

Importers Stock Few

Cultured Pearl Prices Soar

By Patricia Shelton

Cultured pearls are getting harder to find — and harder to pay for.

The pearl necklace that stores across the country used to stock as a "good bargain" item at \$20, \$15 or \$30 as few as three years ago has all but disappeared.

The reason is simple. The customer who would have bought it at that price can't, or won't, pay the \$100 to \$125 it would cost today.

Consequently, pearl importers in the United States are putting their money into higher-quality pearls to attract the customer who has more money and can, and will pay higher prices for something she wants.

"I don't have any trouble selling \$300 to \$1,000 necklaces," said Dan Pless, vice president of the Imperial Pearl Syndicate, one of the largest U.S. importers. "But we've completely discontinued the lower-grade line we used to sell to stores by the thousands. The customer with \$25 to spend can't pay \$100 or so, and the customer with \$100 won't pay it for what she sees at that price."

A SPOKESMAN for the Cultured Pearl Assn. which includes Imperial and many more importers, said the situation is similar all across the industry.

Ironically, serious decreases in the cultured pearl crops in Japan — by far the largest source — hit at about the time fashion turned from screaming exhibitionism to soft, feminine, sometimes nostalgic, clothes that make pearls a logical, desirable accessory. Prestigious fashion designers in world capitals are showing a fortune's worth (borrowed) with their collections.

This, in turn, has started a new fashion in the use of pearls — widespread mixing of colored, semi-precious stones with pearls, and spacing pearls on five gold chains, in order to bring the price of a necklace down.

There's scarcely a major manufacturer of cultured-pearl jewelry who isn't doing it — whether the pearls are the round ones or the less expensive baby seed pearls and baroque biwars that are shaped like fat grains of wheat.

ANOTHER FACTOR besides getting the price down is that the combinations of pearls with colored stones make the necklaces more versatile. You can wear them with sportswear or formal



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clothes.

And whereas fashion designers were showing ropes of pearls piled on by the pound a couple of seasons back, they too are turning to a single strand of 30-inch opera length or 45- or 60-inch ropes, sometimes mixing them with necklaces of colored stones or fine gold chains.

All of this adds up in fashion terms to a "share the wealth" approach for the pearl.

Pless said the pearl crop from Japan is about a third of what it was two years ago, for two major reasons. Many pearl farmers sold their coastal lands to industrial developers. And pollution from industrial waste has killed much of the food that feeds the oysters, resulting in a lot of dead oysters.

He added that although there are "constant" efforts to develop new oyster farms around the tiny islands south of the Japanese mainland,

even if they succeed it will be several years before there can be a crop of any size. He explained it takes at least a year after the "irritant" is implanted in an oyster to grow even a thinly coated pearl, at least two to three years for good grades.

The crop was "very short" by the end of 1972, he said, but surpluses accumulated over recent years were available and the prices remained fairly stable.

"I never had such a shock in my life as when they showed me the prices this year. They had doubled two to three times!" he exclaimed. The surplus had been depleted, and the short crop sent the prices skyrocketing.

PLESS SAID most of the fine, big pearls, above 10 millimeter, come from Burma. "but you're really talking about a lot of money here." Mabe's, or half-pearls, come

mainly from Australia. Australia also has some farms for round pearls, but the color generally isn't good.

Wild, or natural pearls, come from the Red Sea and a few from the South seas. But they are so rare in fine quality that about the only place to look for a necklace of them is in an estate, and the price could easily be \$1 million or more. "About the only person you're going to see wearing an 8- to 10-millimeter pearl necklace today is Queen Elizabeth," Pless said.

In the area of cultured pearls, which although getting more expensive are at least within the realm of possibility, you'll see them mixed in a range of colors from amethyst and topaz to gutsy lapis and tiger eye.

You'll also see pearl companies "diversifying," and dealing more in the semi-precious and precious gem business. Pless went down to Bogota, Columbia, and bought a sizable stock of emeralds. "The price is high," he said, "but they're available."