

Make Clay Beads

Native American beads have existed for centuries. They based their entire trade system on these beads and what they symbolized for each tribe. Many of them were made from materials that the tribe had access to in their natural surroundings. The value of a bead was based on how rare the material was. Some popular materials included turquoise, copper, silver, coral, shells, amber and wood. They also used animal materials such as teeth, horns, carved bones, and ivory. Each tribe determined the worth of each piece based on the material and size. Some were worth more to other tribes simply because they didn't have access to the same products. The arrival of European settlers caused changes in the bead trading process. They brought along glass beads that were worth more to the Natives because they had never seen them before. They also changed the value of beads by introducing the idea of wampum, which were beads strung together on different pieces of material, with length of each piece determining its value.



Now Make Your Own!

Now that you have learned about clay beads, it is time to make your own with air dry clay. Be creative and have fun making your own designs!

Directions:

Use the directions to make homemade clay. Break the clay into smaller, bead-like sized pieces. Roll the pieces into a ball shape and then use the toothpick provided to poke a hole into the middle of the ball. Continue using the toothpick to make designs on the outside of the beads. Beads can be painted or sealed with a clear coat when dry.

Optional: roll leftover clay into small round balls and let dry to make marbles!

What Can Beads Tell Us?

Beads have stood the test of time lasting, in some cases, for thousands of years. How these beads were crafted by hand said a lot about the methods and culture of the people of the time.

From the materials they used to how the beads were incorporated in their everyday lives, they tell a story. Some tribes have “story bead” necklaces where symbols and figures were carved into flat pieces of turquoise or some other type of stone and strung with other beads. Mothers then used the necklaces to illustrate stories handed down from generation to generation.

