

PEARLS TEACHERS' RESOURCE

*Learn more about the exhibition, Pearls, at the
Home of Creativity (21 September 2013 – 19 January 2014)
Key Stage 3-4: Art & Design, Design & Technology*



V&A

Introduction

Pearls are incredibly valuable due to their beauty and rarity, and have long been used to signify status and power. A pearl is made predominantly from calcium carbonate, formed by a mollusc with a shell. When foreign objects, usually small parasites, are caught between the 'mantle' layer and the shell, the mantle is genetically triggered to 'build shell' around this object, forming a pearl. Depending on the region and type of mollusc, pearls vary enormously in size, shape and colour.

For millennia, pearl fishing was located primarily in the Arabian Gulf, particularly around Qatar and Bahrain, and Southern India. Pearl-diving is very dangerous and skilled work; men work in pairs on a dhow (boat) – one is lowered into the sea using a rope and the other must attend closely to return his partner safely to the surface.

In Japan, Kokichi Mikimoto discovered how to manufacture half-pearls in 1898. Later, Tatsuhei Mise and Tokichi Nishikawa (Mikimoto's son-in-law) mastered the creation of spherical, cultured pearls using a small bead as its core. These cheaper pearls were incredibly popular in the 1920s and 30s, transforming the market.

Pre-visit activities

Research the difference between natural and cultured pearls. What countries in the world have dominated the production and consumption of each?

Research key jewellers and identify the hallmarks of their style. Focus particularly on their use of pearls. Possible examples: Tiffany & Co; René Lalique (1860-1945); Charles Robert Ashbee (1863-1942); Jean Fouquet (1899-1994); contemporary designers include John Donald (b.1928), Yoko London, and Hemmerle.

The Museum visit

School groups are requested not to work in groups or draw in the exhibition due to pressure on access to the objects for all visitors. We recommend using this resource to introduce key themes and ideas (outlined below) for students to discuss in pairs in the exhibition. Please use the 'Jewellery' teachers' resource for follow-up activities using the permanent collection.

How have pearls been used symbolically in jewellery and portraiture?

In Indian mythology, pearls were associated with the moon and the Hindu lunar deity Chandra. From the 12th century, pearls were associated with the Virgin Mary and symbolised purity. From the 15th century, pearls, rubies and diamonds were used in love-tokens, such as brooches and rings, combined with related symbols, such as hearts and clasped hands. Perversely, pearls were also symbols of death. In Ancient Greece pearls were believed to be the tears of Gods. From the 16th century, pearls were considered the only appropriate form of mourning jewellery.

How have modern and contemporary designers used pearls in jewellery?

In the 19th century, seed pearls were popular to create nature-inspired forms such as flower petals and grapes. Art Nouveau jewellers preferred the irregularity of 'baroque' pearls, deliberately shunning large, expensive gems. After WWI, fashions shifted and jewellers like Jean Fouquet took inspiration from the geometrical shapes of Cubist and Constructivist art. The current fashion is for rare and unusual pearls, often with evocative names such as 'pistachio Tahitian' and 'pink Chinese'.

How have rulers used pearls as a reflection of status and power?

Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603) was often depicted with pearls on her clothes and hair, showing the wealth of her kingdom and, by association with the Virgin Mary, her purity. In the 19th century, high society women wore long strands of pearls, copying Empress Eugénie (1826-1920), wife of Napoleon III, who was considered the most stylish woman of her time.

Follow-up activities / find out more

- Design two pieces of pearl jewellery – one using pearls to symbolise love and the other to symbolise sorrow.
- Use a found natural object to design a piece of jewellery that must incorporate its irregular features.

'Search the Collections' on the V&A website is a vital resource for teachers and students. It has detailed information on many objects, including related articles and photographs. The Jewellery Hub on the V&A website has short films, articles, interviews with designers and a user-friendly resource, 'Hidden Treasures'. The Pearls exhibition catalogue is available from the V&A Shop.