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*Not Your Grandmother's
Pearls!*

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Nothing is more universal and timeless than pearls. Wander through any major art museum and you'll find them on everyone from maharajahs to lowly servants. There's Rembrandt's *Weighing of Pearls*, Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* — which inspired a Hollywood movie two years ago — and nary a portrait of Queen Elizabeth where she isn't dripping with them. Leonardo da Vinci even had his own recipe for making a small pearl into a large fake, according to *Promethean Ambitions: Alchemy and the Quest to Perfect Nature*. Dissolve the pearl in lemon juice, dry the paste into a powder, mix it with egg white, let it harden, then grind and polish. It's partly pearls' timeless beauty and partly their rich history that makes them so desirable — and so much fun to mess with. Oysters are still making them, albeit usually in a more controlled environment. They still contain all the beauty and luster that once caused people to risk their lives diving for them and rulers to pass laws restricting them to the noble classes. But now they're available in prices and quantities even commoners can afford.

All of which allows designers to work not only with the beauty of a pearl but its age-old associations as well. Pearls offer a way to honor tradition and turn it on its head at the same time — a very contemporary motivation. Still, ask even the most innovative designers why they work with pearls and they say what jewelry makers have probably said for two thousand years: "I love pearls."

reinventing the pearl

By Cathleen McCarthy

Innovative modern designers are taking a new look

PASSION FOR PEARLS. What magic is in a pearl that causes jewelry designers to lapse into rhapsodic praise? Asked why they favor pearls, everyone I spoke to used the words "love," "luscious," and "beauty" in the first five minutes. Some, like Sam Shaw, added "sensual" and "fabulous." More than one — both male and female — describe the pearl's attraction as feminine in nature.

For studio jewelers, odd-shaped pearls provide bulk, luster, and exquisite color at a fraction of the cost of a perfect round. Such pearls are often labeled rejects and priced accordingly. After all, what's a production jeweler going to do with a pearl shaped like a light bulb or a science project gone awry?

At the very least, calibrated settings are out.

But one-of-a-kind designers can design a piece around the odd shape, making it the focal point. That's not exactly a new idea. Renaissance jewelers were famous for building elaborate and bizarre pendants — mermaids, dragons, and ships — around giant blobby masses of baroque pearl. Later, Art Nouveau jewelers found asymmetrical pearls suited their organic themes. German designers built ornate butterflies around lumpy masses of nacre, while Tiffany and the French designers transformed oblong pearls into graceful flower petals, seedpods, and the bodies of dragonflies.





Kate Bracelet, by Frances Smersh, who sets pearls in concrete.
Right: Earrings of 14K gold, lapis crosses, and South Sea pearls,
by Sam Shaw. Photo: Robert Diamante.

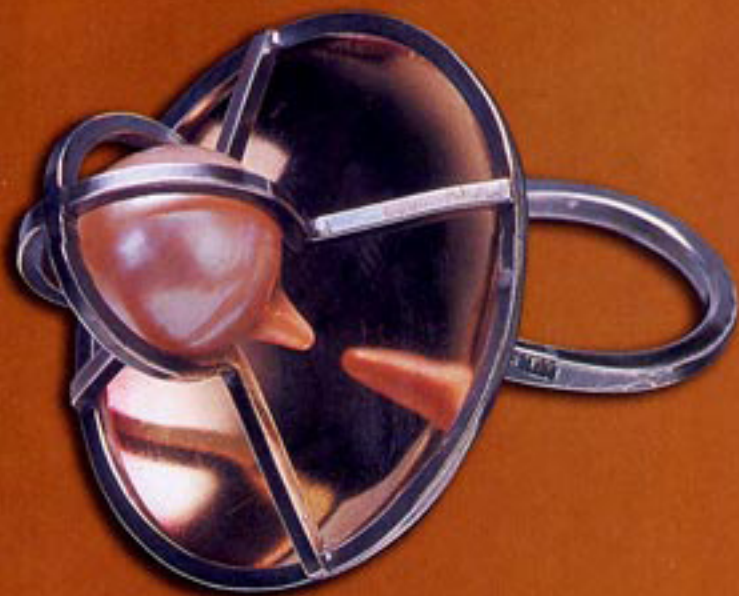
Below left: Brooch by Sam Shaw with a beach stone in 14K
gold with cross-shaped pearls. Photo: Robert Diamante.

Below right: Gina Pankowski's Sensual Tension #1
ring/pendant of sterling silver, 22K bi-metal, and pearl,
with removable shank.



Want to combine traditional
pearls with non-traditional
materials? See "Concrete's
Not Just For Sidewalks" in
STEP by **STEP**, page 53.

at an old favorite.





Sam Shaw designed this necklace, setting pearls in a series of concave, irregularly shaped 22K gold discs. Photo: Robert Diamante.

Creating new combinations of old materials always makes people stop and think.

Opposite page, main photo: Two pendants, by two different artists. For his *Dog Bone* pendant, Sam Shaw allowed a South Sea pearl to move freely in a cage of 14K gold, suspended on an oxidized sterling silver chain. For hers, Gina Pankowski used the 18K gold frame to elegantly mimic the shape of the pearl, and hold it in place. Photo: Todd Murray. Opposite page, far right: Gina Pankowski's *Vertebrae* earrings, of 18K green gold and Tahitian pistachio pearls. Photo: Douglas Yapple.



Jazmin necklace, by Smersh Design, interspersing concrete set in bezels with coin pearls.



Today's designers use pearls in a similar way, either building a piece around an unusual shape or taking advantage of their translucence and spherical form. Pearls still serve as both accent and centerpiece. But unlike centuries past, they are more likely to embellish jewelry that reflects contemporary art, with more references to science and abstract form than Lalique and company would have favored.

Gina Pankowski uses pearls to symbolize seeds or eggs embedded in silver pods or protective shells. Sometimes the pearls are tiny and delicate, sometimes head-turningly large. Like her Art Nouveau predecessors, Pankowski uses pearls to represent contained life. Her *Pearl Orbit* series began in 2000 when she was first thinking about starting a family. (She now has a three-year-old.) "A pearl is an intrusion in the mollusk," she explains, "and from that intrusion, that irritation, they create something so beautiful."

She prefers natural pearls to dyed. "There are so many soft, lustrous, feminine colors available in natural pearls," she says. This sometimes means paying a premium, especially for her favorite: the chartreuse-green South Seas pearls known as 'pistachio,' which she likes to combine with 18-karat green gold.

"I'm really into green. I'm an avid gardener and I love looking into the small layers of growing things. A lot of my work reflects that," says Pankowski, who studied botany and astronomy in college and worked for a while in a greenhouse. "In the *Pearl Orbit* series, the pieces sort of explode that image. In their finished phase, it can be like looking at botanical cells, the pearl being the nucleus of the cell."

DESIGN TIP: Pearls make the most dramatic impact worn on the neck, in Pankowski's opinion. "I do a lot of one-of-a-kind neckpieces. I just find they make great performance pieces. People can't help being transformed by them. When they wear them, they become the ultimate public art. People stop to look."





Left: Sam Shaw's Bird Nest, of 18K gold with South Sea pearls and diamonds.
Photo: Todd Murray.

Above: Bracelet by Sam Shaw, using freshwater pearls, lapis crosses, aquamarine, and turquoise.
Photo: Robert Diamante.

“They vary slightly and are meant to be seen in their entirety. I like all their little flaws, their variations in shape and color.”

PEARLS IN A CAGE. Like Pankowski, Sam Shaw cages pearls but less as a frame and more to facilitate movement. Wearing his *Racetrack* neckpiece is something like wearing the children's game "Mousetrap" around your neck, with a tube of 18-karat gold wire and South Sea pearls as the balls. If you want to be totally distracted, a version called the *Endless Bracelet* can be worn on the wrist and there are rolling pearl rings as well.

Shaw's inspiration came from some loose pearls he had rolling around on his desk. "I thought, 'Pearls are round. Why do they always need to be secured when what they really want to do is roll?' So I decided to put them in cages and the cages took on many different forms, sometimes channeled like tubes, sometimes circular so the pearls can move in any direction, into perpetuity."

So far, he hasn't used anything other than pearls in his rolling series. "Pearls are *luscious*," he says, drawing the word out with relish. "I love pearls. Usually beads are drilled, and having a hole is distracting. Pearls you can get undrilled. The one disappointment about these pieces is that the pearl cannot be against the skin — and they really want to be against skin. They warm up nicely and the weight is good. But hey, you can't have all things."

Unlike most designers, Shaw often sells his jewelry directly to the wearer from his gallery in Northeast Harbor, Maine. What kind of women buy racetrack pearls? "Women buying for themselves, definitely — stylish, affluent women. This jewelry is about fun. It's not 'fine jewelry.' It's high-end costume jewelry."

One thing he has discovered in 15 years of working with pearls is that they are meant to be enjoyed all the way around. "You don't want to view them only from one angle but left, right, front, back. They vary slightly and are meant to be seen in their entirety. I like all their little flaws, their variations in shape and color."

DESIGN TIP: The only trick to designing rolling-pearl pieces, Shaw says, is choosing spherical pearls. He uses 10mm pearls which he buys in bulk so they fit predesigned cages with 11mm inside diameters.

PEARLS IN CONCRETE. Frances Smersh had been making jewelry for a living for nine years when she came up with the combination that turned out to be her bread and butter: pearls set in concrete. If you're picturing a conceptual art piece involving a section of sidewalk, think again. Most of Smersh's pearl-and-concrete jewelry is so polished you could wear it on the lapel to a business meeting. What I find most interesting about the line's conception is that the concrete came first; the pearls were a mere afterthought.

"I was antsy, ready for a change," Smersh recalls. "I like color in the work but I wasn't interested in traditional stone-setting; form is more important to me. I had been experimenting with patinas and looking at European jewelry." She particularly liked the clean, contemporary aesthetic of contemporary German jewelry and admired their willingness to take on materials that wouldn't normally be considered appropriate for jewelry."

After a long period of trial and error, she settled on a fine-grained concrete product and dry pigment process that results in intense color. But it wasn't quite sufficient on its own. "To be completely honest, my initial interest in pearls was as a point of departure from the concrete," she says. "Conceptually it's interesting because when most people think of concrete they think of a sidewalk; you don't embed pearls in a sidewalk. The luster of the pearls contrasts beautifully with the concrete, which has a bit of grit in its texture."

As she began incorporating freshwater pearls, they began to work their magic on her and she found herself enjoying their unique beauty. Her pieces that incorporate pearls are al-

BUYING PEARLS WITH DESIGN IN MIND

Several years ago, production of pearls increased, bringing prices down. Suppliers of cultured pearls in both Tahiti and China have recently begun curtailing production in order to establish some price control. But as of now, pearls of all varieties are abundant and relatively cheap. This has allowed jewelers to be much freer with their designs, to experiment in a way they couldn't have risked before. Some tips for pearl shopping:

- **Don't overlook the rejects.** Pearls are often labeled this way due to flaws in the nacre or inconsistencies in shape and color. For the studio jeweler, this can be a way to get what Sam Shaw calls "more show for the money." Gina Pantowski often uses doublets and triplets, cultured pearls considered rejects, for her Pearl Orbit neckpieces. "The color is natural but they've grown into these odd shapes," she says. "I design the pieces around the pearls so the pearl dictates or inspires the shape."

Another common reject is a pearl with beautiful luster on one side and a blemish on the other. "It comes down to the skills of the jeweler to hide the blemish, which is a fun challenge," says Shaw. He often puts a back on such pearls and makes pendants of them. "I'm always trying to find ways to make wonderful jewelry cheaper."

- **Negotiate.** Price reductions for a flawed pearl vary dramatically. There are many variables including size, quality, shape, and color — and each can affect the price. Shaw buys most of his pearls from familiar vendors at the Tucson gem shows every year, but he always looks for new ones. "You can sometimes find amazing pearls in unlikely places — from someone who isn't really a pearl dealer, for example, but has acquired a couple strands as part of a closeout deal. You have to keep checking. And always ask for a better price."

- **What to look for.** "Buying pearls requires a different sense than gemstones. I look for pearls that feel like skin," Shaw says. "When I'm looking at pearls, it's all about the feminine sensibility of touch. The most important thing to me is the luster: Does this pearl glow and sing?"

- **Strands vs. singles.** "When I'm buying a strand, I like variegated pearls with a variation in color," Shaw says. "In single pearls, I want luster and I want size. I think big pearls are just inherently more fabulous." —CMcC

ways the best sellers, she says. "As soon as people realize what it is, they're very excited. They can wear a piece of jewelry they recognize as having the traditional beauty and value of a pearl and, if they want, they can tell the secret that it's in concrete."

Smersh managed to avoid "setting" the pearls by attaching or sinking them into the concrete, then adhering them. That, of course, presents its own problems. "I try as often as possible to create some kind of framework around the pearls in order to protect them," she says. "Sometimes that's a little tricky."

DESIGN TIP: "Give the pearl room to speak for itself," Smersh advises. "A strand of pearls can be very beautiful but the impact of a single pearl is fantastic. A strand is such a classic, traditional thing. Yes, it has a certain lusciousness and the weight is amazing, but you see it as a strand of pearls. A pearl by itself, or framed to stand on its own, doesn't need a lot of embellishment. Don't underestimate the power of a single pearl."

THINKING OUTSIDE THE JEWELRY BOX. "There is not a lot of innately new design," Smersh muses. "Nature has taken care of all that for us. The visual information and materials available for adornment are essentially recycled. Nobody can come up with the spiral again, for example."

And nobody can literally reinvent the pearl. "The building blocks are already there; people have been working with them since we've been on the Earth," she says. "All we can hope to do is find new combinations, filters and angles to view them through — but that's essential for keeping our visual language fresh."

If you're picturing a conceptual art piece involving a section of sidewalk, think again.

While traditional jewelry done well and thoughtfully can have great impact, she points out, "new combinations done well also have an important place in jewelry. Creating new combinations of old materials always makes people stop and think. Expanding what people do with pearls gives the pearl itself a little boost. They're not just your grandmother's string of pearls. What we're doing as designers is, in essence, continuing the history, embellishing and renewing interest in pearls." ♦

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Cathleen McCarthy is a journalist based in Philadelphia who writes about jewelry, art, and travel. She has been a regular contributor to *Lapidary Journal* since 1992.



Jessica necklace, Kate bracelet, and Bowtie earrings, all by Smersh Design. The concrete is surprisingly light, and a wide range of colors offset the natural pearls. Photo: Todd Murray.