

Pearls

Strung together, mounted as an earring, adorning a simple gold chain-pearls are classic jewelry. Seemingly timeless, they are appropriate for almost any occasion and hold a longstanding place of honor as the quintessential bridal jewel. Most of the world's pearls are harvested in the waters off Japan-seventy-seven tons of them annually-and among the most well-known pearls are those cultured and sold under the Mikimoto name. Today, Kevin Lane, manager of Mikimoto, shares his knowledge of these tiny treasures with Martha.

A pearl is formed when a grain of sand, a fragment of shell, or some other foreign matter gets lodged within the oyster, which then reacts by secreting calcium carbonate. The calcium, called nacre, envelops the irritant and laminates it with layer upon layer; after a year-long period of development, the pearl is ready to be harvested. When the process is initiated by the chance encounter of oyster and irritant, it is a natural pearl; when the irritant is placed in the oyster by hand, it is a cultured pearl. Their beginnings are the sole difference between them-the only way to determine whether a pearl is natural or cultured is to look at the nucleus with an X-ray. Kokichi Mikimoto invented the cultured pearl in 1893, after years of experimentation. He refined his methods until he was granted a patent three years later for his semispherical pearls. Further cultivations yielded him another patent in 1908, this time for the first perfectly spherical pearl, which Mikimoto sold in his Tokyo shop.

Mikimoto pearls are renowned worldwide for their quality, and the company has virtually set the standard for assessing pearls, gauging them by five criteria. The nacre is examined first for thickness-the thicker the nacre, the greater the value. Then, the trained eye appraises the pearl's luster, observing its surface glow and the way the pearl refracts light. Next, the pearl is judged on color; the spectrum of colors in a pearl should include cream, silver, pink, gold, green, blue, and black, and the pearl should have a rich, even color that emanates from deep within. The most valuable pearls are perfectly round, with as smooth a surface as possible.

When caring for pearls there are several things to remember. Pearls react badly to perfumes, hair sprays, and cosmetics, all of which damage the nacre. It's best to put the pearls on after applying any of these, and to take them off as soon as you return home. Chlorine, ammonia, and vinegar are also hazardous to nacre, so avoid wearing the pearls while swimming, cleaning, or cooking. After each wear, pearls should be wiped with a soft clean cloth and stored in a soft pouch or the box in which they were originally packaged. Since acids in the air can have a damaging effect, you may even want to store the pouch in a sealed plastic bag. Finally, if you wear your pearls often, have them restrung annually. Tiny knots in the silk cord between the pearls prevent them from rubbing against one another and keep them together even if the cord breaks.

Sources:

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www.mikimoto.com

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