Beaded Bags from the

Part 1: Beadweaving on weft threads

Bettina Levin

In this series I would like to remember the history of making beaded bags and other beadwork in the Ore Mountains (Erzgebirge) in Germany. I will include the different manufacturing techniques and illustrate them with pieces from my collection. The first technique is beadweaving with beads on weft threads.

The history of beadweaving in the Ore Mountains began in 1867, the year in which Bruno Schneider (1846–1921) applied for a patent in Saxony, Prussia and Austria for a manufacturing process for bead fabric as replacement for bead embroidery (Fig 2). In the same year, he foundetd a mechanical bead weaving mill in Buchholz (today Annaberg-Buchholz, Germany) and began producing beaded fabrics on hand looms (Fig 1). The manufacturing process was a world monopoly at that time.

Fig 1 Advertisement of the company of Bruno Schneider, 1924

Fig 2 Marie & Bruno Schneider

In this period bead embroidery was very popular as decoration for various utensils, but its production was quite laborious. Each bead had to be embroidered individually by hand (as in the pocketbook illustrated on page 35). The beadweaving invented by Bruno Schneider could hardly be distinguished from bead embroidery, but they could be made much faster, cheaper and more efficiently. In the beginning, they were mainly used as inserts for cases, brush backs or basket bottoms (Figs 3–5 & 7).

The production of these pieces of woven beadwork was done on a hand loom. The glass beads were threaded onto threads according to coloured patterns, a separate bead thread for each row. Child labour was widespread in the manufacture of beaded bags (Fig 6). Bruno Schneider had the beads threaded mainly in Schmiedeberg/Kovářská in Bohemia, a few kilometres from Buchholz in Germany. The *Fädelmäd* (thread girls) sat at long tables and threaded the coloured glass beads onto strings from a given pattern. According to Bruno Schneider, only children's hands were suitable for threading because of the fineness of the needles and the beads.

Fig 6 Thread girls from Schmiedeberg/Kovářská, 1906

The Child Protection Act of 1904 significantly restricted the employment of children in the German Empire. Because of these legal requirements and the lower wages in the Bohemian part of the Erzgebirge, the labour-intensive and time-consuming threading was carried out in Bohemia. Bruno Schneider provided the necessary material such as beads, threads and cardboard strips, and the finished threads were then sent back. The weaving of the beaded threads was then done in his factory in Buchholz in Germany.

However, customs duties were incurred for sending the threads across the border, so Bruno Schneider applied to the relevant authorities for duty-free treatment of the beaded threads. His application was not granted, however, so in order to avoid the customs duties, the threaded beads were often smuggled over the border by women and children under their clothes.

Fig 7 Various beadwoven inserts, c. 1870–1890

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Erzgebirge

Fig 8 A replica of a transporteur.

Fig 9 A loom set up with a replica transporteur and strings of beads.

Photos: Bettina Levin

The weaving process was as follows: To weave the bead threads, a so-called 'transporteur' (Fig 8) was needed, which looked similar to a ruler but had grooves and pins along its entire length. The beaded threads were tied tightly to the ends of the conveyor and the beads were spread into the grooves so that there was a bead in each groove. This was also children's work for a long time.

The prepared transporteurs were now handed to the weaver who inserted the beaded thread on the transporteur as weft threads into the shed of the loom (Fig 9). The attached pins were used to separate the warp threads. Then the beaded thread was detached from the transporteur and fixed in the fabric with a few subsequent ground wefts (thread without beads) using a normal weaver's shuttle. The next prepared transporteur was applied, with the beads being shifted from the previous row. In this way, row after row was woven.

In cooperation with the museum 'Die Weberei' (Weaving Mill) in Oederan, this technique of bead weaving with beads on weft threads was successfully reconstructed a few years ago. To do this, the 'transporteur', which was previously only known from drawings in patent specifications and a reference book, was replicated and a loom was set up on which bead weaving could take place (Figs 8 & 9).

The woven pieces had a shifted layer of beads to give the appearance of bead embroidery and to achieve a denser layer of beads. When weaving the small inserts for cases and brushes, there were several woven pieces on the fabric (Fig 13). There are no beads on the back of the beadweaving visible, only fabric (Figs 11 & 12). This distinguishes this type of weaving from the well-known beadweaving on small bead looms, where the beads are also on the weft threads but are threaded twice through the row of beads and in this type the front and back of the beadwork are the same.

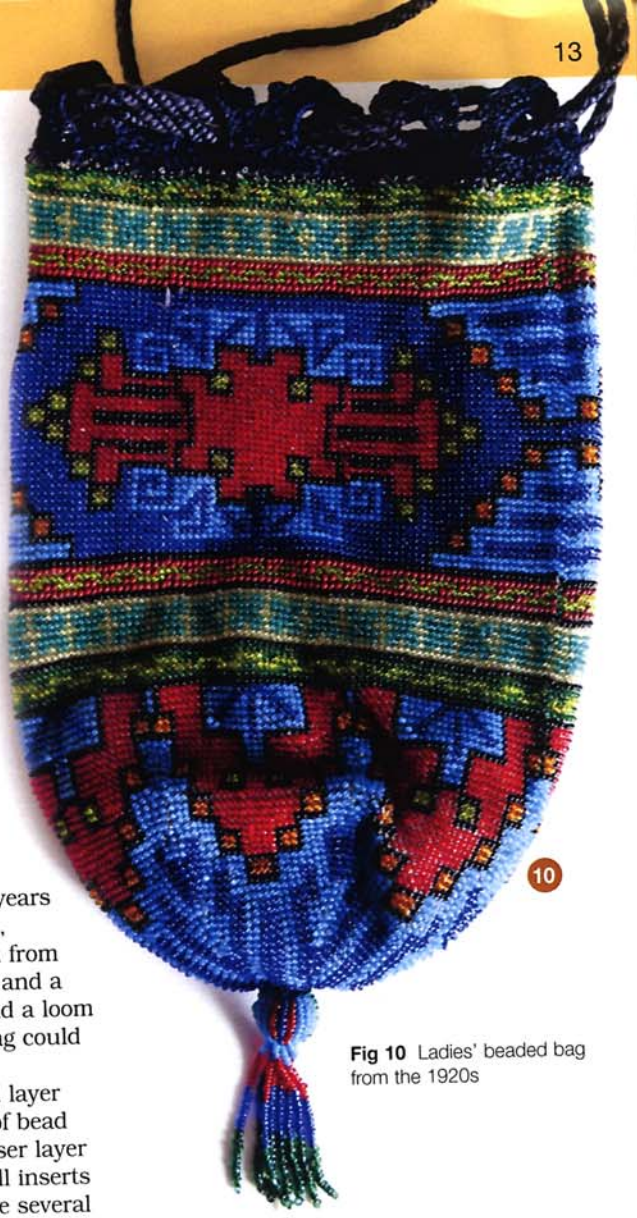
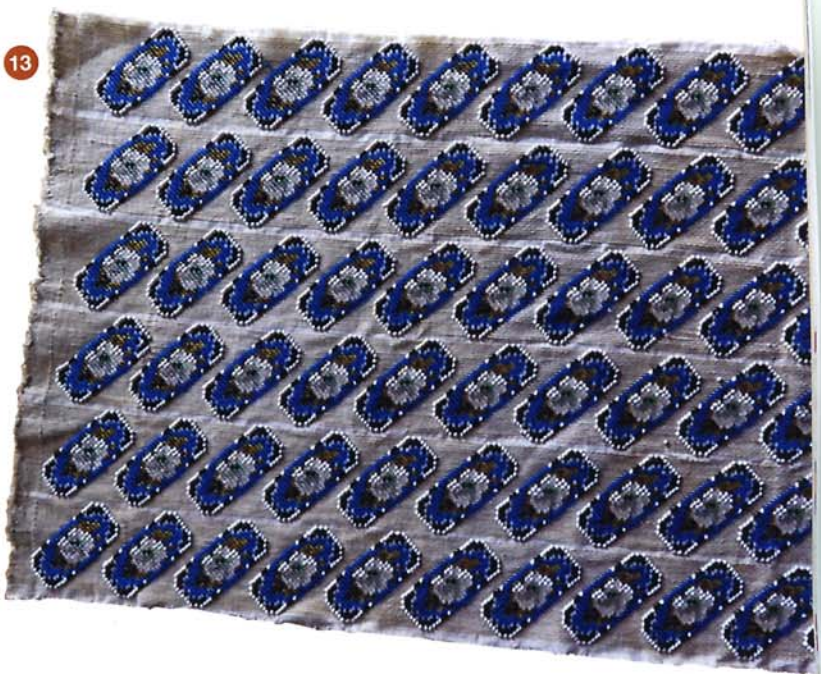


Fig 10 Ladies' beaded bag from the 1920s

In English-language publications, beadweaving from the Ore Mountains is also often incorrectly called 'beading



Figs 14 & 15 Ladies' beaded bags, c. 1900–1930

on canvas', but it is not embroidery but weaving.

Glass beads from Bohemia and Venice, as well as metal beads from France, were used. Typical for the small bead inserts is the use of dark blue beads as ground, a colour that was already very popular in the Biedermeier period (Figs 3–5, 11–13, 16–18).

In order to make his products better known, Bruno Schneider took part in several large trade exhibitions, including those in Wittenberg and Altona in Germany in 1869 and the International Exhibition in Philadelphia in the United States in 1876. In Wittenberg, his exhibited products were awarded a gold medal, while in Altona he received a silver medal. A total of 17 registered designs and patents, which he had protected, bear witness to his inventions and products. Bruno Schneider's beadweaving mill in Buchholz continuously operated from 1867 onwards and was run by his descendants for several years after his death in 1921.

It is worth mentioning Bruno Schneider's importance for the local beaded bag industry. From about 1890 onwards, beaded handbags appeared. In the beginning, it was mainly children's bags with animal motifs that were offered as 'breakfast bags' (Figs 16–18), but later he also produced beaded bags for ➜

Figs 16–18 Children's beaded bags, c. 1870–1890

Gallery: Ladies' beaded bags, c. 1900–1930

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➜ ladies, albeit with little success at first. However, he did manage to create a demand for them towards the end of the 1890's, initially in the United States and later in many other countries. Other entrepreneurs in the Saxon and Bohemian parts of the Ore Mountains followed Bruno Schneider's example and produced beaded bags.

While the local address books before 1900 still list Bruno Schneider as the only entry in this industry, by 1910 there were already 7 and by 1923 more than 30 beaded bag manufacturers, mainly in the German towns of Annaberg, Buchholz, Schlettau, Scheibenberg, Geyer and the Bohemian towns Weipert/Vejprty, Schmiedeberg/Kovářská and Kupferberg/Měděnec in the Ore Mountains.

The ladies' beaded bags which were made with this technique – beads on weft threads – were very high-quality products with small bead sizes dense bead layers. The threading process was particularly time-consuming. For the beaded bag shown in the pattern in Fig 19, about 34,000 glass beads had to be threaded in the right order (Fig 20). The bags were lined with velvet, silk or fine goatskin. Metal handles – occasionally decorated with glass stones – completed the pieces (e.g. Figs i-ix). The finished bag was sometimes adorned with a beaded fringe (e.g. Figs vi–xi). Some bags were only made in limited editions.

The woven beaded bags were sought-

Figs 19 & 20 Pattern and matching beaded bag, around 1900–1930

Photos: Bettina Levin

bag manufacturers from the Erzgebirge had branches abroad. For example, the representative office of another important Buchholz manufacturer, Oskar Kahl, was located in New York at No. 338 Broadway.

The process of bead weaving, in which the beads were strung on weft threads, was largely replaced around 1900 by the Jacquard loom with bead reeds, in which the pattern of the beadweaving was

museums in the region. From July to October 2022 I showed beadwork from my collection, including many beaded bags, in a special exhibition at the