

Historical Embellishments

- Using Bead Embroidery

5000 Years of Beads - An Overview (Including bead applications)



15th Century Mantle Florette

HL Sine Gunnsdottir
Principality of Tir Righ
Kingdom of An Tir
(Written 1996 - 2007)
(Copyright - Janis M. James)

Janis M. James, © 2007

Individuals have my permission to print single copies of the pictures or texts on this site for private non-commercial research purposes, provided the copyright notice and this permission notice are preserved on all copies, for any other use please contact me directly. Remember most pictures belong to various museums, etc

Also note: this document is provided as you see it without any warranties. Every effort has been taken to ensure the accuracy of the information supplied, but I will assume no responsibility for any errors or omissions, or for any damage that may result from the use of the information contained herein.

Historical Overview:

Beads were perhaps mankind's first indulgent luxury. Bead embroidery was practiced long before the last major ice age, with beads fashioned from seashells, seeds, broken eggshells - any colourful discard of nature. Since the first person strung the first bead, almost every culture has prized beadwork.

The history of beadwork spans at least 5000 years. By about 2500 BC, we find from the tombs at Ur in Iraq that remarkable beadwork constructions were created from thousands of very tiny, fairly consistent lapis lazuli beads. There were sewn onto a base to create a covering layer of beadwork and made into a fillet or crown. This piece still exists today.

Archeologists digging into Stone Age graves on Israel's Mount Carmel in 1937 unearthed human skeletons that had been buried with elaborately beaded headdresses, made from the thin, splintered bones of small gazelles and from white dentalium, a kind of shell that still washes up on eastern Mediterranean shores. Many examples also come from the Egyptian tombs.

Whenever human beings have found time on their hands, they have shown an inclination to fill the empty moments by embellishing - walls with paintings, wood with carving, stories with anecdotes, clothes with embroidery & beads.

Excavations of Neolithic burial mounds in Europe have revealed scraps of wool or linen beautified by the primitive doodling of a crude bone needle. Early Egyptian palaces and tombs depict men and women wearing what appear to be richly embroidered clothes. Alexander the Great ordered a wonderfully embroidered & beaded Eastern robe when he conquered Persia in 331 BC.

For these ancients, embroidery was not only a high art, but a royal one, a token of status and luxury for kings, sultans, pharaohs and emperors, for whom designs were created out of precious gold and silver threads drawn through sumptuous fabrics. Sometimes the embroidery was further embellished with bright beads, peacock feathers, lustrous pearls and glittering gems. Gold and silver bezants were often used as beads to enhance.

In the Middle Ages beads were used to embellish **embroidery** work. In Renaissance and Elizabethan England, clothing, purses, fancy boxes, and small pictures were adorned with beads.

Glitter makes a magnificent show, and to royalty, nobles and wealthy people through the ages, that's good enough. Beads, spangles, studs, bezants, sequins, medallions, and other glittery bits of metal have decorated rich clothing for almost as long as we have surviving bits of clothing to see.

Pearls, rhinestones and other pretty bead trimmings are the sartorial equivalent of champagne - their mere presence suggests a festive occasion. Beads are a sensual pleasure to work with, and their own intrinsic beauty makes it easy to create objects of beauty. Beads are suitable for inclusion in many styles of embroidery. High-quality beads are a lasting, unfading, glowing art material. You can play with glass and not get burned! Beads open a door to adventure, history, romance and art.

The following pages show some of the more famous extant pieces of beadwork embellishment from history, particularly as it applies to our SCA timeframe, (although not in historical order as you view). Also please note that the extant items shown are from all through the European Known World and Middle East in a wide time range, and not "just" church items. Examples are approx. circa 1000 to 1700 CE as time allowed them to survive.



Lorenzo Lotto's - "Venus & Cupid
Mid 1520's (Venetian)



+ 89 679 Halberstadt, Diocesanmuseum, Hostienbüchse mit
Perlstickerei, 1.H. 13. Jh. Nr. 148 (Aufn. 1936)
13th Century Reliquary Box - German
- glass seed beads, bezants,
Halberstadt, Germany



Circa 1673 -Martha Edlin (England) This **jewelry case** is decorated with beadwork, a popular embroidery technique in the 17th century, in which tiny glass beads were threaded in sequence and sewn into place. The padded central panel lifts open to show a compartment for jewelry, lined with pink taffeta. The quality of glass beads and other material, and the involvement of a cabinet-maker in making the beadwork up into such a box, would mean that it could only be made within a household which could afford such outlay. Being such an intricate and relatively precious item, the case's owners would have handled it very gently; thus it remains in good condition today. Victoria & Albert Museum



Early 17th century, England (Elizabethan)
Leather embroidered with silk, metallic threads, and spangles; metallic bobbin lace.



Barmas of Tsar Alexei Michailovich
Gold, precious stones, fabrics; casting, Chasing, carving, enamels. 1642



Portrait of Elizabeth I (The Pelican Portrait)
Artist: Nicholas Hilliard, circa 1574



circa 1380, Venetian
Gold Leaf with spangles & Frise



Cuffs, Russia 1550, Velvet, silk, pearls and gold.



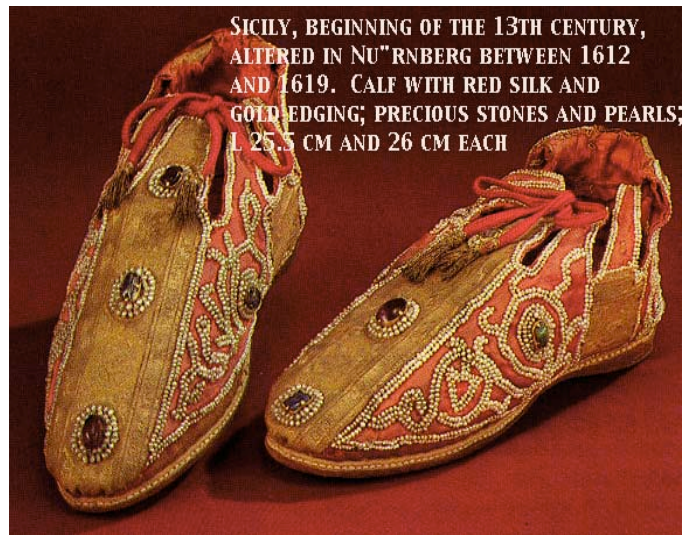
A beaded hat, Fernando de la Cerda
1275. The royal tombs at Burgos, Spain



The Sternenmantel of Heinrich II (or Star Mantle of Henry II) who was the last Saxon king of Germany and late in life, Holy Roman Emperor. The Sternenmantel was presented to Henry by Duke Ismahel of Bari. It was donated to Bamberg Cathedral by either Henry II or his wife, [St Kunigunde](#) (where it was used as a cope). The mantle is currently housed in the Bamber Cathedral Treasury. Years 1018 - 1024. With applied pearls & gold thread embroidery on silk.



1595, France, Silk Velvet with Metal thread and Pearl Embroidery - Woman's purse.



1220, Shoes of the Holy Roman Emperor. Calf with red silk and gold edging, precious stones and pearls. Emperor Friedrich II.



Palermo, Royal workshop, between 1130 and 1154. Purple silk with trimmings in red silk, embroidered in gold, gold filigree, enamel, and pearls; Dalmatic Sleeves.



Detail - close-up of cuff



England early 1600, "swete" bag. Linen plain weave embroidered with silk, gold metallic threads, seed pearls, braided silk and metallic cords and tassels.



Andalusia (Spain) Silk, embroidery, gold & Pearls. Circa 1147 medallions from a dalmatica.



Needle Case (Venice ?) Late 1500
Embroidery over wood with pearls



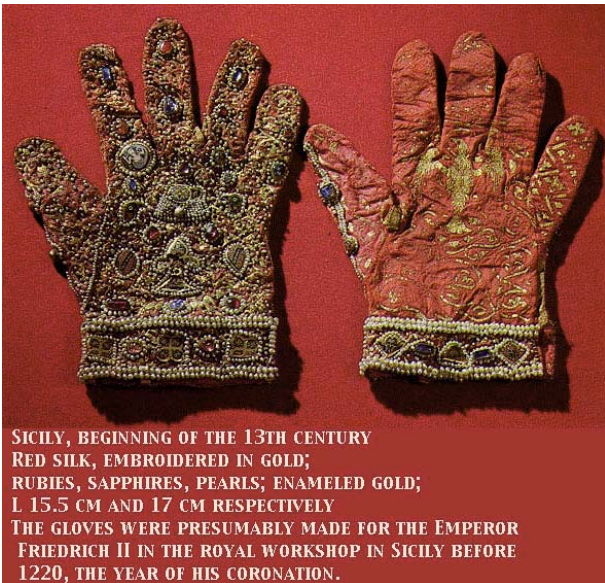
Full Needle Case - the delicacy of the work
and embroidery is amazing.



Mitre - Serbian Orthodox Church
Silk with embroidery & pearls. 1300



A burse (pouch) for Elizabeth 1st.
Gold padded embroidery on red velvet
with pearls and gold discs. 1580-1604



1220, Gloves of the Holy Roman Emperor
 Red silk, embroidered in gold; with rubies,
 sapphires, pearls; enameled gold.



Detail of top side of glove.



Alb of William II of Sicily - 1181



Detail of lower cuff.



William II Alb - Detail of panel on chest front - note heavy use of pearls on the silk.



"Cap of Monomakh" - Russia (Original Coronation Crown of Tzars), late 13th-early 14th century. Gold, precious stones, fur, silk; casting, chasing, carving, filigree, seeds of gold. Moscow Kremlin.



Saddle - Russian Collection Moscow Kremlin Turkey 1550, Wood, velvet, leather, gold, rubies, emeralds, pearls, chasing, weaving, and embroidery.



Horse Chest Band - Turkey, 1600. at Moscow Kremlin, Russia
Leather, woven tape, silk, silver, rubies, emeralds, turquoise, nephrite;
gilding, niello, carving, inlay, smithery, weaving.



A horizontal border, from Alter Hanging, 1250 - 1300
in coral, gold bezants and glass beads. From Halberstadt Germany

As you can see in the extant examples above, beads & precious gems were used for embellishment throughout the Middle Ages and before. There are just too many paintings to show - with artists depicting the finery of the peoples of the times with wonderful examples of bead work on their clothing. I hope these few examples give inspiration for beadwork today. I believe those of us who enjoy beads no longer have to prove they existed in history.