

The Beautiful Berber Beads

Diane Fitzgerald

BEAD PHOTOS BY
DIANE FITZGERALD



Unusual egg-sized silver and enamel beads.

Balleek! Balleek!" the old man shouted at me as he approached on his donkey loaded with bundles. I jumped aside just in time and watched as the animal plodded slowly past me. I was in a narrow dim passageway of the *souk* (marketplace) in the ancient city of Marrakech, Morocco, on my eternal search for beads. The souk is to Moroccans what the mall is to

Americans. Here every type of goods used in daily life can be purchased. From tiny stalls sometimes less than four feet wide vendors sell thread and fabric, spices, clothing, electronic goods, produce, fresh meat, and many other things. If I were lucky, I hoped to find the coveted Berber beads of silver and enamel in combinations of blue, yellow, and green.

It was late afternoon and we had just entered the souk from the huge and bustling main square, *Jamaa el Fna*, which was thronged with people enjoying something like a carnival. Snake charmers had staked out their area and their cobras "stood" at attention (honest!). Women roved through the crowds offering to draw exquisite designs in henna on your hands or feet. Wild dancers whirled and sang as they beat their tambourines. Acrobats balanced on each other's shoulders. Food stalls were everywhere and the aroma of freshly-squeezed orange juice mingled with the scent of lamb skewers being grilled. Monkeys chattered as they waited to pose with you for a photograph. Everywhere older people dressed in the traditional *djellaba* (a long hooded garment worn by men and women) with pointed-toe slippers and crocheted hats enjoyed the spectacle side-by-side with

younger people in jeans, jackets, and tennis shoes.

Since I speak no Arabic and little French, the two dominant languages in Morocco, I had tried to learn the Arabic words for "I want beads"; they sound like "Breet le keek." And even though my French was slightly better, no one could understand me. So instead, I was wearing a sample of the type of bead I was looking for. A few years ago, I had traded a Tom Boylan bead with a German collector for five exquisite examples of Berber beads, not knowing that they would eventually lead me to this awesome place.

In the souk, one has only to indicate an interest in something and a guide will soon present himself and invite you to follow him to a shop of a brother, a



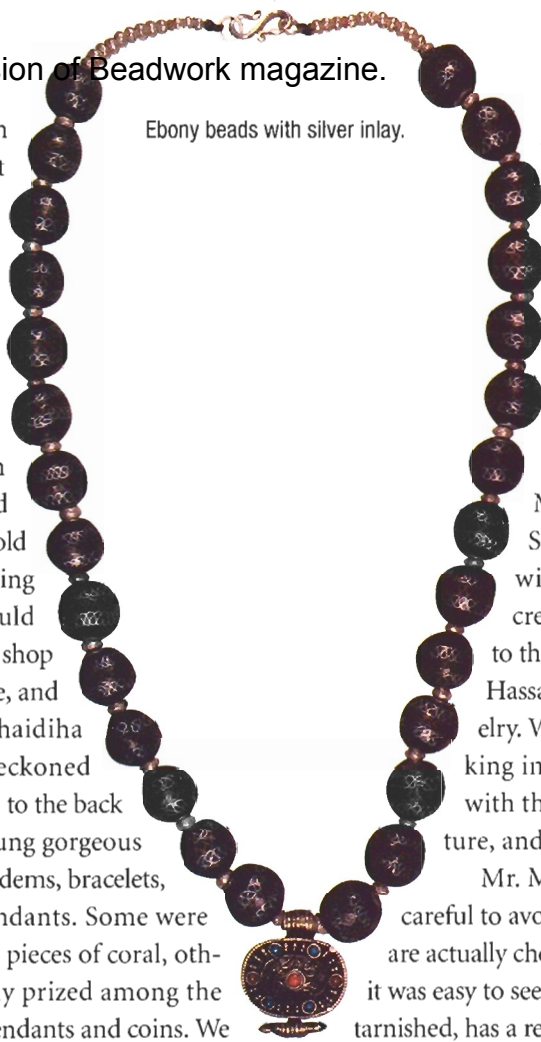
PHOTO BY MICHAEL MALLON

Shopping for beads. A photo on the wall shows Mr. Dhaidiha Mohamed presenting jewelry to King Hassan II.

cousin, or a friend which may (or may not) have what you want. A dear little old man had just done so and I was following quickly behind him, deeper and deeper into the souk, wondering if I'd ever find my way out again. After a five-minute walk, we stopped in front of a shop called Chinguett which was full of old Berber jewelry. After thanking my guide (knowing he would be compensated later by the shop owner) I held up my sample, and the shop owner, Mr. Dhaidiha Mohamed, smiled. He beckoned with his finger to follow him to the back of his shop. On the walls hung gorgeous pieces of jewelry, fibulas, diadems, bracelets, anklets, necklaces, and pendants. Some were strung with large and small pieces of coral, others with amber, both highly prized among the Berbers, along with silver pendants and coins. We sat on small benches while he brought mint tea and then produced a small jar of the beads I was looking for. We began our transaction.

Every purchase in Morocco involves bargaining which ideally is something to be enjoyed in a friendly way. It gives the purchaser time to evaluate the goods and the seller time to evaluate the buyer's desire and hence the highest amount he can ask. The mint tea, which is part of every prolonged transaction, is a sign of respect and should not be refused. To begin the negotiations, the guide books recommend that one offer one-third to one-half the amount initially suggested by the seller. At first, this seems like a real low-ball bid, but it allows the buyer to raise her offer slightly and to eventually end up at about half the original price, which may be about fair. After a few tries, one gets better at it, but perhaps a Westerner used to fixed prices is never completely comfortable. Sometimes walking out of a shop brings the seller around to your way of thinking on the

Ebony beads with silver inlay.



price. If they don't follow you out, you know the price is firm and you can always go back and pay what is asked if you really want it.

I selected several beads and asked to see some of the complete necklaces and a fibula, a pin worn by Berber women to secure a shawl. Fortunately, Mr. Mohamed spoke some English. So our bargaining continued with small talk. To improve his credibility, Mr. Mohamed pointed to the picture of him presenting King Hassan II with a piece of antique jewelry. While we had seen pictures of the king in many shops, this was the first with the owner of the shop in the picture, and he seemed quite proud of it.

Mr. Mohamed also warned me to be careful to avoid beads that look like silver but are actually cheap pot metal. Comparing them, it was easy to see the difference. Silver, even when tarnished, has a recognizable surface texture, color, and weight. Pot metal is lighter in weight, somewhat brownish in color with a dull finish.

Mr. Mohamed admired my necklace which was rather conservative by Berber standards. I explained that some of the beads were Moroccan, some from Bali, Indonesia, and the clear light brown beads were



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from the Czech Republic. “Not amber?” he asked. “No,” I said, “glass,” and I indicated that I had strung the necklace myself. He raised his eyebrows and smiled as he produced a necklace he had strung. It contained multiple strands of small garnet beads interspersed with three silver and enamel beads each the size of a small egg. The latter took my breath away! Their condition was perfect, the areas of enamel were small and delicate, and they included the less often seen turquoise color along with yellow and blue. (You’ve all heard a bead scream, “Take me! I’m yours!”) He was willing to sell just the set of three large beads without the garnets and we quickly agreed on the price. (So much for bargaining! Those beads were mine!)

I selected a few more beads, a small pendant, and a fibula, and he weighed them to determine the beginning price. Then we went back and forth on the amount—he offered his “best price,” then I offered mine until we met somewhere about in the middle. As he wrapped the items, I asked if he knew anyone else who had old Berber beads. “Of course, madam. Come with me and I will show you the shop of my brother.” And off we went.

That night, as I lay in my hotel room with the beads under my pillow, I relived the events of the day. In my mind’s eye, I could see a kaleidoscope of colorful detailed geometric patterns exploding through my mind and suggesting all that I had seen that day. Morocco is a wonderful country and I’d go back again in a minute. ☺

To see more of the jewelry available in this region of Africa you may want to look at *Africa Adorned* by Angela Fisher and Carol Beckwith. Morocco is located on the northwest coast of Africa along the Atlantic Ocean.



A full antique fibula pair and pendant prayer box worn by Berber women.

If you are traveling to Morocco, Diane would be happy to share her list of shops where she found good silver beads. Contact her at dmbeads@bitstream.net

Diane Fitzgerald's life is focused on beads. She collects them, writes about them, teaches beadwork, and creates with beads.



A Moroccan shopping tray filled with beads.



A Moroccan shop ceiling dripping with strung beads from India.