

Irritate An Oyster And What Do You Get? Pearls!

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Ever wonder just how good your pearl necklace is?

The only sure way, unromantic as it sounds, is x-ray.

New processes have made artificial pearls look almost like the real thing. And although probably everybody could tell the difference between a \$100,000 strand of Oriental pearls and a dime store simulated string, some of the in-between varieties are tricky.

Even if you take your necklace to a jeweler for a quick appraisal, you might not find out.

If the jeweler looks down a pearl's drill hole and sees a mother of pearl head, you have only a cultured pearl. If he can't see anything but thinks you have a fine natural necklace, you could send it to a laboratory that has pearl x-ray machines.

What To Know

You can do a pretty good detective job on your own, however, if you the kinds of pearls, how many or the oyster makes them, and what to look for in a good pearl.

Pearls of greatest value are perfectly round, with a pinkish cast and a brilliant flawless skin without cracks, dents, scratches or blemishes. Size is a factor, of course, although a small perfect pearl is costlier than a large, irregular one.

Pearls, the only jewels produced by animal action, come in several shapes and shades. Besides round, they can be pear-shaped, for pendants; button, for rings; irregular, called baroque and used in various ornaments, and seed, which are very small pearls.

Product Of Irritation

How does an oyster produce a pearl?

It is a product of irritation. When a grain of sand or tiny parasite accidentally enters the body of an oyster, the oyster protects himself (or herself—some oysters change sex several times a year) by depositing layers of a pearly substance called nacre around the the irritant. The thinner the layers, the more lustrous the pearl. Pearls produced in this way are called natural or Oriental.

When man puts the irritant—us-

ually a mother of pearl pellet—inside the oyster, the resulting gem is called a cultured pearl.

The third variety has never been near an oyster. Artificial or simulated pearls are made from glass or plastic beads dipped in fish scale essence and then polished. The newest development is a kind of plastic bead that remarkably resembles a fine pearl. But its lighter weight will quickly show the difference.

Wide Price Range

Prices extend from a low of perhaps 50 cents for simulated pearls to hundreds of thousands of dollars for the Orientals. A good pearl cultured necklace can range from \$50 to thousands.

Dealers make no bones about the influx of cultured pearls depressing the natural pearl market. A good Oriental necklace can be bought today from \$800 to \$1,000. A million dollar necklace before 1929 is now available for a mere \$150,000. If you're in the high-price market, it's a good idea to shop around. Prices vary, sometimes considerably, from store to store.

As for the cultured variety, a price increase up to 20 per cent can be expected because of recent

typhoons and floods in Japan, says the Imperial Pearl Syndicate, largest importers of cultured pearls in the United States. The pearls that weren't ruined are of poor quality, and that means good pre-war and pre-flood pearls will be placed on the market, but at higher prices.

Favorite Jewel

The pearl is the American woman's favorite jewel, but some women can't, or shouldn't, wear pearls. Those whose perspiration has more than normal acidity can reduce their pearls to half-size in 10 years.

Other useful things to know:

Pearls are rather soft and scratch easily. Their hardness is from 2½ to 4½ on a scale on which the diamond, the hardest jewel, is 10.

Never put perfume on them. The alcohol content is harmful. Keep them away from excessive heat; never get lipstick or fingernail polish remover on them. Remove your pearls while having a hairdo because the chemicals used are harmful.

Most good natural pearls come from the Persian Gulf, where for centuries thousands of men have depended on pearl diving for a living.

Courageous Industry

Although this remarkable gem was known to ancient man, the cultured pearl industry as we know it today is only about 40 years old. Its story is one of ingenuity and courage—the courage, perhaps appropriately,

being exercised by women.

Early in the 20th century, a poor Japanese macaroni peddler named Kokichi Mikimoto perfected, after years of experimenting, a process conceived by the Chinese centuries before: inserting an irritant directly into the oyster's body to make it produce a pearl.

Now very old and very rich, Mikimoto still runs his own company and stands on his head 10 minutes each day to prove his vigor.

Use Woman Divers

Japanese pearl farms use women divers because they have greater lung capacity and can stay under water longer. These women, called Amas, hunt the oyster for small wages. But it is an honored, glamorous profession, frequently handed down from mother to daughter.

The Ama begins her work at 16 and by her late 20's she is considered too old for its dangers.

In searching for the big Ayoki oyster, the Ama wears a white costume and headdress she hopes will scare away sharks. Carrying only a knife that is both tool and weapon, the Ama dives through the murky water as far down as 50 feet, finds a group of Ayoki, snatches one before they all burrow to safety and quickly surfaces.

Many Dangers

In the underseas world lurk the giant clam, octopus, the sea star bristling with hundreds of poisonous spines, the hungry shark. The Ama risks her life with each

descent, and sometimes loses it.

After the oyster has been delivered to the fishing boat, he is taken to an operating room at the pearl farm, scrubbed to reduce the danger of infection and given an anesthetic. Then his shell is eased open, a short incision made with a scalpel and a mother of pearl pellet is inserted.

The oyster is closed, placed in a wire cage with other oysters and lowered into a quite lagoon to build layers of pearl around the irritant for from three to eight years. Several times a year he is hauled up to see if he is healthy or needs a diet change.

The anesthetic, a recent development, has reduced the mortality rate among inoculated oysters from 60 to 10 per cent.

After the oysters are removed from the sea for the last time, they are opened and the pearls are carefully removed from the pearl sac. The gems are then sorted for color, size, perfection and brilliance.

Cheaper grades of cultured pearls result from larger irritants and less time in the ocean. You can see how a jeweler could easily tell a cheap cultured pearl by looking down the drill hole: the large mother of pearl bead would be covered by only thin veneer of pearl.

Although fossil giraffes are found in Europe and India, the wild living animals are now found only in Africa, south of the Sahara.



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