

A Brief History Of Pearls

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Pearls have been popular in pearl necklaces, bracelets, and other jewelry items and pearls continue to be very popular gems in today's fashion jewelry.

They are formed when an irritant or a foreign body such as a piece of sand enters the soft tissue of an oyster. The mollusk secretes nacre, which is a mixture of fine crystalline calcium carbonate and an organic binder that coats the irritant as a self defensive mechanism. As successive layers of nacre are deposited and harden, the pearl grows.

Most pearls used in fashion jewelry today are processed through method call periculture, where that the irritant needed to stimulate pearl development is introduced by man. In some rare cases, the irritant enters the mollusk tissue with no intervention what so ever from man. The resulting gem is said to be a natural pearl and is very rare and quite expensive.

Historically, pearls have been harvested from seas and oceans by pearl divers. Early records document pearl divers retrieving pearls off the seabed in the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Mannar, which is generally in the area known today as the Middle East. Ancient records also document natural pearl harvesting in the South China Sea.

Centuries later, sometime in the sixteenth century, Spaniards identified several large pearl beds near the island of Margerita, which is a couple of hundred miles off the coast of today's Venezuela. Prior to the nineteenth century, pearl production was left entirely up to the forces of nature. Divers would manually sink to the seabed and retrieve pearl oysters and mollusks. The only way to find the pearl was to destroy the mollusk.

In fact, pearl harvesters had to kill literally thousands of oysters in order of find a single pearl. This is the principal reason why pearls were considered to be very rare, valuable, and expensive. Periculture revolutionized the pearl industry, and made pearl jewelry infinitely more affordable for fashions. In this process, the irritant needed to stimulate pearl development is introduced by man. This process was first developed in the early twentieth century in Australia and the knowledge of the process then spread to East and South East Asia.

Japan became a leading producer of cultured pearls. The Akoya pearls, which are slightly smaller than the typical pearl, became famous the world over. However, with industrial pollution and other environmental and fiscal conditions they virtually wiped out Japan's pearl farming industry. Pearl production at Lake Biwa near Tokyo is a good illustration of this problem. Since the early 1900s, Japanese pearl farmers had a flourishing production business in this ancient freshwater lake.

Production of cultured pearls hit its peak in the early 1970s, when annual production was on the order of six tons. Pollution caused a steady decline in production, until the industry was eventually wiped out. The Japanese tried to restart production in other lakes in the country using different mollusk species, but success if any, has been short lived.

As the cultured pearl industry in Japan was being decimated, the Japanese invested in developing pearl farms in China near Shanghai. This provided the impetus that the Chinese were looking for, and freshwater pearl production in China boomed. China today is the world's largest producer of freshwater pearls, with production in excess of fifteen hundred tons per year. Japan has been relegated to the role of pearl processor in the industry.

Victor Eband is an expert consultant for personalized gifts, invitations, and fine jewelry. Find the best shopping for personalized gifts, invitations, greetings, and history of pearls.

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