

FROM THE PAST: INDIANS OF U.S. SPURN ALL BEADS EXCEPT ITALY'S

Unattributed newspaper article, probably New York City (a shorter version appeared in The Review, Dayton, Ohio, Nov. 15, 1934). It presents both fact and some fiction, like the Czechs not being able to "horn in" and the Italian beads being made near Milan.

New York – For generations Italy has been supplying the American Indian with all the beads employed in the decoration of his apparel and his horse gear, to the exclusion of the products of any other nation. The red folk will buy nothing that isn't up to their own standard of quality, and, thus far, no people save the Italians have been able to meet this demand.

Just how American manufacturers have managed to neglect this field of production is yet to be explained, but the fact remains that they don't count at all in the competition for the Indians' trade, and, in point of fact, Czechoslovakia is the only other country which has attempted, without success, however, to "horn in."

Right in New York is the center of this bead importation for the whole aboriginal population of America, and from the wholesale district here consignments of these tiny decorative globules are dispatched almost daily to trading posts all over the West and to a considerable extent to the remaining Amerind communities of the East, such as the New York State Indians, the Seminoles of Florida and the little groups in Maine.

According to tribal taste the size and colorations of the beads vary, but whether the eventual output of the Indians' industry is moccasins, war bonnets, war shirts, knife and tomahawk sheaths, belts, leggings, rifle slings or papoose carriers, the beads themselves are Italian, made for the most part in the neighborhood of Milan and shipped to New York via Venice.

Dan Frost, sole proprietor of S.A. Frost's Son, in Howard Street, explains that the buying of the Indians' supplies of beads requires a complete knowledge of the taste of the various tribes. "Alaskan Indians, for example," he said, "buy the smallest beads manufactured. Eastward from that territory slightly larger beads are preferred. None of them, however, are large, for the delicacy of the designs most generally requires the use of quite tiny beads. But every Indian tribe has some variation of taste, either as to size or color, in the beads they acquire for their industry. They are disposed to use the more delicate and exquisite for

the things they make for themselves as compared with the things they make for sale, but they maintain a pretty even standard in the matter of demand at that."

Forty Shades Are Used – Difference in the size of the beads is not the only test of Indian taste, according to Mr. Frost. Some of the tribesmen want clear glass, whereas the larger demand is for those of the opaque type.

The color range is wide, about forty different shades of glass beads being sold here with all the rainbow colors and many variant tints based upon the seven shades of the spectrum. The largest demand for beads centers upon the opaque white variety,

"Of course," Mr. Frost resumed, "the latter-day Indian makes no beads of his own. He uses porcupine quills, dyed and sewn in intricate designs, for some of the decorations on his apparel, or other gear, and there are horn and bone and feather embellishments to his ceremonial dress. But it is a remarkable, and to me unexplained, fact that the Indian in distant centuries possessed beads and used them. Whence they came I do not know. There were bead designs on the costumes of the Peruvian Incas and the Aztecs. In the burial mounds beside the Mississippi they have dug up remains of buried heroes, laid to rest long before De Soto ever saw the river, that wore on their last journey garments embellished with beads similar to those sold today."

Foreign Imitations – "Lately there has been some foreign effort to imitate for the American market the products of Indian workmanship. The artful Chinese have tried their hand at the beadwork, and the imitations of the Navajo loom products, rugs and blankets, have been numerous. The Chinese imitations of the beadwork, like the Oriental efforts to duplicate cheaply the delicate French and Irish and Italian laces, have been crude and not durable. One doesn't have to be an expert to detect the counterfeit, but too few buyers really care. The imitations of the Navajo blankets are even worse. What the American Indian deserves from the central government is protection in his arts and his industries."

Mr. Frost was at some pains to explain that it was not tariff protection that the Indian needed, but protection equally against the American manufacturer who copies his designs, his colorations and his fabrics and foists it on the unsuspecting purchaser as genuine. He thinks a law could be honestly and fairly drafted to accomplish just this.