

# THE 5 VIRTUES OF THE PEARL







## THE SOUTH SEA CULTURED PEARL

The largest and rarest of all pearl oysters, and the one that produces the finest pearl nacre, is the South Sea pearl oyster – the *Pinctada Maxima* – which is only found in one isolated region between North Australia and Burma. Each oyster must be individually hand collected by divers in deep water, or alternatively may be grown, with great difficulty, in hatcheries, and then returned to the wild for a matter of years in order to grow into adult oysters. Due to pollution and over exploitation, there remain very few significant wild oyster beds and these are protected through diving quotas by the Australian Government.

These oysters have great value for their mother of pearl content for the button and mother of pearl inlay trade.

Because of the oyster's great size, its pearls are far more substantial than all

other pearls, and throughout the ages, natural South Sea pearls have therefore been prized as the most desirable and most valuable of all pearls.

Although the days of natural pearls are regrettably all but gone, in the past 50 years pearl farmers have mastered the intricacies of the South Sea oyster, and over the last 20 years, cultured South Sea pearls of equivalent quality to the natural South Sea pearl have become a reality in mainstream jewellery markets.



## THE 5 VIRTUES OF THE PEARL

Natural Lustre  
Complexion  
Shape  
Size  
Natural Colour

South Sea cultured pearls should be assessed by the same criteria used to assess the quality of natural pearls. For convenience, a pearl's quality may be analysed by considering 5 characteristics. These can be referred to as:

Left: Oval Pearl



## NATURAL LUSTRE

This refers to the behaviour of light interacting with the pearls' nacre. It is this brilliance of light which makes pearls so appealing. Almost defying description, this feature is referred to as lustre. Lustre is caused when waves of light are reflected from different levels of a pearl's surface. This effect is caused when an angle is formed by the laminae – very thin, overlapping layers of mother of pearl – in relation to the pearl's surface.

The pearls' iridescence and translucence is the beauty you see as light travels from deep within the nacre of the pearl, in the same way as light filters from the depths of a clear blue sea. It differs with individual pearls depending on the quality of each pearl's nacre. The finer the nacre, the more beautiful the pearl.

South Sea pearls, both natural and cultured, have a very distinct appear-

ance. Due to their unique lustre, they exhibit a gentle inner glow which is noticeably different from the surface shine of other pearls. It is sometimes described as comparing the glow of candlelight with that of a fluorescent light.

Occasionally, pearls of very fine quality will exhibit a phenomenon known as *orient*. This is the combination of a translucent lustre with subtle reflections of colour.

Lustre is not to be confused with surface shine as is exhibited by most artificially enhanced pearls. This is the result of surface polishing processes.



# COMPLEXION

Pearl nacre is a beautiful matrix of calcium carbonate crystals and special substances produced by the oyster. This matrix is laid down in perfectly formed microscopic tiles, layer upon layer, the thickness of the pearl being determined by the number of layers, and the thickness of each layer.

The appearance of the nacre will be determined by whether the calcium crystals are “flat” or “prismatic”, by the perfection with which the tiles are laid, and by the fineness and number of layers of tiles.

When the tiles are laid in a perfectly uniform pattern, the nacre will appear identical over the entire pearl surface, thus creating the “flawless” pearl.

However, even nature is not always perfect. Some tiles may be imperfectly laid, resulting in pearls having imperfections on their surface (flaws known as spots or marks), or imperfections within the pearl’s nacre (often referred to as ‘movement’).

The effect on the pearl’s beauty depends on the degree of visibility of these imperfections. This is described as the pearl’s *complexion*.



# SHAPE

If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, then these pearls offer a myriad of opportunities of beauty to behold, as no two pearls are exactly the same. Due to the thickness of their nacre, South Sea cultured pearls are found in an exciting variety of shapes.

Although shape does not affect the quality of a pearl, the demand for particular shapes does have a bearing on value.

For convenience, South Sea cultured pearls are graded into these 8 main shape categories. Several categories are further divided into numerous sub-categories.

Round	Baroque
Semi-Round	Semi-Baroque
Drop	Circlé
Button	Keshi

## SOUTH SEA KESHI PEARLS

'Keshi' is a Japanese term which relates to 'small' pearls, either natural or cultured. In either case, they can have a solid nucleus (such as a grain of sand), a soft nucleus (such as a small piece of organic material), or a hollow centre, but never an implanted nucleus.

As the keshi pearls sometimes found in shells at pearl farms are impossible to differentiate, all keshi pearls found at pearl farms are classified as cultured, unless proven to be natural pearls by an approved gemmological classification institute through an x-ray certification process.

They generally range in size from two to ten millimetres and remain quite rare, particularly when it comes to gem quality keshi.



## SIZE

South Sea cultured pearls dominate the pearl world in size, and are generally between 10mm and 15mm. When found, rarer pearls above 16mm and occasionally in excess of 20mm are highly prized by connoisseurs.



8mm



11mm



13mm



14mm



16mm



18mm

Left: Baroque Pearl



# COLOUR

The most popular colours of South Sea pearls are white or white with various coloured overtones. Overtones can be almost any colour of the rainbow, and are derived from the natural colours of the nacre of the South Sea pearl oyster. When combined with a translucent intense lustre, they create the effect known as “orient”.

## PREDOMINANT COLOURS

Silver

Silver Pink

White

White Rose

Golden White

Gold

Cream

Champagne

Left: Reverse Drop Pearl





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# SOUTH SEA PEARL CONSORTIUM

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