

Designing with Art Glass Beads

BY DIANE FITZGERALD

Tips for beginning-to-intermediate bead jewelers.

Designing a necklace or bracelet with today's art glass beads presents some surprising challenges because the beads themselves are unique. Beadmakers today have tools like graphite paddles and computer controlled kilns, as well as materials such as dichroic glass. They approach beadmaking as 20th century artists, concentrating on expressing their ideas and emotions rather than producing large quantities of identical beads. As a result, beads are often large and present a strong style. The downside is that the beads may be relatively expensive compared to mass produced beads. Having only one or a few beads to begin with — where do we go from here? The following is my personal approach to answering this question.

Reviewing your beads.

Gather your glass beads and study them carefully. You probably bought them because they "spoke" to you — reached out and grabbed you with their irresistibility. Now that they're yours, what do they tell you? If you're unsure about reading their message, ask yourself these questions: Which colors are dominant and which are background? How do they relate to each other? Are the colors bright and distinct or muted, as though they are all mixed with a little beige or gray. Are they pastel, as though they were all mixed with a little white powder? Is the finish shiny or dull? Is the piece transparent or opaque? Does it have texture? What is the character or style of the bead or pendant? Is it formal or informal? Is it something you would wear with jeans, or to an artist's opening? Are the lines and shapes within the piece curving or straight? What do the shapes suggest? What mental picture can you begin to build if you close your eyes and let your mind freely associate with other things you've seen?



Above: Pendant by Mollie Haskins, necklace by Diane Fitzgerald.
Left: The International Bracelet has beads from France, Austria, Germany, Japan, the Czech Republic, Italy, and the U.S.
Above left: Glass bead by Angela Green, other beadwork by Diane Fitzgerald.
All photos courtesy of Diane Fitzgerald.

Planning your necklace.

After you have thought about the beads, begin to think about the necklace as a whole. The following questions should help you to put your stash of beads together: What kind of overall shape do you want — a rope, a collar, a bib, or a flat, V-shaped piece? How long should it be? How will you space the beads to achieve rhythm? Which beads will add variety and how will they be unified? For example, you can have beads in many shapes — but will they all be red, or have shades of red to unify them? Movement is always an eye-catcher. Is there a way to get movement into the necklace with fringe or dangles? Where does your eye go first? Where does it travel next? What kind of a line does your eye follow? Does it meander, glide, or dart about?

Placing your focal bead.

With these thoughts in mind, or even with a few written notes and sketches, begin to think about the next phase — putting it all together. Often before I fall asleep at night, I think about how to design a necklace, picturing various arrangements in my mind. Sometimes I think my brain processes the information while I sleep, because I wake up



with several ideas ready and waiting in the morning.

Your first decision should involve placement of the focal piece. Do you want the focal piece to be integrated into the overall necklace, or do you want it to be framed, contrasted, or set off from the rest of the piece? Are the beads you plan to use in proportion to the focal piece? Should the focal bead be placed in the center, or off to one side? If it's off-center, what will you put on the other side to balance it? You can use either shapes or colors to balance an asymmetrical arrangement. Next, will you have several strands, or one strand? What assembly techniques will you use? What knots, cord, and clasp?

Selecting stringing material.

Once you have come up with your design, carefully consider the type of cord that will use; the first concern is strength. Will it support the weight of the beads without breaking? Will it resist abrasion, stretching, and deterioration? Will the beads hang appealingly without looking stiff and motionless?

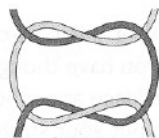
Color is another point you should think about. Will the knots between the beads be a design feature? Are the beads translucent?

There are many options when choosing a cord material, once you have made a decision about the qualities you want it to have. Nylon cord used for upholstery and draperies works well. Bead cord is heat-set nylon cord available in weights F (lightest) to FFF (heaviest). For very small beads, use thread in weights A, B, or D. Monofilament fishing line is not recommended, as after a few years it becomes brittle and breaks. Natural fibers such as silk, linen, waxed linen, cotton (for knotting between beads, consider the great colors in embroidery floss), raffia, hemp, or leather all work well. Don't forget the metals available: beading wire and tiger tail are both fine, steel wires encased in plastic, and fine chain (fox tail). There are numerous other materials you should also keep in mind, such as ribbon, satin cord, rat tail, shoelaces, and wire.

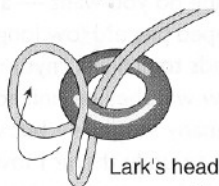
Some useful knots are overhand, square, and lark's-head or sales-tag knot.



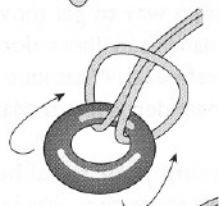
Overhand



Square



Lark's head



Assembling your necklace.

Cover the table with a towel to keep the beads from rolling. Begin the actual assemblage of the necklace by trial and error; make a small section of a necklace and see how it looks. Don't be afraid of taking it apart and starting over, not all pieces come together immediately. One necklace of mine featured a fused glass pendant of the human form and didn't come together satisfactorily until the fourth try! If things really don't work out, try different beads. Look carefully at the colors and shapes then start fresh, after you've let things sit for awhile.

If all else fails, try the technique used by talented necklace designer Shawn Judge of Minneapolis, Minnesota. She "throws the bones," meaning she takes a handful of beads, shakes them up a bit, then throws them like dice on her table. The way they land is the way they will be assembled. (This method can pose a bit of a challenge when some beads land on top of each other!)

Looking for inspiration.

The process of design can challenge both your imagination and skill. Look for inspiration in the objects of your daily life: telephone lines, rock fences, children's toys, and wrinkles on faces. Each necklace will require different methods and materials depending on the beads, design, and your own personal techniques. Experiment — but think like an architect, designer, and engineer. ★

Diane Fitzgerald is a bead artist who teaches and writes about beads and beadwork. Visit her Web site, www.diane.fitzgerald.com, to see more of her work, her class schedule, and her kits.



Diane Fitzgerald