

Antique Beaded Needlework Accessories

Carol Andrews

In this article, Carol Andrews explores a technique used to bead around different shapes of solid cases or 'moulds' which were 19th century needlework accessories such as needle- and tool-cases and thimble holders.

I bought the turquoise needlecase at a fleamarket in Malvern. I rise very early to go to flea and antique markets, as the saying 'the early bird gets the worm', is very true, when your own particular passion is sewing antiques and beaded things!

I have two 19th century cylindrical beaded needlecases, which you may have noticed on the cover of issue 86 of our magazine (Figs 1a & 1b). The pink one is almost perfect, despite being at least 150 years old. It was a generous gift from one of my students who has since died, so of course it is of sentimental value. The other is a pretty turquoise and white beaded needle case which has missing beads and is in need of some TLC.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3a



Fig. 3b



Fig. 1a



Fig. 1b



Fig. 1c



Fig. 4a



Fig. 4b



Fig. 5

Not that this early bird always buys all the exciting things which I find. Quite often I only look for inspiration for my designs and leave others to spend a small fortune on the antique beaded treasures. I always carry a notebook and pencil! Many of the designs in my book *Making Needlework Accessories Embroidered*

NB. Figs 1a-4a and 6 are approximately life-size.

Fig 1a Cylindrical needlecase. Ivory. Carol Andrews Collection (CA).

Fig 1b Cylindrical needlecase Ivory (CA).

Fig 1c Cylindrical needlecase. Rosewood. Carole Morris Collection (CM).

Fig 2 Large rectangular tool-case with oval cross-section. Inside is papier maché with metal reinforcement (CM). See fig 7.

Fig 3a Flat needlecase Ivory (CM).

Fig 3b Flat needlecase Ivory (CA).

Fig 4 Egg-shaped thimble-case. Ivory (CA).

Fig 5 Composite image of beaded items, including 3 needlecases and a thimble-case. First published in Johnson 1999, p 11. Reproduced here by kind permission of the author and Shire Publications Ltd.

Fig 6 Large cylindrical wooden bodkin-case with rounded ends. Lower end is beaded and the damage allows both the technique and the metal wire to be clearly seen (also Figs 8a & 8b). Helen Payne Collection (HP).



Fig. 6

with Beads published by Ruth Bean, are adapted from ideas gleaned during trips to antique fairs. Similarly a number of the beaded needlecase patterns which can be found in the book which I co-authored with Helen Payne – *Patterns for English Beaded Needlecases* – have been adapted from traditional patterns seen on 19th century beaded needlecases.

When I buy old beaded items it is strictly on a limited budget, so invariably they are 'poorly'. Initially I would buy them with the intention of re-using the beads but I soon realised that if I take apart the item the historic value is lost, so I prefer to restore if possible or to leave well alone and simply study them.

My two old needlecases are beaded over ivory 'moulds' but I have also seen a number of examples beaded over rosewood (e.g. Fig 1c). This dark and heavy wood was imported by ship from India and used as ballast during the journey. It became a fashionable and expensive wood in England in the early 19th century. It is likely that the ivory came from India too. I hasten to add that I would never buy any modern item made of ivory but I cannot feel responsible for an elephant which died in the 19th century or earlier.

The seed beads used on antique needlecases of this type are miniscule, around size 18/0 to 20/0. They are generally either translucent or opaque glass.

Popular colours included turquoise, dark blue, wine red, green, black, white and yellow. The beads that particularly fascinate me are wonderful opalescent milky white beads, with a hint of blue. These were popular as background beads and can be seen on many old needlecases (e.g. Fig 1a) as well as on some bead embroideries of the same period. I have never seen a modern equivalent of this size of these particular seed beads but I live in hopes!

Patterns on the old needlecases are usually fairly simple geometric ones but there are a few floral designs on which the base of the stems are always curved (similar to Andrews & Payne 2004, 9 & 17). We have used peyote stitch for modern equivalents of the old needlecases in the pattern book, as the original stitch is not at all easy to work, and we bead over wooden needlecase moulds.

Originally the beads were threaded onto wire which was interlaced through a mesh of needle lace, worked over the mould in twisted buttonhole stitch (Fig 8a). There were two ways of doing this. In the first method the needle lace was worked first and then the wire tip was pushed in between the twists in the buttonhole stitch, picking up single beads en route between each needle lace stitch. Pamela Clabburn (1980, 17; 2001, 38) remarks this was the easiest way, but from experience I would say it was more difficult than the second

Technical details

Fig. 8b

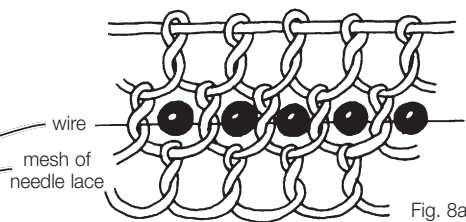
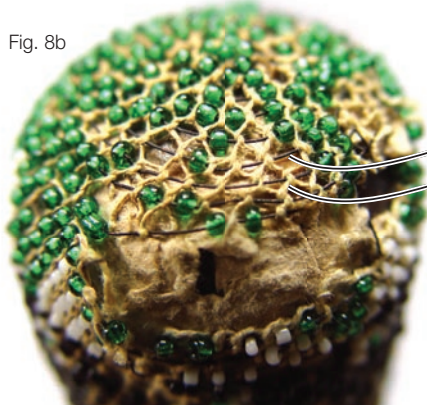


Fig. 8a

Fig 8a A method of construction used to bead around solid moulds such as needle-, tool- and thimble-cases. (After Clabburn 1980. 17)

Figs 8b & 8c The damaged end and bottom of the wooden bodkin-case showing the stitches and wire clearly (HP)

Fig 8d The thimble-case with a clearly defined start line of stitches as also seen in fig 8a (CA)

Fig 9a End of cylindrical needlecase (CA)

Fig 9b The beadwork in mint condition at the end of the large tool-case not allowing the wire and stitches to be seen as clearly as in Figs 8a-b (CM)

Fig 9c End of thimble-case (CA)

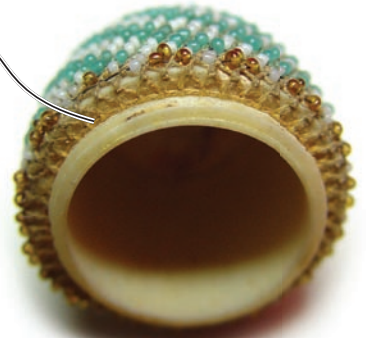


Fig. 8d



Fig. 8c



Fig. 9a

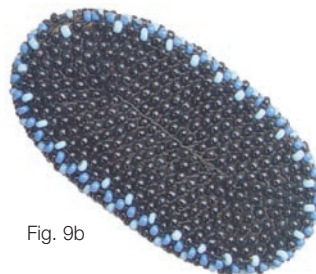


Fig. 9b



Fig. 9c

way in which both processes are worked simultaneously. I find pushing a blunt end of wire, however thin, between the twists in needle lace stitches to be extremely difficult and there is a danger of splitting the thread.

Recently I found a most interesting though poorly 'treasure' at an antique market, worked in the same technique. It is a beaded egg which unscrews and holds a thimble (Figs 8d & 9c). I have ambitions to restore the egg by replacing missing beads, needle lace and wire but I work on the principle that whatever I add must be retrievable, if anyone in the future wishes to undo it. On the egg the original needle lace is stuck to the ivory mould, so it is likely that the needle lace mesh and wired beading were worked simultaneously on this item which is most attractive despite its missing beads.

Bead Society members Carole Morris and Helen Payne also have antique beaded items which have been made using the same most interesting technique. They include two flat beaded needlecases and a third cylindrical one (Figs 3a-b & 1c). There is also a large black and blue case (Fig 2) and a large



Fig 7 Large rectangular tool-case with oval cross-section. Inside can be seen the papier maché lining with metal reinforcement. (CM)

bodkin case (Fig 6). All the items are beaded with very tiny seed beads, and use the same method of construction (Fig 8a).

There are many other illustrations of cylindrical and flat beaded needlecases and egg-shaped thimble-cases in British publications. For example a flat and a cylindrical needlecase c. 1810–1830 (Clabburn 1980, 29; Clabburn 2001, 19 & 33); a flat, a cylindrical and a boot-shaped needlecase, plus an egg-shaped thimble case (Taunton 1997, 170, pl 187); one flat

and two cylindrical needlecases (Rogers 1983, pl 39); one cylindrical and two flat needlecases plus an egg-shaped thimble-case (Johnson 1999, 11; also reproduced here in Fig 5 by kind permission of the author and Shire Publications Ltd).

I wonder how many more examples members have in their own collections? Perhaps we might see them in future issues!

And perhaps someone might be inspired to make a visual charted record of all the surviving patterns and colours on these cases for future reference? (Ed)



Bibliography

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