

## Press Release

## SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### September Artifact of the Month: Strands of Glass Beads



September's artifact of the month at Sheldon Jackson Museum consists of four beautiful strands of glass beads. The lemon-yellow colored strand is marked as "Alaska Amber." The small, very dark blue strand is from Russia. The terra cotta colored string of beads are from the Venice area of Italy, and were part of a cache of trade beads which were on the Sheldon Jackson campus, originally from a barrel of beads found in the Old Russian Trading Post when it was torn down. The dark gold colored beads marked "Alaska Amber" are considered to have a disease called, "bead disease." Bead disease, known as "glass disease" or "sick glass," is actually not a disease at all; rather, it is the result of improper manufacturing. If the glass recipe has the wrong proportion of ingredients, then the result will be crizzled or weeping glass. The crusty look is usually from alkaline salts leaching out to the surface or cracks caused by the deterioration. Most crizzled glass is quite old. It is rarely seen after 1900 and was more common in the 1700 and 1800s.

Beads were brought to Alaska by European explorers. The first sightings of trade beads in Alaska go back as far as 1741, when Danish explorer Vitus Bering noted the beads in his journals. The Russians brought beads to Alaska and traded them in exchange for furs and other items of interest. Although some trade beads may be called Russian trade beads, Russians never manufactured them. Most beads traded in Alaska were made in Venice. Trade beads were generally all made in the same manner, by pinching off bits of colored glass tubing when it was still soft. The world's first commercial bead makers were the Egyptians, who had a monopoly for decades. Then the Venetians started copying the Egyptians in the 1100s – 1400s and by the 1600s, had the monopoly.

Alaska Native people developed "sophisticated ways of life" before Europeans ever arrived in the Americas, according to Peter Francis Jr., director of the Center for Bead Research. The first beads in Alaska were carved from wood. Their complex system of trade beads, which were used as currency to purchase goods and services, is evidence of their advanced civilization.

The power of the simple glass bead among peoples everywhere has had an incredible impact. Beads have been used by people to organize and symbolize their world. Beads have been used for ornamentation, counting, to show wealth or social position, to communicate in ritual and religion, and for trade. Beads had considerable buying power and were used to obtain many goods and were even used to purchase slaves. Beads were a powerful and persuasive factor in the movements of civilization, and especially in the history of the settlements of the American West. The first recorded introduction of trade beads in America was in 1492 when Christopher Columbus brought beads to the new world as gifts and offerings of peace to the people. Explorers quickly learned that beads helped them open doors to new territories.

The beads will be on exhibit at Sheldon Jackson Museum from September 1 through September 30. Summer hours are from 9:00am – 5:00pm daily through September 4, closed September 5 for Labor Day. Summer admission is \$4. No admission is charged for those 18 and under. Winter hours begin September 6, and are from 10:00am to 4:00pm Tuesday through Saturday. Discounted winter admission is \$3, with 18 and under admitted free.

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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