

Bali and Thai Silver

There are two things that are very important when buying beads or jewelry featuring "Bali Silver" (for ease of discussion I'm lumping Thai and Bali together for the moment, so bear with me for referring to them as merely "Bali Silver").

The first of the two things is what metal was used to create the beads. The second is *how* the beads were created.

It's important for each of us, as customers and as sellers, to become as familiar with jewelry and beading products as possible. Therefore, you must study and research (if you want this knowledge) so that you can tell the difference by looking, whether something probably IS what the seller says it is. Sometimes sellers are less than honest, and sometimes sellers are just ignorant of what they have. There's always the great excuse of: "Well, it's what I was told it was when *I* purchased it."

It's not a bad idea to remember (at all times), if something looks to good to be true, it most likely is. It's NOT good enough for you to merely BELIEVE what each seller says. Becoming familiar with the current going rate of Bali silver is one way of most likely getting closer to the truth. If the price quoted is 10-20 cents above most other vendors, you are probably being overcharged. If the price is 10-20 cents below, you are probably being sold poor quality. I think it's our responsibility as buyers and sellers to KNOW what we're dealing with.

So... back to Bali Silver and its two points of interest.

One is whether or not the item is sterling or higher. The best way here is to handle and examine all kinds of beads until you are pretty darn good at guessing correctly.

Sterling has a certain color that base metal won't. Something could be silver-plated and will (obviously) still look like sterling 'cause it IS... on the outside, but that outside is generally very thin and liable to wear off even with casual use.

Here are photos of bracelets I've made. All were with genuine sterling silver beads except for one which was made from beads that are referred to as sterling silver but the fine print stated that the beads have a brass core. Can you see the difference? Sometimes, it's a gut instinct, nothing you can specifically put your finger on... but you just KNOW something doesn't look right. I purchased those beads, btw, as research. If you handle genuine, fake, and everything in between, you will learn more.





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If you guessed the fourth bracelet, good eye!

You can also look for a mark (a "925" or "sterling" stamp). MOST of the time, these will be legit. But again, use your knowledge and your intuition. Items *can* be marked falsely. It's not as common, though, so it's a better gage of authenticity.

Another way to TRY to tell sterling silver from plated is the weight. I once bought a charm bracelet on eBay that was described as all sterling components: the chain, the headpins, the charms, etc. When I opened the package, my first indication that I'd been ripped off was the weight of the item. Sterling is substantial... this bracelet was WAY too lightweight. It's all a learning experience.

There is also a distinct sound that sterling beads seem to make when knocking against one another. Experience... again.

So as far as being able to tell if something touted as sterling really is sterling or not... it can be hit and miss, and your best bet is for you to become as familiar with sterling and non-sterling as you can, so YOU can use your intuition when making an educated guess.

The second thing I want to discuss in regards to Bali and Thai silver is the following: I have immense respect for the makers of true Bali silver because they are artisans and I love what they do, both in looks and in idea (the creation of their items).

For Bali silver, the Indonesian silversmiths use techniques of granulation, which means they apply tiny sterling decorations (dots, scrolls, lines, etc) to the surface of a cast shape. They also decorate by appliquéd, incision, etching and wire wrapping. Each piece is meticulously crafted using only sterling silver for these tiny works of art.

Let me back up here and explain what "casting" is. Casting (in regards to silver beads) means molten (heated to the point of being liquid) silver is poured into a mold. When it's cooled, tada... you have your bead... or your base bead.

What the Bali silversmiths do is cast the base (working background) shape, usually a sphere, and then carefully decorate that shape by the means I mentioned above. They solder all these teeny tiny pieces of sterling ONTO the main part of the bead. It's art, I tell you! And each bead amazes and thrills me no end.

Thai (particularly the Seven Hill Tribes) beads are a little different in that the silversmiths work primarily with "pure silver" (99.9% silver content, as opposed to 92.5% silver content of sterling). Pure silver is softer and therefore lends itself to their style of decorating more easily, as they do more shaping and etching of the beads.

Okay, now back to Bali... so, the thing you want to look for in Bali silver is that the "decorations" on the beads appear to you soldered on and not part of the casting session. If the dots "bleed" into one another, it's easier to assume they were created when silver was poured into a mold that had dot indentations in it rather than they were created as separate little dots and applied to a base bead. If wire scrolls have no line, how was it applied to the bead? A line applied to a bead would have a beginning and an ending... it would look like these. Someone applied those lines and dots of silver to the beads.



There are also beads sold that are all made from a mold, the entire thing. The little dots, lines and scrolls are part of the casting mold; they aren't added on afterward. To the untrained eye, they can appear very like an embellished silversmith's bead. Look closely at the beads you buy. Do they look like they were hand-decorated or do they look like someone just dumped it out of a mold?



With time and experience, you will get a "feel" for the quality of the products available.

It doesn't take an expert eye (merely an educated one) to see the HUGE difference in quality between well-made beads and mass-produced inferior beads. Give yourself some time and you will get to the point where you can easily spot the difference.

Don't get me wrong... "casting" a bead is nothing to be ashamed of. There are some exquisite cast beads out there. I'm just saying that if you're paying for beads that are hand-decorated... make sure you're GETTING beads that are hand-decorated. A bead that is all cast should always be less expensive than a hand-decorated similar bead.

Frequently Asked Questions:

Question 1: Certain beads that I know are NOT from Bali, as they are marked India when you receive them from a certain supplier, can closely resemble Bali beads. While I take care to keep my bags separate, India vs. Bali, and I don't use the term Bali unless I know I received them either directly from Bali or from a trusted supplier, I see these beads listed regularly in jewelry as Bali silver. Here is a picture of two beads. How does one distinguish these from Bali sterling silver? Maybe my eye just is not trained enough yet!

My response: Good question! For now here's what *I* would do. If these beads are as beautiful as these examples you've posted, I'd say, "Hand-crafted Sterling Silver beads". You're right; the term "Bali Silver" is overused and often incorrectly used. There can be and are exquisite beads coming out of other countries from other silversmiths. There are Bali beads, there are Thai beads, there are Turkish beads, Indian beads, etc. Name them if you know the source, otherwise go by the quality and refer to them as either hand-decorated or cast beads.

Question 2: I have a question, are you saying that cast beads can't be authentic Bali beads? I have a direct supplier and I purchase both ornate and cast Bali (if I like how it looks, even if its cast without additional adornment, I buy it). I have never had reason to think these beads are not authentic *Bali beads* Are you saying some of the beads I import aren't authentic and some are - from the same supplier?

My response: There are cast beads that are from Bali and are beautiful... but they are NOT the highly decorated beads most people think of when they think of "Bali Silver". The "cast beads" I was referring to earlier are the ones that are specifically cast in an attempt to APPEAR as though they are hand-decorated. So yes, "cast" is not the problem... but cast to appear as though they're hand-decorated, now THAT'S a problem, especially if someone is pricing them as though they were meticulously hand-made. There are some GORGEOUS cast Bali beads that are not outwardly decorated. Just because they're "cast" does not make them fake Bali beads. When I refer to "fake Bali beads", it's beads that are specifically cast in a way as to APPEAR like the highly decorated Bali beads.

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