**Brick-red Series**—Opaque glass of brick-red color served as the base to which bead designs in white, yellow, black, green, and perhaps other colors were affixed. These beads were individually made by winding the base glass around a wire or mandrel, then putting the design on the exterior. An earlier form of bead than the millefiori, possibly prior to the 1700s, they were continued in production through the early 19th century.

**Yellow Series**—Here the trade bead was made with a base of glass in various hues of yellow, buff-yellow, and orange-yellow, with designs in other colors affixed to the exterior. Many of these are small cylinders, but some are oval in profile or may take on other shapes. Presumably they were made in



Assorted Venetian beads of the brick-red series are grouped at the top, beads of the yellow series in the center, and beads of the green series at the bottom.

Venice for the African trade during the 1800s and early 1900s.

**Black Series**—An outstanding series of bead designs used black glass as the base. Many were made in Venice, but some apparently came from the factory in Amsterdam which operated in the late 1600s and early 1700s. One particular type of black-based bead encircled with undulating lines of white, definitely attributed to Amsterdam, has been found, though never in abundance, at American Indian sites in the Mississippi Valley, in the South, and in the Northeast. In contrast, entire strings of what appears to be the identical bead have come from Africa in recent years. The supposition is that these were traded into Africa in considerable quantity by the Dutch during the 18th century, and have remained in use ever since. While a number of the black-based patterns

obtained today date to the 1700s, more date to the mid- and late 1800s.

**Green Series**—Trade beads built upon a base of green glass are known, but they are not as abundant as those of the brick-red and the yellow series. Beads made on a blue base are relatively rare.

**Chevron Beads**—Most famous of all Venetian beads is the chevron. (Actually the Chevron goes back to Ancient Egypt.) The classic chevron bead is made of six layers of glass which run, from the center to the outside, white, dark blue, white, brick-red, white, dark blue. Chevron-like designs appear when the cylindrical beads are ground into barrel shape. A simpler chevron bead was made in the same colors but without the inner blue layer. In green chevrons or red chevrons, green or red glass was substituted for the usual blue.

Chevron beads have been found at American Indian sites dating to the 16th century. They are still being made in Venice, but today they are called "rosetta." The chevron beads now coming from Africa were probably made during the Victorian period or later, though specimens of greater age may be intermixed.

**Other Beads of European Origin**—Many other trade bead types have come out of Africa that do not fall readily into the categories discussed. Some seem to be older patterns, perhaps from the 17th and

18th centuries, and some are similar, if not identical, to beads from 16th to 18th century American Indian sites. An outstanding example is a spherical glass bead about 1/2-inch diameter with a relatively large hole. Made by the winding technique, it came in clear, cobalt blue, milk-white, and occasionally green.

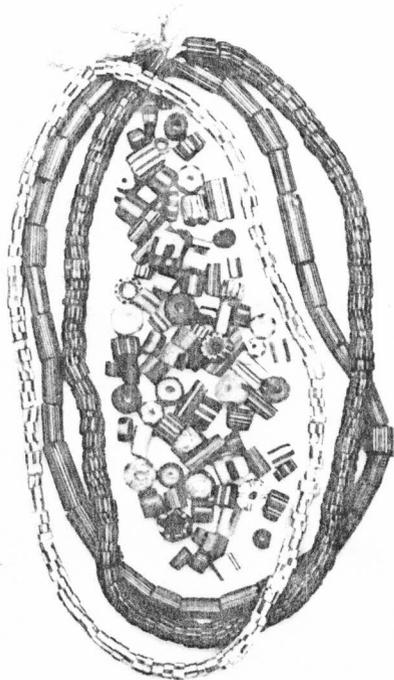
Beads of this type are known from Indian sites, particularly those in the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys and in the South. Oval beads of milk-white glass with designs in Delft blue glass delicately laid on the outside were possibly made in Amsterdam in the 17th and 18th centuries. One of these white beads with diagonal blue stripes from Africa appears identical to beads found at an early 18th century Indian site in the Mississippi Valley.

Unusual beads of opaque glass in single colors have ends that are not flat but a sequence of ridges and valleys radiating from the center

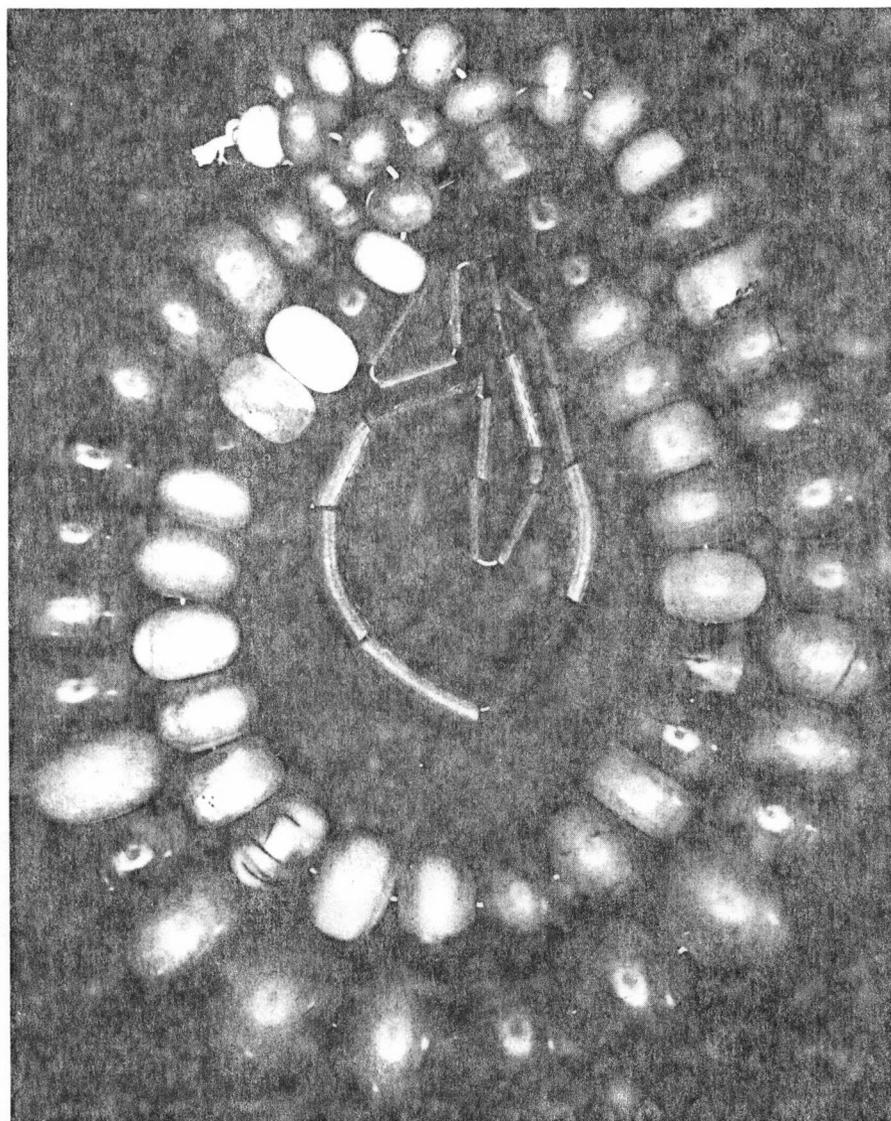
which fit together, or articulate, to form a snake-like string of matched beads. Close examination suggests that the valleys and ridges were cut by a special grinding machine. These probably date from the late 19th century.

**Amber Beads**—One of the most spectacular of bead types coming from Africa today is the large amber bead. Usually they are shaped somewhat like a squashed sphere, and range from 1/2 to 2 inches in diameter. Made in North Africa, they were entered into trade, and can be found in other parts of the continent, commonly used and highly regarded.

Most of the large roundish amber beads are of translucent amber, though some are red in color. Copal is the name given to hardened tree resins of which amber is one type. Cylindrical beads of red copal, varying in diameter from one-fourth to one-half inch, may be found among African trade beads.



Striped beads go far back in time. They were made by drawing out long tubes or canes which then were cut into pieces; these were much less expensive to produce than millefiori-types.



Large amber beads, as much as 2 inches in diameter, are made and used in North Africa. A related material, a red-colored hardened plant resin called copal, comprises the smaller beads in the center.

**African Glass Beads**—In times past, some unusual and attractive trade glass beads have been made by Africans themselves. Their method was to make small cylindrical impressions in soft clay, affix a spindle in the center, pour in powdered glass, and fire the little clay "pot" until the powdered glass fused into a solid glass bead. Collectors refer to these aptly as "pot beads."

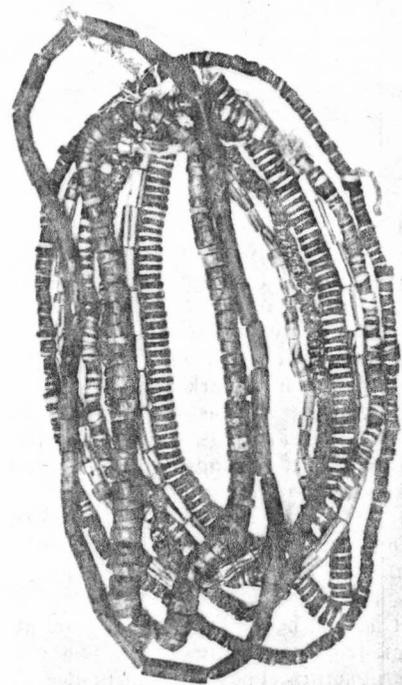
Pot beads come as layered discs and short cylinders, also as short cylinders with longitudinal stripes. Sometimes they were made from fragments of glass beads pounded as fine as sand. One form comes as a cylinder with oval cross-sections, almost always of yellow-colored glass with longitudinal stripes. Pot beads apparently date from the 19th and early 20th centuries. One of their distinctive aspects is that the glass always appears slightly porous, the result of imperfect fusion from the powdered state.

Some types of handmade wound beads are being made in Africa today, for use in African trading as well as for the tourist trade. In

comparison with Venetian beads, they are relatively crude.

**African-made Stone Beads**—A fairly common bead from West Africa is native-made from the brick-red laterite soil prevalent in the region. Made as cylinders and discs, they may be either carefully or crudely shaped. The laterite soil is actually a soft stone, basically bauxite, a mixture of aluminum and iron oxides; it is a reasonable approximation of the red catlinite from which some American Indian beads were made; for costume purposes, they can serve as a substitute.

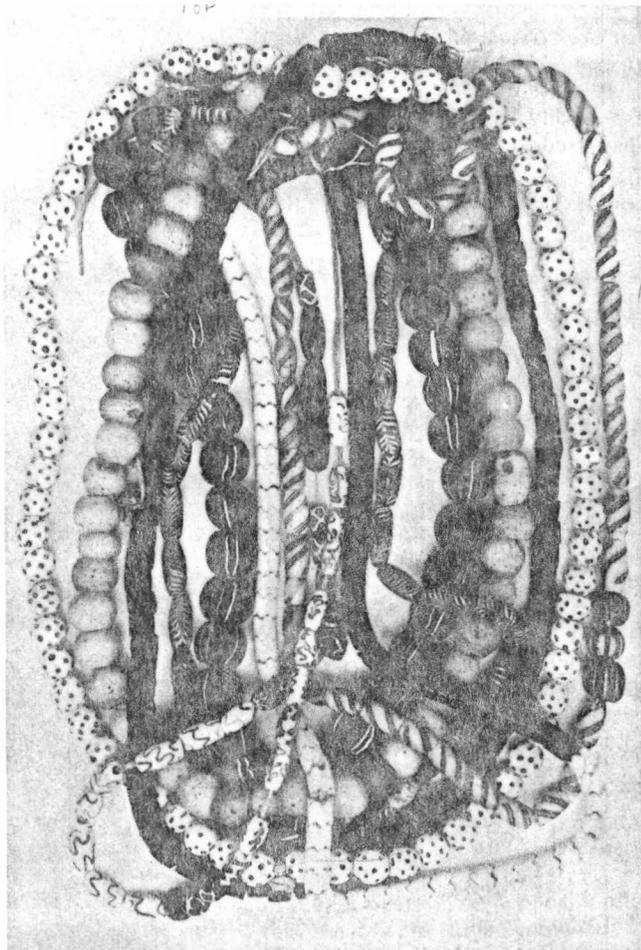
**Trade Beads of the 20th Century**—Beads of the modern world are made by machine from glass, plastic, and other substances; the holes in them tend to be rather small. They come from Africa mixed with older beads. One is tempted to exclude them from trade bead status, but in the cause of consistency they must be regarded as a relatively new form of trade bead. The trade bead story is not yet finished; no doubt new forms will appear in the future.



Two strands of red stone beads made by natives in West Africa overlie six strings of "pot beads" made by West African natives from powdered glass.



Chevron beads, known to the Venetians who make them as "rosetta" beads, go back in time more than a thousand years. They come in many sizes and are finished in different ways by cutting and grinding.



Many other types of old trade beads come out of Africa today in small quantity. The examples shown here include a number of types similar or identical to American Indian trade beads.