

Bead — Pinguaq

MAKUT PINGUAT CUCUNARTUT. – THESE BEADS ARE BEAUTIFUL.



Photo: Detail of a beaded headdress collected on Kodiak ca. 1972 by Alphonse Pinart. Courtesy of the Château-Musée. Photograph by Will Anderson.

In classical Alutiiq society, wealthy people displayed their social position through elaborate personal ornamentation. In addition to jewelry, members of the Alutiiq elite wore tattoos and ornate garments to symbolize prestige. Before the availability of European goods, clothing and jewelry were embellished with a variety of hand-carved beads. People fashioned shell, bone, ivory, amber, coal, slate, and even halibut vertebrae into decorations for parkas, rain gear, headdresses, bags, and labrets. In Prince William Sound, Alutiiqs made shiny beads of unbaked clay mixed with seal oil, and on the Kenai Peninsula, people carved beads and nose rings from a distinctive red shale.

With the arrival of Russian fur traders, glass beads replaced those made locally and became an important commodity. Manufactured in distant Asian and European factories, these colorful trinkets were inexpensive, easy to ship, and coveted by Native peoples. In return for their labor, the Russians paid Alutiiqs with beads and other cheap baubles, ensuring a large profit for themselves. For Alutiiqs, new varieties of brightly colored beads fit well into the prestige-based economy and were widely incorporated into ancestral arts. The *Cornaline d'Aleppo*, a dark red bead made in Venice, was particularly prized, perhaps because its color resembled traditional red pigments.