

Eye on Gems:

Pearls

by Mark A. Schaffer

Open to almost any style or fashion column these days and you will see a celebrity or model wearing a striking pair of pearl earrings—from long, lithe pendants to single studs—either mounted alone or complemented by diamonds or other gems. Pearls remain as stylish today as they were centuries ago, and continue to hold their allure as signifiers of elegance, purity, and romance.

Among the oldest precious gems known, with instances of use as far back as in ancient Egypt, pearls have long been recognized for their beauty and mystique. As such, they have played a leading role in the ornamentation of jewelry, objects, and even textiles. Natural pearls are found in a variety of colors, luster, shapes, and sizes and have been traditionally harvested from salt waters in the Orient, although those from other locations, including fresh waters, have been used as well.

Because of the increasing rarity and greater cost of natural pearls, most of the jewelry made since the first decades of the twentieth century incorporates cultured pearls.¹ Many contemporary designs, however, are based on jewelry from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and admirers of pearls will find that antique natural pearl jewelry can be worn to similar, or better, effect.

For centuries, pearls have been a symbol of privilege for aristocrats and royalty throughout Europe. European crown jewels include many examples of natural pearls set in

Fig. 1: *Coronation Portrait of Empress Elizabeth (1741–1761)*. Russian School, attributed to Louis Caravaque (d.1754), ca. 1750. Oil on canvas. 51 x 39 1/4 in.





Fig. 5 (below and opposite page): A group of varicolored natural pearl necklaces, England, early twentieth century. \$4,000–\$14,000.

brooches, diadems, or strung together in long strands. Figure 1 shows Empress Elizabeth, daughter of Peter the Great of Russia, wearing an enormous natural pearl as part of her coronation robes.



As incomes in England and Europe rose, and fortunes were made through the expansion of markets in the nineteenth century, pearl jewelry became available to a clientele beyond the upper echelon of society. Figure 2 shows off a natural pearl incorporated into an English bangle dating from the 1840s, the beginning of the Victorian period. As the nineteenth century progressed, more affordable, and hence more modest, pieces emerged, such as the brooches in figures 3a–c.



Queen Victoria popularized snake jewelry after receiving an emerald-studded snake engagement ring from Prince Albert. The snake necklace in figure 4 incorporates many small lustrous pearls combined together to form an impressive whole.



Fig. 2: Natural pearl, emerald, and diamond bangle, England, ca. 1840. \$50,000. (Shown with an emerald and diamond ring, England, ca. 1920.)

Fig. 3a: Natural black pearl and diamond cluster brooch, English, ca. 1890. Length: 1 in.



Fig. 3b: Siberian amethyst, natural pearl, and diamond brooch, St. Petersburg, ca. 1890. Width: 1 1/4 in.



Fig. 4: Articulated natural pearl and gold snake necklace, with a diamond nose, and ruby and diamond eyes, English, mid-nineteenth century. Length: 16 in. \$28,000.



Fig. 3c: Diamond and natural pearl lozenge-shaped brooch, Russian, late nineteenth century. Length: 1 3/8 in. Figs. 3a–c: \$8,000–\$15,000.





Clockwise from upper left: **Fig. 6a:** Five-strand diamond, platinum, and natural pearl necklace with individual diamond-set geometric ornaments, England, ca. 1910. Inside length: 16 5/8 in. \$27,000.

Fig. 6b: Graduated pearl necklace with diamond clasp, Tiffany & Co., late 1930s. Overall length: 25 in.

Fig. 7: Four-row diamond, ruby, and natural pearl necklace, Cartier, New York, 1931. Inside length: 16 in. Made for the Strauss family, founders of Macy's department stores.

Fig. 8: Diamond and platinum brooch-clip suspending a natural pearl drop, Cartier, Paris, 1940s. Length: 2 1/2 in.

Fig. 9: Pair of natural pearl and diamond drop earrings, Lacloue Frères, France, ca. 1920. \$22,000.


Fig. 10: Pair of natural pearl and diamond drop earrings, England, ca. 1950. Length: 2 5/8 in. \$45,000.

Small pearls strung into strands that combined several colors were popular in England at the turn of the twentieth century (Fig. 5).

Elaborate compositions of small pearls combined with diamonds and platinum became popular at the beginning of the twentieth century, as seen in the outer necklace in figure 6a. Large pearls remained the most valuable, and the emerging brand-name jewelers of the twentieth century incorporated them into their designs. Tiffany's necklace in figure 6b includes pearls graduated up to 10.5 mm, terminated by a 2 1/2-carat diamond clasp. Cartier became especially famous for its use of natural pearls, highlighted by its legendary purchase in 1917 of its New York building from banker Morton F. Plant for a million dollar two-strand pearl necklace coveted by Plant's wife.

During the period between the world wars, art deco jewelry design was angular, colorful, and somewhat futuristic in appearance. Although the 1930s saw the wide introduction of good quality cultured pearls, jewelry made with natural pearls is most sought after by today's collectors. Figure 7 features a diamond and natural pearl necklace by Cartier, New York,

that incorporates the then fashionable color red. Figure 8 shows a Cartier, Paris, brooch-clip, its elegant, angular platinum and diamond drapery suspending a large natural ribbon pearl.

Elegant as contemporary pearl jewelry may be, the three strands of delicate pearls suspended from art deco diamond tops in figure 9, the 1950s diamond and pearl drop earrings in figure 10, or other vintage pieces of jewelry such as those illustrated here, would fit the style pages of any twenty-first century publication. 

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All illustrations courtesy of A La Vieille Russie.

¹ Cultured pearls are created by surgically implanting an irritant into the oyster, which results in a pearl. Otherwise, they share the same properties as natural pearls.