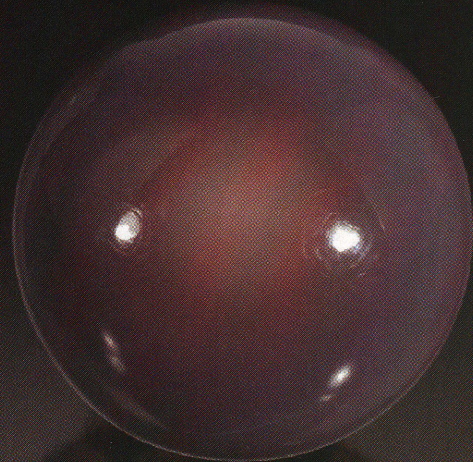


## Purple Reign

*Interest in one of the world's rarest pearl varieties is revived after a collector finds a magnificent brooch in a pile of costume jewelry*

BY ROBERT WELDON, G.G.



The brooch's center Quahog pearl is detachable from the jewelry. The 13.56-ct. pearl has the "eye effect" and desirable deep purple to lilac hues.

**T**he next time you're at the Oyster Bar in New York City, preparing to wash down a littleneck clam with a splash of pale ale, think for a moment about what else the little chap is known for. Consider, for example, this delicious bivalve mollusk, native of Rhode Island, is capable of producing the extraordinarily rare, purple Quahog pearl (pronounced "kwa-hog" or "co-hog.")

If the name confounds you, bear in mind that littleneck clams are Quahogs (also known by their Latin name, *Merccenaria mercenaria*). The name comes from Rhode Island's earliest residents, the Narragansett Indian tribe, who called the local clams poquahock. The mollusk's purplish shells were used by the tribe in bead making and were used as a form of money in their most highly fashioned form. Rarely, these mollusks also yield extraordinary natural carbonaceous pearls.

A small collection of Quahog pearl jewelry was shown at the Tucson gem and mineral shows in February by Antoinette Matlins, pearl expert and author. Detailed information about the Quahog pearls will be included in her newest edition of *The Pearl Book*, due this summer. For many gemologists, it was the first time they'd ever even heard of such a pearl. Since then, stories on the Quahog pearls have surfaced on the Internet, on major television

networks, and were the focus of a brief moment on the Oprah Winfrey Show.

How Quahog pearls have reentered the spotlight despite their rarity is itself an interesting tale.

### Lucky Find

Alan Golash, a Rhode Island jeweler, and a friend, Michael Westman, were poking through antique stores when Westman came across a brooch tucked in a basket of costume jewelry. Westman, an antiques dealer, immediately recognized the quality make of the brooch, the delicate enamel pattern and the patina of the gold. He purchased the piece for the asking price – a reported \$14.

"Neither of us had any inkling of what that 'purple thing in the middle' was," Golash recalls. After microscopic examination, Golash thought it was a pearl of some kind. Golash says he and Westman became partners in the jewel, with Golash determined to find out exactly what the purplish gems were. "We set out to speak with experts at Christie's, the Gemological Institute of America, the American Gemological Laboratory and others from whom we received identifications, certificates and opinions," Golash says. However, he credits Matlins for really placing the





This brooch, found in an antique store collection of costume jewelry, contains two superb Quahog pearls. The large round center pearl is 14mm (0.55 inch) in diameter and the smaller drop is 9.5mm by 7 mm.

Quahog pearl back in the limelight through her enthusiasm, research and outreach to the media.

Matlins was also determined to do some research of her own on the jewelry. "Because the brooch bears no maker's marks, I wanted to research its style," she says. "We needed to be able to pinpoint the era in which it was made." Her research eventually turned to a series of books in her library about the Victoria and Albert Museum jewelry collections. There she spotted a gold Garter brooch, *circa* 1845, with almost identical design characteristics. Matlins surmises the mystery brooch was manufactured around that time, perhaps in the U.S., and certainly incorporates uniquely American Quahog pearls as its central elements.

Through Matlins' efforts, the pearl brooch was accepted as a centerpiece for exhibition at the International Exhibit of the Pearl, organized by New York City's American Museum of Natural History, due to open later this fall in Tokyo, Japan.

### Judging Quahog Pearls

Like natural Melo melo pearls and conch pearls, Quahog pearls are non-nacreous and a few pearl purists contend they are therefore not "pearls" in the classic sense. Nevertheless, seasoned gemologists around the world refer to these calcareous formations as pearls. The Quahog pearls' quality factors and attributes are:

**Color.** At their best, Quahog pearls are deep purple to lilac, often fading to a creamy colored center, which Matlins calls an "eye effect." Uniformly white Quahog pearls are the least rare, and tan to brown is a bit rarer.

**Size.** Quahog pearls are usually small, (4-6mm generally), but may reach 18-20mm (just under an inch in diameter). Both pearls in the brooch found by Michael Westman are considered large and of superb color.

**Shape.** Matlins says Quahogs' desirable shapes are round, oval, acorn and tear-drop shapes. "Round button shapes are most desirable – especially if they have a nice dome."

**Surface Characteristics.** Matlins describes the surface of the best Quahog pearls as being smooth and porcelain-like. Surface quality characteristics that work for other pearls, such as pits and blemishes, work equally for Quahog pearls. Quahogs tend to have fewer pits and blemishes than most nacreous pearls.

**Luster.** Quahog pearls cannot be judged using the same standards of lustrousness used to describe nacreous pearls. Soft, shiny porcelain finishes are best, while chalky white finishes are least desired.

By these standards, Westman and Golash's lucky find in a basket of costume jewelry points to one of the world's rarest pearl treasures. ■