

and set by arbitrary standards. A first grade pearl should have a perfect "skin," i.e., be free from flaws and specks, and should have a fine "orient," that is, a delicate texture of translucent pink or cream color with an iridescent luster. It is difficult to say whether the size, shape, or color of a pearl is the more important. Other qualities being equal, a perfectly symmetrical pearl is more desirable than a pear-shaped or a flat one. There are pearls of all colors — white, black, gray, green, yellow, gold, and pink. The size of the pearl is important only in combination with a desirable color and shape. Luster is probably the most important characteristic of a first-class pearl; other qualities can be more or less lacking if the pearl has good luster or depth. The most perfect pearl in existence is said to be one in the Zosima Museum in Moscow, known as "La Pellegrina," weighing 28 carats. The largest known pearl is an irregularly shaped one in the Victoria and Albert Museum, having a circumference of 4.5 inches.

The value of a really rare pearl increases by leaps and bounds from purchaser to purchaser. A single example is a Persian Gulf pearl purchased by Barbara Hutton for \$75,000; the pearl originally sold for \$30,000. It is not necessarily on the spot where the pearl is produced that it is most cheaply procured, and if procured, of the finest quality. Arabs in the Persian Gulf know that the Best Gulf pearls may be purchased most cheaply in India. Peddlers may be found in most towns on the Persian Gulf with necklaces of Gulf pearls for sale; however, these have usually been imported from Bombay.

VALUE OF PERSIAN GULF PEARLS

The annual value of the Persian Gulf pearl fisheries is difficult to estimate exactly, as there are no published figures and the season's crop is not shipped out through any single port. Figures published by some authors are actually only the value of the pearls passing through Bahrein Island. However, as close to 90 percent of the Gulf pearls do pass through Bahrein, these figures give a rough estimate. The earliest figure known dates back to the early 19th century; Wilson stated in 1833 that the value of the pearls produced at Bahrein amounted to from £200,000 to £240,000, while the value of the whole fisheries was about

£300,000.¹ Wellsted stated that in 1835 the total value was £400,000.² Zwemer stated that the value of pearls shipped from Bahrein in 1896 was £303,941.³

Cox gives the value of pearls exported in 1925 as £220,000 from Bahrein and £9,000 from Lingeh in Iran, and for 1926 as £192,000 from Bahrein, £11,000 from Kuwait, and £5,200 from Lingeh (a total of about £208,000 for 1926); Cox further states that the true value was probably ten times these figures, for reasons he fails to clarify.⁴ However, Thornburg has accepted this last statement of Cox's as a fact and has arrived at a figure of \$10 million for the value of the Bahrein fisheries in 1926,⁵ a figure that is unreasonably high. Thornburg estimates that in the years immediately following World War II the value of the Bahrein pearl fisheries was about \$250,000; Kruegar states that in 1949 the value of the Bahrein pearl fisheries amounted to \$200,000.⁶ Rihani gives figures for the whole Gulf which amount to about \$15 million,⁷ the most absurd value published.

A summary of the more reliable figures would seem to be as follows:

1830's	\$1,500,000
1835.....	2,000,000
1896.....	1,500,000
1925.....	1,200,000
1926.....	1,000,000
1946.....	250,000
1949.....	200,000

As can be seen from the above table, the value of the fisheries dropped to only a fraction of its previous value after the world depression of the thirties. It should also be pointed out that due to world inflation the figure of \$200,000 for 1949 represents less than \$100,000 on 1926 monetary standards. However, while the depression dealt the Gulf pearl fisheries a devastating blow, its

¹ D. Wilson, "Memorandum Respecting the Pearl Fisheries in the Persian Gulf," *Geographical Journal*, III (1883), p. 284.

² James R. Wellsted, *Travels in Arabia* (London, 1838), p. 264.

³ Samuel M. Zwemer, *Cradle of Islam* (New York, 1900), p. 100.

⁴ Percy Z. Cox, "Persian Gulf," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago, 1946), vol. 17, p. 605.

⁵ Max Thornburg, "Bahrein," *Encyclopedia Americana* (New York, 1949), vol. 3, p. 48a.

⁶ H. C. Kruegar, "Bahrein," *Collier's Encyclopedia*, II (New York, 1949), p. 668.

⁷ Ameen Rihani, *Around the Coasts of Arabia* (London, 1930), p. 275.

continued decline cannot be laid at its door. Japanese cultured pearls first started to appear on the market in quantities in the twenties just before the depression. As time has gone on the competition they offered has tended to become less and less, but on the other hand, the world demand for this gem has reached an all-time low, mainly because of the effect of the cultured pearl.

The introduction of cultured pearls and artificial pearls alike has had far-reaching effects on the natural pearl market. While they do not compete insofar as price is concerned when they are recognized as cultured, it takes an expert to distinguish them. Thus, the net effect of cultured pearls, and even more so of the expertly fabricated synthetic pearls, has been to cheapen the pearl as a precious gem in the eyes of those who wear them. There are actually some women who prefer cultured pearls, which are usually more uniform. As a result, natural Gulf pearls do not bring a tenth of what they did a quarter of a century ago at Bahrein.

It is a strange fact that even though a cultured pearl is worth only a few percent of the value of real pearls, there are few pearl merchants in the Persian Gulf who can tell a good cultured pearl from the Gulf pearl without destroying the two in the effort.⁸ Radiography (x-ray), x-ray diffraction, fluorescence under x-ray radiation, or specific gravity determinations, alone or in various combinations, may be used to detect cultured pearls, but these physical tests are not used by the Arabs for obvious reasons.

One might ask why cultured pearls have not been "introduced" into the Persian Gulf pearl market by divers, captains, or merchants. The Arab will tell you that this is improbable. The importation of cultured pearls into the Persian Gulf is prohibited, and in fact carries a severe penalty. The oysters are opened in sight of the divers, so they all know how many exceptional pearls the *nakhoda* (captain) receives and thus what exceptional pearls

⁸ One of the world's leading authorities on the differentiation of cultured and natural pearls by their physical properties, Dr. A. E. Alexander, visited the Persian Gulf in 1947 to study the pearl fisheries and took with him a number of fine cultured pearls which he showed to a group of about thirty Bahrein pearl dealers. These Arabs had never seen a cultured pearl, whose importation is normally prohibited, and were astounded at its quality.