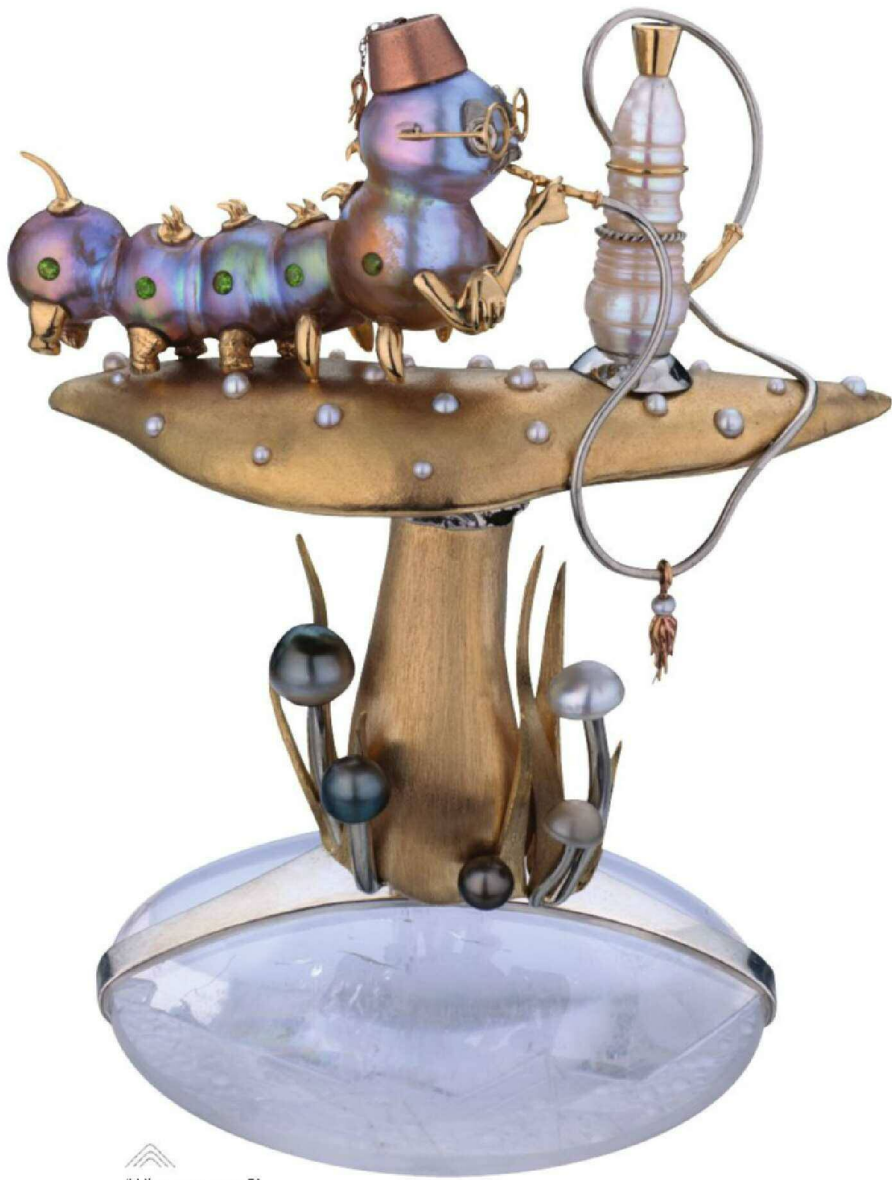


# Pearls

A creative inspiration



Who are you?

By Lyn L. Strelau

Pearls are perhaps my favourite gem! There is something magical about these gifts of nature. They can be subtle and velvety soft, or dramatic and brilliantly metallic. The immense variety of colour and form offers unending scope for jewellery design.

For some people, pearls still present a traditional image: grandmothers in cashmere, first ladies of days gone by, or blushing brides. Today's pearls run the gamut from elegant to edgy and are worn by stars of both the large and small screen, fashion-savvy women from every walk of life, and even confident gentlemen.

Colours range from the deepest Tahitian, Fijian, and Cook Island blacks to pristine whites from Australia and Japan, golden pearls from Burma and Indonesia, and metallic freshwater pastels from China. Recent introductions of cultured abalone pearls from New Zealand, steely blue Akoyas from Vietnam, and a host of colours from Mexico's west coast, have joined existing sources to provide an even greater variety that complements every complexion. In short, pearls never cease to inspire me as a designer.

Photos courtesy Lyn L. Strelau

“Freshwater pearls entice in pink, purple, orange, blue, bronze, or copper, while the base colour of white pearls can exhibit tones of silver, cream, blue, or gold.”

### More colour than meets the eye

Within each pearl category, there is not only an amazing range of base colours, but an infinite array of overtones. While called ‘black,’ South Sea Tahitian pearls can actually range in body colour from jet black through grey or shades of brown, green, gold, or blue. Freshwater pearls entice in pink, purple, orange, blue, bronze, or copper, while the base colour of white pearls can exhibit tones of silver, cream, blue, or gold. A pearl’s real magic, however, is in the orient, the complex overtones that overlay basic body colours with a mysterious shifting iridescence of aubergine purple, rose pink, emerald

green, shimmering gold, or sapphire blue—literally every colour of the spectrum. Often, there is only a single colour, although in rare instances, you may see multiple colours in subtle combinations reflecting the hues of a peacock’s tail.

In addition to the complicated colours of pearls, an amazing variety of shapes exist—perfect classic spheres, buttons, elegant drops, and a menagerie of baroque shapes. The latter can be incredibly inspiring, akin to looking at clouds to reveal what a seemingly random form may become with a little imagination, not to mention metal or gemstones.



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When selecting pearls, lustre is the most important quality to look for; a brilliant reflective metallic appearance is indicative of a high-quality gem. Japanese Akoya pearls grown in cooler northern waters can display a mirror-like surface. Most South Sea pearls have a softer velvety lustre, although the very best can exhibit brilliant reflections, drawing the eye into the depths of their mystery. Surface finish is also important. Unblemished pearls are rare indeed, but with careful examination, you can choose pearls whose 'beauty marks' can be hidden or even incorporated into a design.

Pearls alone are beautiful to wear, whether as simple stud earrings, a drop pendant, or a luxurious strand. I love to combine them with white and coloured diamonds, and especially with coloured gemstones. These pairings can be complementary or contrasting, and either can result in a piece that is greater than the mere sum of its parts. Pearls are often the initial inspiration for my designs and I may incorporate gemstones as accents. Occasionally, though, gemstones are the impetus and pearls just seem to add the crowning touch. On these pages are some recent designs illustrating the interplay of pearls, metal, and gemstones, creating pieces that run the gamut from classical to pure whimsy.

### 'Who are you?'

It does not pay to argue with Mother Nature! While browsing the vast collection of a dealer's pearls at a recent Tucson show, I was confronted by a multi-nucleated Chinese freshwater pearl that could be nothing other than a caterpillar. By coincidence, this was the year two films inspired by Lewis Carroll's, *Alice in Wonderland*, had been released. The die was cast for the creation of a fantasy brooch/sculpture entitled, 'Who are you?,' depicting the cranky, hookah-smoking creature from *Wonderland* (see page 138). A bit more searching uncovered another pearl perfect for the hookah pipe, while a collection of small South Sea button-shaped Keshis would eventually become baby mushrooms.

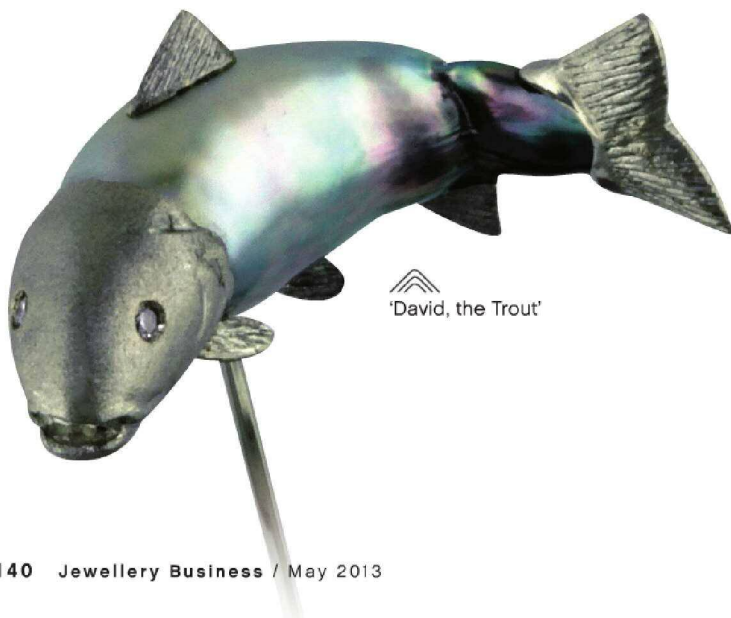
Back at the shop, I formed a gold and silver mushroom, as well as the caterpillar pearl, with demantoid garnet used for spots along its body, brown diamond for its eyes, gold shaped into wire-frame glasses, and a jaunty fez to place on top of its head. Although the entire mushroom is a functional brooch, it rests on a stand made of a 'looking glass lens' of crystal quartz, allowing the piece to be displayed as a sculpture or executive desk toy.

### 'Gothica'

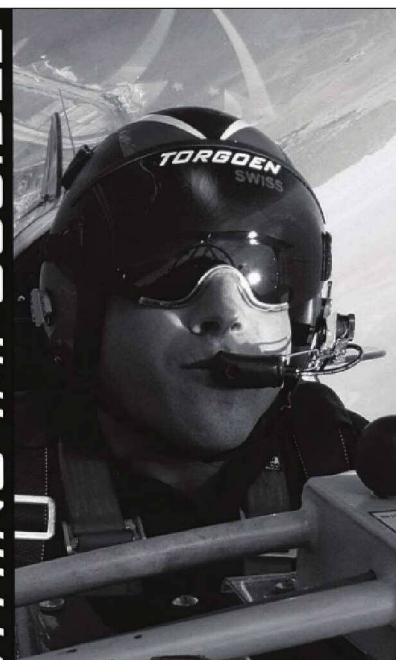
Although not often seen today, the Japanese version of Keshi pearls are beautiful and look like liquid-spun silk. They range in size from that of poppy to sunflower seeds, and often require 50 to 75 strands to create an impact. 'Gothica' is made of two multi-strand ropes that terminate in gothic arch-inspired finials and a simple white South Sea pearl. These incorporate interchangeable bayonet fittings, allowing the pearls to be worn singly or as one long necklace with a variety of ornamental central clasps.

### 'David, the Trout'

Following nature's lead, I found the iridescent grey-black baroque Tahitian pearl seen to the left. The pearl reminded me of a friend, David, Trout, an Arizona jewellery designer who sadly passed away the previous year. With a little white gold for the head and fins, as well as diamonds for eyes, the pearl became David's namesake, 'David, the Trout.'



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### 'The World as it Once Was'

In 2012, the Cultured Pearl Association of America (CPAA) produced a video documentary about pearls of the Pacific Rim. As they visited pearl farms to shoot the video segments, they received donations of pearls from nine producers. I was pleased to be chosen as one of nine 'pearl steward designers' to participate in this project. We did not know which pearls we would be working with until the packages arrived, rather like a chef's black box approach. We were each given a video camera with which to record the design process and creation of our jewellery pieces, while segments of our videos were incorporated into the final documentary.

At first glance, the two Chinese freshwater baroque 'fireball' pearls I was dealt left me baffled. They were an amorphous mystery, until I spent some time with them. Eventually, they revealed themselves, becoming a set of brooches titled, 'The World as it Once Was.' One is a woolly mammoth complete with diamond-set white gold tusks, rose gold trunk and tail, and brown diamond eyes. The other pearl became an abstract comet with a tail of pink, green, yellow, and white gold set with natural fancy-coloured and white diamonds. Perhaps this is the comet that crashed to the Earth

'The World as it Once Was'



'Autumn Equinox'

bringing about the demise of mammoths. These two designs are an example of a situation where the pearls came first and gemstones chosen to suit.

### 'Autumn Equinox'

The earrings in the photo above began with a pair of gems cut by Stephen Avery of Colorado: rubellite tourmaline, and spessartite garnet in warm autumn colours. It took a bit of searching, but I found two Chinese freshwater drop-shaped pearls to complement the gems. One had an orangey-peach body colour with a rose overtone, while the other had



'Bacchanalia'

a rose body colour with a contrasting orange overtone. Natural fancy-coloured pink and yellowish diamonds added the final touch. Initially, I expected to pair similar colours, but in the end, I decided that opposites attract.

### 'Bacchanalia'

'Bacchanalia' is a classical fantasy necklace initially inspired by a collection of baroque Chinese freshwater pearls I found at the Tucson GemFair. At first glance, it was obvious they were leaves, and being a lover of wine, that meant grape leaves. It took nearly three years to finish this necklace, as I slowly decided how it would evolve and assembled the materials. First, I chose the natural fancy-coloured diamonds to set in gold stems on each leaf. Next, I added grape leaves in yellow, green, rose, and white gold in different sizes. Lastly, I created clusters of grapes from tiny freshwater pearls, while pear-shaped pearl drops provided texture and opulence. Depicting the wine god, Bacchus, an antique shell cameo

surrounded by gold grape leaves became the central clasp of the piece.

I really encourage my fellow jewellery designers to take another look at today's pearls. There has never been a greater selection or variety from which to choose. Pearls provide endless inspiration to challenge your imagination and create jewels to delight your clientele. From classic and elegant to bohemian and baroque, let your imagination run free! ♦

*Llyn L. Strelau is the owner of Jewels by Design, a designer-goldsmith studio in Calgary established in 1984. His firm specializes in custom jewellery design for a local and international clientele. Strelau has received numerous design awards, including the American Gem Trade Association's (AGTA's) Spectrum Awards and De Beers' Beyond Tradition—A Celebration of Canadian Craft. His work has also been published in Masters: Gemstones, Major Works by Leading Jewelers. Strelau can be reached via e-mail at designer@jewelsbydesign.com or (403) 228-0644.*

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