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How to Choose Fine Pearls

By Amanda Raab

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by: **Amanda Raab**

Pearls are very alluring and hold a quality that both defines elegance and natural beauty. There are more varieties and availability of pearls today than ever before. The "cultured pearl" now rivals with fine diamonds, sapphires, emeralds, and rubies.

Today most pearls are cultured, meaning that the mollusk is purposely inserted with an irritant or "nucleus" from which it creates a pearl. A better way to think of the difference between natural pearls and cultured pearls is to think of the natural pearl as a result of the mollusk working alone and the cultured pearls as a product of nature being helped by science. Cultured pearls are not "fake" like many people may think. The culturing process takes from two to three years and is a very delicate process. The pearl farmers have little control on what the outcome of the pearl will look like or if the mollusk will reject the nucleus. Not all pearls are fine quality or even desirable at all. The end result is ultimately a consequence of nature.

Choosing pearls that are of the best quality are determined by luster, nacre thickness and quality (the outer layer), color, surface perfection, shape, and size. The biggest factor of pearl quality is nacre thickness and quality which determines how long the pearl will last. Nacre thickness determines the longevity of the pearl and nacre quality determines how light reflects through the layers of the pearls. High luster and iridescence come from high quality nacre and any pearl with these characteristics has quality, thick nacre. When judging nacre look for uniform iridescence, intensity of luster, cracks and peeling, estimate thickness near the drill hole between the nacre and the shell bead (nacre is lighter). Pearls are very thick with at least .5 mm on all pearls, thick with at least .5mm on most pearls, medium with between .35 and .5 mm on most pearls, and thin with .25 mm or less on most pearls.

Luster is also important and one of the first factors to notice. Luster is an intense brightness that illuminates from within the pearl rather than just being "shiny" like in imitation pearls. The intense brightness results from light being reflected throughout the numerous layers of nacre. Quality pearls will have a sharp contrast between the brightest area where direct light is hitting the pearls and the

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shaded area creating an illusion of a "ball within the pearl." Check for luster by examining them under a fluorescent lamp and rolling them from side to side to examine uniform luster. Examine pearls over a light gray or white material and never black because it is harder to see the true quality of the pearl.

Pearl color is also important. When choosing pearls note their body color and overtones. The most desirable and more rare white pearls have "rose" colored overtones. Cream colored pearls are more affordable because they are less rare. Also, pearls can have tones rated in intensity. Darker toned pearls are more desirable and expensive compared to lighter toned pearls. Many natural body colors are available in pearls including white, black, gray, blue, gold, pink, and green. Distinctive colored pearls are rarer and harder to find. Have a qualified gemologist check the pearls to make sure they have not been dyed, especially for costlier pearls like the black or golden varieties.

Examine pearls' surface for blemishes. Although it is best to check for most pearl characteristics on a light background, it is best to check for blemishes on a dark background. Check in both intense and

diffused light. No pearls are perfect and small blemishes can be sacrificed for more important quality like nacre and luster. Pearls with higher luster conceal blemishes better.

When choosing pearls also consider shape. There are three pearl shapes including symmetrical, spherical, and baroque. The spherical is the rarest and most desirable. Symmetrical pearls include teardrop or pear-shaped pearls and desirable but usually less expensive than spherical pearls. Baroque pearls are irregularly shaped and often the least expensive.

Size should also be taken into consideration. Larger cultured pearls are rarer and more expensive. Akoya pearls over 7 ½ millimeters are much more costly and prices dramatically rise with each ½ millimeter over 8 millimeters. South Sea and Tahitian pearls also have high increase in price when size is over 15 millimeters.

One more factor to consider in pearls is the precision in matching the pearl quality in a string of pearls. It is important to take all of the above factors in consideration when matching the pearls. Graduated pearls also take careful matching. Pearl matching affects the value of the jewelry because when pearls are not matched properly it takes away from the appearance of the jewelry. Also, make sure the pearls are all drilled in the center so they lay properly. Off-center drilled pearls will not lay correctly and reduces the value of the piece.

It is always important to get an independent laboratory report when in doubt of pearl enhancements that may have been employed to make the pearls appear more valuable. Make sure the person appraising the pearls is a Graduate Gemologist (GG) which is the Gemological Institute of America's (GIA) highest award.

Other things to consider when purchasing pearls include finding out what the merchant's return policy is. Make sure they have at least a 30-day full refund policy.

Amanda Raab
Owner Of Pure Pearls

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How to care for pearls

By Yan Berry

How to care for pearls by Yan Berry

Pearls are delicate and soft gems compared with other gemstones. They need extra gentle care. Here is a guide to pearl care.

- Clean – wipe pearls regularly and gently with a soft cloth moistened with water. Pearls can absorb perfume, skin oils and dirt easily. Do not clean pearls with detergents and don't soak pearls in water.
- Protect – avoid temperature extremes and chemicals such as vinegar, alcohol and hair spray. They can damage pearl surfaces.
- Wear - put on pearls after you have applied makeup and hair spray.
- Store – pearls can be scratched easily. They should be stored in a soft place such as a velvet box or a satin pouch. Avoid putting pearls next to diamond or gemstones jewelry.
- Restring – for a frequently worn pearl necklace, it is recommended to restring the necklace once every one or two years since silk thread may get weakened over time.

Mrs. Berry is a pearl expert. She is also the founder of Premium Pearl, a leading online provider of high quality pearl jewelry.

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