

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



*My tenth birthday was just two days away and a package had already arrived from Aunt Suzie in New York! I was so excited I could hardly wait to open it, but Mother said I had to wait until my birthday. We lived in a small Midwestern town and it was the Depression, so money was scarce and stores didn't carry a lot of unusual things compared to what was available in New York. I knew Aunt Suzie would send something special—she always did. The box looked like it might have pajamas or a blouse inside, but it rattled! What could it be?*

*My birthday finally arrived and I opened my gift. It was a kit with lots of colorful beads, string, needle, and instructions to make a table mat to put under hot dishes or plants. I loved to make things so I couldn't wait to get started!*

—Fictionalized recollection

# Tile Bead Mats

Diane Fitzgerald

Making tile bead mats was a popular hobby for children and adults in the 1930s and 1940s. It provided a pleasant pastime that resulted in a decorative item to brighten a table. The beads, which were inexpensive and came in many colors, were tubular with large holes and measured about  $\frac{3}{8}$ " long and about  $\frac{1}{4}$ " in diameter. The beads resemble today's plastic "perlen" beads that are placed on a pegged form and ironed to make them adhere to each other. The tile bead mats were made using peyote stitch and sometimes brick stitch, both easy-to-learn techniques. Depending on the size, one could complete a mat in an evening or two. They were often 6" in diameter, but larger ones up to 12" were also available. The beads were occasionally used for jewelry or making a basket over a wire or glass form.

My first tile mat was included in a box of miscellaneous beads my mother found at a flea market, and it was broken into several pieces. I could see that it was supposed to be star shaped and tried to put it back together, but some beads were missing. So I put it away and didn't think too much about it until I found another one and my collection was born. You know, "Buy one of something and it's an oddity, buy two and you're on your way to a collection."

I soon found that the tile bead mat kits I collected were one of many colorful beadwork kits offered by the Walco Company in the 1930s, familiar to many beadworkers for their Indian Bead Loom Kits. The Walco Company, also known as the Walbead Company, Walcraft Company, and later as the Walco Toy Company, made three variations of the Tile-Craft Kit for mat-making: Number 1210 kit was a single boxed set and Number 1211 was a little more elaborate with two drawers and more beads. The most exciting kit had three drawers, each with a separate bead kit: a Tile-Craft Kit (No. 1200) in the top drawer, a Bead Jewelry and Marionettes Outfit (No. 1800) in the middle drawer, and the Snowflake Jewelry Outfit (No. 2900) in the bottom drawer. Imagine getting that extravaganza for Christmas!

# Walco Bead Co.

Importers and  
Manufacturers

37 WEST 37th ST.  
New York 18, N. Y.

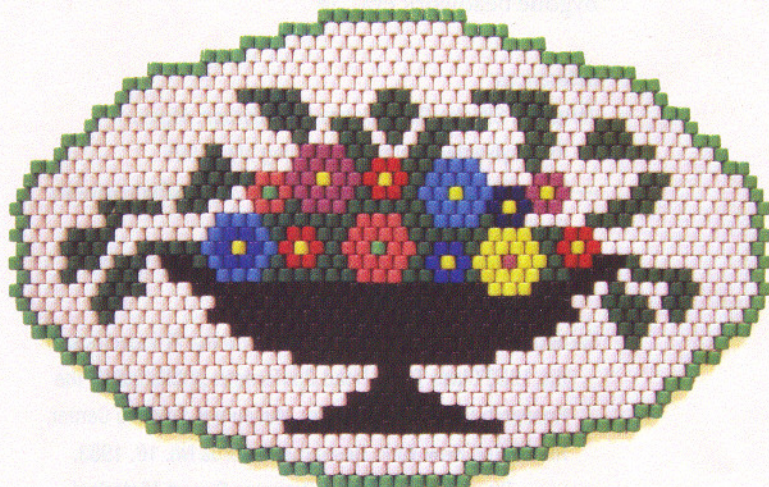
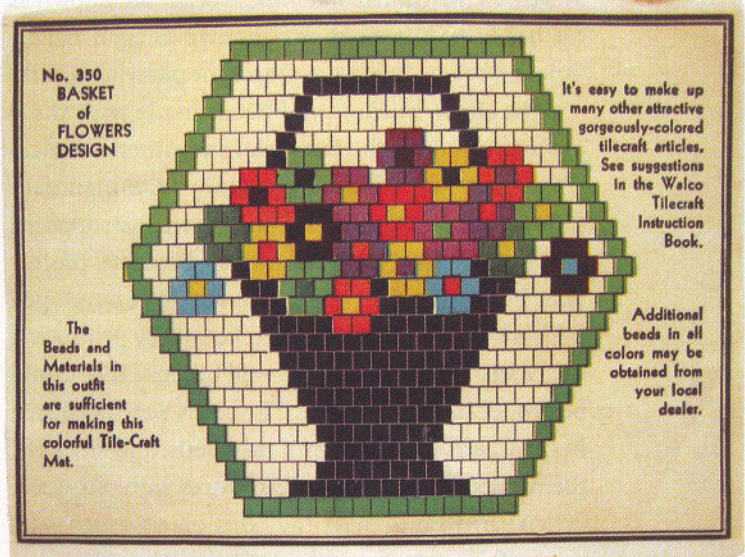
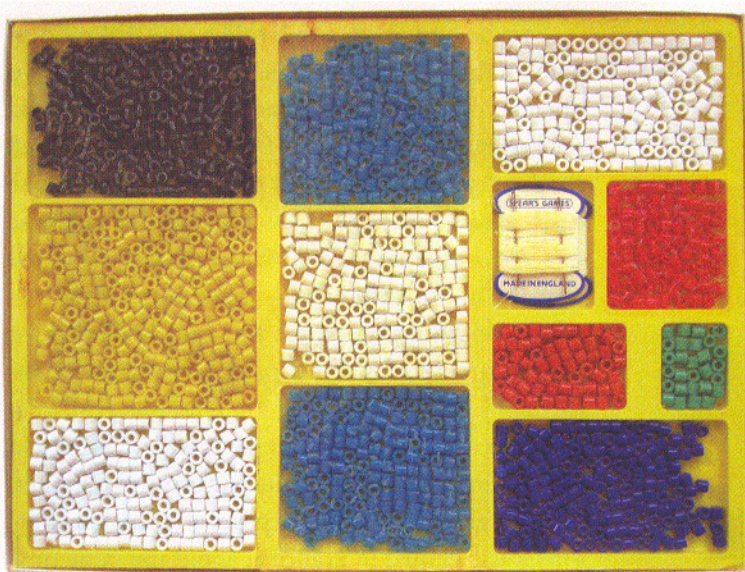
## STYLE N°1205 TILE-CRAFT BEADS

COLOR NO.	SYMBOL	COLOR NAME	COLOR NO.	SYMBOL	COLOR NAME
201		WHITE	232	+	CREAM
246	■	YELLOW	235	△	TAN
279	☆	LT. GREEN	238	⊠	MED. BROWN
280	⊙	MED. GREEN	239	●	DK. BROWN
282	⊗	DK. GREEN	253	⊘	SALMON

219	□	LT. BLUE	203	⊞	PEARL
224	⊕	MED. BLUE	249	○	ORANGE
226	▲	DK. BLUE	264	≡	MED. PINK
268	⊥	LAVENDER	266	⊗	DK. PINK
273	△	GRAY	252	⊗	CORAL
202	■	BLACK	256	□	RED

NOTE: WHEN ORDERING, MENTION CLEARLY STYLE  
N° 1205 AND COLOR NUMBERS WANTED.

COLOR 201 WHITE IS SHOWN BLANK ON ALL DESIGNS.



Today, one can occasionally find the tile bead mats at antique shows, flea markets, or on eBay reasonably priced from \$5 to \$10, and up to \$25 or more for a mat at least 12" in diameter. Sometimes, one can find entire intact kits which contain all the supplies and instructions for making a tile bead mat. Walco also offered extra supplies by mail order—design paper, colored pencils, needles, pincers, and cord. Perhaps the most interesting accessory available was the Tile Craft Design Board, a 9" × 12" board with notches in which beads could be laid to aid in designing or actual beading.

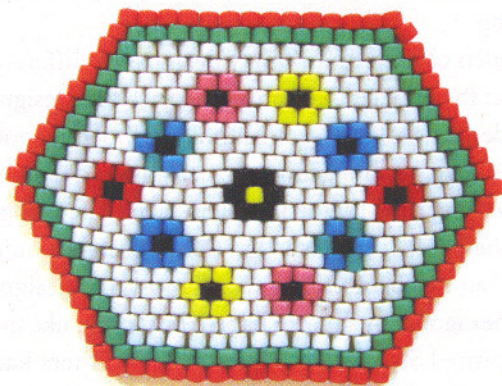
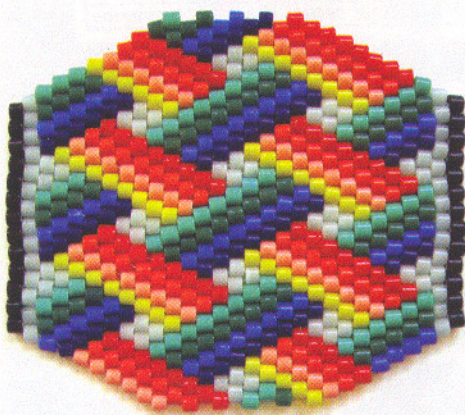
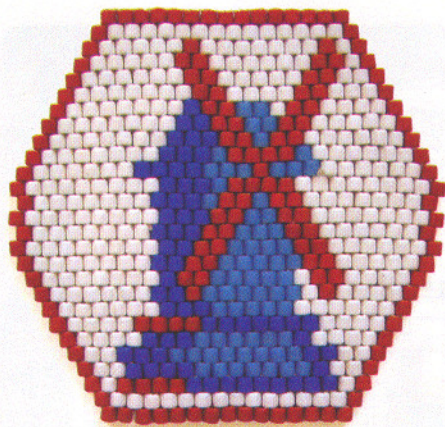
Walco offered up to thirty designs for different mats in the booklet that came with each kit. Designs included a floral basket, windmill, sailboat, teapot, dragon, flag, several geometric designs, and a set of four playing card-themed coasters called The Bridge Set. The booklet suggests that these coasters would make "an excellent bridge prize." Most mat designs were hexagonal or square shaped, but some, like the Six-Pointed Star, had complex shapes; others had intricate floral borders.

Sample cards of tile beads sold by the Walco Company in the 1930s show a nice range of twenty-two opaque colors. Under the Panther Head trademark, the Redlhammer Bros. Co. of Czechoslovakia offered sixty opaque colors and eight sizes of tile beads. These beads have an interesting history and give us a glimpse into the competitiveness of the bead industry of the time. Before zippers, buttons were the primary closure for clothing, and there was a ready market for cheap buttons for underwear and everyday garments. In 1840 Richard Prosser of England was granted a patent to make knobs and rings, as well as beads and buttons, out of clay and feldspar ground together, molded, and fired. A similar process for making buttons was patented in France at about the same time by Jean Felix Bapterosse and was soon applied to beads as well. In the United States these beads are known as tile beads, in Europe they're known as agate beads, Oriental beads, Bapterosse beads, or porcelain beads.

The cheap buttons and beads made with these processes flooded the European and American markets and dealt a cruel blow to Bohemian manufacturers who up until then had been the major suppliers. However, by 1884 the Redlhammer Brothers, prominent Bohemian glass manufacturers, had developed their own formula and were successfully producing tile beads. These beads sold well because they could be produced more cheaply. Tile beads were produced in the Czech Republic until the 1960s, and stocks of them are still available in bead stores with old stock. When turned into mats and hung on a kitchen wall, they offer a colorful and interesting glimpse into a bygone beadwork era. ☺

#### References

- Jargstorf, Sibylle. *Glass Beads from Europe*. Atglen, Pennsylvania: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 1995.
- . *Baubles, Buttons and Beads*. Atglen, Pennsylvania: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 1993.
- . *Glass in Jewelry*. Atglen, Pennsylvania: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 1991.
- Sprague, Roderick. *Tile Bead Manufacturing*. Proceedings of the 1982 Glass Trade Bead Conference published by the Research Division, Rochester Museum & Science Center, Rochester, New York, Research Records No. 16, 1983.
- . *Glass Trade Beads: A Progress Report*. Historical Archaeology, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1985.



# Cherries in the Snow

**M**ake your own tile bead mat with a cherry design following the brick-stitched pattern below. This pattern may also be worked in peyote stitch.

## Materials

54 red tile beads  
385 white tile beads  
25 medium green tile beads  
110 green tile beads  
2 black tile beads  
Conso #18 cord, FF bead cord, or similar

## Notions

Scissors  
Size 22 tapestry needle

Pattern is worked from the top downward. *Increase at the beginning and end of Rows 2–13.*

Row 1: 15 green.

Row 2: 1 green, 14 white, 1 green.

Row 3: 1 green, 15 white, 1 green.

Row 4: 1 green, 16 white, 1 green.

Row 5: 1 green, 3 white, 3 medium green, 6 white, 2 medium green, 3 white, 1 green.

Row 6: 1 green, 4 white, 1 medium green, 1 green, 2 medium green, 3 white, 3 medium green, 4 white, 1 green.

Row 7: 1 green, 5 white, 1 medium green, 1 green, 2 medium green, 2 white, 1 medium green, 1 green, 1 medium green, 5 white, 1 green.

Row 8: 1 green, 6 white, 2 medium green, 1 green, 1 medium green, 1 white, 1 medium green, 1 green, 1 medium green, 6 white, 1 green.

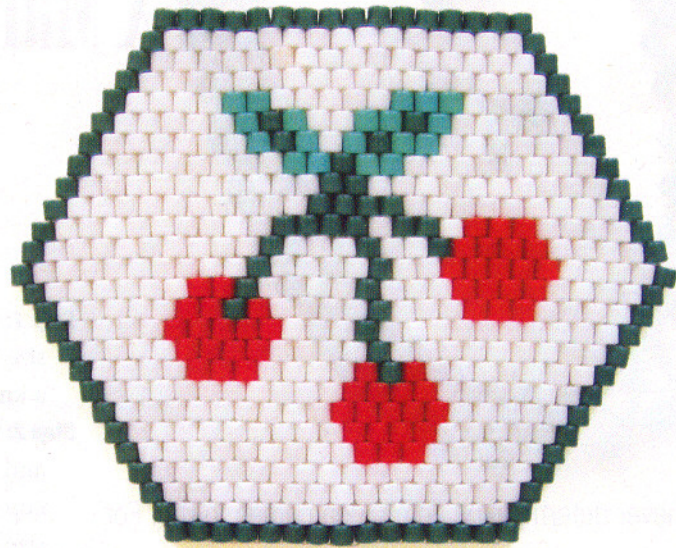
Row 9: 1 green, 8 white, 2 medium green, 1 green, 2 medium green, 8 white, 1 green.

Row 10: 2 black, 1 green, 10 white, 2 green, 10 white, 1 green.

Row 11: 1 green, 9 white, 4 green, 10 white, 1 green.

Row 12: 1 green, 4 white, 3 red, 1 white, 2 green, 1 white, 4 green, 9 white, 1 green.

Row 13: 1 green, 4 white, 4 red, 1 green, 2 white, 1 green, 3 white, 1 green, 9 white, 1 green.



*Decrease at beginning and end of Rows 14–27.*

Row 14: 4 white, 5 red, 2 white, 1 green, 4 white, 1 green, 9 white.

Row 15: 1 green, 4 white, 4 red, 3 white, 1 green, 4 white, 1 green, 2 red, 6 white, 1 green.

Row 16: 1 green, 4 white, 3 red, 3 white, 1 green, 4 white, 1 red, 1 green, 2 red, 5 white, 1 green.

Row 17: 1 green, 10 white, 1 green, 3 white, 5 red, 4 white, 1 green.

Row 18: 1 green, 9 white, 1 green, 4 white, 4 red, 4 white, 1 green.

Row 19: 1 green, 7 white, 1 red, 1 green, 1 red, 4 white, 3 red, 4 white, 1 green.

Row 20: 1 green, 6 white, 4 red, 10 white, 1 green.

Row 21: 1 green, 5 white, 5 red, 9 white, 1 green.

Row 22: 1 green, 5 white, 4 red, 9 white, 1 green.

Row 23: 1 green, 5 white, 3 red, 9 white, 1 green.

Row 24: 1 green, 16 white, 1 green.

Row 25: 1 green, 15 white, 1 green.

Row 26: 1 green, 14 white, 1 green.

Row 27: 15 green. ©

## Sources for tile beads

Eagle Feather Trading Post, 168 W. 12th St., Ogden, UT 84404; (801) 393-3991 or EglCrafts@aol.com.

Harman Importing Co., 95 Bi-County Blvd., Farmingdale, NY 11735-3919; 1-800-BEADS NY.

Diane Fitzgerald, based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, is a bead collector who teaches and writes frequently about many kinds of beads and beadwork. Visit [www.dianefitzgerald.com](http://www.dianefitzgerald.com).



