



Linnaean Pearls

The first cultured pearls were from Sweden and are now part of the Linnaean collections in the Linnean Society



Portrait of Linnaeus by Krafft

Linnaeus removed the shells from the river, drilled a small hole in the shell of the freshwater mussel *Unio pictorum* L. (the "Painter's Mussel", so called because artists would use the shallow valves to mix their pigment) and inserted a tiny granule of limestone or plaster between the mantle and the shell. To produce a free pearl rather than a blister pearl he held this small bead away from the shell's inner surface with a "T" shaped silver wire. The pearl mussels were returned to the riverbed for six years and resulted in pearls of modest quality.

The Linnaean pearls have now returned to London !

The great Swedish Naturalist, Carl Linnaeus, produced the first spherical pearls ever cultured in any mollusc, from salt or fresh water. This was the reason he received his noble title of "von" as this discovery was considered of great potential economic value for Sweden.

The pearls shown here are part of a larger series in the collections of Linnaeus, now in the possession of the Linnean Society of London. Among them are two pearls still attached to the shell showing the metal posts which reveal the technique.



Linnaeus sold the secret to a Swedish merchant called Peter Bagge in 1762 for 6000 "dalars" (or approximately £ 1,250 which would be over £ 93,000 today). Bagge obtained a monopoly permit from the King of Sweden to develop pearl culture but neither he, nor his grandson, ever took up the idea and put it into practice.

The Linnaean pearls travel the world

A set of Linnaeus' experimental pearls has been travelling the world since 2001 as part of the blockbuster exhibition "Pearls" organised and administered by the American Museum of Natural History in New York. The itinerary so far is below. The pearls are back in London for the tercentenary celebrations until October, when they will join the rest of the exhibition in Paris, opening to the public there on October 27, 2007.

October 13, 2001 - April 14, 2002
June 28, 2002 - January 05, 2003
March 29 - July 30, 2003
September 27, 2003 - January 18, 2004
March 13 - July 25, 2004
September 18, 2004 - January 09, 2005
March 05, 2005 - June 22, 2005
October 08, 2005 - January 22, 2006
April 08 - August 06, 2006
December 02, 2007 - January 15, 2007

American Museum of Natural History, New York
Field Museum, Chicago
Fernbank Museum of Natural History, Atlanta
Houston Museum of Natural Science, Houston
Midland Center for the Arts, Midland, Michigan
Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto
Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee
National Science Museum, Tokyo
Australian Museum, Sydney
Abu Dhabi Cultural Centre, Abu Dhabi

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