

Pearl Wisdom

CHERYL FENTON **writer**

although superstition says they bring tears, pearls have instead brought smiles to many. Pearls even played a big role in bringing a renowned real estate deal to a close when, in 1917, the sale of a Fifth Avenue mansion to French jeweler Jacques Cartier was had for the price of two pearl necklaces.

Although now obvious in popularity and worth, the creation of pearls mystified ancient civilizations. In China, it was believed that pearls formed in the brain of a dragon. Ancient Greeks thought they were from lightning striking the ocean. Their spherical shape led many cultures to associate this gem with the moon.

In truth, pearls are works of nature's art, the only gems created by a live creature from an irritant it can't expel.

Pearls are the result of a mollusk protecting itself from an irritation—a grain of sand, a piece of bone, or a parasite that has found its way through the shell and into its soft tissue. The layers of protection form “nacre,” a type of calcium carbonate, and as it

builds, a pearl is formed.

Mastoloni pearl necklace with
round diamond pave clasp

Type: South Sea

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COURTESY OF A. M. DEPRISCO WELLESLEY



Bezel set diamond strand leading to a Tahitian South Sea pearl with a diamond pave top
 Type: Tahitian South Sea

As its creation is in nature's hands, it stands to reason that a pearl would be a rarity, if not an oddity. During its formation, the battle with the irritant might end in the oyster's demise. Or the pearl might become worthless due to outer influences like tides and disease. With nature in charge and price reflecting this, pearls were desired by many, but purchased by few.

"The finest pearls were coveted more than diamonds back in the 1800s because pearls were only found in their natural state," explains David Walker, owner of Chestnut Hill's David & Co. and Shreve, Crump & Low on Boston's Boylston Street.

In the late 1800s an enthusiastic jeweler decided to bring an end to the untouchable pearl industry by bringing a little help to Mother Nature. This jeweler was Kokichi Mikimoto, a name now synonymous with pearls.

The help he brought was in developing the method of culturing pearls. "I would like to adorn the necks of all the women of the world with pearls," Mikimoto said shortly after he succeeded in culturing a perfectly round pearl in 1905, 12 years after his first successful semi-circular pearl. Today, most pearls are cultured.



Multi-colored pearl necklace with 14-karat and diamond clasp, and pearl earrings with 18-karat and diamonds (left) and 14-karat and diamonds (right).
 Type: South Sea

To create a pearl, a technician inserts a "nuclei," (usually beads or mantle tissue from other mollusks) into a mollusk. The mollusk is then returned to the water, and nature picks up where humans left off. Only an X-ray tells the truth of this cultured pearl's manmade beginning.

"Pearls are now cross-generational. You see Sarah Jessica Parker in [the movie] *Sex and The City* and the Mikimoto strand that she wears predominantly," says Manager Debbie Sidorowicz of Lux Bond & Green Wellesley, who has given seminars on pearls at the Nantucket Wine Festival and the Postcomers Club in Wellesley. "People still celebrate pearls as a classic wedding and graduation gift but it's more of a fashion look now."

"They're an easy thing for most people to wear," agrees Walker. "Living in a time of understated elegance where people don't want to

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Seven strand cultured freshwater pearl bracelet with antique-style diamond clasp
Type: Freshwater

wear big gaudy necklaces, the trend is to wear something understated. Pearls fit into this understated quality category of jewelry.”

“A classic strand is always in fashion,” adds Albert DePrisco, owner of A.M. DePrisco Wellesley. “Sixteen inches that falls onto the nape of the neck with seven to eight millimeter pearls is something that has been worn for decades.” Go as long as forty-five inches in different colors, doubled or knotted in the center for a fun, modern twist.

Under the Sea

Today’s cultured pearl market primarily includes Akoya, South Sea, Tahitian, and Freshwater pearls, each with its own size range and color characteristics.

The most popular pearl and a perfect choice for all occasions is the Akoya, according to Mark Dell’Arciprete, manager at Natick’s Ross-



14-karat 36-inch pearl and diamond 2.58-karat necklace with 14-karat pearl and diamond 1.02-karat earrings
Type: South Sea

Simons. Primarily harvested from chilly Japanese waters, these pearls range in size from three millimeters to ten millimeters and are known for their luster and rich color—white or cream with overtones in rose, silver, or cream.



Multi-colored pearl necklace with round diamond pave clasp
Type: Tahitian

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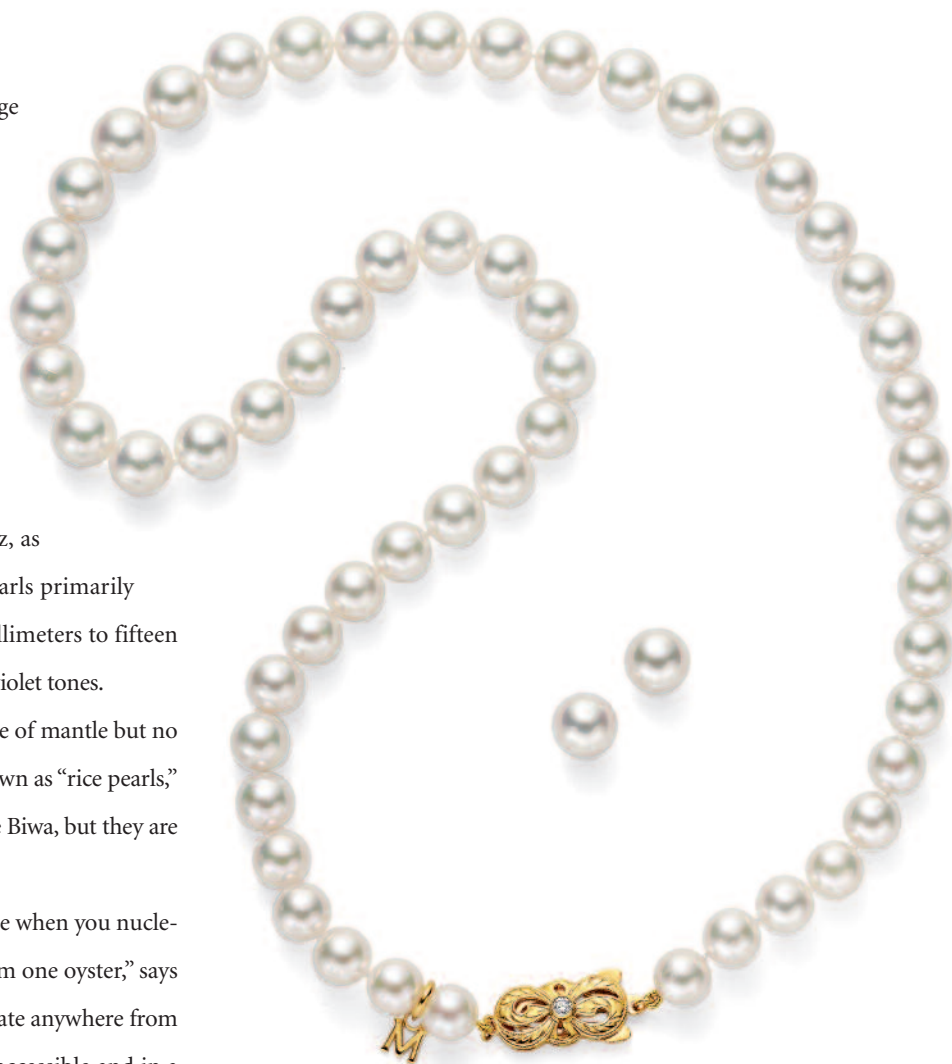
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On the other side of the spectrum is the large South Sea pearl, what Dell’Arciprete calls the “rarest of pearls,” from ten millimeters to as large as twenty millimeters. These white, cream, or golden beauties are grown in the warm waters of Australia, Indonesia and the Philippines from oysters the size of dinner plates.

Between the Akoya and South Sea for size, but in its own category for color, Tahitian pearls are unique treasures, known, according to Sidorowicz, as the “kings of the ocean.” These naturally black pearls primarily come from Tahiti and are approximately eight millimeters to fifteen millimeters. Their colors combine blue, green, and violet tones.

When a freshwater mussel is inserted with a piece of mantle but no bead, this creates a Freshwater pearl. Originally known as “rice pearls,” the first country to cultivate these was Japan in Lake Biwa, but they are now almost exclusive to China.

“Freshwater pearls are affordable fashion because when you nucleate an Akoya oyster, you can only get one pearl from one oyster,” says Sidorowicz. “With freshwater pearls, you can nucleate anywhere from 10 to 30 in one mollusk. That makes them more accessible and in a lower price range, but they still offer beautiful luster and great color range. They have added more fashion into the overall pearl industry.”



Mikimoto strand necklace and complementing stud earrings
Type: Akoya



Caring for Pearls

Pearls should be the last thing you put on and the first thing you take off.

- APPLY cosmetics, perfume, and hairspray before putting on your pearls. If the pearls will be touching your skin, leave that area free of cosmetics or perfumes.
- AFTER WEARING pearls, run them through a damp, soft cloth. Clean them periodically with warm water and a mild, non-detergent soap. Never put pearls in an ultrasonic cleaner or use anything containing ammonia.
- ALTHOUGH they're from the water, wearing pearls in the water is a no-no. The silk strings will darken and weaken.
- HAVE THEM restrung in a timely manner. Once you can move the pearls between the notches, it means the silk has weakened and it's time to have them restrung.
- NEVER STORE them hanging up, which will stretch the silk.
- THE MOST UNSAFE place to store pearls is a safe deposit box. They need to breathe.

Mikimoto
South Sea Pearls

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LUX BOND & GREEN

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Finding Quality

Although their origins were mysterious in ancient times, pearls leave no questions unanswered when it comes to quality. The naked eye sees all.

“It’s all right there, so you just have to know what to look for,” says Walker. “You can look at a strand of poor quality and one of fine quality, and your eye will almost always go to the finer quality strand.”

According to the Gemological Institute of America (GIA), consumers should keep the following “Pearl Value Factors” in mind: luster, surface qualities, shape, and color.

■ **LUSTER**—A strong luster gives pearls a slippery or wet look. A greater surface glow (or “inner light”) will capture not only your eye, but a higher price. “If the pearl is smooth and lustrous that means it has a heavy nacre thickness, so it spent a fair amount of time in the oyster to develop that coat,” says DePrisco, “which means a bigger expense.”

■ **SURFACE QUALITY**—Since no pearl is completely free of blemishes (bumps, abrasions, spots), the idea is to find one with the fewest number. Imperfections can be on the surface or below, where nacre isn’t thick enough. Test for “blinking” by rolling the strand between your fingers, suggests Pat Maffeo, manager and buyer at Barmakian Jewelers.

“Put your thumbs together, forefingers in front of you, making a window, take the strand where your thumbs are and roll it backward to the end of your hand,” Maffeo explains. “Do you see little bumps as



Baroque pearl necklace accented with sections of cognac pave set diamonds
Type: Baroque South Sea

you roll them? If it’s coated evenly, it has same look when you roll it. If it’s coated more heavily on one side than the other, it looks like blinking because it’s there and then isn’t it. You’re looking at a thin part of the nacre, so you’re looking through to the bead.”

■ **SHAPE**—Although many shapes are available, perfectly round pearls are the rarest and most valuable. If your preference is to keep with tradition and choose a round pearl, it’s important to look for the roundest one available.

Oddly shaped pearls are, however, gaining interest. Button, teardrop and baroque shapes are favored because they are unusual.

“One of the beauties of baroque pearls especially is they’re very natural, not uniform at all,” says DePrisco. “The more irregular they are, the more appealing they are to the eye.”

■ **COLOR**—There are two colors to consider—“body” (the dominant color) and “overtone” (a translucent tint). Color is determined by the insertion of a piece of the oyster’s colored lip in addition to the bead. White is produced by silver-lipped oysters; golden by golden-lipped; black by black-lipped. Although white, cream, black, and gray are the most familiar, pearl colors can extend to virtually every hue. Overtones can be rose, greenish, or bluish, and in black pearls it’s almost an oily look.

No matter the color you choose, it should be rich and evenly distributed. Dell’Arciprete recommends viewing the pearls on a white background and, the final test, to hold the pearls against your skin to see if they agree with your skin tone. White and pink rose tend to flatter the widest range of complexion colors.



Necklace by German designer Schoeffel
Type: Baroque South Sea

BECKY BRANNON / COURTESY OF QUADRUM

COURTESY OF A.M. DEPRISCO WELLESLEY

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Mastoloni diamond and pearl earrings

Type: South Sea



When buying a strand or multi-pearl pieces of jewelry, take all these factors into consideration and determine what Maffeo refers to as the “make.”

“How is it matched? Do they all look like they came from the same oyster, even though we know they didn’t?” “Does this look like a bunch of beads that someone strung or a strand of pearls that someone took the time to sort?”

The better the match, the more time it took to create—one of your biggest expenses when choosing a strand. Some strands can take years to perfectly match.

Pearl Possibilities

“Pearls enhance a woman and soften her look, and there are so many wonderful pearl choices as far as price points, colors, and styles,” says Vickie Mancini, vice president and buyer at Anderson’s Jewelers in Wellesley. Wearing multiple strands of different lengths and combining them with chunky gold necklaces are fun fashion trends currently in vogue. And thanks to Michelle Obama, the classic strand and traditional multi-strand necklaces are more popular than ever.

“It used to be that a woman wasn’t supposed to wear pearls before 5:00 pm,” says Janet Armstrong, longtime jewelry designer and goldsmith at Joel Bagnal Goldsmiths and Jewelers in Wellesley. “That has all changed. Women are now wearing pearls with jeans and T-shirts, and why not?”

Creative jewelry enthusiasts are seeking ways to use pearls they may have inherited or owned for a long time. Anderson suggests taking a longer strand of pearls and re-stringing them to create a choker and a bracelet or a pair of earrings. For a temporary change, Armstrong sug-

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gests purchasing a pearl shortener, a clever device that hooks between any two pearls to make them as short as one likes to complement a particular outfit. The versatility of pearls also makes it easy to take an older necklace and design a customized jewelry

piece with a modern twist. For one customer, Armstrong made molds of individual pearls from an existing necklace, cast each one in gold, and re-strung them to create an exquisite signature look.

Round or baroque, white or black, classic design or trendy, one last thought on pearls remains: “I tell men it’s the [equivalent of] a navy blue suit,” says Sidorowicz. “If a woman doesn’t have pearls in her wardrobe, she should.” **WW**

Sources

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