

Pearls: The Only Gemstone From a Living Creature

By Patti Albrecht

Pearls have fascinated people since ancient times; they are valued around the world for their beauty and rarity. The Bible even refers to a man who was willing to trade everything he owned for ONE pearl of high value. While most gemstones are lying buried deep under the ground, pearls are the only gemstones that are not mined, polished or cut. Their iridescence and symmetry come from the natural processes of the living mollusks that form them.

A common myth insists that a grain of sand irritates an oyster and causes it to form a pearl. While this may possibly happen in rare cases, a small piece of organic material or an injury most often initiates the formation of a pearl. In either case, the pearl is irritating to the oyster. The mantle begins to secrete nacre or mother of pearl, which is soothing to the oyster and covers the irritant. Over time, many layers of nacre are deposited, forming a natural saltwater pearl.



with a little human help. Mussels or clams are the most common types of mollusks used for freshwater pearl production. A small piece of the mantle from another mollusk or a small bead is inserted between the mantle and the shell. Sometimes, just cutting the mantle is enough to start the secretion of nacre that will form a pearl. In the freshwater mollusks, several irritants can be inserted into the same creature at once, prompting the creation of more than one pearl. The color of the pearl is influenced by what the mollusks are fed; the most common colors are white, cream, rose and champagne.

The innovative technique of cultivating freshwater pearls made pearl ownership available to all. Freshwater pearls are still real pearls, but they have been instigated



Pearls are valued by size, luster, color, symmetry and flaws. Translucent layers of microscopic crystals that refract light into rainbows of color create the multicolored iridescence that seems to radiate from within a pearl: the finer the layer of nacre, the greater the iridescence. These natural layers also allow for an easy way to distinguish real pearls from fake ones. If a real pearl is lightly rubbed between one's teeth, grittiness will be felt. Since fake pearls are usually made from glass or plastic, they will feel smooth.

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