

Reproduced Shell Necklace

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We have enjoyed the progression of Indian Artifact Magazine over the last two years. There are two factors I am especially interested in; the sorry and very sad monetary direction this hobby has turned into and articles that expose reproduce artifacts. We have all purchased or have been fooled by reproductions as noted in your issue (Vol. 18-3, pgs 34-35) of your magazine. We know of several items in my collection that are now obvious reproductions and several items that are questionable and would never resell them as “old artifacts” or at least provide a warning if in doubt. Due to the quickly elevating value placed on artifacts this hobby is turning into an ugly business venture with little regard to historical value and less honesty each day. It is to bad we don't have a method like the Ebay auctions to rate and openly criticize and expose dishonest dealers.

Several personality trends we have found are indicators of pending problems. Beware of dealers that are reluctant to provide good solid background information about an artifact or just seem to automatically spill information from their mouth including a collector name, state and county. It is obvious that as you purchase more and more items for resale that there is no way to know where an item came from unless marked or posted in a some sort of record book. Beware if the price seems too cheap. Ask if you can show the item to someone you trust. Dealers know who habitually sell reproduced artifacts and will usually warn you when you take the effort to ask. Don't forget, honest dealers reputations are quickly tainted just by unwanted association with dishonest dealers attending the same trade shows. Even with these precautions I am sure you will buy reproduction pieces as long as you are in the hobby.

Reproduced artifacts are more commonly found in stone items of which the most commonly collected artifact are points. These are prevalent, especially the larger Archic or all Paleo types. Reproduced points can be found in any flea market in a basket market \$1.00 each. Years ago we bought a small display of “authentic points” at the Chicago airport gift shop. Of course we realized they were fake but wanted to show others how

ridiculous this can be especially when they even used printed glass as the media to make the points.

Reproduced artifacts are especially prevalent in hard to find items such as; pipes, gorgets, plummets, and similar items. Just assess your own collection. How many axes, plummets, gorgets and pipes do you own when compared to points? Correct, very few! Your chances of finding these items compared to points is probably less then 1% compared to points. Especially beware of the old gray haired guy who shows up at a flea market and has a table full of unique artifacts other then points (this will be another article). Items that are normally reproduced are; (1) rare in normal collections, (2) are in more demand and (3) normally command higher prices at shows.

In this short article we would like to share with you one of my newest, fantastic, moulded artificial acquisition. It was purchased at the Boiling Green, Kentucky artifact show (formally the Owenboro Show) last year from a dealer we have dealt with in the past, enjoy very much and still trust. They, like myself, were fooled and perhaps just over trusted the person who they obtained the item from and would not question his or her integrity. Even so, we both were fooled. We would like to outline this reproduced artifact so others will not purchase any more from whoever is manufacturing these. Yes, you heard it right, these are actually being mass moulded.

The item was what we thought was a “shell” necklace (photo 1) which included a small, real whelk shell mask. Our main interest was the mask (which was not from the same collector) however, the necklace was part of the purchase. We were especially interested in shell items since we were then in the process of writing and publishing a book on “Shell Artifacts” (see Hoff 2007) that we collected in Florida over the years. We purchased and/or photographed many shell artifacts at trade shows. However, the best way to understand an artifact and how it was used, is to own, touch and examine it over and over. Unfortunately, this cannot be done when you do not own the artifact.

We were excited about our purchase and was showing them to a friend who is very good in restoration of artifacts. He commented that the “shell beads” look as if the patina was painted on. Of course, at that point you go into the defensive, “I want to believe mode”. Most collectors have all been in this position before. However, we took his comment seriously but, said maybe they painted red ochre on the beads and it had faded over the years? However, it seemed strange that the beads look old and eroded from the elements yet, why would they

later paint them? Since our backgrounds are in science we are use to having to closely examine things. So we exited into the lab with our tails between our legs to give this a “good look” and a series of tests. Examination under a dissecting microscope show positive painting (photo 2) of the patina and it actually would develop a shine when rubbed slightly indicating a dull finish was applied on top. It would also flake off when scraped. If it was ochre it would have soaked into the old shell and left a stain. This was not the case. Still we continued to “wanna believe”.

We then decided to sacrifice a smaller bead for further examination and testing. The surface showed a lot of reflective properties like mica chips. At first we were not over alarmed since it came northern Georgia and the soil in this area contains mica chips. However, we then started to dissect the bead by scraping and low and behold there were more chips in the bead itself. Not knowing exactly what deteriorated old shell material actually looked like under a scope, we obtained some shell material that was much older then the so called “shell beads”. Needless to say, we did not find mica chips. Another identifying factor was that no white powder rubbed off on your hand which is common with old shell material that has not been overly treated for deterioration. Still we continued to “wanna believe”.

The next test was “acid proof” that this was not composed of shell material. We placed the bead and some old shell material in a 10% hydrochloric acid solution. The real shell material bubbled profusely as it should and the bead barely bubbled. Another strike against authenticity. Still we continued to “wanna believe”.

We then decided that these beads were probably cast from a mould. We compared each against the other with the hope that the sleazy artifact replicator would use two that were alike. Yep, we found two that were very much alike including; general shape, size, hole size, and several identical lines and pits in the surface (photo 3). Even though they were the same piece, each was distinctly different indicating that some additional mechanical modification was performed on each piece. When the patina was painted on it made it even harder to notice the difference. Still we wanted to believe since “how could we make such a mistake”? So we, like others, buried our pride, ate crow and decided to be more careful in the future.

We am always astonished at the effort someone will take to fake an artifact. If you own a heavy whelk shell columella bead necklace you might want to give it a better examination since the counterfeiter still has the

original molds.

Hope you enjoyed this article and it helps you in your next purchase of an “artifact?”. We included more information of several other fake shell artifacts in our book (Hoff 2007). Careful, be sure to give them a “good look-over” the next time.



Figure 1 --- Complete artificial shell necklace with two identical but slightly modified beads in the center.



Figure 2 --- Central round bead with fake patina. Note chipped paint in center and lines of the brush.



Figure 3 - Side of two identical beads from the same mold. Green markings show areas that are the same and were not modified.



Figure 4 - Other side of two identical beads. Green markings show areas that are the same and were not modified.