

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Bead Envy**

In the late 1960s, Chesterfield Cigarettes advertised that their cigarette was "a silly millimeter longer than the 100's". The company also claimed, "It isn't much. But wait 'til you taste it. It's one better." Just imagine how much more damage that "silly millimeter" delivered.

In the case of pearl necklaces, millimeters matter more (or at least that's what most ladies tell me) ... and there's nothing "silly" about it.



Pearls are those wonderful hard objects of beauty produced within the soft tissue of living shelled mollusks, such as oysters. An irritant, (could be a grain of sand), works its way inside the bivalve and begins to irritate the soft dorsal body wall. The oyster, in order to protect itself, begins to form layers around this irritant. The oyster keeps adding concentric layers (with the result often being a beautiful, perfectly formed pearl). Just like the outer shell of mollusks, pearls are composed of calcium carbonate in minute crystalline form. This, unfortunately, means they can be dissolved in vinegar or other acid solutions. So be careful not to drop your pearls in your salad.

The size of a pearl is measured (according to its diameter) in millimeters. Pearls range in size from one millimeter or less, in the case of very small pearls, to as much as twenty millimeters (more than 3/4") for large South Sea pearls. Most pearls sold today, however, fall in the 7 to 7 1/2 millimeter range. Akoya pearls greater than 8 millimeters are considered extremely rare. Pearls larger than 10 millimeters are generally not Akoya pearls, but are instead: White South Sea pearls, black Tahitians or large freshwater pearls.

The optimal pearl is perfectly smooth and round, but many other shapes (baroque pearls) are known to occur. The finest quality natural pearls have been highly treasured as gemstones and objects of beauty through the ages. In their natural state, they are valued for being fine, admirable and rare. A "wild" or "natural pearl" is one that forms without any human intervention, and is indeed rare. A "cultured pearl" is created in a pearl farm, where humans introduce the "irritant" and monitor the process. Pearls can be form in freshwater or saltwater environments. "Cultured pearls" marketed today can be divided into two groups. The first category encompasses the beaded "cultured pearls", including Akoya, South Sea and Tahiti. The second category covers the non-beaded freshwater "cultured pearls", like the Biwa or Chinese pearls.

The word "pearl" in English comes into the language by way of the French word "*perle*". This was derived from the Latin *perna* meaning leg, after the shape of the ham (or mutton) leg-shaped mollusk. In Spanish, the word for "pearl" is "*margarita*". In 1498, Christopher Columbus, arrived at Margarita Island (*Isla de Margarita*) off the coast of Venezuela. The island abounded in pearls, so the island had to be fortified against the threat of pirate attacks. Pearls represented almost a third of all New World tribute to the Spanish Crown.

Pearl necklaces, earrings and bracelets were popular in the nineteenth century (Dolley Madison wore an entire set, a gift from her husband, to his inaugural ball), but also as additional adornment for garments and turbans (she wore a turban, too). Pearls were a major statement and a departure from British fashion. While British aristocrats (of both sexes) encrusted themselves in diamonds, Dolley Madison proudly wore her pearls.

Another type of jewelry item in the nineteenth century was mourning jewelry. Brooches and rings were the most common form of this memento jewelry. In an advertisement in the New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, May 22, 1864, jewelers Lion & Andree, located at the corner of Royal and Bienville streets in the French Quarter, offered a variety of these types of mourning jewelry for sale: "Bracelets, Ear Rings, Brooches, Belt Buckles, Necklaces, Sleeve Buttons, Watch chains, etc."

New Orleans ladies (in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) loved pearls and other forms of jewelry. An article in the *Daily Picayune*, February 7, 1864, touched on the topic of "Fashionable Jewelry". The writer commented, "It seems that the current of favor is setting in strongly towards corals, turquoises, amethysts, and topazes, all of which have been rather out of vogue for a few years past. The new style of corals is particularly pretty, the pretty product of the patient submarine worker being mixed with gold, pearls, enamels, and a variety of jewels, and with the happiest effects."

A lovely portrait of Marie Madeleine Broutin de la Ronde (c. 1760) at the Historic New Orleans Collection exhibits this elegant lady's use of pearls. They are not used as a necklace, but are intertwined in a grey updo with a red diamond-shaped gemstone at the center top of her coiffure. She is painted wearing a scoop neck silver-grey gown, ornamented with another large jewel above her elbow. Her pearls are of a significant millimeter size.

Madame Elmiere Olivier de Vezin Verret, on the other hand, in her portrait (1822, also at the Historic New Orleans Collection) is wearing drop pearl and coral earrings accompanied by a twisted double strand of seed pearls. A seed pearl is a "natural pearl" weighing less than a quarter of a grain (64.79891 milligrams). Seed pearls did not acquire their name because of any unique culturing process, but for no other reason than their remarkable size (less than two millimeters in diameter). Madame Verret's necklace was still quite elegant.

Over the years, however, New Orleanians have become involved with less than "gem quality" necklaces. This has been the result of the Crescent City's unique institution known as Mardi Gras. Carnival throws over time came to include (then inexpensive) necklaces which consisted of lovely Czechoslovakian glass beads. Float riders would toss these favored Bohemian bijoux to the crowds, mostly during the early half of the twentieth century. Japanese glass beads were fashioned of extremely thin tubular glass that was dangerous to grab in the turmoil of a parade. These were less desirable.

But, with the advent of plastic, Mardi Gras beads have grown from thin strands to necklaces of gigantic proportions. An advertisement for these enormous beads, explains:

"Make a statement at your Mardi Gras party wearing this Big Mardi Gras Beads Necklace! Featuring plastic, golf ball sized novelty beads in Mardi Gras colors alternating in the strand". This version "measures 46in long".

Another Mardi Gras beads outlet touts its "Graduating Jumbo Balls" with its "king-sized 48" necklace (metallic Purple, Green, and Gold) which graduates from large 25mm balls to absolutely huge 50mm balls". Or one may choose its "72 inch PGG Whopper Balls", an absolutely huge 72" strand of enormous metallic purple, green and gold balls. Consists of 25, 30, 40, 50, 60 and 80mm balls. Hangs about three feet!" For the Fourth of July, a "king-sized 48" necklace "of metallic red, silver and blue" is offered if one wishes to purchase the outlet's "Patriotic Graduating Jumbo Balls".

Clearly, "Millimeter Madness" has taken over the populace of this fair city. Competing Krewes try to outdo the other in the size of their necklaces. Parade goers often get whacked hard in the head by

incoming bead projectiles. What's more, many no longer bend over to pick up beads of minimal millimeter stature.



*Multi-millimeter bead necklaces adorn a French Quarter balcony.*

Every year, the size of the beads becomes a little more dangerous. In a *Times-Picayune* article covering Mardi Gras 2012, EMS (Emergency Medical Services) deputy chief Ken Bouvier commented on another reason for the bead casualties: "We had a lot of facial injuries," he said, "because float riders had an overabundance of beads, so they threw packs of beads instead of handfuls." Every year, revelers suffer fractured teeth, split lips, broken noses and various eye injuries. Some of the multi-millimeter beads are hollow, but others are not. Thrown forcefully, they can certainly inflict some damage to the facial area.

Apart from Shrove Tuesday and the preceding Carnival parade festivities, New Orleans has an even larger ball millimeter problem to contend with. These particular maxi-balls have been incorporated into the many fanciful canine sculptures displayed all around town. Every section of Fido's body is nothing more than a series of gargantuan graduated "Jumbo Balls". The statuary below features a playful pup playing with (What else?): Mardi Gras beads!



From the photograph above, one can see that this New Orleans tradition of super-sizing its bead diameters has gone to the dogs.

## **NED HÉMARD**

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