

I have a theory that goes like this. If the oldest profession in the world is the realm of the (ahem) hired lady, then what would be the second oldest profession? Well, considering she had to be paid I would assume it is bead making. The oldest found piece of jewelry featured two snail shells that someone put a hole through and then ran a strip of leather through. The maker hung it around his or her neck and a fashion trend was born (still in use by the surfer/beatnik crowd, by the way). This particular piece of jewelry is thought to be 100,000 years old.

Imagine! 100,000 years ago somebody wanted to adorn themselves with beads, just like we do today.

And the trend has grown. Beads have been found in all regions of the world accompanying all of man's achievements and stages in his rise from the primordial ooze. They have been found in ancient Egyptian burials and in Anasazi cave dwelling in the Southwestern United States. The early Britons wore beads around their necks, as did remote tribes people in Africa.

They have been used as currency to trade for people (as in Africa) and for land (as in Manhattan). They have been—and still are—prized for their beauty and intricacy. Even today, contemporary and antique beads are considered valuable, collectable, and are worth thousands of dollars.

The oldest forms of beads were the type uncovered in North Africa, the snail shell beads. Seashells were commonly used by primitive jewelry makers because of their natural beauty and the ease with which they could be transformed into an amulet or bead. This method is still used, as in the Ni'ihua jewelry made with tiny shells on the smallest of the Hawaiian Islands.

This type of bead was transformed by a more advanced method. Bead makers began shaping beads into thin circles, called heishi. Stacked together these create a brilliant shell necklace. Again, this is still a common form of beaded jewelry.

Clay and ceramic beads, essentially mud that has been shaped and baked, then decorated, has been used for thousands of years. Not as old as using shell, but still one of the oldest methods. This method was used from Egypt to Greece and Rome, Africa, Europe and Africa.

Egyptian scarab beads are still a very popular type of bead in the Middle East. These beads are fashioned to look like the scarab beetle, then baked and painted.

Bead makers began using glass well over a thousand years ago. They mixed glass sand with dyes to create stunning colors, then first melted the glass and either cast beads in clay or sand casts, or they melted the glass into rods and then melted those into formed beads, wrapping the rods around a wire. Perhaps the highest forms of glass beads were those made in Venice hundreds of years ago.

Artisans made millifiore beads using colorful glass rods that resembled flowers. By melting these together into a mosaic they would make brilliant and intricate designs. These beads were traded all over the world, and found their way to Africa, the Americas and throughout the Middle East.

Bead making is a high art form, and artisans still create stunning works of art as has been done for hundreds of years. The next time you buy a beaded bracelet or necklace, think about all the history and tradition in the second oldest profession!