

# PEARLS OF WISDOM

Senior Editor Steve Paugh joins the Museum of Islamic Art's pearl exhibition curator Hubert Bari for an exclusive look at the ocean's most opulent orb.

>>> Behold: the humble yet exquisite pearl. It is the very definition of an enigma wrapped in elegance; the quintessential symbol of inborn luxury. Perfectly spherical, oracularly opaque and richly bewitching, the power of the pearl is driven by the fathoms of subtle rainbow halos that blink and twist in the infinite depths that taunts us just beyond its surface. The pearl has captivated the living world with its mysterious splendour for over 7,000 years - an obsession that is realised in no greater region than the Gulf. Long known for its storied history in pearl hunting, Qatar is the perfect setting to unfurl a world of pearl, and so it has at an ongoing temporary exhibition at Doha's own Museum of Islamic Art. Created to shuck the heretofore tight-lipped shell that clasps tightly the secrets of pearls, the exhibition answers questions with as much brilliance as it amazes with its pieces. Of course, the first question I had when I walked in and was surrounded by a kingdom of pearls was quite simple: Where does it all come from?

"Fish poop" was the unexpected yet informative two-word reply given to me from the exhibition's curator, Hubert Bari. As "cultivated" and "natural" as the pearls that so inspire him, Bari is a joyfully varied gem. He is erudite yet affable, learned yet relaxed

and, given the nature of the aforementioned answer to my initial query, infectiously jovial. While admittedly funny, Bari's answer was no less true. Contrary to popular belief, pearls are not formed from a grain of sand, but instead from a parasite, which is often born and then released from the stomachs of fish - hence, fish poop. This parasite lodges itself into the "mantle" (shell-creating organ) of a mollusk, and as it attempts to escape into the soft flesh of the animal, it can bring with its shell-making cells. The irritation caused from this mixture of shell and flesh then creates a cyst, which in turn produces a conchiferous (or "shell-like") substance from which a pearl is eventually formed. Interestingly, sometimes the "parasite" comes in the form of a worm or small fish, and the museum has a few astounding examples of these "pearlified" organisms that must be seen to be believed.

Such was the initial salvo of information that would burst into a deluge of data and inundate me with intrigue. Bari went on to say that this accidental natural process has always been rare, stating that around 2,000 Arabian Gulf oysters had to be caught to even find one pearl; and that even more sea snails in the Caribbean - an astounding 20,000 - had to be fished for a single pink pearl.

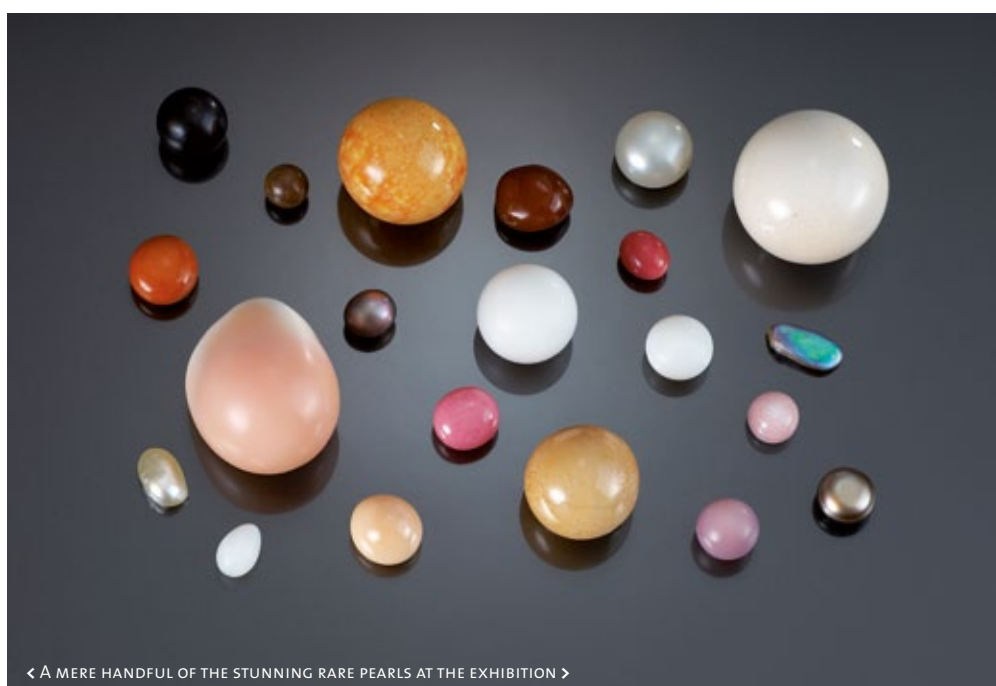


< A PEARL NECKLACE BY THE FAMED TAHITIAN FARMER, ROBERT WAN >

Thanks to overfishing and a strong cultivated (man-engineered) pearl industry, however, the exclusivity of natural pearls has grown exponentially. Still, the scarcity of natural pearls and the beauty of those that are cultivated continue to fascinate and astound on a global level.



< A SEVEN-STRAINED PEARL NECKLACE >



< A MERE HANDFUL OF THE STUNNING RARE PEARLS AT THE EXHIBITION >



< MIKIMOTO'S STUNNING "GRAPE" NECKLACE >



< AN IMAGE OF THE LAST PEARL DIVE IN QATAR >

As the exhibition shows, the pearl trade has thrived across the planet for millennia, emanating not only from the Arabian Gulf in places like Bahrain and Qatar, but also in Panama, Mexico, Venezuela, South-East Asia, North America and even the Arctic Circle. From these places, they rolled to and from the farthest reaches of the planet, particularly to places like Greece, Rome, China and India, where some of the most stunning pieces of art, jewellery and other finery were created for admirers. The large globe that stands

as the nucleus of the first room illustrates this rambling nature of the pearl, as do the examples that surround it. In our tour around this room, Bari showed me, amongst other pieces, a collection of sixteen unique Melo pearls from Geneva, each one ablaze in a vibrant orange starburst of colour, appearing as a moment of brilliant fire, ironically frozen in a spherical second. Nearby are the first two pearls of the chambered nautilus to have been identified, measuring 10.9 mm (7.53 carats) and 9.4 mm (4.48 carats) respectively, these

pearls tremble in a deep mist of cloud and cold, the crisp beauty of which I have never in my life before that moment beheld. Still more examples were the Queen conch pink pearl from the Caribbean, the extremely rare freshwater pearls from the Mississippi and black pearls birthed from the *Atrina vexillum*, all of which successfully redefine the previously held preconceived notions of the pearl.

Ducking through the hallway to the right, we sauntered past large microscopes where guests get even more up close and personal with the ins and outs of the multi-layered world of the pearl, exploring as they do magnified cross sections of pearls as well as those that remain intact. On the wall hang x-ray images of the pearls we had just seen, creating an even deeper understanding and appreciation of the natural art that goes into their creation. The remainder of the hall is a waltz through time as guests are shown the historic, cultural and even religious significance that the pearl has commanded from under its magnificently murky visage. Even at the end of this journey through the ages, the historicity of this amazing experience is far from over; in actual fact, it is just the beginning.

"Now this is really something," said Bari with almost ringmaster aplomb as he led us into the next section. Even these heartfelt words, the panache of which I learned not to take lightly during our tour, paled in the light of what met



< EXTRACTING THE ELEGANCE >

us as we turned the corner. There is one name that still today exists as THE symbol of the long-held local love affair with the pearl: Alfardan. In a monumental arrangement, the Museum of Islamic Art has showcased the indescribably breathtaking personal collection of Mr. Hussain Alfardan, himself. Otherwise known as “The Pearl King,” Alfardan has, over the years, accumulated one of the finest collections of natural pearls the world has ever seen, which is ironic given that this is the first time it has ever been shown publicly. Resting in piles across the velvety red landscape of cloth that is the traditional presentation of pearls, the Alfardan trove is a rich banquet of free-standing and strung pearls sourced from across the world, including South-East Asia, Australasia and the Americas, not to mention the Arabian Gulf. Facing this spectacular display on the opposite wall is a video that shows an in-depth slideshow of images and film showing the lost culture of pearling in the Gulf, as well as the very last pearl dive in Qatar, which was held at the end of the 1970s. Set in the scene of an aquatic theatre, this section is perhaps the most arresting, as it sets up beautifully the rest of the tour, which explores the decline of the pearling industry and the rise of the cultivated pearl.

In terms of pearls, if the 19th century belonged to nature, then surely the 20th belonged to Man. Commanding a reverent attention at the centre of the next room is a bust of the man who truly revolutionised the art of pearl making, Japanese entrepreneur Kokichi Mikimoto. By working with two other men, Tatsuhei Mise and Tokichi Nishikawa, who had perfected the process of creating and harvesting homegrown spherical pearls, Mikimoto successfully wrenched the rare process from the vice-like grip of Mother Nature and into the waiting hands of humanity. Since then, cultivated pearls have dominated the luxury landscape over their natural cousins. The museum tells this story in a unique way; not just with words, but in the priceless creations that have resulted from this amazing discovery. Pieces like the Yaguruma, which contains cultured pearls, sapphires, diamonds and emeralds and was one of the earliest pieces of jewellery to be produced by Mikimoto, and the uncanny Necklace Grape, which is comprised of 163 black South Sea Pearls, are but two of the staggeringly tremendous examples that have come about thanks to Mr. Mikimoto. The most tremendous of these, if not for its understated design, then for its celebrity significance, is the Mikimoto pearl necklace that belonged to Marilyn Monroe, which was famously given to her on her honeymoon by then husband Joe



&lt; JEWELMER PEARL FARM, THE PHILIPPINES &gt;



&lt; "PEARL FISHING BOAT" A DEPICTION BY ARTIST ALI SHARIF &gt;



&lt; BLACK PEARLS FROM THE MAR DE CORTEZ &gt;

DiMaggio. "You will never be as close to her as this," said Bari with a smile.

The stardom that is rife in this exhibition, however, does not end in Hollywood heartbreakers and American sporting stars. Just around the corner lies the true glitz and glamour in the section appropriately called "The Treasure." At the centre of this collection are pieces like the unique Carpet of Baroda. Made in 1865 by the Maharaja of Baroda, the 1.5 million pearls sewn onto deerskin came from the fishing of at least 750 million Arabian Gulf oysters. God bless excess! Other treasures include a decadent Chinese imperial robe, an emerald, diamond and of course pearl-festooned Nepalese headdress and one of the oddest yet most wondrous creations, a yellow gold and diamond tarantula with a massive and extremely rare reddish-brown horse conch pearl abdomen. Now, that's our kind of arachnid. These treasures, set in massive glass displays or quaint wooden display cases stretch and snake through the section like a glittering constellation of untold wealth, all the way into the final room of the exhibit. As you will see in our exclusive interview with him, Bari is a fierce admirer of the late, great Coco Chanel. Her unequalled taste in fashion and her ability to set trends, as she did with pearls, led her to fame during her life as well as an incredible posthumous respect and veneration that holds true today. The collection in this homage to Chanel is nigh-unprecedented in scintillating elegance and allure, with extraordinary pieces that were inspired by Mademoiselle Chanel herself.

Engrossing to the point of hypnosis, the special pearl exhibition at the Museum of Islamic Art is quite literally a "tour" de force through the haute history of one of the world's most remarkable precious materials. In it, Hubert Bari has expertly chronicled the pearl's natural narrative through time and captured its essence as a living piece of art. Be sure that you don't miss your opportunity to pry into the secret and seductive world of the pearl.



< THE FAMOUS YAGURUMA SASH CLIP BY MIKIMOTO >



< FISHING FOR FASHION: THE AQUEOUS ART OF PEARL CULTIVATION >



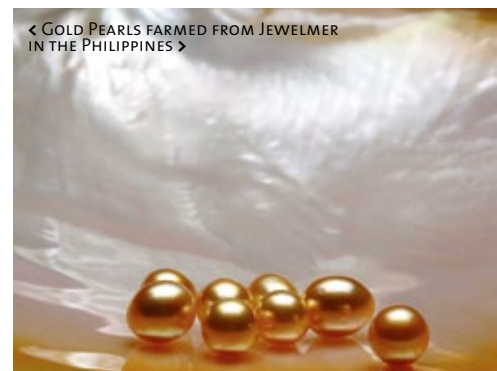
< THE CHRYSANTHEMUM BROOCH BY FAERBER >



< AN INNER WHIRL OF THE PEARL >



< "BULLET PEARLS" ARE SOME OF THE MORE ODDLY-SHAPED OFFERINGS AT THE EXHIBITION >



< GOLD PEARLS FARMED FROM JEWELMER IN THE PHILIPPINES >

# THE PEARL IS HIS OYSTER

SLT gives Exhibition Curator Hubert Bari a pearl for his thoughts.

**What was the process like to get this particular exhibition together? With all of the many different pieces from literally everywhere around the world, you must have had your fair share of challenges in curating it.**

It was a challenge to have accepted this natural history section in the exhibition, especially with the weird pearls and weird shells that are unknown to almost everybody. But then, I wanted to show that pearls were not just these white things that come from the Gulf alone; that would have been too easy. For me, the most beautiful pearls are not the ones everyone thinks of, but the large orange pearls from Vietnam and Burma. We have groups of ten or two pearls, or even one alone that are unknown in the world, and what I was chasing was to show that great, big variety.

With the works of art in the collection, like the ones from Chanel, you know what to call it and where to get them, but for the pearls, I had to study and analyse each one, and to find the original shell. This was big work! But now, people are discovering that places like the Mississippi and Tennessee rivers were full of pearls from years ago, and that now the animals are extinct and the pearls are finished. The collection you see here is the only place you can see them.

**We know that Alfardan is a huge name in Qatar's bejewelled history, but what statement are you making by including this personal collection?**

Of course, the presentation of the Alfardan pearl collection is really impressive. These are classical, beautiful pearls, but the market for these and other natural pearls is quite narrow. We have come to rely on recycling our jewellery with natural pearls because the discovery of them today is very limited. Some of the others are extremely rare, with only 30 or 40 found a year. But you still have passionate people hunting for pearls - what I call the weekend divers - so maybe there are something like 100 pearls found a year, maximum. But then, even that would be less than one percent of the pearls found in a year in the Gulf. So, I mean, you need something like three years to find one necklace!



< PEARL EXHIBITION CURATOR, HUBERT BARI >

**Do you have a few pieces in the exhibition that really strike you? Any personal favourites?**

In the Mikimoto section, we have probably our most glamorous object: the Marilyn Monroe necklace. It really is spectacular, not only because of what it is, but also because you know who wore it once. I personally also like the extraordinary 15cm chrysanthemum corsage brooch made in the 1900 by Henri Vever for the World's Fair in Paris with these strange Mississippi pearls, which are for me the most important pieces on the market. It is a beautiful object and typical of 1900s France, with a return to nature. Of course, the great thing with pearls is that they can be used to create things from the natural world, like the necklace we have with black pearls in the form of grapes. You can imagine a lot of fruits and flowers made of pearls, and the 1900s was a very rich period for them. They are very versatile.

**You pay significant attention to domestic and international celebrity in the exhibition, with a whole section dedicated to Alfardan and Mikimoto respectively, and you finally cap off the exhibition with Chanel. Why did you decide to finish with Chanel?**

Well it's good to finish with the light depiction of the pearl. I'm also an admirer of the character of Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel. She was beautiful and independent in the way she was against a purely male society. She was also in love with pearls! After the second world war, when the luxury concept was started again, she really popularised the use of pearls. She was always wearing them, and was responsible for bringing them back into fashion. Of course,

Chanel uses only cultivated pearls, so there would not be Chanel without the cultivation process made popular by Mikimoto, which is another reason why I included them both in the exhibition. They compliment each other.

**In closing, after visitors see the natural beauty of the pearl and get inundated with all of the gorgeous sights, what do you hope that people will walk away with and what do you hope they will do with their new knowledge?**

Well, I would hope they would go to the museum shop to buy pearls, but unfortunately we aren't selling anything! [laughs] Honestly, in Qatar, I think that it's important to have people appreciating cultivated pearls because everyone swears by natural pearls, even though they are finished here. You know, in Bahrain, for example, it is forbidden to introduce or sell cultivated pearls because the pearl artisans are still valued today and the new process goes against the natural pearl and a certain way of life and industry. Many people believe that the cultivated pearl completely destroyed the industry in the region for natural pearls, but that's not true. The cultivated pearl arrived and destroyed a lot of fisheries, but the seas were overfished anyway and this was a time when the oil industry started. For most fishers, it was just better to work in the oil industry than be a slave as a pearl driver, where the conditions were poor and the job was difficult. Still, I think it's important for everyone to see and experience this lineage. We want to educate and inspire in the limited time we have as an exhibition. [laughs] A limited time for a limited material.