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Precious pearls

The centuries-old favorites are staging another comeback

By Carolyn DeMarco
staff writer

SINCE TIME immemorial women have been draping themselves in strands of lustrous, elegant pearls. The semi-precious spheres have been found in ancient tombs in Syria and Egypt, in Indian burial sites along the Mississippi and in Central American temples. The oldest pearl necklace in existence, now in the Cairo museum belonged to a Persian queen circa 2300 B.C.

Since then the little round wonders have bounced in and out of fashion fortune. By all accounts they've staged another comeback, this one prompted in part by the jewelry choice of the new First Lady, Barbara Bush. (Don't tell anyone, but the lady's pearls are fakes — created by Kenneth Lane — but fakes nevertheless.)

The Jewelry Industry Council in New York supplied the research materials for this everything-you-always-wanted-to-know article about the pearls you wear around your neck.

Until the 20th century pearls were aquatic accidents of nature retrieved by divers. Despite the romance surrounding pearls, the natural pearl is a rather unromantic occurrence. It forms in a saltwater or freshwater mollusk — usually oyster, but also mussel or abalone when an irritant lodges in the shell.

The animal reacts by secreting nacre, a crystalline substance whose basis is calcium carbonate. As thin concentric layers of nacre build up, the pearl acquires its particular refractive quality, called luster. The thicker the nacre, the higher the luster.

"MAN'S HUNGER for pearls led to the depletion of natural oyster beds," said Stefan Alletti, president of the Jewelry Industry Council, "then to the development of a new science and the multi-billion dollar cultured pearl industry."

By the end of the 19th century natural pearl beds were exhausted. In 1893 the one-time noodle vendor Koichi Mikimoto succeeded in implanting objects into the oyster to be covered with nacre. When the method was refined to produce the perfectly round pearls the science and industry of pearl culturing was born. Cultured pearls now make up the majority of the world's pearl trade.

South Seas pearls are the elite of the pearl world although they've never numbered more than 2 percent of the output. Japanese cultivators have control of the mass market with the United States the largest importer. And in the past decade, freshwater cultured pearls from lakes and rivers in Japan and China and the Tennessee and Wabash rivers in the United States have been making inroads.

Freshwater pearls, sometimes called Biwa after Japan's Lake Biwa, are baroque and range in size and shape from that of a crinkly flake Krispie to large irregularly shaped pieces.

THE TREMENDOUS range in pearl prices is reflective of quality and scarcity. In pearls of any category, only a small percentage of the yearly crop is of gem, or fine quality, the equivalent of flawlessness when judged by its size, color, roundness, cleanness, luster, color and surface perfection.

Some factors considered in grading:

- **Size.** The length of time in the oyster determines the layers of nacre and therefore the size. Generally, the harvesting of a pearl comes after three to seven years in the oyster. Generally large pearls are more costly. A 50 percent increase in size can result in a 500 percent increase in cost.

- **Color.** The uncommon black and green pearls are rarest and most expensive. Biggest-selling shades are "champagne," a deep cream shade and the desirable "rose-white." While the color has an effect on price, it has nothing to do with quality. Some pearls are artificially dyed, but it tends to reduce the luster, eliminating the pearl's "overtone."

- **Luster.** Light reflections have a dramatic effect on beauty. Luster is the deep-seated glow formed by the refraction of light through the nacre crystals, which creates iridescent beams of color. All other factors being equal, the higher the luster, the more valuable the pearl.

- **Shape.** Most pearls are slightly off round. Perfectly round pearls are the most costly, but only if they have high luster.

- **Spotting.** A bad quality pearl is one that is cracked, chipped, badly blemished or not fully coated with nacre. The closer the blemishes are to the drill hole, the less noticeable they will be.

Some other items of interest: Nabe pearls are large hemispherical pearls grown as a blister on the shell of the oyster and used in earrings and pins because of their flat base.

• **Size.** Pearls are measured in millimeters from 4mm to 9mm with 6mm to 7mm most popular. A millimeter is approximately one twenty-fifth of an inch.

• **Faux pearls or simulated pearls** are glass beads coated in iridescent nacre from fish scales. The more times the pearl is dipped, the more iridescence. Faux pearls lack the subtle luster of cultured pearls, but sometimes the only way to tell is by touch. Fakes are completely smooth. Real pearls have a gritty surface, which can be felt by rubbing against your teeth.



The simplicity of pearl earrings and single strand gets a dressier look with an enhancer. The pearls are furnished courtesy of Karagossian and Sons Jewelers, Sylvan Lake.

Go to great lengths

The most common lengths for uniform pearl strands are:
Choker — 14-16 inches.
Princess — 17-19 inches.
Matinee — 20-24 inches.
Opera — 28-30 inches.
Rope — anything longer than opera, usually 31-47 inches. Also called satoir or larist.

Try the strands out to see if they fit properly. A choker should nestle at the base of the throat. A matinee strand should reach the top of the cleavage and a princess strand falls between the two. Some opera-length necklaces come apart for use as a bracelet/matinee combination.

Treat pearls with care

For pearls to stay beautiful for long periods of time they must be treated with tender, loving care, according to the Jewelry Industry Council in New York.

Every owner should follow a few simple but important rules for maintaining the loveliness of all genuine pearls, natural or cultured, the council said.

- Pearls should be strung with knots between the spheres. The knots keep them from touching and damaging each other.

- The string on which they are strung, especially if it's a natural fiber, should never be allowed to get wet. And the pearls should occasionally be restringing.

- Never put on pearls until after you've applied makeup and perfume, as chemicals can harm the pearls' finish.

- For the same reason, never immerse pearls in chemical or acid solutions. Forget about ultrasonic or steam-cleaning. The romantic story of the pearl that Cleopatra "drank" is based on fact — pearls can dissolve.

- Protect pearls from perspiration and a dusty, damp atmosphere by wiping them with a chamomile-like cloth after each wearing. Keep them in a closed, soft-lined box when they aren't being worn.

- Avoid drooping or banging pearls down on a hard surface.

By Debbie Sklar
special writer

As the winter breezes nip at our noses, one lucky soul won't have to worry about wrapping herself in layers of clothing — she'll be living in East Africa. But it's not going to be all fun and games.

"I'm nervous, but I'm really looking forward to the experience," said Melissa Joy, 42, who left last month to join the Peace Corps in Tanzania.

As part of her job with the Peace Corps, Joy will be teaching a course called "Women in Development" at a local university in Tanzania. In es-

sence it will be a home economics class, she said.

A graduate of Harrison High School, Joy is a member of Orchard United Methodist Church in Farmington Hills and is a resident of West Bloomfield. She attended Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, where she majored in finance and minored in political science.

"After I graduated, thoughts of law school entered my mind. But my ultimate goal has always been to become an ambassador, and my mom thought the Peace Corps would be a great place to get some experience.

"I SEE the Peace Corps as a perfect way for me to move closer to my lifetime goal. Working for the government or other countries has always really intrigued me."

Joy was so intrigued that during the spring term of her junior year in college she went into the recruitment office of the Peace Corps at Ohio University and filled out an application. The completed application was sent to the Detroit office of the Peace Corps.

"The application was amazing," she said, rolling her eyes backward. "It was about 30 pages long, and it asked everything and anything that you could possibly imagine."

Some of the questions asked about her educational background and skills, she said.

IN ADDITION to filling out the 20-page application, Joy had to seek out eight letters of personal recommendations, which would later be sent to Washington. She also had to have a complete medical examination to prove she was healthy.

Obviously Joy filled out the application well, because the Detroit office called her last summer for an interview, which lasted an hour and a half.

"In addition to showing me a movie with three people that were currently active with the Peace Corps, the interviewer asked me a lot of questions on how I would handle a certain problem if it arose. They really want to see if you're a rational human being."

The interviewer said he would recommend Joy to the program and forwarded her name to the Chicago office. From there, everything is sent to the headquarters in Washington, which makes the final decision. Just one of seven applicants makes it to the top, Joy said.

THE FINAL word in Joy's case resulted in a two-year stint in Tanzania, which began in October. She had a three-day seminar in Atlanta with

other Peace Corps employees prior to departing for Tanzania.

"All my expenses will be paid for including room, board and allowance. In return I'll be acting as a goodwill ambassador to the people in Tanzania where I'll be residing."

The application asked her to list three choices of where she would like to be stationed.

"My first choice was somewhere in the Caribbean," she said, laughing. "Then I thought more realistically and decided on Tanzania as my second choice because it is a stable country."

TANZANIA IS on the Indian Ocean, north of Kenya, south of Mozambique and west of Zaire. The nation has 21.7 million residents. The capital is Zanzibar, which has a population of 600,000.

Tanzania is slightly smaller than Texas and New Mexico combined. In 1985 the per-capita income was listed at \$200. The infant mortality rate is 110 out of 1,000. Life expectancy is 52. The literacy rate is 60 percent. The country's official language is English.

There are hundreds of tribes. Thirty-five percent of the population is of the Muslim faith.

"AS AMERICANS we were told that we could not go over to their country and talk about America as being so great. As employees of the Peace Corps, we are to go to the country where we are stationed and live with them like we were one of them. We are to act as if we are silent leaders.

"You can answer questions about America, but you are not to divulge any information about our country."

After her two-year stay in Tanzania, Joy hopes to come back to Michigan and join the federal reserve, she said.

EVERYONE SHE knows is excited for her, she said.

"My parents are already planning to come and visit me after I've been there for a year. Sure, I'm going to miss everything and everyone here, but I can always call home."

"Trying to remain optimistic, 'I'm really rather excited about this whole experience, but at the same time I'm somewhat skeptical,' she said.

"The good thing about the Peace Corps is that if I don't like it after one month I can come home. It's not like the Army where once you're in, you can't get out.

"I'm planning on giving it at least six months before I decide to toss in the towel."

'All my expenses will be paid for, including room, board and allowance. In return I'll be acting as a Goodwill Ambassador to the people in Tanzania, where I'll be residing.'

— Melissa Joy

