

# The Miyuki company: Production of seed beads and Delicas in Japan

Diane Fitzgerald

The antecedent of the Miyuki Company, the largest manufacturer of seed beads in Japan, was founded in the 1930's when seed beadmaking was introduced to Japan from Europe by an Osaka wholesaler. Mr. Seiichi Katsouka senior, grandfather of the current president, joined the business. Due to the impossibility of procuring raw materials, production was halted when World War II broke out.

After the war, Mr. Katsouka senior launched a bead making company and his son-in-law Hiroshi Katsouka also joined the company. With only a small variety of beads initially, they could produce only transparent and opaque beads. These were loom-woven into narrow bands in Native American (primary opaque) colors and designs by home workers and exported to the United States. At this time, the company was also striving to improve quality and to increase the number of colours.

Demand increased further with the development of the plating process for silver-lined beads undertaken by Hiroshi Katsouka. Masayoshi Katsouka, current president of Miyuki, joined the company in 1972 and his son, Kenji Katsouka joined the company as associate director about one year ago, the fourth generation of the family now involved in the business. In 2006 a modern factory was completed in Fukuyama, and the old factory is now used for inventory and shipping.

In the early 1960's, bead embroidery on dresses and beaded bags was becoming popular, triggered in part by Japan's Empress Michiko who often carried a beaded bag. Beaded bags were also worn with Japanese-style kimonos which were also popular at that time. Other events also contributed to the idea of a new type of bead. Mrs. Katsouka, wife of the current president, recalls that about 20 years ago, she and her husband were attracted to an old beaded bag displayed in an antique shop they had seen when walking around Paris. Around the same time, there was an inquiry from a customer about the feasibility of producing beads which differed from traditional round seed beads that would be suitable for weaving in terms of shape. *Delica* beads, which differ from seed beads

in that their shape is more cylindrical than round, were soon to follow.

*Delica* beads (their name taken from the word 'delicate') are a relatively new type of bead first offered in 1982. Since then they have grown in popularity both for loomed and off-loom beadwork. The color range of the most popular size 11, (1.3mm long x 1.6mm wide with an inside hole diameter of 0.8mm) includes 800-900 colors with a variety of finishes including gold lustre lustre, silver-lined, colour-lined, AB (rainbow), iridescent and matte. When new colours are being considered, the head of production presents a range to the president of the company, Mr. Katsouka, who makes the final selection. Cylinder beads are also produced in a larger size referred to as size 8 and now also in size 10, slightly larger than the original *Delica* cylinder bead.

The most difficult aspect of making *Delica* beads is the cutting. Because the wall of the bead is thin, it is easily broken making cutting difficult. As a result of a continuous process of trial and error, Miyuki developed a cutting machine and method of heating cut pieces evenly so that the elegant and exquisite *Delica* beads would have a uniform and consistent shape. Miyuki followed through by developing their own original bead looms, purse frames, findings and instructions.

The process of making seed beads (including cylinder beads) resembles the old Venetian method of making drawn beads in many ways and is shown in picture overleaf. The process begins with raw materials, silica, soda and the base colouring ingredients, many of which are imported to Japan. These are melted in a furnace at 1400°C. The glass is then moved from the furnace to the pot which has a hole in the bottom. The shape of the hole determines the outer shape of the bead such as round, triangular or square. Compressed air is forced through a tube in the bottom of the pot to make the hole in the glass tube. The tube is pushed along a conveyor belt and cools slightly as it travels. At the end of the belt the tube is cut into lengths of about a metre. These tubes are gathered into bundles for cutting into the length for the various bead types.

Cutting takes place on the second floor. Using a rotating steel blade and positioned horizontally, the tubes are placed in the machine and advance vertically as the blade slices off the required length. The cutting process perhaps represents the biggest departure from the Venetian and Czech methods in which a double-bladed guillotine positioned vertically was used to cut the glass tubes which advanced horizontally.

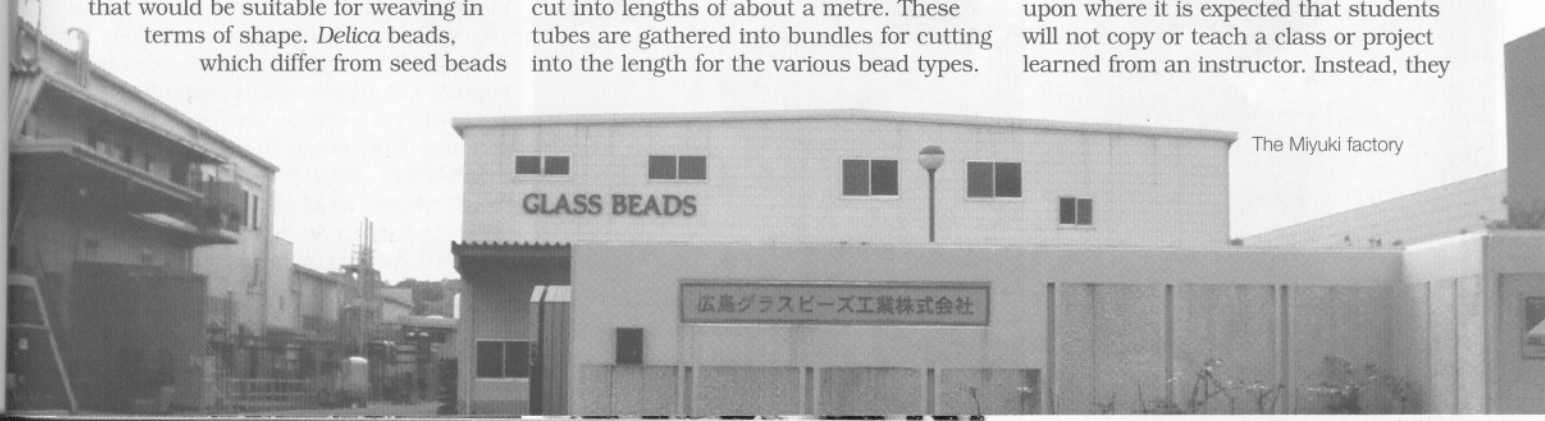
The cut pieces are mixed with carbon powder and heated to 700°C to round and eliminate the sharp edges. The carbon powder is rinsed off the beads with water (carbon is filtered from the water before it is returned to the water system.) but the beads are not glossy so they are returned to the kiln to be reheated. The beads are enhanced by dyeing, silver- and gold-lining, plating and lustre coating. The beads are washed and dried again before they are packaged and shipped to supply ardent bead artists in Japan, Europe and North America.

Bead weaving with *Delica* beads immediately evoked a strong response from handicraft enthusiasts in Japan and the company received many requests to teach the process. Miyuki began to train teachers and established the 'Delica Bead Loom Association' in 1984. The aim of this association is to develop bead weaving schools throughout Japan and to educate and train teachers. The head office of the association was established in Fukuyama and branch offices soon followed in Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya as the association grew.

## The Delica Bead Loom Association

The Delica Bead Loom Association, now in its 23rd year, resembles the British City and Guilds model of needlework training in that there is a three-tiered hierarchy of instructors, associate masters and master instructors as well as student members. This is in contrast to beadwork teacher development in the USA where there is no association accredited training course or diploma to confer credibility and status. Instead, US beadwork teachers are largely self-taught and their status depends on their ability to teach, their designs, authorship of books and magazine articles, and word-of-mouth comments from one student to another about the teacher, her instructions and her class demeanor.

Another marked contrast is that students who take a class from an instructor in Japan expect that they can eventually teach that class to others, while in the USA this is ethically not appropriate and highly frowned upon where it is expected that students will not copy or teach a class or project learned from an instructor. Instead, they



The Miyuki factory



Mrs. Katsuoka examines raw glass



Mr. Katsuoka near the melting oven



working melted glass

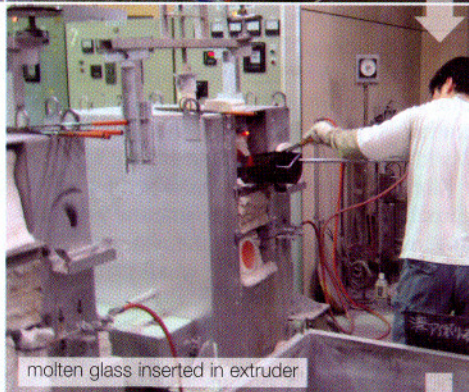
are expected to develop their own ideas and gain credibility and status in this way.

The Delica Bead Loom Association currently has about 4,000 members and 600 teachers at the various levels. General meetings are held annually in the various regions of Japan and a newsletter is sent to teachers. The association also holds exhibits of members' work usually at department stores, galleries, hotels and public halls. Students who achieve instructor status can purchase beads and

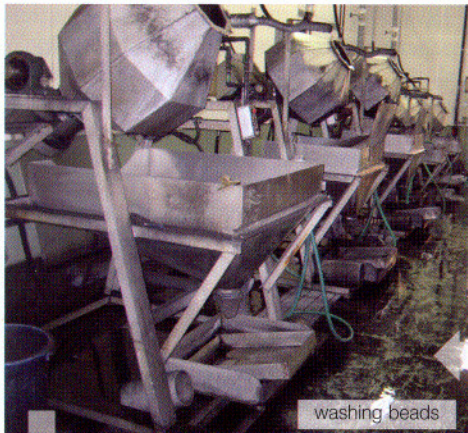
kits directly from Miyuki and sell them at retail to supplement the fees paid to them for teaching.

### Beads Factory Stores

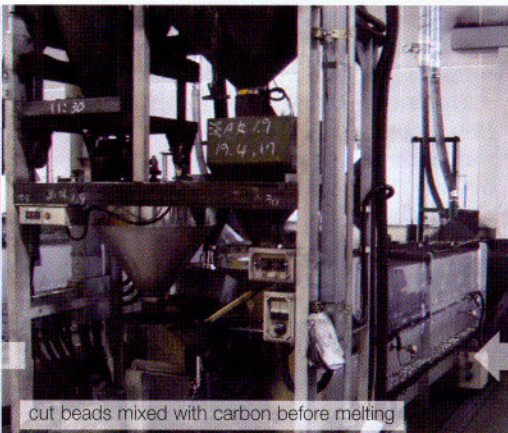
When bead weaving began to be popular in Japan, Miyuki realized there were few if any retail bead stores in Japan where beads could be purchased other than in small bags at craft shops, stationery stores, toyshops and similar places. Miyuki began its retail business, now managed



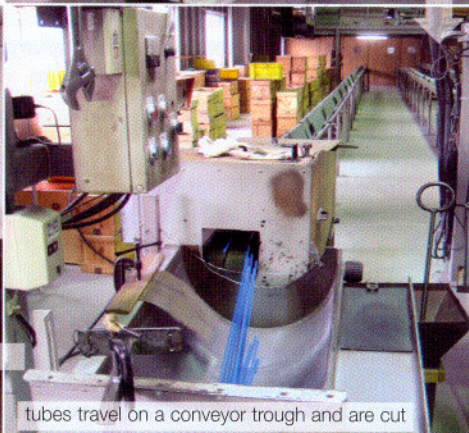
molten glass inserted in extruder



washing beads



cut beads mixed with carbon before melting



tubes travel on a conveyor trough and are cut



dried beads reheated to make them shine

by Makiko Katsouka, wife of Miyuki's president, with the opening of its first store - *Beads Factory* - in Fukuyama where the factory is located. Additional *Beads Factory* stores are located in Tokyo and Osaka. Beads are displayed in glass jars with seed beads priced per eight grams and weighed for the customer while larger beads are sold individually. Kits and an elegant range of findings are also offered. Staff at the shops encourage business and draw in customers by creating jewellery and interior decorating items and wearing or displaying them in the shop windows and throughout

the shops.

An interesting boost for the bead business came about in 1997 when football became popular in Japan and professional players began to wear an international good luck charm, the *misanga*. A *misanga* is made with embroidery floss or heavy thread and is similar to friendship bracelets which originated in Brazil. It may be made with basic knots with a pattern or as a three-strand plaited braid. These became a fashion item among young people and led to an increased interest in crafts and thus to beads.

The next boom in beads began around 2000 and centred on Swarovski crystals. Japanese Princess Masako wore a necklace made with Swarovski bicones and popular actresses began making bead jewellery for themselves or as gifts. Ring kits also were popular among women, broadening the age range of interest in beads.

A magazine, *Beads News*, was first published in Japan in 2001 by Kobunnya which showed bead enthusiasts modelling jewellery they made themselves. This triggered the opening of many more bead shops in Japan, sales on the Internet and exchange of ideas through classes by US, UK and Japanese teachers.



dyeing



Mr and Mrs Katsuoka with the author...

... and a few million beads!

