



Pearl

Birthstone Month: June

Anniversary: 3rd and 30th

Season/Zodiac: Gemini

Interesting Facts/History

Pearl was among the favorite gem materials of the Roman Empire. In Tudor England, the 1500s were known as “the pearl age”. On his 3rd voyage to the Americas, Columbus kept his discovery of Pearls in the New World a secret, and he fell out of favour with the King of Spain. In the Orient, pearl powders are sold as an aphrodisiac. For medicinal use Pearls are composed of calcium carbonate, an essential supplement for promoting strong bones and teeth, as well as the prime ingredient in stomach antacids. Pearls are unique in that they are the only gem of the sea from living creatures requiring no faceting or polishing to reveal their natural beauty. In the early 1900s the first successful commercial culturing of round pearls began. Since the 1920s cultured pearls have almost completely replaced natural pearls in the market.

Name Derivation

From the Latin “Margarita” which means “child of the sea”.

Composition of Cultured Pearls

The iridescent layer inside some species of shells is called “Mother-of-Pearl”. When these layers accumulate on the implanted nucleus (made from shell) it is called “nacre” (nay-ker). The finer, thicker and more uniform the nacre is, the more lustrous and blemish-free the pearl forms, and therefore it is more valuable and desirable.

The Pearl Culturing Process

At an age of 2-3 years (Japan) and 4-5 years (South Seas), the oyster is implanted with a round nucleus of mother-of-pearl that is left inside for 1-3 years. After much tender-loving-care, the oysters are harvested. Fine quality cultured pearls are extremely rare. Only 25-50% of the crop produces a pearl, and fewer than 5% are of export quality. Environmental factors such as pollution, natural predators and adverse weather over the considerable time it takes to raise oysters, seed them, and nurture the crop until harvest should give one an appreciation for man and mother nature working closely together to produce these wonders of the sea.

Varieties - Types of Cultured Pearls

Freshwater Pearls - Originating in lakes, rivers, and streams, these pearls are generally “baroque” or free-form in shape, and come in a multitude of colours, sizes, and shapes. China is the largest producer of these pearls. The United States also produces many freshwater pearls. An important high-quality producer in the past was Lake Biwa in Japan.

Three-Quarter Pearls - These are cultured pearls that are flat on one side and are ideally suited for earrings, pendants, and rings. Since they are not round, they are much more affordable, and are set such that the client has the full benefit of a much larger appearing pearl.

Mabe’ Pearls - This fashionable, and affordable larger-sized assembled pearl product is constructed from a blister pearl (resembling an egg-shell) harvested from the magnificent mabe’, or butterfly-shaped shell. This blister pearl is attached to a flat base of mother-of-pearl and filled with a solid mother-of-pearl bead and a special bonding agent. The final result is a larger cultured pearl product in a variety of shapes with a flat back perfect for earrings and pendants. Mabe’ pearls offer a fashion-forward look, in a larger size at a very economical price.

Japanese Pearls - Much of the world’s round cultured pearls under 10 mm are harvested in Japan. These pearls are typically White, Light Cream, Silver-Gray, and rarely Pink in colour. Japanese pearls are known for their smooth texture and high luster.

South Seas Pearls - A marvelous array of larger cultured pearls, usually over 10 mm, from rounds to drop shapes, barrels, rosebuds, and symmetrical shapes in a variety of colours are produced. Black Pearls are cultured in Tahitian oysters. Other species of shell typically produce cream colours, and more rarely white, and silver-gray shades. Considering the extreme rarity of South Seas oysters, and the older ages of the oysters at nucleation, the largest, finest strands of these pearls may take years to assemble, the pearls matched from among thousands of beads. These strands can command from tens of thousands up to a million dollars in value.

Pearl (cont'd)

Size

Three things determine the size of a cultured pearl: the size of the mother-of-pearl nucleus, the size of the oyster, and the thickness of the nacre. Size is an important value factor. Certain sizes that are in fashion demand, may command premium prices. Supply and demand are the over-riding factors.

Shape

Among connoisseurs, the more perfectly round a pearl is, the more valuable and desirable it becomes. Pearls today are offered in a fascinating array of shapes and sizes. Many are very fashionable and affordable.

Colour - 3 Components

Pearl colour includes: the body colour (the primary colour - either light, dark, or coloured), the overtone colour (a tint that appears super-imposed on the body colour), and a rare component called orient (an iridescent, or rainbow of colours that generally is found on baroque pearls, or those with an irregular surface).

The most valuable pearls in the light body colour group are pink, pink rosé and white rosé with a very high luster, and are well matched, and round, with a clean surface. The finest dark pearls are black with a metallic green overtone colour. Pearls also come in pastel colours such as: pink, purple, yellow, golden, green, silver, and blue. The most valuable overtone colour in light pearls is rosé, and in black pearls, green is most desirable. The colour of the "mother-of-pearl" inside the shell determines the pearl colour, depending on the species.

Luster

Of the value factors, luster is among the most important. Luster refers to the quality and quantity of light reflecting from the pearl's surface, or "brightness" of the pearl. Very high luster is a sign of fine quality nacre, and is found only in the most rare pearls that command a premium price. Japanese pearls, in general, exhibit a higher luster than South Sea varieties that show a softer, more velvety appearance.

Surface Texture

This feature refers to the degree of surface perfection. Finer quality nacre is very smooth, and nearly blemish-free, however, most pearls have natural surface characteristics that serve to identify them and act as "mother nature's" fingerprints. The cleaner the surface, the higher luster produced, and more valuable the pearls become.

Nacre Thickness

Top quality cultured pearls have thick layers of very finely accumulated nacre that produce a magnificent luster, and durable pearl. Japan has strict export standards regarding nacre thickness to ensure a quality product worldwide.

Matching-Blending

When multiple pearls are combined, the quality of matching them such as in earrings is an important factor. In selecting pearls for a strand, the pearls are closely blended for all of the features presented here. In all strands the closest matching, finest quality pearls are found in the front third of the strand.

Where Pearls are Cultured and Harvested

Japan, China, South Seas including Tahiti, Australia, Burma, the Philippines, the United States.

Pearl (cont'd)

Selecting Pearl Colours that Complement You

Dark Skin Tones - Cream, Golden Pearl body colours
Pinkish Skin Tones - Cream/Rosé Colours
Light Skin Tones - Pink, White/Rosé, Light Cream/Rosé
Brunette Hair Colour - Cream/Rosé Colours
Reddish Hair Colour - Cream/Rosé Colours
Blonde Hair Colour - White/Rosé Colours

Pearl Strand Lengths

Choker = 14" - 16"
Princess = 16" - 18"
Matinee = 21" - 24"
Opera = 28" - 32"

Durability

Hardness (*resistance to scratching*) = 2 1/2 - 4 on the Moh's Scale.
Toughness (*resistance to breaking, chipping, cracking*) = Usually good unless the outer layers have surface imperfections.
Stability (*to heat, light, chemicals*) = Avoid any exposure to prolonged heat including intense light sources. Generally stable to light.
Avoid chemicals. Cultured Pearls are attacked by all acids, perspiration, skin oils, perfume, and hairspray (alcohol-based).

Care and Cleaning

Ultrasonic = Never.
Steam Cleaning = Never.
Repair Recommendations = Avoid heat. Restring often (once a year). Wipe off with a soft, damp cloth after each wearing. Do not submerge or soak in any liquid. Store away from other jewelry items. Put on last, take off first to avoid direct contact with perfume and hairspray.

Enhancements

Most Cultured Pearls are subjected to bleaching as a normal part of the processing phase of the gem to whiten and brighten the nacre. Some Cultured Pearls are dyed to produce a number of dynamic fashion looks.

Fashion Significance

Cultured pearls are an essential part of every sophisticated woman's complete jewelry wardrobe. An elegant strand of cultured pearls worn with matching earrings, bracelet and ring are perfect for any occasion, and are truly timeless. Pearls can be enjoyed and cherished for generations to come. From a fashion perspective, pearls offer many exciting accessorizing opportunities including pendant enhancers, pins, strand shorteners, and interchangeable gemstone clasps.