

Beading

Some of the earliest examples of beadwork date to the Egyptian Pharaohic period and include necklaces, dresses, and other items made of fiancé (soft glass that resembles clay) beads. The first examples of bead embroidery date to approximately 300bce to Siberian Nomads. Many forms of beadwork can be found in the SCA period though not all. As an example, loomed beadwork cannot (at this time) be dated prior to 1630. Bead weaving is easier to find after 1500. Bead embroidery can be found in many times using many different types of beads. A number of 12th and 13th century religious items survive, mainly from Germany and this time period saw a great number of glass seed beads used in conjunction with pearls, coral, and small gold plaques and sequins. Later period item in the same area generally do not use glass beads. The British isles have almost no surviving beadwork until very late in the 16th century when most of the upper class clothing was swimming in pearls. It wasn't until after the British started domestic production of glass seed beads in the 1630's that we find numerous examples of beadwork with glass beads including loomed beadwork, layette baskets covered with beaded flowers and small caskets (jewelry boxes) embroidered with designs all created with glass beads.

Beads are sized in two different ways – depending on the size. Larger beads like pearls are all sized by diameter: the smallest are generally 2mm while there really is no upper limit though few beads are larger than 16mm. Popular sizes are 2 and 4mm for embroidery and 6 and 8mm for jewelry. Rosaries are generally made from 10 or 12mm. Even numbers predominate. Seed beads are sized in the opposite direction. The largest of the beads have the smallest numbers and the smallest beads are size 24 and resemble a grain of sand with a hole through it. Average sizes are 9, 11 and 12. Currently the smallest being manufactured are 15.

Aside from beads, the only other items one might need to do beading are a stringing material. Fine gauge wire is an excellent choice for most things and was widely used in period. Another choice is a needle and thread. The best thread would be upholstery thread since it is incredibly strong. Beading thread, called Nymo, is fairly strong and is made flat (which fits through a needle better). A period choice is silk and it is strong enough for most things but fairly expensive. Do not use dental floss – it is made to be biodegradable and while it is strong it will not last very long.

Beads used in period were glass seed beads (for possible colors consult books on historical glass or stained glass from period), pearls, coral, some stones like garnet (called balis ruby at the time) lapis and amethyst were also used. Late period also had artificial stones and pearls made out of glass. The fakes must have been pretty good too because there were many ordinances banning their use. Murano, the island off the coast from Venice Italy, was for most of the period the largest glass producing center in the world.

Resources

Bead Embroidery by Joan Edwards, ISBN 0800806751, 0-916896-44-7. This is probably

the best book on the subject. A classic, first published in 1966.

Mediaeval European Jewellery With a Catalogue of the Collection in the Victoria & Albert Museum by Ronald Lightbown, ISBN 0948107871. This is an awesome book on all forms of adornment from hats to belts. It also contains a whole chapter on Paternosters (rosaries) though the book is not dedicated to beads overall.

Creative Bead Weaving by Carol Wilcox Wells, ISBN 1579900801. This is a good book to consult for technique. 1-887374-05-1

Medievalbeads.com contains a comprehensive collection of period beadwork examples.

Roxelana.com has a collection of research papers on beadwork.