

WHAT ARE REAL KESHI PEARLS

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When I refer to keshi in this article, I am referring to Japanese Akoya Saltwater keshi pearls. "Keshi" was initially used to refer to natural seed pearls found when harvesting the Japanese Akoya oysters. These natural pearls resembled poppy seeds, which in Japanese is called 'keshi' thus the name. Keshi may result from either freshwater or saltwater pearls but by the traditional definition, keshi are NOT freshwater pearls. In the marketplace, many dealers are using the term keshi and referring to Chinese freshwater pearls. Chinese freshwater pearls are not the traditional keshi and it is our opinion that they should not be called as such. CIBJO an international confederation of national jewelry trade organizations has the current definition of keshi as follows on Page 16 of the Pearl Book :

"5.102. Keshi Cultured Pearl A trade term that designates a non-beaded cultured pearl (5.137) formed accidentally or intentionally by human intervention in marine pearl oysters such as the Akoya oyster (*Pinctada fucata*(5.159), Silver/Gold lipped oyster (5.199) (*Pinctada maxima* (5.164)) and Black lipped oyster (*Pinctada margaritifera* (5.163)) and is a by-product of the culturing process. The creation results from the formation of a pearl sac either following injury of the mantle rim upon handling, from a partial piece of the inserted (transplanted) mantle tissue (5.112) or the whole inserted piece (5.156) following the rejection of a bead (5.16). See also South Sea Keshi Cultured Pearl (5.199). (Hänni, 2006)"

I think in the market place there has to be a distinction made on the type of pearl you are talking about. With the availability of so many types of pearls, it can get difficult to evaluate them correctly as prices, quality, origins availability, etc are constantly changing.

Pearls have been found in jewelry dating back to at 100 BC and long beyond. The American Museum of Natural History has an interesting site regarding the history of pearls at <http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/pearls/index.html> The largest pearl known was found in the Philippines in 1934 in a giant clam. The pearl weighs 14 lb and was discovered by an anonymous Filipino Muslim diver off the island of Palawan. According to the legend, a Palawan chieftain gave the pearl to Wilbur Dowell Cobb in 1936 because he had saved his sons life. The pearl had been named the "Pearl of Allah" by the Muslim tribal chief, because it resembled a turbaned head and now officially named the Pearl of Lao-tze. It is estimated to be valued at 40 million dollars. Contrast this to a keshi pearl which can be as small as 0.5 or 0.6 mm with a whole size of 0.2 or 0.3 mm for stringing.

India and many Middle Eastern countries have a long history with pearls. More than 500 years ago, keshi pearls were very popular among the Maharajahs of India and

with the princesses of the Arabian kingdoms. Found in their surrounding seas, these “gifts of the mermaids,” as they were known, were worn with pride and associated with royalty. Before Kokichi Mikimoto made a name for himself in the culturing process in the early 1900’s, natural pearls were rare and expensive and were only affordable by the rich and famous. Mikimoto changed the industry. His remarkable efforts in marketing cultured pearls have created an industry where there was previously none, and made pearls easily available to all. Indian merchants sourced keshi pearls in Japan, and since then, have been importing these pearls from the Orient. So started the history of Japanese Akoya keshi, which are a byproduct of the culturing process. Over the last 40 years, Japan has slowly become the biggest buyer of keshi pearls. As more people discover them, the demand worldwide is continually increasing for this unique gift of the mermaids.

Because of the culturing process, the natural pearl lovers of India & Middle East do not consider cultured as ‘real’ pearls. Japanese Akoya saltwater keshi are the closest to a natural seawater pearl that one can obtain. Natural pearl strands can demand hundreds of thousands of dollars, while Chinese cultured freshwater strands can start from a few dollars. Japanese Akoya keshi can range from \$45 a strand up to a few thousand for a perfectly round matched strand of 5 mm pearls.

To explain what Japanese Akoya saltwater keshi pearls are, one must start by explaining what they are not: Keshi are not found in large quantities but are an extremely rare form of pearl. They are not freshwater pearls, which are harvested by the hundreds of tons. On the other hand keshi are seawater pearls and are found in quantities from 1% to half of 1% of the total Japanese Akoya cultured pearl production. A report by the Japanese government in the beginning of 2009 stated that their pearl production was in the 70 ton range. We think this 70 ton figure is from the mid 1990’s and we currently estimate that it is between the 15 to 25 ton range, which would bring the Japanese Akoya keshi production to about 300 to 500 pounds per year (2009). (European Gemmological Symposium 2009 --- Presentation by Andy Müller, Kobe/Japan) As the Japanese farmers produce less and less, many smaller scale farmers will go out of business, but because the Japanese domestic market are such a big buyer of these Akoya pearl there will always be farmers who will be operating on a niche bases.

Japanese keshi pearls can range from 0.6 mm to 7 mm (very rare). As for the south sea and black pearl keshi can occur in much larger sizes. The smaller Japanese Akoya keshi are the original keshi pearls that gave the industry its name. In fact, keshi are precious because they are the most difficult to find of all pearls. Japanese Akoya keshi can take up to a few years to form, although less than a year for smaller sizes are typical. Keshi are formed in a controlled environment and come in many shapes, hues, luster’s, colors and sizes and can range from pure white to gray with tones of, blue, green, pink and yellow.

Keshi pearls, can be formed in a couple of different ways, and I will briefly explain some common methods. One way a keshi can form occurs when the oyster rejects

the beaded nucleus and an irritant makes its way inside the oyster. Layers of nacre are secreted over this irritant and a keshi is formed. Also what can occur is that the implanted tissue fractures and forms separate sacs, which in turn can form a keshi. Again it is important to note that the Japanese Akoya keshi is a by-product of the culturing process, but the keshi itself is 100 % nacre unlike other cultured pearls, which contain a beaded nucleus.

As the Sea of Japan becomes more polluted, there has been a dramatic decrease in keshi production. It is estimated that keshi production will be cut in half over the next five years, and will become almost unobtainable within the next ten years. Akoya keshi are also becoming rarer due to the mechanization of the cultured pearl harvesting process. In the past, pearls were taken out by hand, but now more automation is used and the pearls are sorted by machine, which causes the smaller-sized keshi to be washed away. Also, with regards to Tahitian and South Sea keshi, farmers are now x-raying oysters to determine whether or not the nucleus has been expelled. If it has been expelled, the oyster is re-nucleated before a keshi can be formed.

Jewelry-quality keshi are produced in healthy strong oysters, but as previously mentioned, because of pollution in the Japanese Sea, these oysters are becoming weaker and weaker, in many instances no longer able to produce pearls. It is also true that only the better farms produce jewelry-quality keshi. At the same time, many farmers x-ray the oyster, as they want the Akoya pearl to have a large nacre, and will remove any keshi that has started to grow. There is also a perception that the Akoya is renucleated, after a pearl is formed and removed from the oyster. In reality this type of oyster is never renucleated. and a thickness of 0.3 to 0.4 mm is the average thickness on a cultured Akoya pearl. A Japanese Akoya keshi is a fully nacre pearl, hence the closeness to a natural pearl.

There is also one other factor when considering the rarity of Japanese Akoya saltwater keshi, and that is since the smaller keshi are drilled by hand, the artisan who have the ability to drill these pearls are leaving the industry, and we estimate that there will be no more drillers left in the near future. Keshi are farmed in Japan then sent to India to be drilled and strung. After this drilling and stringing process, they are once again sent back to Japan to be restrung and used for jewelry. The artisan drillers in India are leaving the countryside and moving to bigger cities like Mumbai and are not being replaced.

Keshi pearls come in a variety of different colors and shades, and are known for their luster and uncommon orient. This is a result of their composition consisting of solid nacre. Since these pearls are formed without a nucleus, shapes tend to come more baroque, with round being very rare. Other shapes include rice, oval, flat, and semi-round. The round keshi pearls are so rare that they are sold by the carat or momme. (1 momme (m) = 3.75 g = 18.75 cts) Normally you may see 0.01 percent of all keshi production perfectly round, so these type of strands are quite rare indeed. A few strands of round akoya keshi pearls with matching color may take 10 years to collect.

Evaluation

The Pearl Exporting Company specializes in Japanese Akoya saltwater keshi pearls, and are involved in every aspect of the business. We have been in business since 1962 and are known for the quality of our product and beauty of our designs. We drill the pearls, have them strung using the traditional process, and incorporate them in our innovative jewelry designs. We provide strands, loose as well as innovative keshi jewelry.

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