



Pearls

V&A and Qatar Museums Authority exhibition

Sponsored by Shell

21 September 2013 – 19 January 2014

www.vam.ac.uk/pearls | [#pearls](https://twitter.com/pearls)

A pearl-drop earring worn by Charles I at his execution in 1649, magnificent pearl tiaras worn by European nobility and a necklace of cultured pearls given to Marilyn Monroe by Joe DiMaggio in 1954 are among the incredible array of jewels and other objects on display in a new exhibition at the V&A. Organised in partnership with the Qatar Museums Authority (QMA), the exhibition explores the history of pearls from the early Roman Empire to the present, and is a highlight event of the Qatar UK 2013 Year of Culture.

On display are over 200 pieces of jewellery and works of art showcasing the extraordinary variety of colour and shape of natural and cultured pearls. The exhibition examines how pearls have been employed over centuries in both East and West as a symbol of status and wealth, how tastes vary in different cultures as well as the changing designs of jewellery with pearls.

The exhibition begins with an insight into the natural history of pearls showcased by a rare collection of molluscs from the Qatar Museums Authority and the pearl-fishing trade from across the Gulf to Europe and Asia, since Antiquity. A magnificent selection of natural pearls from the Gulf demonstrates how Gulf pearls have long been some of the most desirable and valuable in the world. The opening section also reveals the often dangerous working methods of pearl divers and shows the trading practices of pearl merchants in the Gulf, together with examples of equipment required for weighing and valuing pearls. Examples of early experiments in producing cultured pearls attempted in the 18th century by Carl Linnaeus are shown with scientific instruments which were used in the first half of the 20th century to distinguish between the natural and the cultured pearl.

The central focus of the exhibition chronicles the representation of pearls in jewellery through history, showcasing Ancient Roman jewels made as early as the 1st century AD and takes the exhibition up to date with contemporary work made by designers practising today. Through Antiquity myths and legends surrounded the pearl and early examples of Roman and Byzantine jewellery show how they were used as a sign of power and an indicator of rank in society. In Medieval times pearls were transformed from a symbol of

luxury and ostentation into a Christian symbol representing purity and chastity, as represented by the Hylle Jewel with the scene of the Annunciation.

During the Renaissance, as Europe experienced a period of affluence, pearls began to be used extravagantly in jewellery and featured prominently in a new genre of portrait painting as a mark of extreme authority and wealth. On display are paintings and portrait miniatures featuring nobles, courtiers and affluent merchants of society, adorned with pearls. Other highlights from the 1600s include 'Queen Mary II' pearls (1662 -1694) as well as examples of irregular and unusual-shaped Baroque pearls forming striking jewellery designs.

The fascination with pearls continued in the 18th century. Celebrities of the day including Marie-Antoinette, her mother the Empress Maria Theresa, Empress Catherine the Great of Russia and Queen Charlotte, wore opulent pearls either in swags or as multiple strands and chokers, as seen in the portrait miniature of Queen Charlotte (1781). However, wearing jewellery was not restricted to women; men of distinction also wore jewels and accessories. On show are a set of buttons finely enamelled and framed with pearls worn by George III (1780).

In Victorian times pearls often had symbolic meanings and were found in sentimental jewels, or as naturalistic motifs with allegorical content. Examples featured include the so-called 'Dagmar necklace' gifted to Princess Alexandra when she married the Prince of Wales, the future King Edward VII, in 1863 and a pendant locket with black pearl commemorating Prince Albert (1862).

Delicate compositions of Art Nouveau jewels sparsely decorated with pearls contrast with the opulent application of pearls in fashionable sautoirs of the 1920s or a three-stranded Cartier necklace with Gulf pearls designed in the 1930s. An Art Deco brooch by Jean Fouquet (1937) was in its period as innovative as the contemporary designs of the Munich jeweller Stefan Hemmerle with rare Melo pearls (2011). The figurative creations of Geoffrey Rowlandson (1999) and the complex use of pearls in Sam Tho Duong's necklace (2011) illustrate the diversity of contemporary jewellery designs with pearls.

An Icon with Virgin and Child decorated with Russian freshwater pearls (1886), an Imperial Robe from China studded with pearls (c. 1870 – 1911) and a Chinese wedding head-dress (1800-1900) examine the significance of pearls in the Far East. They are shown alongside tiaras formerly belonging to the British and European high nobility, such as the Rosebery pearl and diamond Tiara (1878), as well pieces worn by celebrities of today, including Elizabeth Taylor's Bulgari pearl-drop pendant earrings (1972).

The exhibition also follows the invention of the cultured pearl and its production on an industrial scale initiated by Kokichi Mikimoto in Japan. He succeeded in developing the

necessary technology to establish ways of making pearls affordable for every woman to wear. Today in East Asia and the South Seas an impressive variety of cultured pearls are found in unusual colours.

The jewellery and works of art are drawn from the V&A and QMA's collections, alongside objects from British collections including Tate Britain, the British Museum and the Royal Collection and established jewellery houses such as Mikimoto, Tiffany & Co, Bulgari, Cartier, Chaumet, René Lalique and YOKO London.

The exhibition will be a highlight of the Qatar UK 2013 Year of Culture which is a programme of cultural exchanges and events in Qatar and the UK coordinated by the British Council and Qatar Museums Authority. The Year aims to forge new and support existing partnerships between the two countries in the arts, education, sport and science, while promoting an awareness and appreciation of each country's culture, achievements and heritage.

- ENDS -

Notes to Editors

- *Pearls* has been co-curated by independent jewellery historian and curator Beatriz Chadour-Sampson and Hubert Bari, Director of the future Pearl and Jewellery Museum at QMA.
- The exhibition takes place at the V&A from 21 September 2013 – 19 January 2014
- The V&A is open daily 10:00 – 17:45 and until 22:00 every Friday.
- *Pearls* is part of the events programme for *Qatar UK 2013 Year of Culture*
- View a film about the *Pearls* exhibition on the V&A Channel: www.vam.ac.uk/channel

Ticket Information

Tickets: £10 (concessions available)

V&A Members go free

For bookings visit www.vam.ac.uk (booking fee applies) or call 020 7420 9736

Qatar Museums Authority

Qatar Museums Authority was founded in 2005 by His Highness the Emir, Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani. Under the leadership of its Chairperson, H.E. Sheikha Al Mayassa, QMA is transforming the State of Qatar into a cultural hub for the Middle East. The globally acclaimed Museum of Islamic Art, designed by I.M. Pei, was inaugurated in 2008. In 2010, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art opened, creating a focus for the emerging modern and contemporary art scene in the region. The National Museum of Qatar is currently being developed in a major new building designed by Jean Nouvel. The ambitious forward programme is gathering pace including large-scale exhibitions by international artists, showing in the Middle East for the first time. Among these are Cai Guo-Qiang, (2011), Louise Bourgeois (2012), and Takashi Murakami (2012).

Qatar UK 2013 Year of Culture

Qatar UK 2013 is a year-long cultural exchange programme between the United Kingdom and the State of Qatar, aiming to strengthen bilateral relations by creating lasting partnerships between institutions and individuals. Mutual recognition, understanding and appreciation of Qatari and British cultures are cultivated through over 60 entertaining and educational events throughout the year in both nations.

Qatar UK 2013 is coordinated by the British Council and Qatar Museums Authority with the support of Platinum Sponsors Qatargas, Shell and Vodafone.

For more information on the Year of Culture please visit www.qataruk2013.com.

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Exhibition Sponsors

About Qatar Shell

Qatar Shell is proud to be the sponsor of the *Pearls* exhibition at the V&A, supporting the Qatar Museums Authority as it brings the best of Qatar to the UK. Qatar Shell is also a Platinum Sponsor of the Qatar UK 2013 Year of Culture, which is a season of events celebrating and showcasing the deep-rooted cultural relations between Qatar and the UK.

Qatar Shell is committed to supporting Qatar's National Vision 2030 – in social, human, environmental and economic development. As the largest international investor in Qatar, Qatar Shell works closely with Qatar Petroleum to develop the country's energy industry providing a significant contribution to the Economic pillar. Together with Qatar Petroleum, Shell has delivered two of the largest energy projects in the world in Qatar: the world's largest gas-to-liquids plant, Pearl GTL; and the Qatargas 4 Liquefied Natural Gas project.

Qatar Shell also contributes to the Economic, Social and Human pillars by pursuing opportunities for local Qatari suppliers, and the recruitment of Qatari staff, thereby promoting a diverse economy, and sustainable development.

Exhibition Publication and Merchandise

An accompanying exhibition catalogue, *Pearls*, by Beatriz Chadour-Sampson with Hubert Bari (V&A Publishing) will be available at £25.

A capsule collection of pearls and pearl-inspired product will be available for purchase in the V&A Shop and online from 16 September 2013 to January 2014.

For PRESS information on the book and related product contact Julie Chan on +44 (0)20 7942 2701 or email j.chan@vam.ac.uk

For further PRESS information about the V&A *Pearls* exhibition please contact Alice Evans in the V&A press office on +44 (0) 20 7942 2508 or email a.evans@vam.ac.uk

A selection of press images are available to download free of charge from pressimages.vam.ac.uk

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