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The Beauty of Chinese Beads

China is historically one of the great bead making and trading nations of the world. Numerous empires ruled China throughout its history, and as a result, its periods of prosperity and peace fluctuated. The Tang dynasty (618-906 AD) was a developmental period that was predominately peaceful. During the Tang dynasty, time could be devoted to the luxuries of life. This dynasty is therefore recognized as the Golden Age of all arts in China. Although the Chinese have worn beaded jewelry since 3,000 BC, Chinese bead making was most prevalent during both the Tang and Ming (1368-1644 AD) dynasties, (Turner, p.80). Jade and glass beads have been excavated from tombs of the Imperial family and high officials from these periods. The Chinese have adorned themselves with beads since this time without interruption. The beauty of Chinese beads contributes to China's worldwide reputation as a leading influence on the art of bead making- glass bead making, carving and jade, (Tait, p.115)

Limited, reliable historical information is available about the history of Chinese beads. Much of the information that exists was passed down by word of mouth. Most historical records that describe the Chinese formula for glass making were written with deception to protect the artist's glass making secrets. However, it is know that China used glass as the primary material for glazes and beads because of its low cost, its strength and its hardness, (Fenstermaker, 20).

Unlike western nations, the Chinese used a lead-barium formula in making glass, which makes it more brilliant, easier to cut and easier to remelt. These beads are much softer and heavier than contemporary glass beads made of soda-lime glass, (Holland, p.2). The prevailing theory is that this soft glass was primarily furnace worked. However, Chinese artisans may have used an isolated flame of some sort to achieve smaller details on the glass, such as tiny dots, (Holland, p. 2). Tools for making ancient glass beads were first wooden, then bronze or copper, then iron and then steel. Chinese glass beads are easily recognized by their large holes, irregular outlines, inclusive clay, bubbles, peaks around the apertures and their variety of colors. Chinese glass beads are often referred to as Peking or Canton glass beads. Most Peking glass beads were made to imitate precious stones, especially jade, “the Chinese stone of heaven,” (Tait, p.167). Green glass was the most common glass used to imitate jade.

Jade was highly regarded as China’s most beautiful stone, more precious than gold. The Chinese began carving jade as early as 3,000 BC and were the first to use jade for beads and jewelry, (Fenstermaker, 26). China began concentrating its production of jade beads and carvings during its prosperous Shang (1700-1050 BC) and Zhou (1050-221 BC) dynasties. This production and popularity of jade expanded during the Tang dynasty. Jade’s rarity and difficulty of getting supplies made it a precious material, (Tait, p. 18). It is defined as a tough stone either of jadeite or nephrite minerals, and it is chemically composed of sodium silicate and chromium. The hardness of jade makes it possible for detailed carvings and contributes to its popularity because it is difficult to crack or chip. Jade is generally a green stone, however, it comes in many colors, opaque

and translucent, basically white to grayish, pink, lilac, and blue. It is a natural stone that always has a “glassy,” waxy, dullish gleam, (Fenstermaker, p. 25-26).

Ancient jade was handcarved with saws, iron disks and drills. Quartz, garnet, emery and ruby dust were applied with wood, leather or gourd skin to polish jade beads. The entire process of jade carving required a great deal of technical skill, time and patients. It is easy to distinguish between an ancient carved jade piece and a modern one because handcrafted jade has harmonious lines and modern electrical carving tools produce a hard-cut surface, (Fenstermaker, p.27).

The unit of the family and not the individual is an important aspect of Chinese culture, and it is perpetuated through the art of family bead and jewelry making. This explains why some beads made within a family were signed by the family and dated, (Fenstermaker, p.2). Chinese children made many of the Peking glass beads because their small hands enabled them to provide painting and carving details. One particular technique is referred to as hand-dot design, in which tiny dots are symmetrically arranged on the bead, (Holland, p.1). Bead making in China was also a very naturalistic art. Nature was an inspiration to Chinese artists, and they were very serious about the design and representation of nature. They believed the natural world is the world of reality, myths, humor and supernatural. The idealistic Chinese artist believed that, “Each bead was part of a story or a symbol of nature or life,” (Fenstermaker, p.27). Chinese artists used all natural colors of the rainbow with beadwork. The designs on beads are usually a flowing or circular design like music, clear and definite (Fenstermaker, p.11).

Meditation was highly involved with bead making. Artists would meditate outdoors in valleys and in the countryside and would then paint designs on beads from memory. Beads depicted their love for nature and all things naturalistic- birds, hills, flowers, leaves, fruits, fish, crickets, owls, squirrels and other animals. These animals and other nature designs were carved in glass beads and in jade for thousands of years, (Fenstermaker, p.8-10).

Beetles were considered an emblem of eternity and were a common insect illustrated. Jade animal carvings, both three-dimensional and flat, were pierced so they could be worn as pendants. Chinese artists also fantasized with dragons, phoenix birds and other animal figures. The dragon is a popular image often referred to as carrying spirits on its back. Dragons are designed in all shades of blue. Cobalt is used in blues and added to molten glass or used to hand paint designs on blue and white porcelain beads. Artists also incorporated a humorous side of life in their beadwork, by carving and painting smiling and laughing faces, (Tait, p.195).

As well as the spiritual significance of Chinese beads, the design, color and endless detail all contributed to the beauty of these beads. The shapes, diameters and colors of Peking glass beads varied. The colors ranged from transparent to pinks, ruby red, orange, brown, turquoise, green, blues and blacks. Chinese artists made use of different colorings in the stones to provide a relief effect to the designs and add special beauty. The elaborate designs on simple shaped beads emphasize the skill of Chinese artists and contribute to the beauty and uniqueness of the beads. Glass and jade beads worn by the Chinese were especially beautiful because the various colors contrasted beautifully with their dark hair and fair skin. Jades soft, waxy luster is also very

appealing to the eye, and its smooth coolness appeals to one's sense of touch, (Fenstermaker, p.26).

Jade was often worn as part of formal and ceremonial dress. Jewels worn by the Emperors and Empresses, particularly of the Ming dynasty, were extremely elaborate. Jewels and glass and jade beads hanged from headdresses and sleeves of their robes, (Tait, p.167). Peking glass beads, especially imitation glass jade, was very popular among the Chinese because of its beauty, and also because glass jewelry was inexpensive and could be bought and worn by almost anyone, (Fenstermaker, p.27). Peking glass and jade beads were worn as finger and arm rings, bracelets, decorative necklaces and prayer necklaces. Jade beads were also incorporated into belt-hooks and hair ornaments worn by men and women. Elaborate gold and silver hairpins set with jade flowers were popular during the late Ming dynasty, (Tait, p.169).

Ancient beads have significant meaning, usually associated with religion or power connected with a dynasty. Some necklaces from bead to bead, told a story or myth. A string of handcarved beads often was the artisans lifetime work, (Fenstermaker, p. 42). People all over the world believed in magical powers in beads. The Chinese wore beads as ornamentation and often to keep evil spirits away and to bring good fortune. Jade was believed to poses special quasi-magical or spiritual qualities. The Chinese believed that jade had healing properties and supernatural powers to help assist and preserve dead bodies. It particularly helped dead women ascend to the heavens and avoid terrors of the underworld, (Tait, p.194). Jade beads were also viewed as a token of love, and were sometimes given as a token of friendship and thanks. These beliefs still influence the art of bead making.

“History has always revealed the Chinese as a people with immense vitality and creativity,” (Fenstermaker, p.3). These qualities are extremely evident in Chinese delicate and fine, glass and jade beads. The Chinese were perfectionists in their jewelry making trades. The Peking glass and true jade beads are considered among the finest and most complex beads ever made because of their original and detailed designs. They are appreciated for both their artistic qualities and spiritual value. Old China beads continue to be highly regarded and desired. They are considered rare because the Chinese did not flood the trading markets with other countries with these beads, (Francis, p.67). However, these beads have gained worldwide exposure and are considered among the most beautiful forms of ornamentation.

Figure I illustrates various shades of jade stone. This picture displays five flat and three-dimensional animal carvings that were worn as ornamentation. The top row contains a buffalo and a cicada from the Shang dynasty. The other animals are from the Western Zhou period and are of a fish, a bird and a stag. Each of these carvings is pierced so they could be worn on robes or as pendants, (Tait, p.195).

The five Chinese jade flowers are from the late Ming dynasty. These lighter shade carvings were placed with elaborate gold and silver hairpins, and were often found in 16th century tombs, (Tait, p.169). The four square carvings represent the various shades of jade that were used as belt ornaments. The carvings in the middle row are from the Ming dynasty, and they illustrate the popular use of dragons in Chinese ornamentation. These small and intricate carvings emphasize the skill that was required of Chinese artisans, (Tait, p.68).

Figure III is a mélange of Peking glass beads. This collection of beads illustrates the assortment of colors used, and they all have characteristic precise, large perforations. The first four beads are translucent glass and differ in size and color. The first bead is 8mm in length and the fourth bead is 7mm in diameter. The last two beads in this row are purple and bubbles are present in the glass. The beads in the second, third and fourth row have white slip coating in their perforations. Their colors are pink, pale yellow and orange, red, green and cobalt blue. The red beads are very rare. The fifth row contains white opaque beads and two cobalt blue beads. The sixth row of translucent and opaque beads identifies the simplistic carvings of flowers, (Fenstermaker, plate XIII).

Figure IV is the same painted bead shown from different views. This bead is hollowed glass and the fish are painted on the inside of the surface. The thickness of this bead is 17mm. This bead expresses the naturalistic aspects of Chinese bead making. The artist has transformed a simple natural behavior into a beautiful piece of art, (Fenstermaker, plate XIV).

Figure V is an assortment of unusual Chinese beads and pendants. The beads in the top row are porcelain and are decorated with different colored dragons. The first two have round perforations and the last two are round perforated. The second row begins with two translucent melon beads. The second, fourth and fifth beads are assembled versions of the first two and they are perforated on the back by two closely spaced holes. The third pair of beads are oval shaped, wound translucent glass. The upper red bead contains crumbs of glass that are used as a swirled decoration. The first and second beads of the third row are clear glass beads engraved with an eye and sun pattern used four times. The last three beads in this row are hollow porcelain beads painted with

dragons and plants. The grapes in the fifth row are a green glass, jade imitation. The leaves and grapes are attached to round metal links connected by wires. The last three beads are examples of the use of goldstone. The last two are examples of popular Chinese glass rings, (Fenstermaker, plate XV).

Figure VI is an elaborate hair ornament from the 14th-15th century AD that was used to enclose a knot or bun of hair. This colorful hair ornament incorporated dragons and Peking glass beads that imitated various types of precious stones. This brightly colored piece identifies how Chinese artists contrasted colorful beads with silver, and gold in this case, to highlight the beautiful colors of Peking glass beads, (Tait, p.168).