

# Pearls and Their Care

By Sandy Patterson



Pearls were created millions of years ago and discovered, no doubt, by early man while searching the seashore for food. The natural pearl is formed when an irritant such as a grain of sand becomes trapped in the mollusk. The mollusk secretes *nacre* (mother-of-pearl) that coats the particle in layers over a period of time. The size and shape of the pearl depends on the species of mollusk, how long it took to form and where it formed inside the mollusk – the shape is oval, pear-shaped, or “baroque” (meaning not symmetrical). Pearls less than 1 millimeter are called seed pearls.

Layers of nacre create tiny prisms of refracted light in a rainbow of colors or *luster*. Colors range from a silvery white, to gold, to pink, to bluish gray, to black. A real pearl can be distinguished from an imitation by rubbing it gently against your teeth; it should feel gritty due to the crystalline structure of the nacre as opposed to the imitation pearl which is smooth and slippery.

Pearls have been revered by royalty and religious leaders throughout time as one of the most beautiful gems on earth. At a banquet honoring Marc Anthony, Cleopatra, it is written, wagered she could serve the most expensive meal ever provided by dissolving a priceless pearl in vinegar and swallowing it, thus winning the wager. Ancient Greeks used pearls at weddings where they were said to bring love. To Islam, pearls represent perfection and completeness. Hindus think of the pearl as one of the planetary gems associated with the moon and is second only to the diamond in esteem. Archeologists found that in the Persian Gulf people were buried with a pearl resting in their right hand. The Koran described pearls as one of the greatest treasures provided in Paradise. In ancient Egypt mother-of-pearl was used for decorative purposes as far back as 4000 BC. In 2300 BC it is recorded that the Chinese considered pearls as one of the most prized possessions of royalty.

Freshwater pearls live in mussels in lakes, rivers and streams. Freshwater pearls of Europe, Asia and North America were prized thousands of years ago. It is believed that Julius Caesar invaded Britain in 55 BC to obtain freshwater pearls. Abundant “river pearls” were provided to nobility and church for embroidery, jewelry and decorative pieces. In the Americas, native tribes were found using freshwater pearls as jewelry and for trade. Freshwater pearls can be rice shaped, spherical, freeform or asymmetrical. Colors range from milky white, to peach, pink, and lavender. In the early 1900s, buttons were made of American mother-of-pearl supplied by freshwater pearl mussels. With the invention of plastic in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, m-o-p buttons were no longer produced.



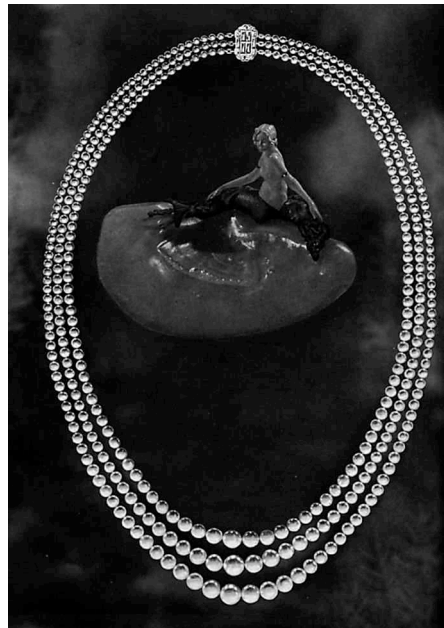
Mother-of-Pearl Necklace  
c. 1928



Mother-of-Pearl Cufflinks  
c. 1928

Kokichi Mikimoto developed a process which artificially stimulated a mollusk to produce a *cultured* pearl. In 1899 he opened his first Mikimoto pearl shop in the fashionable Ginza district of Japan. Cultured pearls were more affordable to followers of fashion than the natural pearl and became a popular export in the 1920s and 30s. French designer, Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel, wore cultured pearls with elegantly casual designs and created a new fashion statement. Pearls were the accepted fashion accessory for high fashion as well as for less formal occasions.

Mikimoto Pearls  
c. 1930



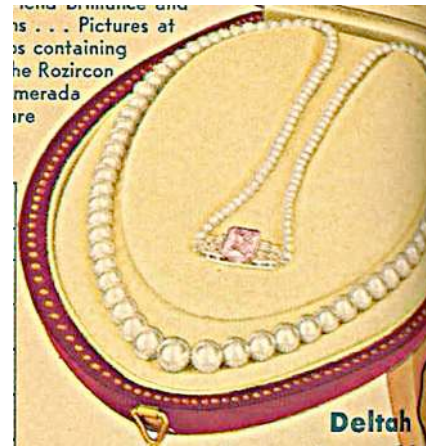
Seed Pearl and Diamond Necklace  
c. 1931

Faux pearls were created back as far as the realm of Queen Elizabeth I of England and beyond to the ancient Romans due to the rarity of natural pearls and their popularity. Techniques used varied and included coating glass, shell and ceramic, with a mixture of a varnish-like substance and fish scales or flakes of mica.

Imitation pearls and other “costume” jewelry became very fashionable and an affordable jewelry accessory, particularly since the years of the Great Depression. Popular lengths of pearls or faux pearls are the Choker 14-15 inches, Matinee 20-24 inches, Opera 30-36 inches (worn doubled or long) and the Sautoir – longer than Opera length up to 60 inches. Among the most popular manufacturers of faux pearls in the 1920s and 30s were Deltah, La Tausca, Richelieu, Senorita, and many others.



Faux Pear Watch Bracelet  
c. 1929



La Tausca Pearl and Crystal Necklace  
c. 1929



Deltah Necklaces  
Pearl and Crystal  
c. 1929

## Care of Pearls

Because of their softer, more delicate organic origin, pearls can easily be scratched or damaged. Perfume, hair spray and cosmetics should be applied **before** pearls are put on. Natural body oil and perspiration can also dull the pearl's luster. After wearing pearls, wipe them with a soft damp towel to remove body oils and chemicals. Wash them with mild soap periodically and have them restrung every one or two years if they are worn frequently. Knotting between each pearl prevents pearls rubbing against one another and from falling off the strand if it breaks. Store your pearls wrapped separately from other jewelry in a soft cloth or soft lined container to prevent scratches.

*Article on Pearls and Their Care by Sandy Patterson  
Pictures from catalogs of the years 1928-1931  
and private collections*

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