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# PEARL FASHION THROUGH THE AGES

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*This article traces the use of pearls from antiquity to the initial appearance of cultured pearls in the 1920s. The first section touches on the early fascination with pearls as revealed through historical literature, including Cleopatra's pearls, Roman pearl jewelry, and medicinal pearl recipes of the Middle Ages. During the Renaissance, Spain's exploration of the New World resulted in the discovery of vast quantities of valuable pearls that were eventually spread throughout Europe. Queen Elizabeth I's magnificent collection of pearls and the intriguing baroque pearl figurines of the later Renaissance are also discussed. The article concludes with a review of pearl fashion from 1800 to 1930, including delicate Victorian seed-pearl jewelry, Queen Alexandra's dog-collar chokers, and Art Deco pearl-inlaid jewelry.*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Pearls are the oldest gems known to man, perhaps because no shaping or cutting is needed to reveal their beauty. Scrolls and papyri from ancient civilizations describe wondrous legends of pearls long turned to dust. Time and again throughout Western history, the passion for pearls was reborn whenever culture and civilization thrived. Faceless ancients, Roman statesmen, Renaissance kings and queens, Victorian ladies, and sleek flappers were all fascinated by the natural beauty—and intrigue—of pearls. In recent years, pearls and pearl jewelry have once again assumed a major role in the public eye; no longer the sole province of royalty and the wealthy, cultured pearls are now one of the most popular of gems worldwide.

The origins of this fascination with pearls are as captivating as the pearl itself, more so than many other gems, perhaps, because its very fragility has made a historical record that much more difficult to maintain. This article delves into that history with a survey of pearl fashion from ancient to modern times, encompassing trends in the Mediterranean, Western Europe, and the United States. We will examine how pearls were used in jewelry, art, and even medicine through the ages, and the cyclical nature of pearl fashion throughout history.

## EARLY HISTORY

In one of the earliest references to the use of pearls for adornment, the Greek poet Homer described the Roman goddess Juno's pearl earrings in his epic poem, the *Iliad*: "In three bright drops her glittering gem suspends from her ears." And in the masterful *Odyssey*, also composed several centuries before Christ, he again refers to "Earrings bright with triple drops that / cast a trembling light . . . the liquid drops of tears that you have shed / shall come again transformed in Orient pearls / advantaging their loan with interest / of ten times double gain of happiness" (Fitzgerald, 1961).





Figure 1. This gold-covered bronze Paphos pin consists of a large (14 mm) saltwater pearl topped with a small (4 mm) freshwater pearl. This unusual pin was found in the temple of Aphrodite at Paphos (on Cyprus) and dates from the third century B.C. Photo by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.

The earliest archaeological evidence of pearls in jewelry was found at Susa, the ancient capital of Elam, in the Khuzistan region of Iran. In 1901, a magnificent necklace of 216 pearls divided into three equal rows was recovered from the bronze sarcophagus of an Achaemenid princess at Susa. The necklace, which is currently in the Louvre museum in Paris, dates from not later than the fourth century B.C.

The Paphos pin, currently in the British Museum in London, illustrates a very different form of pearl jewelry that was known in Greece in the third century B.C. (figure 1). It came from the temple of Aphrodite at Paphos, on the island of Cyprus. According to Kunz and Stevenson in their outstanding *Book of the Pearl* (1908), the 14-mm saltwater pearl in this pin is the largest ancient pearl ever found, weighing about 70 grains. Interestingly, the small (4 mm) pearl is freshwater in origin, and weighs only about 2 grains.

Not until the Mithridatic Wars (88–63 B.C.), and the resultant annexation of Syria by Pompey the Great, did pearls become abundant and popular in Rome. The great treasures of the Near East enriched the victorious army as well as the aristocracy. According to Roman chronicler Pliny (23–79 A.D.) in his *Natural History*, the displays at Pompey's third triumphal procession included 33 crowns of pearls and a shrine covered with pearls, as well as numerous other pearl ornaments. Pearls also have been cited as one of the reasons for the first Roman invasion of Britain in 55 B.C. (Ogden, 1982). Kunz and Stevenson (1908) refer to a number of Roman writers, such as Tacitus, who described British pearls as golden brown and second only to Indian pearls in value.

Pliny also described the two large and very valuable pearls that Cleopatra wore in her ears, recounting how she dissolved one and subsequently swallowed it to win a wager she had made with Roman statesman Mark Antony. Following her death (in 30 B.C.), the other pearl was cut in two "in order that this, the other half of the entertainment, might serve as pendants for the ears of Venus, in the Pantheon at Rome" (Pliny, Book 11, Chap. 36, from Bostock and Riley, 1893–98).

Pearls quickly gained great favor in the eyes of the Romans. Some Roman ladies in Nero's day (the first century A.D.) slept on pearl-inlaid beds (Kunz and Stevenson, 1908). The basic Roman earring during these years when the Roman Empire was at its height was composed of a disk-shaped earwire



with pendant (Garside, 1979), for which pearls were frequently used (figure 2). Another popular style was an S-shaped wire threaded with pearls. Pliny said that even an oyster's ability to close itself could not protect it from a woman's ears (Book 11, Chap. 55, from Bostock and Riley, 1893-98).

## MIDDLE AGES

**Byzantium and the Early Middle Ages.** As the division of the Roman empire into East and West was finalized with the fall of the Western empire in the fifth century A.D., Constantinople, on the site of the ancient city of Byzantium, became the center of culture and civilization in Europe and the Near East. Like their counterparts in Rome, the Byzantine jewelers preferred to use fine gold leaf on most large decorative objects, often with discreet quantities of gems as well. Pearls from the Indian Ocean, lapis lazuli from Asia Minor, as well as agates, rose quartz, emeralds, and amethyst were popular materials. In a Byzantine mosaic at San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy, the Emperor Justinian (527-565 A.D.) is shown bedecked with pearls and wearing a sacred pearl cap that marks him as the spiritual and temporal leader of his people.

The earrings from this period often hung down to the shoulder, and included enamel, pearls, and other gems. Sickel-shaped earrings of filigree with triangles of filigree and pearls were popular (Garside, 1979), as were necklaces with both pearls and unevenly cut emeralds.

While Constantinople thrived as a cultural center in what is present-day Turkey, much of Western Europe suffered from the attacks of barbarians and a general breakdown in political institutions during the centuries immediately following the dissolution of the Roman empire. Although interest in jewelry for personal adornment was almost nonexistent compared to that of the earlier (more affluent and more secure) Roman gentry, the introduction and spread of Christianity gave a fresh impetus to the arts in Western Europe. With churches to be built and decorated, iconography was brought into the decorative tradition of the jeweler. The change was confirmed in the works of sainted goldsmiths of the seventh century, who often banded together in monasteries to create great jeweled shrines.

With the widespread adoption of Christianity in Western Europe came a change in burial rites. Unlike the earlier polytheistic Romans and Egyp-



*Figure 2. Three pearls hang from rings attached to a thick wire hoop with gold balls and garnets on these Roman (second century B.C.) earrings. Granulation beads decorate the front surfaces only. Photo courtesy of the Walters Art Gallery.*

tians, the Christians of Western Europe were not buried with all their jewelry (Rogers and Beard, 1947). Therefore, for the most part jewelry recovered from the eighth century on is limited to those items preserved in cathedral treasures or royal collections (Gregoriotti, 1969). Consequently, relatively few examples of pearls used for personal adornment have survived from this period. Even so, the sociopolitical climate of this period was not conducive to the wearing of many jewels. The main items were rings for use as talismans and seals, and brooches to hold garments together.

During this period of transition from pagan to Christian beliefs in Western Europe, from the intellectual and cultural disruption of the Dark Ages to the enlightenment of the Renaissance, pearls were perhaps most frequently used in a capacity far removed from personal adornment or religious decoration: for their mystical and medicinal attributes.

**Mystical and Medicinal Uses of Pearls.** From the earliest time, pearls have been credited with mys-



tical properties and healing virtues. Both the Hindus and Taoists believed that pearls had the power to perpetuate youth. The Archbishop of Mainz, Rabanus Maurus, wrote in 850 that "mystically, the pearl signifies the hope of the Kingdom of Heaven, or charity and the sweetness of celestial life." Pearl signified purity, innocence, humility, and a retiring spirit (Evans, 1970).

Pearl is described as a remedy in the oldest Sanskrit medical work, *Charaka-Samhita*. Much later, in 1240, Narahari, a physician of Kashmir, wrote that pearl cures eye diseases, is an antidote for poisons, cures consumption and morbid disturbances, and increases strength and general health. The *Lapidaries of Alfonso X of Castile* (1221–1284) report that pearl is excellent in medicinal art for treating palpitations of the heart, for those who are sad or timid, and in every sickness caused by melancholia. It also removes impurities from the blood.

While interest in the mystical and medicinal properties of pearls may have flourished during the Middle Ages, it did not end there by any means. One of the great authorities of the 17th century, Anselmus Boetius de Boodt (1550–1634), physician to Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II, gave directions for *aqua perlata*, which he recommended to restore strength. Dissolve the pearls in strong vinegar or, better, in lemon juice. Add fresh juice and then decant. Add enough sugar to sweeten the milky and turbid solution. Take care to cover the glass while the pearls are dissolving, lest the essence should escape. Drink as needed.

The practice of ingesting pearls to cure ailments is also well documented in the 19th century. Arabian doctors in 1825 believed powdered pearls were helpful to alleviate weak eyes, nervousness, heart palpitations, and hemorrhaging. In 1881, the Raja S. M. of Tagore listed a page of the curative powers then attributed to pearl powder in his treatise on gems (*Mani-Mala*, Vol. II, pp. 871–873). Essentially, the list agrees with that of the Arabian doctors. The accepted dosage was  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  grain of powdered pearl, depending on the ailment.

**Late Middle Ages.** During the 11th to 13th centuries, the returning crusaders brought back both pearls and a taste for adornment (Kunz and Stevenson, 1908). During this period, too, we begin to see fine jewels reemerge as a symbol of rank. In the 11th century, the monastic workshops

declined and were gradually replaced by secular workshops that served the courts and noble families. In the 12th century, the first goldsmith guilds were formed.

By the end of the 13th century, not only had the wearing of jewels become a definite mark of rank, but efforts were taken to legally restrict this practice to the nobility. The French ordinances of 1283 forbid the bourgeois and their ladies from wearing precious stones, belts of gold set with pearls, or coronals of gold or silver.

As the 13th century progressed, the amount of jewelry worn increased slowly. Because the Italian trading cities were strengthening their contacts with Eastern markets in the 14th century, pearls gradually became more abundant. With the increased supply and demand for gemstones came more laws regulating their use. In 1331 an edict was passed in Paris that prohibited the use of paste gems, and in 1355 jewelers were forbidden to use "oriental" (saltwater) and "river" (freshwater) pearls in the same piece. In the 1300s, luxury played a greater and greater role in the French court, with jewelry as well as clothes and furnishings more richly and intricately fashioned.

The French influences as well as Edward II's (1284–1327) taste for luxury brought similar standards of magnificence into English fashion. The inventory of Alice Perrers, the mistress of Edward III (1312–1377), stated that she owned nearly 22,000 pearls (Evans, 1970).

This was a time of transition in the history of jewels. Not only were gems available in great quantities, but cutters were also developing new techniques and better skills. This shifted the emphasis from the design of jewels in gold and the techniques of filigree and enameling, to the beauty and glow of the gems themselves. Pearls were used to outline gems and to provide a contrast that drew attention to the colors of these gemstones.

An interesting tangent to this is the fashion seen in the 15th century of illustrating gems in the margins of illuminated manuscripts. One of the best examples is the *Grimani Breviary*, in which the jewels are lozenge-cut and *en cabochon* in simple gold rims surrounded by pearls (Evans, 1970). Drilled pearls were frequently sewn into the covers of manuscripts during this period or depicted on the elaborate illustrations included inside (figure 3).

From 1380 on, women's hair styles grew more and more elaborate. The hair was puffed and pad-





Figure 3. The border of this page from an early 16th-century German Book of the Hours is illustrated with pearls hanging from fine gold chains. Pearls also are used to accentuate the quarterfoil, trefoil, and cross pendants. Photo courtesy of the Walters Art Gallery.

ded around the ears with a golden net to keep the shape. In her 1970 book, Evans includes a picture of a portrait by Van der Goes of Margaret of Denmark (1353–1412) that shows her hair held in place by a gold network with a toque-like coronal draped with pearls. She is also wearing a necklace composed of two rows of pearls divided by clusters of gemstones with a large pearl hanging from a triangular pendant.

As low-necked dresses became fashionable in the middle of the 14th century, a necklace or chain and pendant became a decorative necessity. When Margaret, the wife of John Paston, wrote to her husband in 1455, she asked him for "sommethyng for my nekke" since, when Queen Margaret of Anjou came to Norwich, Margaret had to borrow a cousin's "devys" (pendants) "for I durst not for shame go with my beads among so many fresch jauntylwomen" (Evans, 1970).

Purely ornamental pendants grew more popular. Many were so unique that they had names. Ludovico il Moro, Duke of Milan, had a diamond pendant with three pearls, valued at 12,000 ducats, called "Il Lupo." Pendants were frequently worn on the hat, as were other jewels designed specifically as hat ornaments.

## RENAISSANCE

No one day or even year marks the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance in Europe. Rather, it was a gradual revival of artistic and intellectual life. The Renaissance (literally, *rebirth*) marked the transition in Europe from medieval to modern times. It began in 15th-century Italy, rose to magnificent heights in the 16th century in England and France, and gradually declined during the 17th century. This period was marked by a humanistic revival of classical influence, expressed in a flowering of art, literature, and science. The nobility of Europe were hungry for power and wealth and for any opportunity to display it, surrounding themselves with extravagant jewelry and ornaments. It was during this opulent era that pearls and pearl jewelry became extremely popular throughout Europe, especially with the influx of enormous amounts of saltwater pearls from the newly discovered Americas.

**The Dawn of the Pearl Age.** When Columbus braved the flat, monster-ridden sea of his era to land in the Americas in 1492, he opened the door to a New World rich with precious stones, pearls, and gold. On his third voyage, in 1498, he discovered that the natives on the islands off the Venezuelan coast had accumulated large amounts of valuable pearls. Columbus traveled from island to island, trading scissors, broken pottery, needles, and buttons for the Indians' treasure. Upon his return to Spain, he presented his sponsors, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, with almost 50 ounces of pearls collected on that voyage.

The great pearl rush was on as Ferdinand and Isabella financed a series of expeditions to the New World. A 1499 inventory of the Spanish monarchs revealed ropes that contained up to 700 pearls each; 122 assorted pearls were sewn onto one gorget (an ornamental collar) alone (Muller, 1972).

In 1515, the Spanish explorer Balboa discovered a breath-taking 200-grain pear-shaped pearl in the Gulf of Panama. Known as *La Peregrina*, after the fierce, swift peregrine falcon,





*Figure 4. This portrait of King Henry VIII by Hans Holbein the Younger shows Henry's flamboyant taste in finery. Each knot on his collar ornament contains 16 large round pearls, and large pearls are also sewn onto his hat.*

this pearl was to grace the Spanish crown jewels for several centuries. Ironically, although this pearl still exists today, its luster and value were severely damaged when it was chewed by the dog of its current owner, Elizabeth Taylor (Sitwell, 1985).

Yet another Spanish explorer, Hernando De Soto, was sent to explore the Savannah River area in North America. One report for this expedition mentioned fabulous amounts of pearls owned by the natives: "The quantity of pearls there was so great that 300 horses and 900 men would not have sufficed for its transportation" (Kunz and Stevenson, 1908). Pearls poured into Spain: in one year, over 320 kg (700 lbs.) of pearls arrived in the port of Seville alone. Spain was at the height of its grandeur, and the nation's pride was reflected in its *nef pendants*: miniature sailing ships made from gold and encrusted with gems and pearls. These pendants were also popular in the Mediterranean countries, which were enjoying much wealth and power due to their strong shipping industries.

In England, an imperious Henry VIII assumed the throne in 1509. His legendary love of personal

splendor was financed at first by the money he inherited from his father, and then in part by the treasures he wrested from monasteries and cathedrals when he disbanded the Catholic church in England. Henry craved jewelry, and ordered massive amounts of pearls to be sewn onto his robes, coats, hats, and even his shoes (figure 4). Following Henry's example, men of his court sported gold-and-pearl earrings. Henry also lavished pearls on his court favorites and his many wives. Examples of the ladies' lovely ropes of pearls can be seen in portraits by court painter Hans Holbein the Younger.

It was during the reign of Henry's daughter, Queen Elizabeth I (1558–1603), that pearls were prized more than any other jewel. Elizabeth realized that as an unmarried ruler she would appear weak or vulnerable in the eyes of her contemporary male monarchs. She used her passion for pearls—and all they represented—to silently demonstrate her power, opulence, and regal dignity (figure 5). Horace Walpole, an 18th-century author, described the Renaissance queen vividly: "A pale



Roman nose, a head of hair loaded with crowns and powdered with diamonds, a vast ruff, a vaster farthingale, and a bushel of pearls, are features by which everybody knows at once the pictures of Queen Elizabeth" (Kunz and Stevenson, 1908). Literally thousands of pearls were sewn onto her gowns in a crisscross fashion, and all had to be carefully removed each time the gowns were cleaned. She also wore magnificent pearl earrings, and owned several large pendant pearls. In addition to all this, she customarily wore seven or more ropes of large, fine pearls, the longest of which extended to her knees.

Elizabeth also acquired the famous Hanoverian pearls, which had originally been given to Catherine de Medici upon her marriage to King Henry II of France in 1533. Catherine passed the pearls to her daughter-in-law Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots. A contemporary described the Hanoverian pearls thus: "There are six strings in which they are strung like rosary beads, and besides these, there are 25 separate pearls even more beautiful and bigger than those which are strung, the greater part like nutmegs" (Twining, 1960). Queen Elizabeth saw Mary as a threat to her sovereignty, and in 1567 the fierce English Queen had Mary beheaded. Afterwards, Elizabeth bought the Hanoverian pearls (at her own price) and incorporated them into her crown jewels.

Even in death, Elizabeth was dressed in all her finery. Her funeral procession was designed to imprint the image of her regal strength on her contemporaries, and indeed left the world with an image of the Queen that would endure through the coming centuries. A wax effigy of the dead queen lay on top of the royal coffin, arrayed with Elizabeth's pearls: a coronet of large round pearls, her famous pearl ropes, a splendid pearl stomacher, and large pearl earrings. There were even broad pearl medallions attached to her shoes.

**Figurine Pendants.** As mentioned earlier, Renaissance artists turned to the beauty and grace of the classics for much of their inspiration. During this period, a philosophy known as Humanism was widely espoused. Humanism emphasized human values as opposed to dogma and ritual and was instrumental in reviving interest in Greek and Hebrew studies. Thus, Greek mythology and stories from the Old Testament became the subjects of many interesting jewels and ornaments.

Some of the best known examples of this type

of work are the highly imaginative figurine pendants that became popular during the middle of the Renaissance. Pearls of different shapes, sizes, and colors were used to create miniature figures constructed from precious metal and enamel work and encrusted with other precious stones. The pearls were strategically positioned to represent portions of the anatomy, such as a person's stomach, a horse's body, or a woman's bosom. The oddly shaped pearls stimulated the artists to create magnificent mermaids, sirens, sea monsters, and wonderful Greek gods and goddesses. One of the most famous pearl figurines is the Canning Jewel (figure 6): a large baroque pearl forms the torso of Triton, son of the Greek god Neptune. In addition to these fanciful creatures, animals such as rabbits, swans, pelicans, dolphins, monkeys, and lions

*Figure 5. This portrait reveals how Queen Elizabeth I used her passion for jewels and especially pearls to reinforce her image of regal strength.*







Figure 6. The famous Canning Jewel (circa 1560) uses a large baroque pearl to form the body of this richly jeweled Triton. Photo courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

were also popular subjects for figurine pendants (figure 7). According to Heiniger and Heiniger (1974), "this imaginative marriage of natural phenomena with the technical perfection of the goldsmith's art was characteristic of this age of exploration and discovery."

During the late 16th century, an art style called Mannerism appeared in Europe. It employed the classicism of the early Renaissance, but incorporated a feeling of tenseness, subjectivity, and artificiality. Manneristic art is characterized by jarring color combinations, elongated or otherwise disproportioned figures, an illogical mixture of classical motifs, and highly imaginative or grotesque fantasies. The pearl pendant figurines of this period reflect this preoccupation with the bizarre. Jewelers and goldsmiths such as Gerardet, Ferbecq, Dinglinger, and Mignot were "obsessed" by the grotesque, creating miniature pearl figurines of one-eyed beggars, David with the severed

head of Goliath, and other twisted characters, all painstakingly crafted with the finest materials (Hughes, 1972; Mezhausen, 1968).

## MODERN

**Early Modern: The Age of Pearls Declines.** Gradually, the opulence of the Renaissance began to fade. The 17th century saw most of Western Europe involved with religious and political up-

Figure 7. This jeweled, enameled, gold, and baroque pearl lion (4¾ in. tall) is typical of the fanciful pearl figurine pendants that were popular throughout England, Western Europe, and the Mediterranean during the Renaissance. Photo reproduced courtesy of Sotheby's.





heaval. The Thirty Years' War ravaged the continent, and England was torn apart by a Civil War from 1642–1646. In the New World, natives had grown hostile to the explorers' exploitation, the traditional fisheries were exhausted, and there was no money to spare for new expeditions.

Many European governments tried to invoke sumptuary laws to help curb the excesses of the nobility. These laws regulated how much and what type of jewelry could be worn by certain people. The sumptuaries were especially restrictive to the rising middle class and, as witnessed by paintings and other historical documents from this period, the European nobility tried to disregard these restrictions whenever possible.

In Spain, the sumptuary laws, or *pragmáticas*, attempted to forbid jewelry manufacturing and enamel and relief work. The wearing of certain jewels was restricted. Women were only allowed to wear necklaces of uniformly shaped stones, beads, or pearls, or a simple pearl pendant (Muller, 1972). In response, bodices were cut lower to display the strands and pendant pearls to their full advantage. Despite these restrictions, the Spanish nobility continued to deck themselves with as much jewelry as they dared, making full use of the pearls that were allowed them. Bracelets, or *muelles*, of strung pearls held together by a single clasp, and single-pronged hair pins (*punsónes*) made of gold and pearls were very popular. Gold filigree and pearl earrings were common, and pearls were also incorporated into gold hair filets called *apretadores*. Pearl-studded hat ornaments were popular with Spanish noblemen of this period.

But even this semirestricted display of wealth could not be sustained for long under severe economic stress. One by one, European governments—and the nobility that had controlled them—were forced, often through violence, to acknowledge the needs and rights of the lower classes. Thus, it was not until the early 19th century that pearls and pearl jewelry came back into vogue.

**Neoclassic (1800–1820).** At the beginning of the 19th century, jewelry styles and dress were more tailored and simple in reaction to the exaggerated and flamboyant dress of the late 18th century. This simplicity was further influenced by early archaeological explorations, particularly those at Pompeii, which brought to light the lifestyle of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Women's dresses imitated the flowing robes, their hair was styled à



Figure 8. This 19th-century cameo brooch made of coral has been surrounded by gold set with pearls in the classical revival style.

la Grecque, and jewelry was patterned as close to the original designs as possible. There was an absolute passion for cameo jewelry during the Neoclassic period. Antique cameos were preferred, but many fine imitations were made by talented gem carvers in Italy and Germany. Pearls were often used as accents in the borders around cameos (figure 8), intaglios, and mosaics, as well as around lapis lazuli, agate, malachite, and jasper cabochons (Hinks, 1975). Even Napoleon I gave his wife Josephine a parure (matching set of jewelry usually comprised of a necklace, brooch, bracelet, and earrings) of 82 cameos set in gold and surrounded by pearls (O'Day, 1974).

During the Regency period in England (1811–1820), jewelry often took the shape of garlands of fruit or flowers. Pearls and seed pearls were used to represent clusters of currants or bunches of grapes in necklaces, earrings, bracelets, and tiaras. These pieces were executed with delicacy and realism.

**Early Victorian (1837–1860).** The coronation of Queen Victoria in 1837 began a new era that was to continue throughout the century. England was





Figure 9. An engraving done by John Sartain in 1858 of Princess Victoria (Queen Victoria's daughter) and her husband Prince Frederick William III of Prussia. Note how the low-cut dresses of this time promoted the use of elaborate jeweled head ornaments as well as ropes of pearls worn draped across the shoulders and bosom rather than around the neck.

prosperous and readily embraced the virtues that their diminutive but indomitable Queen represented: thrift, industriousness, respectability, and domesticity. France was too busy with politics to set fashions for the Western world, as it had done before and during Napoleon's reign, so the people of England turned to Queen Victoria and slavishly copied her mode of dress and ornamentation. Only 18 when she was crowned, the young queen had a taste for color and splendor. Jewelry fashions, set by her, had a light, airy quality with an intensely romantic flavor that offset the grinding rigidity of the industrialization of that time. Ladies still wore cameos, often accompanied by strings of pearls. In the evening, *ferronières* (strings of pearls worn on the head with one large pearl or jewel suspended on the brow) were worn. Since evening dresses were quite décolleté, large, elaborate jeweled collars (figure 9) were worn more on the shoulders than around the neck (Hinks, 1975). Often Medieval in style, these collars were made of enameled gold set with gems and baroque pearls.

Medieval costume balls were in vogue, and fabulous jewels were concocted for these revels as well as for regular wear. Castellani and Giuliano, Italian jewelers during this time, catered to this passion and produced reproductions of Byzantine and Medieval jewelry. As a consequence of the

ongoing archaeological excavation of classical sites by the British, copies of Etruscan, Greek, and Roman styles were fabricated as well. Castellani's Etruscan and Greco-Roman pieces were primarily of gold with only an occasional bezel-set pearl or cabochon-cut stone. A rare example exists in a paper knife fashioned after a Roman dagger, with a beautiful four-lobed baroque pearl mounted with a smaller baroque pearl in the hilt (Munn, 1983). Giuliano, however, often used many pearls in his Medieval revivalist jewelry. The pearls were incorporated in a variety of ways: as the final drop from the point of an enameled pendant set with gems, strung on gold wire as links in a chain, bezel set or fixed on pins to outline a pendant or brooch, and as tasseled ends to some of his more elaborate collars (Munn, 1983).

Seed-pearl jewelry also was popular during this period. The tiny pearls, coming primarily from India or China, were drilled and threaded on white horsehair to a mother-of-pearl backing (Becker, 1980). These delicate necklaces and earrings took the shape of flowers and vines following the romantic style of the times (figure 10).

According to the *World of Fashion* in 1838, "Pearls are much in request with muslin robes, and it matters little whether they are mock or real" (Flower, 1951). A variety of imitations were used to





Figure 10. Intricate jewelry made of seed pearls on mother-of-pearl backings was very popular during the early 19th century. Photo © Harold & Erica Van Pelt.

fill the occasional void in supplies of natural pearl. French pearl imitations were made by filling thin glass spheres with "oriental essence," an iridescent paste made with fish scales. Diamonds and natural pearls were sometimes incorporated into the same piece. This was the case with an elaborate diamond and pearl necklace constructed for Empress Eugénie, the wife of Napoleon III. The 73 pendalogue pearls in the large, collar-shaped *berthe* necklace, comprised of gems from the French crown jewels, were false because the jewelers were unable to find enough good-quality matching pearls within the budget allowed to complete the piece (Gere, 1972).

Because pearls continued to signify purity and sweetness, they were thought to be an appropriate wedding gift, especially for European royal weddings, although it was considered unlucky for the

bride to wear them on her wedding day. Empress Eugénie ignored this superstition and wore several strings of pearls on the day of her wedding to then-president of France, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte. According to Kunz and Stevenson (1908), her later life was "one long tragedy."

**High Victorian (1860–1890).** Queen Victoria went into deep mourning after Prince Albert's death in 1861. As a result, mourning jewelry became quite fashionable. Hair jewelry was one of the forms this fashion took. Here, the hair of a loved one was woven or braided into a variety of patterns and worn as a sentimental remembrance. When set under glass in a brooch or locket, the hair was often ringed with pearls, signifying tears for the departed (Becker, 1980). Portraits of the deceased were also painted on mother-of-pearl. These lockets and por-





Figure 11. Machine-stamped jewelry, such as this gold and black enamel parure set with half-pearls, emeralds, and diamonds, became common during the industrial revolution. Lightweight and moderately priced, this type of jewelry was popularized by the emerging middle class. Photo courtesy of the Walters Art Gallery.

traits were often worn as pendants suspended from pearl necklaces or chains with pearl links.

Gemstones such as topaz and amethyst mounted in filigreed gold and offset with freshwater pearls were also fashionable during the early 1860s. The popularity of these jewels, and the continued interest in Renaissance revival jewelry, caused a sudden demand for freshwater pearls.

At the time, freshwater pearls came from either the Mississippi River in the United States, or from the Tay and Spey Rivers in Scotland (Bradford, 1959). For many years, the Scottish rivers had been fished for pearls in a modest way by one fisherman year-round and by children during the height of summer. Prices paid varied from three-pence to a shilling per pearl, depending on size and quality. In 1863 Moritz Unger, a gem dealer in Edinburgh, advertised that he would buy unlimited quantities of freshwater pearls for a fixed price. This announcement instigated a "pearl fever," whereby men and women of all ages fished avidly for pearls. Ultimately, the "fever" caused a

pearl glut and the bottom fell out of the market (Hinks, 1975).

As the new middle class acquired more disposable income, they began to wear more jewelry (figure 11). Where before, a single strand of pearls was considered by many families to be the only suitable ornament for an unmarried daughter (Bradford, 1959), jewelry was now worn by women of all ages. Pearls were incorporated into many items of jewelry for everyday wear. Serpents, birds, crosses, hearts, stars, and flowers were popular motifs that were often pavéed with pearls and worn as brooches, necklaces, rings, bracelets, earrings, and hair ornaments. For evening, pearls were woven in the hair, and the *aigrette*, a feathered hair ornament, richly set with pearls, came into vogue. The *sautoir*, a long rope of pearls often with tasseled ends (figure 12), first appeared at this time (Flower, 1951).

Men wore pearls as well, set in gold with mother-of-pearl or onyx as shirt studs and cuff links. They also sported pearls mounted in novelty





Figure 12. Seed-pearl sautoirs like the one shown here first became popular in the mid to late 19th century. The tassels also have yellow and blue sapphires as well as diamonds set in white gold.

settings (e.g., griffins, horseshoes, insects, and animals) as stick pins in their ties or lapels (Becker, 1980).

**Turn of the Century.** Toward the end of the 19th century and into the beginning of the 20th, several types of jewelry were in fashion. Even though they differ from one another in terms of style, components, and craftsmanship, they overlap somewhat in terms of the periods during which they were popular, and there is no question that they influenced one another. The names we associate with these various styles are the Arts and Crafts Movement (1850–1890), Art Nouveau (1870–1910), and Edwardian (1890–1920).

The Arts and Crafts Movement, which had its roots in England in the 1850s, was a reaction against the standardization of the industrial revolution. The ideals espoused by the followers of this movement were based on the Renaissance concept of individual craftsmanship preserved within a professional community or guild. The jewelry created under the influence of this movement is symmetrical and has a simplified serenity showing Pre-Raphaelite and Celtic influences (O'Day, 1974). Jewelers borrowed the flowing lines and rhythms found in nature. Their materials were primarily silver with colored enameling, accented by pearls and cabochon-cut gems. Moonstones, turquoise, garnets, opals, and mother-of-pearl were most frequently employed. The look of this jewelry was handcrafted and deliberately unfinished.

Out of this fertile ground grew the more polished and sophisticated movement known as Art

Nouveau. L'Art Nouveau was the name of a fashionable shop in Paris, owned by Samuel Bing, that sold Arts and Crafts wares and Oriental imports (O'Day, 1974); the latter were in great demand after Japan lifted its trade embargo in the 1860s. Art Nouveau jewelry, symbolizing a break from normal constraints, appealed to liberal, rising middle-class women, actresses, and other women in the arts who enjoyed dramatic modes of expression.

British jewelers were fairly restrained in their designs, and there is a cool detachment in their Art Nouveau pieces. Baroque pearls, set in a manner similar to Renaissance jewelry, formed the bodies of insects or flowers, as well as drops dangling from brooches, pendants, and necklaces (figure 13). The

Figure 13. This Art Nouveau brooch is made out of gold and enamel and is set with pearls, cabochon sapphires, and diamonds.







Figure 14. Her Grace, the Duchess of Marlborough, is shown here in ceremonial dress wearing a pearl dog collar of the kind made fashionable by Queen Alexandra. Note also the Edwardian crescent pendant.

French jewelers, however, took up the naturalistic trend and carried it to daringly erotic and grotesque extremes. Lalique, Fouquet, Falize, Vever, and Louis Tiffany created Art Nouveau jewelry.

The upper class and the nobility generally disdained Art Nouveau jewelry as being too decadent. This was a prosperous time for them, and they ostentatiously displayed their wealth in their jewelry. Although pearls were considered rarer and were more expensive than diamonds, women wore them in profusion (Kunz and Stevenson, 1908). In the last years of the 19th century, Queen Victoria, although in strict control of the government, was largely in seclusion socially. Her eldest son Edward, Prince of Wales, and his wife Alexandra were the visible trend-setters of the wealthy upper class and nobility of Europe. They inspired a style of

jewelry, subsequently called Edwardian, that was characterized by pearls and diamonds set in delicate platinum or white gold mountings. The fabrication techniques were intended to make the mountings nearly invisible, and the pieces were light and feminine in contrast to the heavy gold of the late Victorian period. Stars and crescents were popular symbols and these, studded with pearls, were incorporated into dainty necklaces, pins, bracelets, and earrings (Becker, 1980).

One pearl fashion that is particularly attributed to Alexandra was the dog collar: a choker of eight or more strands of pearls with gold spacers at intervals. She wore these chokers to hide a scar on her neck, and the style soon became popular with her contemporaries (figure 14; O'Day, 1974). For formal and state occasions, the dog collar was further augmented by *rivières* (three or more strands of pearls graduated in length) and *sautoirs*, along with bracelets, earrings, and tiaras (Becker, 1980).

For her coronation in 1901, Queen Alexandra wore seven strands of pearls, some of which were undoubtedly the Hanoverian pearls mentioned earlier. These were inherited by Queen Victoria after a bitter lawsuit with her uncle, the Duke of Cumberland. As the last of the House of Hanover, he claimed all of the jewels that had come to England with George I and any jewels added during the Hanoverian reign. Fortunately, there was sufficient evidence that the pearls had been in the crown jewels since the 16th century, when Elizabeth I acquired them from the estate of Mary Stuart. The House of Lords ruled that the pearls should pass to Queen Victoria and be "vested as heirlooms forever in the British Crown" (Abbott, 1933). Because of the lawsuit, Queen Victoria never felt comfortable wearing the Hanoverian pearls, but Queen Alexandra wore them frequently. On one occasion, they broke as she was getting into her coach, scattering into the street and under the hooves of the horses. Miraculously, the pearls were all recovered without undue harm and are part of the crown jewels of England today (Abbott, 1933).

**Art Deco (1920–1930).** The start of World War I in 1914, and the subsequent onset of the Russian Revolution in 1917, ushered in a period of radical change throughout Europe and the Western world. Speed and modernity were the dominating concepts of the 1920s. Cars and especially airplanes were new symbols of the times. Again, there was a reaction against the preceding period. Where Ed-





Figure 15. This woven Art Deco seed-pearl handbag is attached to a white enameled gold frame studded with carved emeralds, rubies, sapphires, and diamonds. Photo courtesy of Cartier, Inc.

wardian jewelry was ultra-feminine and essentially colorless, the new styles utilized geometric shapes, bold colors, and stylized symmetry. Arabic, Egyptian, and Oriental patterns and motifs were imitated in platinum and brightly colored gems. The artwork of the time was cubist and abstract, and the music was jazz. Women were more independent than ever before. They wore their hair bobbed, their clothes tailored, and their skirts short. The sleek, slim look was accentuated by long earrings and long ropes of pearls (Becker, 1980).

In 1916, one of the chief architects of the Art Deco movement, Louis Cartier, traded a two-strand oriental pearl necklace for a Neo-Renaissance mansion on Fifth Avenue, which remains New York's House of Cartier to this day. Both the necklace and the mansion were valued at \$1.2 million, a fair exchange at the time (Cartier, 1982).

The style came to be known as Art Deco after an exhibition in Paris called "Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels," in 1925. Pearls were

utilized in Art Deco jewelry as a contrast to the emeralds, rubies, and sapphires that were commonly used together. The pearls added a textural richness and softness to the stiff geometric shapes. Mother-of-pearl was used in cigarette cases that women now carried as well as men. Some of these were combined vanity and cigarette cases and had rings or clips incorporated into the design so that they could be fastened onto a belt. Because of the heightened fascination with ancient Egypt that followed the discovery of King Tutankhamen's tomb, these cases were frequently of Egyptian design, intricately worked in contrasting colors and materials to look like miniature sarcophagi. Chinese motifs were also popular, with inlaid mother-of-pearl carved and stained to depict Oriental scenes. Seed pearls were woven into beaded evening bags, richly finished with gold clasps that were set with gems (figure 15). Mother-of-pearl and pearls were also used in the Deco clocks that Cartier in particular popularized during the 1920s, to embellish the pedestals and sometimes the faces of these unique timepieces, and on the posts to mark the hours (see cover).

## CONCLUSION

Several factors contributed to the decline in popularity of natural pearl jewelry beginning in the 1920s. Cultured pearls, which had been in an experimental stage since 1893, appeared on the market in the 1920s, causing the devaluation of the natural pearl and creating confusion with pearl consumers. The great Depression of the 1930s curtailed spending on jewelry and other luxuries for many years. World War II saw the exhaustion and pollution of Oriental pearl fisheries. Following this war, Japan, eager to regain financial stability, concentrated on enlarging their cultured pearl industry. Today, fine-quality natural pearls are rare and very highly valued.

Within the past decade, pearls have made a spectacular reentry into the fashion scene. Large quantities of lower-priced cultured pearls are now available to a new generation of young, eager consumers. High-fashion jewelry designers feature an astounding variety of pearl jewelry, including rings, pendants, and brooches. Necklaces, bracelets, and chokers of pearls, often set with lavishly jeweled clasps, have surged to the forefront of fashion. Innovative pearl jewelry for men is also gaining popularity.

Thus, although their popularity has fluctuated



over the centuries, pearls continue to be one of mankind's most precious gems. Their luminous sheen and rich luster are as attractive to modern men and women as they were to their earliest ancestors. Whenever culture flourished, pearls

were fashioned into beautiful, imaginative jewels. Despite their fragility, some of these precious pearl treasures have withstood the rigors of time, testimony to the creativity and skill of craftsmen throughout the ages.

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