



the history is in the beads

People tell Marcia Fossey her basement is like a museum.

It's down here that the Edmonton jewelry designer keeps her vast collection of historic and vintage beads, many of them hundreds of years old.

"I have one of the largest collections of historic trade beads and vintage glass in Western Canada, at least," she says.

For two decades, Fossey has been collecting beads — turquoise vaseline beads that glow under black light, heavy African amber beads that are more than 150 years old, tiny red and white beads used for bartering by the Hudson's Bay Company.

"I kept running into beads in museums in the Yukon, in Alaska," she explains. "I'd seen the beads under glass. I'd seen them in artifacts."

Drawn to their beauty, Fossey, who was then living in Whitehorse, soon began making necklaces, earrings and bracelets out of her stock.

"I wanted to be a fashion designer and I couldn't draw," says the University of Alberta home economics grad. "But I could design with beads." Initially, she made the jewelry for herself, but people seemed to like them so much, Fossey decided to take them to a local craft sale. She sold about 25 necklaces in three hours.

When she moved back to her hometown of Edmonton in 1997, Fossey and her jewelry were snapped up quickly by the Alberta Craft Council, which helped push Ponderosa Designs to some 40 museum and gallery gift shops in Western Canada.

Fossey also sells her jewelry every Saturday at the Old Strathcona Farmers Market and does custom-work by appointment from her home studio.

Talking to Fossey about beads is like talking to a human encyclopedia. While she has dozens of books on the subject, she can rhyme off the origins and dates of her gems without even referring to the tomes.

"Who wore this? What were they like?" she asks. "It's really incredible to think where a bead has gone, who has worn it, and how often we can wear a piece of history."

Historic beads are widely available, but are becoming increasingly rare as supply meets demand and bead collecting becomes more popular, she says.

"I go to some of the largest bead and gem shows in the world," says Fossey. "What I used to buy 10 years ago, there's maybe a 10th of the selection. Some

beads simply run out." To expand her repertoire, Fossey has incorporated new beads, as well as vintage, recycled glass into her work. She's also done her fair share of digging around for quality beads — literally going through boxes, she says, in old warehouses in Manhattan.

"I'm very passionate about what I do," she says. "I love sharing what I do with people."

With every piece, Fossey includes a small card that details where each bauble comes from. Many of her customers like that her jewelry has a green appeal.

"It's a resource that gets to be redone," she says. "People who buy my jewelry love history. They love the fact that they're buying something that's being recreated from an old necklace."

To keep things fresh, Fossey is always trying new approaches to her designs — currently, she's playing around with Roman glass, thousands of years old, and 300-year-old metal Ethiopian crosses.

"I literally lay awake thinking of designs," she says. "Part of my success is the fact that I'm always changing what I do so I'm not bored."

For more information, visit albertacraft.ab.ca/marciafossey

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As featured in the
Edmonton Journal

