



PisiRkat (N): Pinguat – BEADS

Makut pinguat cucunartut. – THESE BEADS ARE BEAUTIFUL.

Before the availability of European goods, Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people embellished their clothing and jewelry with a variety of handmade beads. Pieces of shell, bone, ivory, amber, coal, slate, and even halibut vertebrae were fashioned into decorations for parkas, raingear, headdresses, hunting hats, bags, and labrets. In Prince William Sound, people made shiny beads from unbaked clay mixed with seal oil, and on the Kenai Peninsula, they carved beads from soft red shale. A necklace collected in Kodiak in the 19th century, features hundreds of tiny bird claws set into each other to form small loops, like beads.

Some shells were particularly coveted for decoration. Alutiiq people obtained dentalium shells, the curved, white, tusk-shaped shells of scaphopods, in trade with the societies of Southeast Alaska. They used these graceful shells as beads to decorate clothing and as earrings and nose pins. They were considered extremely valuable. Historic sources indicate that a pair of delicate dentalium shells could be traded for an entire squirrel skin parka.

By 1840, trade goods from Asia and Europe began reaching Alaska in large quantities, supplied by merchants in Siberian ports and Hudson's Bay Company outposts in the United States and western Canada. Russian colonists hoarded the finer goods—porcelains, iron tools, and gunflints—for their own use, but traded food and trinkets to the Alutiiq. Traders used inexpensive commodities like glass beads to pay Alutiiq hunters for valuable sea otter hides resold in distant markets.

Manufactured in Asian and European factories, colorful glass beads were cheap, easy to ship, and coveted by Native peoples. On Kodiak, these brightly colored beads fit well into the prestige-based economy and were widely incorporated into ancestral arts—like the production of headdresses. The Cornaline d'Alleppe, a dark red bead made in Venice, was particularly prized, perhaps as its color resembled traditional red pigments.

LEARN MORE:

Cultural Arts—Beading, <https://alutiiqmuseum.org/learn/the-alutiiq-sugpiaq-people/cultural-arts/beading>



Detail of glass beads in an Alutiiq beaddress, Afognak Island, 1872, Pinart Collection, Musée Boulogne-sur-Mer, France. Photo by Will Anderson.