

AIKO BEADS

DON PIERCE



I was less than enthusiastic when I heard that the Japanese bead manufacturer TOHO had introduced a new line of seed beads. After all, I own almost all the Delica seed bead colors and most of the original colors of TOHO Antiques (now called Treasures). I'm not likely to try something else now, I thought. Garumph, I muttered. Enough said.

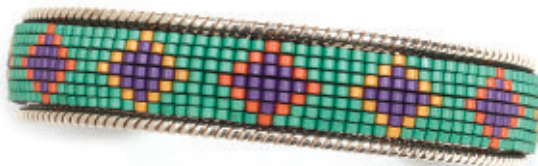
Then last year, just before the *Bead & Button* show, I received an invitation to a reception to meet the president and other executives from TOHO and view the new bead line. So I went. After all, the invitation mentioned wine and hors d'oeuvres. The invitees (famous designers like me—here, here) were introduced to Mr. Yamanaka and his lovely wife Aiko after whom the new beads are named. They were both very gracious. The main subject of the evening among the guests was the new beads: Were they any good? What do they cost? After examining the beads, the consensus among the designers was that the Aikos really are good and, unfortunately, two or more times as expensive as Delicas and TOHO Treasures. Well that's it, I thought. I won't pay those kind of prices. No way, I said.

Despite my reaction, I perused the Aiko sample cards and the photos of swatches done in Aikos, Delicas, and Treasures. The Aikos did look good, but Delicas are good, too.

And a lot cheaper. Plus, as I say, I already have seven quadrillion Delicas arranged neatly on one wall of my studio.

When I returned home I did a dangerous thing. I tried some Aikos in my loomwork. Then I decided to do a major piece with them. I bought some, then I bought more. By now I've made several pieces with these new beads, and I am hooked. Hopelessly, haplessly, helplessly hooked.

Aikos are perfectly consistent in size. There are no bad ones in the bunch. I've been working with them a lot these days, and up to now I have culled only two beads out of perhaps 20,000. That, my friends, is perfection.



A cuff made with galvanized frost Aikos.

But they are expensive. Right now they cost about twice as much as Delicas. So, acting as the researcher I sometimes can be, I was determined to find out why. I conceived my first experiment after being told that Aikos are lighter than other seed beads. I weighed ten grams of each type of seed

Above: The author's peyote-stitched pendants. The one on the left features a James Jones Dichroic bead; the one on the right a Larry Scott bead.

bead, and sure enough, there were more beads in the ten grams of Aikos, roughly five percent more. My next experiment was a culling test, and as I mentioned earlier, there is virtually no culling needed with the Aikos. That means something, too.

So, between the lighter weight and the lack of culling there's some rationale for the higher price. It's not enough to balance the cost, but it helps. For me, a big factor in my work is time management, and the lack of culling definitely saves time. I also find that because Aikos are all exactly the same size, they pop up between warp threads without any effort, and the consistency in size makes for dead even loomwork margins—something I also appreciate.

One problem with Aikos, like Delicas and Treasures, is that color can rub off on the galvanized and dyed finishes. The problem hasn't been solved, but I've been told TOHO is working on it.

TOHO will introduce 1,071 colors, including hexagons, to the Aiko line by the end of November. I've become particularly enamored of the galvanized frost finishes, which don't rub off. They speak to me of the Southwest, as the bracelet made with Aikos (on page 42) does.

My friend, the talented and very humble Judy Walker, shares essentially my feelings about Aikos. She says "Every bead I picked up fit like a little tile, and the finished peyote-stitched beadwork was straight, tight, flat-surfaced, and supple." Judy has also mixed the Aikos with Delicas. Other than reporting some trouble with two Aiko dyed colors, which she felt were even less durable than their Delica counterparts, she had no problems. I had a similar reaction from Shannon Zelenak of Bobby Bead, who has had access to the Aikos since their introduction. Shannon's *Dragonfly* at right illustrates the consistency of the Aikos. Her comments about Aikos are effusive: "What can I tell you, I love them!"

Though I really love these new beads I find that there's one downside: Using such consistently sized beads eliminates a good excuse for work that just doesn't measure up.

So the bottom line is, are the new Aikos really that good? Yes. Are they a joy to work with? Yes. Are they worth the extra cost if speed and precision are tantamount? Absolutely! ●

Request TOHO Aiko beads at your local bead shop. In the United States, the beads are available wholesale-only from Tambrook Bead & Trade (www.tambrookbeads.com) and by retail and wholesale at Bobby Bead (www.bobbybead.com).

Don Pierce is the father of Larry the Loom and author of *Beading on a Loom* (Interweave Press, 1999) and *Designs for Beading on a Loom* (Don Pierce, 2001). Contact Don at www.donpierce.com or donpierce@harborside.com.