



Beaded African clothing and headdress

In their simplest form, beads are small, perforated spheres, usually strung to create necklaces. They can be made of metal, pottery, glass, or precious or semi-precious stones, such as ivory, coral, turquoise, amber, or rock crystal, or glass. The human desire for personal ornamentation and decoration is clearly evident from the frequent presence of beads in archaeological sites. The earliest beads, dating from the Paleolithic period, were made mainly with seeds, nuts, grains, animal teeth, bones, and, most especially, sea shells. Indeed, like sea cowries, beads were used in barter and in ceremonial exchanges; they thus contain precious information on early trade routes.

Ancient Bead Ornamentation

Beads found in early Egyptian tombs are thought to date from about 4000 B.C.E. Faience (glazed ceramic) beads appeared in Egypt's predynastic period and continued to be made in Roman times. The Phoenicians and Egyptians also made fancy beads with human and animal faces. What were probably the earliest gold beads, going back to 3000 B.C.E., were found in the Sumerian and Indus valleys; gold beads of later date have been found in Ashanteland (Ghana) and other parts of Africa. Mycenaean beads found in Crete, dating from the Late Bronze Age (c. 1100 B.C.E), were fashioned in original floral shapes, such as lilies and lotuses, as well as granulated surfaces. Stone and shell beads, and from the fifteenth century C.E. on, glass beads, were worn in large quantities by American Indians.

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Among some populations, beads are worn as much for magical as for decorative purposes. For example, in Middle Eastern and

southern European countries, coral beads are thought to encourage fertility and are frequently an essential part of a woman's trousseau. Turquoise and blue-colored beads are attached to the clothes of brides and children, as well as to the collars of domestic animals-or hung to cars' viewing mirrors-to avert bad luck and illness. Amulets thought to have the power to avert impotence, loss of breast milk, or the alienation of a husband's affection, often include "eye beads" strung together with cowries: thanks to a subtle resemblance of openings and curved lines, the latter are understood to symbolically represent the eye as well as the female genitalia.

Religious Significance

The word "bead" comes from the Middle English word "bede," which means pray, and beads strung to make rosaries have been used since the Middle Ages to count prayers. But even as strings of beads took on well-defined religious significance in Europe, they rapidly took on new meanings, as they were exported to diverse cultures that had their own symbolic systems. Rosaries, which were among the earliest strings of crystal and glass beads exported from Venice in significant quantities by crusaders, soon became part of garments and ornaments related to entirely different belief systems and rituals. They were often used as counters in trade. Certain types of beads that acquired rarity value were removed from economic exchange cycles to become ancestral property, only changing hands as bride-wealth or used to validate claims to royal and aristocratic status.

Beads as Currency and Identity

European traders often exchanged beads for African or American Indian goods of very much greater value, such as gold or even slaves. According to traditional lore, the whole island of Manhattan was bought by Dutch settlers for the equivalent in beads of twenty-four dollars. The story-a foundation myth of the United States-is often told to show how the Indians were primitive and naive. But in reality, as research on different societies has shown, beads had been used in trade for centuries before the arrival of Europeans, and their value was determined by social consensus.

For many African populations, beads are important markers of identity. Beaded garments and hats are worn at all times, but most especially on ceremonial occasions. Young women make small bead jewels for their favorite boys. The contrast of different colors and shapes can give these jewels a variety of meanings and whites have described them as "love letters." For some South African Kwa-Zulu women, who have developed remarkable skill in creating beaded figures or dolls dressed in ethnic costume, to sell to tourists in the vicinity of Durban, bead-work has become a useful source of income.

The use of beads for personal adornment, as well as for decoration of a variety of objects, has continued uninterrupted through history. They can be stitched or woven into textiles, used in embroidery, or applied to hats, belts, handbags, or to household objects, such as boxes or lampshades. American Indians have long applied vividly colored glass beads in original geometrical designs to leather clothing, bags, and leather boots.

While Venetians dominated the manufacture and export of glass beads from the fifteenth to the mid-twentieth century, by the early 2000s beads were made in all parts of the world. Since the 1960s, interest in the cultures and customs of third-world countries has led to a keen search for old beads on the part of museum keepers and antique dealers. This in turn has led to a revival in large-scale production and use of beads by the general public. Fashion items such as handbags, ladies' waistcoats, and belts vividly decorated with beads are made in China and other parts of the Far East.

Venetian beads, while not produced on as large a scale as they were in the past, remain very high quality, and the city's association with glass beads helps it maintain a lively second-hand and antique trade, as well as a strong interest in experimentation and creativity in the search for new versions of the traditional craft of making glass beads and their use in personal ornaments. Beadwork, in particular the stringing of necklaces and bracelets, has become a widespread pastime, and shops with lively displays of beads, fine metal, or cotton and silk thread are found in almost every city. The low cost of beads in

relation to jewelry makes them a very versatile ornamental element, often specially created to enhance a particular outfit or occasion.

See also [Costume Jewelry](#); Jewelry; Necklaces and Pendants; [Spangles](#).

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Ancient Beads - Ancient beads and etched beads from the Indus Valley civilization up to 1500 AD. Ancient Beads can be thousands of years old and reach back to the cradle of civilization! What fascinates me deeply is that Beads are the oldest art form in the world! They are older than the cave paintings. Most probably you will feel a significant difference between wearing ancient beads, full of history, and new factory made. Just imagine the feeling of wearing an old bead, that has been in use for more than 30 generations.



We both had bracelets made from Millefiori beads and learned a little of their history from the jeweler who fascinated us with stories of their prominence in African trade over the centuries. In the 5 months since the original purchase my friend has become somewhat of an expert herself, purchasing a number of books on bead history through the ages. It was time for me to put my feet into the water and am beginning with this book which is a wonderful and comprehensive look at beads. It's a perfect book for a "bead" beginner or someone who just wants to add to their library. The bo