

Flower Forever: Bead Craft from France and Venice.

Ragnar Levi. Bokförlaget Langenskiöld, Köpmangatan 9, SE-111 31, Stockholm, Sweden. 2015. 180 pp., 152 color figs., 10 B&W figs. ISBN 978-9-187-00788-0. \$40.00 (hard cover).

References on flower beading tend to come in waves, from *Godey's Lady's Book* in the mid-1800s, through the lady hobbyist era of the late 1960s and 70s, to the Japanese hobbyists and publications catering to them in the mid-1990s. The common thread through the majority of these was a plethora of how-to instructions for making beaded flowers and bouquets. What was barely touched upon, however, was the history, both of the flowers and the materials used to make them, which Ragnar Levi addresses in his new book, *Flower Forever: Bead Craft from France and Venice.*



Lavishly illustrated with photographs of current work and frequently charming historic images, Levi takes us through the history of beaded flowers in Europe, noting the making of them as a source of income for poor vineyard workers and others during the normally unproductive winter season. And while the earlier examples were largely pieces used in ecclesiastical settings, with less than perfect beads made up into both flowers and bouquets and carried into churches by altar and choir boys during processions at Easter and Christmas, other forms included “funeral crowns,” known as *Totenkronen* in German, and employed in central Europe upon the death of a young or unmarried

person in a tradition many hundreds of years old and widely practiced, regardless of Christian sect. Other forms included the funeral wreath, colorful and exuberant in France, generally more somber in *Mitteleuropa*. Over time, the beaded funeral wreath fell out of favor, as the taintness of old, rusted ones created a messy appearance ill suited to a place of serene peace and as the creators of replacement pieces died off. Levi cites a pair of more recent memorial expressions commemorating two significant historical events of the early 21st century: the attacks of 9-11 and Japan's earthquake/tsunami in 2011. Japanese bead artist Minako Shimonagase gathered a hundred Japanese students to help create a traditional cherry tree in full blossom to commemorate the latter; the former was memorialized with the creation of funeral wreaths of handmade beaded flowers from around the world.

Flower Forever is a feast of discovery, both that of the writer and others who have collected these colorful expressions, but also a feast of details in looking deeper at what makes them what they are. The book begins with beaded flowers and their historical roots, covering both the aforementioned memorial and ecclesiastical pieces, and in England, christening baskets and wedding paraphernalia. In regard to the manufacture of beads themselves, Levi winds his way through Venice, France, Bohemia (later Czechoslovakia), and further in the book, references seed bead making in India, Egypt, and Asia in general. He acknowledges in detail the role that wars and depressions play in when and where beads were made, and cites the exportation of a Venetian factory setting to Rouen, France, in order to take fuller advantage of France's great demand for seed beads. In fact, enough mention is made of seed bead making in France that once again, I hunger to see in print *the* definitive work on beadmaking in France through the centuries, rather than just the scattershot of information we've had to date, interesting and informative though much of it is.

Some of his historical information, however, seems suspect. For instance, he credits Marco Polo with having brought glass beads to the attention of the Italians in the 13th century, a tale that Peter Francis, Jr., discounted in his 1979 book, *The Story of Venetian Beads*, noting the tale can be traced no farther back than 1811 to a Carlo Neijmann Rizzo, a “pseudo-historian who never allowed the lack of evidence to get in his way when constructing the history of Venetian glass.”

On the plus side, extensive descriptions are given regarding both the process of beadmaking, with many Italian terms, and the environment in which they are

made, as well as much discussion of how many workers there were, of what sexes, and what work they performed, giving a fuller picture of glass bead manufacturing than we ordinarily are privy to. There's much discussion about the nature of bead sizes and the colors and surface treatments used, sometimes in quite some detail. In terms of how the glass itself is made for use in beadmiking, one charming story relates the acquisition of the sand that forms such a large part of the glass body, from an interview with Bruna Costantini, who grew up literally surrounded by her family's seed bead factory: "When the wet sand came to the factory to be used in the glass production, it was full of fresh clams and other molluscs that were picked out and put aside to be eaten. 'The whole room smelled of the sea!' exclaims Costantini, with a sweep of her hand from her nose, in a gesture encompassing the room" (p. 145).

Much is told about the cottage industry work associated with beads and wreath production, with wreaths and associated parts being made in people's homes, and extensive coverage is given to *l'impiraressa*, the women in Venice who gathered in sunny alleyways to gossip and string the huge quantities of beaded hanks sold around the world. Making funeral wreaths became such a popular way to make money in France that well into the 20th century, women could be seen in working-class neighborhoods in the town of Chauny sitting outside their front doors threading beaded flowers for delivery to the factory. Those imprisoned were also significant practitioners of this art. The First World War created a tremendous demand for memorial wreaths and the need for workers was so great that over 40,000 people, including prisoners, were employed at this.

In the center of the book, a few pages describe technique, but they are really more oriented toward the *theory* of technique and what is most critical to know about how choices are made. Close ups illustrate various finishing details and discuss how the flower elements are made and why.

The book wraps up with a series of short interviews with people of interest to the author and to the reader of the book as well, including Evelyn Ulzen (Berlin, Germany) who, along with her husband, Jürgen, collected over 13,000 pieces of beadwork and made of their home a museum, including around 200 objects associated with funeral wreaths; the aforementioned Bruna Costantini (Venice, Italy); and several beaded flower creators. Tudy Sammartini spoke of her aunt Nella Sammartini Lopez y Royo (Venice, Italy), who revived the practice of beaded flower making in Venice in the 1980s and about whom she wrote a book.

I very much recommend *Flower Forever* both to lovers of beadwork and bead history and to those who find beaded flowers appealing. The pictures are pretty and detailed and the information is clear and understandable. The book is available from flowerforeverbook@gmail.com.

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Beads from Germany: Idar-Oberstein, Lauscha, Neugablonz.

Floor Kaspers. Marblings Publishing, Amsterdam. 2016. 134 pp., 165 figs. ISBN: 9789491311031. \$37.79 (soft cover); \$51.79 (hard cover). Also available as a free download at <http://beadmuseum.com/files/BeadsfromGermany.pdf>.

In this book, Kaspers documents three German "bead towns:" Idar-Oberstein, Lauscha, and Neugablonz, exploring how each town became so focused on the production and/or distribution of beads made of agate or glass, and "what happens when the demand... slows down" (p. 7). The book is divided into six sections entitled "Introduction," "Idar-Obarstein," "Lauscha," "Neugablonz," "Conclusion," "Notes" and "Literature." Not content merely to quote previous publications, many of them in German or English, Kaspers travels to each of the three towns to explore museums and other sites and interview people formerly or currently involved in the bead trade. In the process, she elicits information that is unavailable to armchair bead historians.

For example, following in the footsteps of German bead researcher Jürgen Busch, she visits the ruins in Lauscha of the glassworking furnace constructed in 1897 by Günter Kühnert & Co., which was abandoned in 1990 after German reunification, following decades of making marbles, marble beads, and other glass products. Inside the remains of one building she finds old bags of soda, lime, and quartz as well as old molds. Nearby, she finds pieces of cane and malformed marbles, though no marble beads (pp. 86-91).

Striking images accompany the text, including archival photos of beadmakers or bead sellers at work. Other photos were apparently taken by Kaspers herself, including close-ups of beads, bead sample cards, and beadmakers in action, in addition to colorful glass rods leaning against the wall of a factory (front cover), a concrete sculpture of a glassblower