

A Slice of the Bead Pie (or My Life in Beads)

by Diane Fitzgerald

(From an illustrated talk given at our AGM in July 2001, with small adaptations - Ed)

I am going to tell you how beads changed my life. This may sound like I am trying to be profound, but I am sure many of you could say the same. They have pushed me to learn history. They have brought me new friends and put me in contact with people as diverse as Zulu women of South Africa and bead traders from around the world. Beads have meant financial gain - not riches, just a little money. Beads have given me immense pleasure both as something to be enjoyed aesthetically and as a creative outlet and mental challenge. I cannot begin to tell you the fun I've had since I got into collecting beads, writing about beads and working with beads. So let me tell you my story.

It seems most introductions to the subject of beads begin with "Since prehistoric man first strung the tooth of a sabre-toothed tiger, we have been wearing beads..." so I didn't want to disappoint you. Beads fell on fertile ground when I first held them in my hands. I come from a long line of needleworkers. I have a picture of my Danish great great grandmother sitting by a window, bent over her lace-making pillow. Her daughter emigrated to the USA and lived her entire life in a log cabin in northern Wisconsin, stitching every day on quilts, embroidery and lace as well as the necessary

clothing and household goods. My grandmothers on both sides of my family were also needleworkers as is my mother who is now 87 and still loves to stitch.

I have a frame which holds a picture of my mother holding me as a baby. The frame, which is a type of 'Whimsy' beadwork made by the Seneca Indians of the Northeast (see newsletter 58, p11-15), was given to me by my mother. She has always encouraged me in anything with a needle and thread. I think there must be a gene for liking needlework and I consider myself very lucky to be a recipient of it. My older sister wasn't so lucky. She is completely inept and once hemmed her coat with electrical tape rather than pick up a needle.

My father was also an influence, encouraging me to learn about photography which is good training for looking at detail and composition. When I was about eight, my father showed me how to make a pinhole camera and it worked! Later I used another camera to photograph my dollhouse furniture, which was good experience for photographing beadwork.

My brother was an influence too. He shared his enthusiasm for doing oriental rug designs in needlepoint. I copied a rug of my grandmothers, but for knitting I had to go to adult evening classes, since only my great



The Brighton

B.E.A.D.S.H.O.P.

Beads, books, findings, fimo & threads

The toast of the bead world

Send £3.50 for our 72 page large format full colour catalogue, redeemable against your first order over £10.

SAME DAY MAIL ORDER SERVICE WHOLESALE & RETAIL

The Brighton Bead Shop

Dept A, 21 Sydney St, Brighton, BN1 4EN

Tel: 01273-672481 Fax: 01273-689389

Web site: www.beadsunlimited.co.uk

E-mail: sales@beadsunlimited.co.uk

A FANTASTIC RANGE OF

SILVER "S" CLASPS

30 beautiful designs
plus soldered jump rings to suit
& a small range of gold clasps

Also

Old/new beads of silver, coral, amber, amazonite lapis, garnet, crystal, turquoise, agate, carnelian opal, moonstone etc

For details, send Addressed Envelope & 2 x 2nd class stamps to:

BCC, 7 Churton Place London SW1V 2LN
email Barbiecc@mail.com
Tel/Fax 020 7834 7474
(Minimum order £5)

grandmother, who is long gone, was a knitter. I still love to knit although the beads don't leave me much time for it and bead knitting just isn't my thing. The textures and colours of yarns available today just really make my fingers itch to knit again.

We're lucky where I live in Minnesota to have many fibre groups. One that I belonged to for several years was the Minnesota Quilters. At their monthly meetings and annual conference, I learned much about colour and design on a large scale.

At the University of Minnesota, I learned the elements and principles of design. This was good training and I have been using what I learned ever



Fig 1 (opposite) Diane at work

Fig 2 Large wire-beaded 'parrot' from Diane's collection.



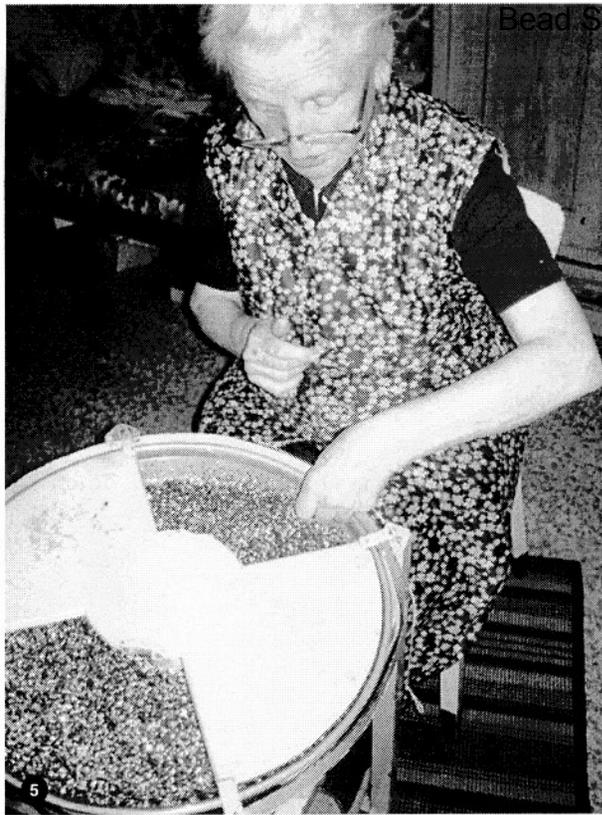
Figs 3 & 4 The "wiggly little piece, like a sea anemone" – probably a native american piece – which belonged to Horace Goodhue and which inspired Diane to write the book *Contemporary Beadwork II: Sea Anemone*.



since. There is nothing like spending an entire weekend mixing paint to create graduations of colour to really begin to understand colour and I highly recommend such classes.

I joined a small group of fibre artists, called *Diverse Directions*, mostly quilters who were doing non-traditional work, and began to branch out and try a few new things. One of the people in the group, Barb Hjort, became a very good friend. I admired her greatly because she was so much fun and so creative. When she asked me to join her on a trip to Chicago for a class at the Textile Art Center, I said yes without even asking what the class was. I knew if Barb liked it, it would be fun.

That was the weekend that really changed my life. I met Helen Banes and learned how to weave with beads. Helen is a fantastic artist



and an excellent teacher. I took careful notes of all the instruction Helen gave, and as I learned in Journalism School, typed up my notes as soon as I returned home.

I wove necklaces for about a year afterward and at the end of the year received a Second Place Award in *Fibres Minnesota*, a juried show for all types of fibre artists. At the show I met someone who had a large stash of beads to sell, and I was desperate for beads. At the time, there was only one bead store in Minneapolis that sold beads for native american work. After some negotiation, my husband and I loaded \$11,000 worth of beads in the trunk of our little Toyota and took them home.

With my notes in hand, a large stash of beads that I didn't know what to do with and people asking about the necklaces, I decided to try teaching it. Classes were fun - I held them in my husband's office (he's a computer consultant) and soon the idea of a book was sloshing around in my mind.

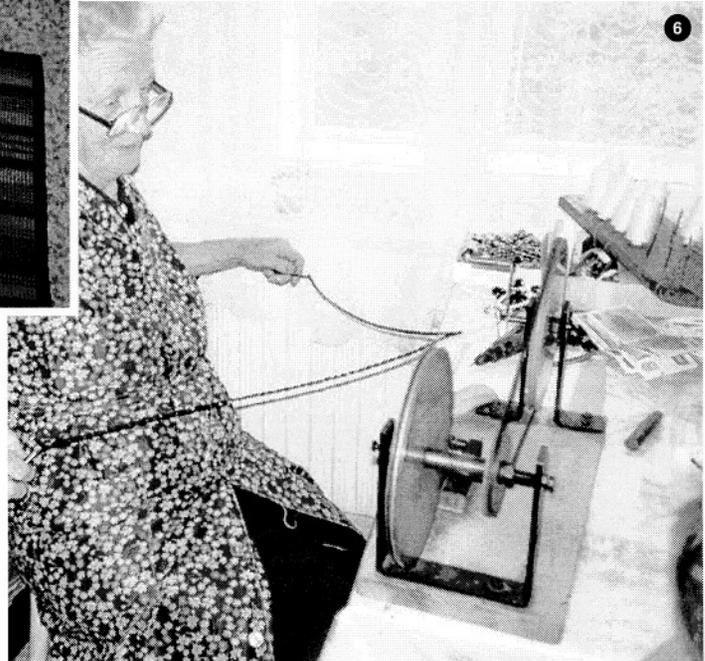
I contacted Helen, and she was delighted with the idea of a book. She had been teaching her technique for about 10-15 years at the time but still had very sparse instructions written down. We agreed that I would do the writing and she would provide the pictures. We were fortunate that the second publisher we contacted was interested - his wife was a weaver - and the book, *Beads & Threads* (now sadly out of print), was published in 1995. Some 25,000 copies were sold. Helen has now just completed a second book on her own, *Fiber and Beads* which simplifies the technique even further and contains many simpler patterns.

It was about the same time that there was an exhibit of beadwork of all kinds - wild stuff like a beaded Cadillac - at the J. Michael Kohler Gallery in Wisconsin. This exhibit was a real revelation. It turned me on to some of the things you could do with beads besides weave them and string them.

About this time I came across a little book by Horace Goodhue, *Indian Bead-weaving Patterns*, and noticed that he lived just across the river in St. Paul, so I called to see if he taught beadwork. He did and invited me to join his class where I learned several stitches. He set an example

for me in the way he documented native american techniques. His book is by far the most comprehensive when it comes to instructions in native american beadwork. He was never too happy with me though, because I wanted to do contemporary pieces instead of native american work.

While taking classes, Horace would show us pieces from his collection. When he brought out a wiggly little piece, like a sea anemone, I just fell in love with it (figs 3 & 4). He could see how absolutely crazy I was to do it and he loaned it to me. I remember taking it home in a little box and just being so delighted. This piece has quite a story. He found it in his mother's jewellery box after she died. Although Horace had collected native american beadwork since he was a youngster, she never told him about it. She grew up in North Dakota, and he thought it might



have been a gift from a native american friend. The colours that were used were coral, mustard, white, black and blue and an interesting diagonal chain.

When I got home, I examined it with a magnifying glass and tried to figure out how it was made. I tried several off-loom techniques, but they didn't work. One morning after about two weeks of pondering the problem, I woke up and knew that it must have been made on a loom. I called my office - I was working in public relations for an electric utility organisation at the time - and told them I'd like to take a vacation day. I then dug out my old wire loom from childhood. At 11pm that evening, I had made my first *Sea Anemone* piece.

The technique is unusual because there are beads on both the warp and the weft threads and the rows of fringes are added to the weft as it is woven, not added later. I am fairly certain this is how the original piece was made.

After writing *Beads & Threads*, I was getting better at writing instructions and I knew no-one had ever documented this technique so I did a little booklet explaining it. There is a second chapter to the story about the original piece. Horace and his wife, Orpha, always travelled to the Southwest to avoid Minnesota winters, and Horace would take his collection with them out of fear of it being stolen while he was away. One day, as they were driving, Orpha said, "I think I smell smoke!" and they had no more than pulled their van off to the side of the road than it went up in flames and with it, his collection and that wonderful little piece of beadwork. I'm happy I can pass this technique on to others now.

I continued to experiment with beadwork and for a time was fascinated with patterns which are an interesting mental exercise. I have an old Persian pattern, and as simple as it seems, it took me a while to get it right – and the amazing thing is that although it appears to be a repeating pattern, I have not been able to find the repeat along the horizontal or vertical edge.

My next undertaking was a self-published book of 50 patterns for peyote stitch. The patterns in the book are geometrics and florals that can be used in a variety of ways. I had watched the pleasure my mother had in doing counted cross stitch over the years and thought if I could provide patterns with more than just graphs, people would find that helpful. The book is unique in that it not only has the graph to show the pattern, but also the row-by-row bead counts written out, which at the time I wrote it was quite unusual. One of the things I've realised with teaching is that some people are picture-orientated and some, like my husband, are text-orientated. The book is for both of these types. It also has a *Bead-Line Guide* to identify the row you are working if you follow the graph.

Since then, I've written more books and my most recent is *Beading with Brick Stitch*, published by Interweave Press which came out in March 2001. The book is the fourth in a series of books each devoted to working with beads. It contains a history of brick stitch, several projects and a gallery of work from people across the USA. I like to brag that one week it ranked in the top 2000 on *Amazon.com's* list of a half million books – both fiction and non-fiction. I was quite pleased that such a specialist book could reach this point.



Fig 5 A Czech bead stringer in a small village near Jablonec uses a simple machine like a potter's wheel and several 6" threaded needles to thread beads.

Fig 6 The same lady shows how to twist strands of beads together for a necklace using another machine.

Fig 7 Button making using a pressing tong in the *Elegant Button* factory near Jablonec in 1993 (now closed down).

Fig 8 A worker in a Czech bead factory inserting a molten glass rod into a machine which clamps down, pressing many beads at a time.

Meanwhile, I began to collect and learn more about African beadwork and the tremendous variety of styles that Africans have invented to augment their ceremonies and to communicate information.

The Yoruba crown I have, worn by a chieftain, has several identifiable features – bold face, the tall triangular shape and the birds climbing up the sides and perched on top. It is completely covered with beads which are sewn to cloth and then glued to a leather form. Another part of the chief's regalia would be a pouch. Items such as these are pretty easy to obtain in the USA at bead shows and even occasionally at flea markets.

Maasai earrings are large, about six inches long and two inches wide. Because they are beaded on thick leather they are very heavy and their weight is supported by a string of beads worn over the top of the head.

Young Kuba women wear a beaded apron while dancing. The strands of shells at the bottom make a delightful sound when in use. The African trader I bought mine from told me shyly that they are worn with nothing underneath.

A flowerette necklace intrigued me for a long time. Finally, I came across a woman who was importing beadwork from South Africa and I asked her to send me a variety of pieces. In the box was another similar piece, which allowed me to identify it as Zulu. I ended up buying the whole box because they were so different from anything I had seen before.

I studied those pieces and tried to figure out how they were done. Sometimes, I would have to cut apart the piece, which is really scary because you don't know if you're at the beginning or end of the piece. I can honestly say, I've restored all the pieces I cut into. Out of that box of beadwork came my next book, *Zulu Beaded Chain Techniques*. These stitches are unusual, and very different from native American techniques. The Zulu people often loop one thread around another thread, rather than going through a bead. This may be because they used sinew without a needle and it was easier than going through a bead.

I like to use these techniques in new and different ways. I created a little basket based on the *Square Tube* instructions. The stitch has vertical ridges connected by rows of seed beads and can be used to make three-dimensional forms as well.

