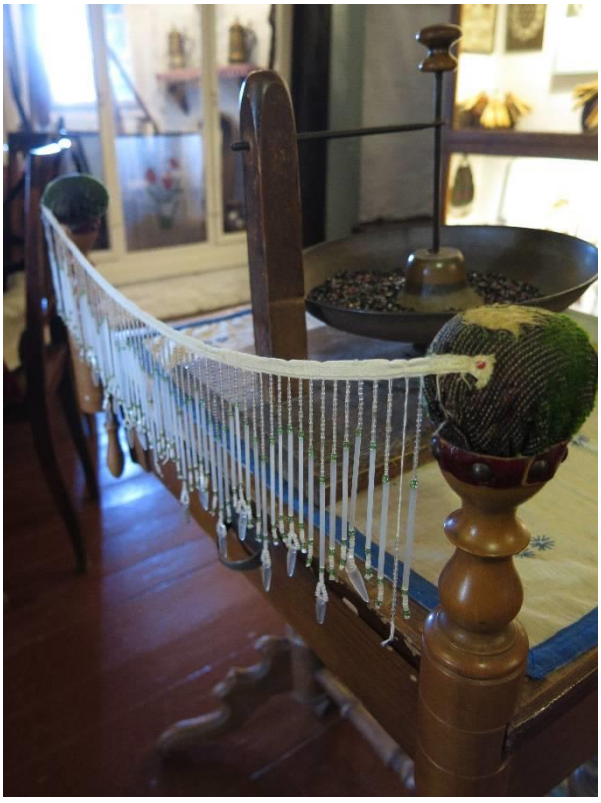
Beaded fringes from the Erzgebirge (Ore Mountains)

From Dr. Bettina Levin

The history of production of beaded fringes in the Ergebirge (Ore Mountains) is closely linked to the development of the lighting industry. At first, oil lamps, candles or kerosene lamps lit up the darkness. The invention of gas and a little later of the electric light provided people at that time a completely unfamiliar brightness. Hardly conceivable today, they sought ways to dampen the intensity of the glaring, blinding light.

Frosted (satin) glass was at that time the preferred material for lampshades. Around 1903 it became popular to decorate these lampshades with beaded fringes and in this way to soften the light. As a result, a lighting trimmings industry developed in the upper Erzgebirge (Ore Mountains).
Initially, the glass beaded fringes were monochrome, the lower margin smooth or jagged. Later, beads of different sizes and colours were combined into patterns. Popular bead colours were crystal, topaz, green and ruby. In addition to purely geometric patterns, floral designs were very popular.



By 1910, there were already so many orders for beaded fringes that there was not enough labour. Seamstresses had to be retrained to work on beaded fringes. World War I, however, brought business to a halt by hindering exports. Domestic demand was also low. The manufacturers tried to increase sales by producing fringe trimmings with patriotic motives to support the war effort.

After the end of the war, a brisk demand for beaded fringes immediately set in again. Starting in 1920, the business was temporarily restricted by the introduction of a luxury tax on light bulb fringes, but recovered quickly. In addition to beaded fringes for the lighting industry, window curtains and other beaded window dressings were also made.
The production of the fringes took place partly mechanically and partly in homework. The upper edge of the beaded fringes consisted of a textile border. This was woven or made by crochet gallon machines. The fringe threads, which were later to carry the beads, were already woven on the band in the form of a loop.

The completion of the finished beaded fringe was then pure hand and home work. The border was stretched taut between two so-called fringe sticks, which were attached to the work table, and the hanging fringe threads were individually beaded. For this purpose, a special beading needle of thin wire was used, which had at one end a glass knob, and at the other end a fine hook. On this bead needle the required number of beads for the individual beaded fringe was threaded, the hook was hung in the loop

of the fringe thread and the beads were then pushed on to the fringe thread. The lower end was secured with a loop or a knot.

If the beaded fringe was monochrome, a threading bowl was used for the beads. The bowl filled with glass beads was set in rotation and the bead needle held flat in the bowl – in this manner the beads pushed themselves onto the needle. This process was therefore also called push-on. For patterned beaded fringes on the other hand, the glass beads had to be threaded on the bead needle in the correct order for each individual fringe and then pushed onto the appropriate thread.

Sometimes the glass beaded fringes also contained individual wooden beads in the pattern. In addition, purely wood-beaded fringes were popular, often combined with knotted silk fringes. At the time, such wood bead fringes were also used to decorate pieces of furniture.
A report on the production of lamp bead fringes at home in Geyer reports that the kitchen served as a working space. For a meter of beaded fringe, it took 1 to 13 hours of work depending on the design and pattern. One to three times a week, a delivery was made by the contractor. Often children had to help with this work, usually they made the ordinary, simple fringes but needed about twice as much time as an adult. The wage for this work in 1925 was 12 to 45 pfennigs an hour.
Despite the large amount of manual work, it was possible for individual manufacturers to deliver 15,000 meters of beaded fringes per month. The beaded fringes were either sold wrapped on cardboard cards or attached to metal wire circles of various diameters - appropriate in size for the different lamp shapes. A catalogue from a Berlin lighting company in 1912 lists such beaded fringes loose, per meter with prices between 2 and 7.50 marks. In 1924 prices started as low as 85 pfennigs per meter.

The glass beads used came mainly from the Bohemian town of Gablonz on the Neisse / Jablonec nad Nisou. The translucent colours of the glass beads produced here were greatly in demand, they gave beautiful light effects. In addition to the small round glass beads, which were referred to as seed beads, there were also shapes such as bulbs, bells, cubes, garnets, bugles and tubes. Atlas tubes - frosted glass tubes - which received their appearance by the inclusion of fine air bubbles during the manufacturing process were also popular. At the beginning of the twenties, exchange rate fluctuations, high import duties and delivery bottlenecks, which made glass beads from Czechoslovakia more expensive, were a problem. In 1922, the shortage of glass beads took on such proportions that waste beads and glass tube breakage were sought out in the Erzgebirge (Ore Mountains), from which suitable beads for the production of lamp fringe could be cut.

Wooden beads were sourced from both Saxony and Bohemia. Many manufacturers settled in Annaberg and the surroundings. The company Schowanek from Albrechtsdorf in the Jizera Mountains / Albrechtice v Jizerských horách made especially high quality wooden beads. The wooden beads were made of birch, beech, maple or ash wood turned on automatic machines and then polished. After that, they were dyed,

mostly black, monochrome colourful or golden bronze. Later multi-coloured with sprayed patterns or beautiful batik effects came in fashion.

Occasionally fringes were also made of beads made of papier-maché and so-called legumin-beads. Legumin beads were made from legumes such as peas or beans, were specially impregnated and dyed.

The most important centers of beaded fringe production in the German Ore Mountains were Annaberg, Scheibenberg and Geyer. Alone in Annaberg in the ‘20’s there were more than 2 dozen producers for such trimmings. Producers of silk and synthetic silk lampshades were also resident in Annaberg.

Beaded fringes of glass and wooden beads were also produced in Buchholz, Schlettau, Sehma, Cranzahl, Crottendorf, Elterlein and Marienberg. On the Bohemian side of the border, in Weipert / Vejprty and Kupferberg / Měděnec, beaded fringes were also produced. As the beads were an inland product and the wages lower, the fringes could be made more cheaply in the Bohemian Ore Mountains.

Another center of beaded fringe production in Czechoslovakia was in the area around Gablonz on the Neisse / Jablonec nad Nisou. In the twenties glass bead trimmings made in Japan and China were also serious competition for the companies in the Erzgebirge (Ore Mountains).
The local beaded fringe manufacturers marketed their products mainly at the Leipzig trade fair. Many manufacturers also had representatives in Berlin, the former center of the German lighting industry.

With the worldwide economic crisis of 1929, the era of beaded trimmings for lighting came to an end. Orders from overseas ceased and at the same time, the styles had changed and textile fringes eg. silk or chenille, became the preferred decoration for lampshades.

Today there are still traces of this production history to be found in a number of museums in the area. Notably the Turmmuseum (Tower Museum) in Geyer and the Heimatmuseum (Homeland Museum) in Scheibenberg have a worthwhile collection of glass beaded fringes, beaded curtains and tools for the production of beaded fringes.

Lamp with various glass bead patterns, Heimatmuseum Scheibenberg

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This Article appeared in the original version in: Erzgebirgische Heimatblätter, 39. Jg. 2017, Heft 6, S.8-11

Photo page 1 – Fringe sticks, Glass bead fringe and threading bowl, Turmmuseum Geyer

Photo page 2 – Sample card with various glass bead fringes, Company Alfred Siegel, Crottendorf, ca. 1920-1930

All Photos Dr. Bettina Levin

Advertisement from the Company Alfred Siegel, Crottendorf (Source: Weltplätze des Handels und der Industrie 1924 – World Places of Trade and Industry, 1924)

Translation from German by C. Perrin