

History of Trade Beads

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While beads date back as far as 40,000 years, and have been made by every culture, it is interesting to note that the Egyptians had already made glass beads as early as 1365 B.C.

The word “Bead” has its origin from the Middle English word “bede”, meaning prayer. For thousands of years man has used beads of all sorts for decorations and ornaments.

Prior to European contact, beads in North America were made from gold, jade, bone, turquoise, and hand polished shell beads. Bead trading in North America started with Columbus in the late fourteen hundreds, and continued with explorers such as Alexander Mackenzie, David Thompson, and Lewis and Clark. Lewis and Clark’s expedition alone is said to have carried thirty three pounds of small trade beads, with the plain blue and white ones being most popular for trading. Because beads are light weight, easy to pack, undamaged by water, and were most desirable by tribes who had never seen them before, the “coureurs de bois” carried them along with other light weight goods in their backpacks on forest trails and in canoes pursuing beaver pelts during the 17th and 18th centuries. Also the rugged early fur trappers or mountain men exchanged countless millions of these glass trade beads for vast fortunes in valuable fur. When the Hudson’s Bay Company was formed, the use of the glass trade beads was constant.

At the beginning of European trade, glass beads weren’t desired by the Natives for their “monetary” or exchange value, but for their symbolic value. Beads are traditionally part of ritual exchanges, and are valued more for symbolic associations rather than for what an item is “worth” in raw commodity exchange. Glass beads helped to invigorate and transform traditional ideological, social, and religious systems of Natives, and so were perceived by them as “Luxury” and “Prestige” items, and an indicator of wealth.

There has been some confusion over the trade bead classification, a basic problem has been the naming of trade beads by where they were found, who traded them, the tribes that used them and even by the methods they were transported, or from the ships they were shipped. A couple examples are –

(A) the pony bead, which is generally considered to be a simple, sometimes crude, monochrome glass bead about 1/8 inch in diameter. This bead was first brought into the western states by the “pony” pack trains of the traders.

(B) The “Russian” trade beads that are considered to be short beads with multiple facets. This bead is most often seen in various shades of transparent blue, but is also seen as a deep transparent green or amber, a translucent white and occasionally in other colors. Since there is no evidence that Russians made any glass beads, this bead was no doubt used by the Russians to fur traders and Indians.

Most of the early trade beads were rather large and of the necklace variety, as the demand grew, the beads became smaller as they could be produced faster. With these smaller beads, the Indians began to incorporate them into their clothing, baskets, dolls, and used in ceremonies. Glass beads have been highly valued by the Indians and frequently used to trade for provisions.

It's ironic that these simple glass trade beads that the white man so lavishly gave to the Indians, in days of exploration and fur trade, are highly sought after today by bead collectors of all nations.

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