April 2020

Gems of Gods and Mortals: The Changing Symbolism of Pearls Throughout the Roman Empire

Emily Hallman

Savannah College of Art and Design, ehallm20@student.scad.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh>

Part of the [Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons](#), [Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Classical Archaeology and Art History Commons](#), [European History Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [History of Religion Commons](#), and the [History of Religions of Western Origin Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hallman, Emily (2020) "Gems of Gods and Mortals: The Changing Symbolism of Pearls Throughout the Roman Empire," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*. Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2020.100101

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol10/iss1/1>

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

Gems of Gods and Mortals:
The Changing Symbolism of Pearls Throughout the Roman Empire

Emily Hallman

Savannah College of Art and Design

(Savannah, GA)

Biography

Emily Hallman is a third-year undergraduate student at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) in Georgia, where she is pursuing degrees in Art History and Preservation Design. Currently a member of the SCAD Art History Society and tutor in the Writer's Studio, she aids both undergraduate and master's students in cultivating strong and clear voices through their writing while further developing her own. In her free time, she volunteers as a docent for local museums at the Telfair Academy and Jepson Center, where she educates visitors of all ages and fosters a love for art and history in her community.

Abstract

Gems of Gods and Mortals: The Changing Symbolism of Pearls Throughout the Roman Empire

Born in the wombs of shells and polished by mother nature herself, pearls were regarded as gifts from the gods. For millennia, the creation of pearls was credited to the tears of heavenly creatures or the formation of sun-touched dewdrops. Countless civilizations, both Western and Non-Western, have their own myths and legends surrounding the pearl, a mark of their mysterious allure. The artform of jewelry, favored by the Roman aristocracy, took advantage of naturally perfected pearls to create stunning pieces with staggering prices. The pearl's meaning evolved throughout the Roman Empire and into Early Christian Rome, setting up a contradictory legacy of earthly decadence and divine modesty. Deciphering the language of the pearl through perhaps the most recognizable period of Western history allows for a closer examination of the social customs of a world superpower. During the Roman Era, pearls went through a dramatic period of metamorphosis which mirrored the state of empire. The ancient Romans transformed pearls from a symbol of the gods to a memento of mortal decadence, finally ending their evolution as gems of the heavens.

Keywords: Pearls; Roman Empire; Jewelry; Art History; Roman Art; Ancient and Classical Art

No other gemstone was more highly treasured or sought after. Luxury, seduction, purity, and modesty were but a few ideas they came to symbolize over the thousands of years of their wear. The gems of the sea, pearls were the earliest gems known to man. Born in the wombs of shells and polished by mother nature herself, pearls were regarded as gifts from the gods. For millennia, the creation of pearls was credited to the tears of heavenly creatures or the formation of sun-touched dewdrops. The art of naturally perfected pearls and their meaning evolved throughout the Roman Empire and into Early Christian Rome, setting up a contradictory legacy of earthly decadence and divine modesty. During the Roman Empire, pearls went through a dramatic period of metamorphosis. The ancient Romans converted pearls from a symbol of the gods to a memento of mortal decadence, finally ending their transformation as gems of the heavens.

Before Romulus and Remus carved out the boundaries of Rome, several powerful ancient civilizations were fascinated with pearls. The oldest sacred text of India, the Rigveda, composed between 1500-1000 BC,¹ used the word *krisana* numerous times in reference to the gems.² In China, it is told that the 23rd-century BC Emperor Yu, celebrated for his regulation of flooding, was gifted pearls from the river Hwai.³ The oldest known pearl ornament dates to the fourth century BC and was found in the sarcophagus of a Persian princess (Fig. 1). The so-called *Susa Necklace*, named for the location of its discovery in 1901, contains a total of 216 pearls strung across three rows, divided into nine sections by gold discs.⁴ The Muslim Koran describes

¹ Cristian Violatti, "The Vedas," *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, May 8, 2018, https://www.ancient.eu/The_Vedas/.

² George Frederick Kunz and Charles Hugh Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl* (New York: Dover Publications, 2001), 3-4.

³ Kunz and Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl*, 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 404-405.

Paradise as being laden with pearls; they are the stones and fruits of the trees, and each person admitted to the heavenly realm is crowned with luminous pearls and waited on by maidens reminiscent of the gem.⁵ Greece had a love affair with the oriental pearls. In the *Iliad*, Homer refers to Hera wearing the jewel as earrings, saying, “In three bright drops, her glittering gems suspended from her ears.”⁶ Probably initially introduced through Phoenician trade and further popularized by the Persian wars in the fifth century BC, pearls became synonymous with Grecian splendor. The *Paphos Pin* (Fig. 2), from the temple of Aphrodite on the island of Cyprus, dates from the third century BC and contains the largest ancient pearl ever found, measuring 14 millimeters.⁷ Plated in gold, the pin is crowned by an eroded pearl which has long lost its luster.

It was through the Greeks that Rome became acquainted with the pearl. In 211 BC, the Roman general Marcellus conquered the immensely wealthy Greek city Syracuse on the island of Sicily. In his *Life of Marcellus*, Plutarch chronicles the looting of the art-filled city, stating, “It is even said, that the plunder of Syracuse was as rich as that of Carthage after it. For the rest of the city was soon betrayed to the Romans, and pillaged...”⁸ The Romans quickly absorbed Greek culture and took it for their own, copying the athletic idealized nudes of Polykleitos and Praxiteles and building temples in the ornate Greek orders. Pearls undoubtedly comprised some

⁵ Kunz and Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl*, 7-8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷ Donna M. Dirlam, Elise B. Misorowski, and Sally A. Thomas, “Pearl Fashion Through the Ages,” *Gems and Gemology* 21, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 64, <https://www.gia.edu/doc/Pearl-Fashion-Through-the-Agesv.pdf>.

⁸ Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. John and William Langhorne (London: William Tegg and Company, 1848), 223-224.

of the spoils brought back from Syracuse. Known under the word *margaritae*, or more commonly as *unio*, pearls were admired by the luxuriant Romans, though not yet abundant.⁹

In 61 BC, Pompey the Great processed into Rome, riding the wave of a great victory in Asia Minor. He had conquered Armenia, and among the spoils he brought to Rome were innumerable pearl ornaments including thirty-three crowns enveloped in the gem, a pearl-adorned shrine, and even a portrait of the general solely comprised of pearls.¹⁰ The Romans who witnessed the procession would have been overwhelmed by such a spectacular display of exotic wealth (Fig. 3). As the pearls filled the treasuries of the triumphant Romans, they found their way around the necks of the aristocracy and dangling from the ears of the rich. This introduction of luxury was unmatched in the Republic, though it would be emulated by future conquerors.

Julius Caesar's taste for luxury inevitably led him to an adoration of pearls. Rumors circulated that his invasion of Britain was partly a search for pearls. Suetonius, in his *Life of Julius Caesar*, reports, "They say that he was led to invade Britain by the hope of getting pearls, and that in comparing their size he sometimes weighed them with his own hand; that he was always a most enthusiastic collector of gems..."¹¹ Upon his victorious return to Rome in 46 BC, Caesar sought to rival Pompey's triumph, dedicating a cuirass made of pearls to Venus Genetrix, the very goddess from whom he claimed descent. Just like the image of Pompey displayed in his triumph, the cuirass was made entirely of pearls.¹² Upon crossing the sea to the British Isles, Caesar had conquered the ocean, thus making pearls a suitable gift of thanks to the goddess.

⁹ Kunz and Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl*, 9.

¹⁰ Kunz and Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl*, 9.

¹¹ Suetonius, "The Life of Julius Caesar," in *The Lives of the Caesars*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1913), 65.

¹² Marleen B. Flory, "Pearls for Venus," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 37, no. 4 (1988): 499. https://0-www-jstor-org.library.scad.edu/stable/4436082?read-now=1&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

Caesar's taste for *luxuria* was possibly one of the reasons for his downfall. He was assassinated only two years after his triumph. In 41 BC, Marc Antony summoned Caesar's lover and the wealthiest woman in the world, the Egyptian queen Cleopatra, to Tarsus. It was in a banquet with Antony that, on a bet, Cleopatra is fabled to have removed one of her pearl earrings, dropped it into a cup of vinegar, and drank it. Pliny writes,

“There were two Pearls, the very largest that ever were known in any Age, and they were possessed by Cleopatra, the last Queen of Egypt... Now she wore at her Ears that most remarkable and truly singular Work of Nature... she took one of them from her Ear, steeped it in the Vinegar, and when it was liquefied, drank it.”¹³

Cleopatra won her bet, and the other pearl was cut in half to hang from the ears of the statue of Venus in the Pantheon.

Augustus fulfilled her wish when, in 25 BC, he allegedly brought the split pearl back to Rome and presented it to the Pantheon Venus. As the pearl symbolized the Orient and especially Egypt, Augustus was claiming total victory over the East by displaying them on the patron divinity of Rome.¹⁴

This seeming tendency of making gifts of pearls to the goddess Venus originates in the story of her birth. She was born of the sea, emerging beautiful and completely formed from a shell, much the same way that pearls are created. A bronze statuette of the goddess dating from the first-century BC or the first to second-century AD wears tiny pearls strung with gold wire through her ears (Fig. 4). Another bronze Venus, from about 100 AD, wears a pearl pendant through one ear (Fig. 5). Lustrous fruits of the ocean and of love and perfected by nature, pearls

¹³ Pliny the Elder, *Pliny's Natural History in Thirty-Seven Books*, trans. Philemon Holland, ed. Wernerian Club (London: George Barclay, 1847-1848), 155.

¹⁴ Flory, “Pearls for Venus,” 503.

were a fitting reminder of the goddess of beauty, love, and fertility. Through dedicating gifts of the gem to Venus, the Romans were recalling her origins.

At the height of the pearl craze of the Roman Empire, pearls became more associated with mortal excess than with godly attributes. The Roman poet Martial makes the first moralist comment on the nobility's obsession with them when he writes about a woman named Gellia. Speaking of her love for her pearls, he says she "swears, not by... our gods or goddesses, but by her pearls. These she embraces; these she covers with kisses; these she calls her brothers and sisters; these she loves more ardently than her two children. If she should chance to lose these, she declares she could not live even an hour."¹⁵ The Romans artfully wove pearls of all sizes into necklaces, earrings, and pins. It is said that some women and even the infamous Emperor Caligula wore sandals embroidered with pearls.¹⁶

Surviving jewelry still shows the extravagant taste for pearl ornaments. The largest collection in existence comes from Pompeii and Herculaneum, where the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD preserved the fragile gems (Fig. 6). A popular type of earring consisted of two to three pearls dangling from gold wire; the pearls would make a chiming sound as they clinked together, so that the wealth of the aristocratic women could not only be seen but be heard (Fig. 7). A Fayum mummy portrait from Egypt shows a woman wearing this type of ear-pendant (Fig. 8). She is decorated with her best jewelry, among which are the dangling pearl ornaments hanging from her ears. Pliny speaks of these earrings in his *Natural History*:

"The Ladies take great Pride to have these dangling from their Fingers, and two or three pendent at their Ears. There is Luxury conveyed in the Names they have devised for these, and wanton Excess in what they carry about; for when they knock one against

¹⁵ Lucía Avail-Chicharro, "Romans prized these jewels more than diamonds," *National Geographic*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/magazine/2019/03-04/roman-republics-captivation-with-pearls/>.

¹⁶ Kunz and Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl*, 9.

another they call them Crotalia (Cymbals), as if they delighted to hear the Sound of their Pearls rattling together...”¹⁷

Pliny was one of many critics of the elitism and classism that came to be associated with pearls. He chronicled countless stories, always relating the gem to mortal excess and outrageous expense.

It is telling that Rome’s least popular emperors were credited with an infatuation with the jewels. In another story surrounding the emperor, Caligula gave his favorite horse Incitatus a pearl necklace after he supposedly raised it to consulship. Nero, provoked by his passion for theatre, presented his actors with pearl-adorned masks and scepters.¹⁸ The moralist writers collecting these tales were probably incited to voice their critical opinions by the reputation of the emperors. They were warning the Roman citizens of the dangers of self-indulgence, citing an excessive display of the most expensive gem in the known world as one of the reasons for their downfall. In the satirical writings, the ephemeral nature of pearls was highlighted and used to symbolize the materiality of worldly possession. The Roman Empire took possession of the mysterious god-like gems of the sea; it turned the symbolic associations of godly love, fertility, and beauty into immodesty, overindulgence, and luxury.

In 313 AD, Emperor Constantine announced the Edict of Milan, declaring religious tolerance for Christianity in the empire. This was the first of many actions that made Constantine the first Christian Roman Emperor, although he was only baptized on his deathbed in 337. After building his royal residence in Byzantium, he renamed it Constantinople and made it the new capital of the empire. The new eastern city became the center of culture and the arts, of which

¹⁷ Pliny, *Natural History*, 153-154.

¹⁸ Silvia Malaguzzi, *The Pearl*, (New York: Rizzoli, 2001), 21.

Oriental pearls were especially popular. However, with the new influence of Christianity, the symbolic meaning of pearls took another dramatic shift.

In the New Testament book of Matthew, Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it.”¹⁹ Treasured pearls became linked with the similarly valued Word of God. When Christ was baptized, he was reborn through the cleansing power of the water. In the same way, pearls are born inside shells in the waters of the ocean, imbuing them with a powerful spiritual connection to Christ.²⁰ This miraculous birth was also likened to the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. It was widely believed at the time that a pearl was created when a dewdrop fell from the moonlit heavens and entered an oyster.²¹ The Virgin Mary conceived the baby Jesus in a similar manner, through heavenly intervention. The very images of purity, devotion, modesty, and virtue, both Jesus and Mary became likened to pearls, which previously represented the antithesis.

This new spiritual meaning was appropriately displayed in churches, as seen in the mosaics at San Vitale in Ravenna (Fig. 9). The Emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora wear *perpendulia* (Fig. 10), dozens of pearls strung over and dangling around their heads, crowning them with dominion over both the spiritual and temporal realms.²² These are not worldly people, concerned with material possession; they are God-ordained rulers, belonging to the heavens. Thus, people in possession of these gems now became spiritual individuals and assumed all the virtues that they now represented.

¹⁹ Matt. 13:45-46 (King James Bible).

²⁰ Malaguzzi, *The Pearl*, 31.

²¹ Kunz and Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl*, 36.

²² Dirlam, Misiorowski, and Thomas, “Pearl Fashion Through the Ages,” 65.

Over the thousands of years of their use as ornament, pearls were always attributed with a powerful symbolic meaning. Originally related to the Roman goddess of love, beauty, and fertility, Venus, the gems are still seen dangling from the ears of her statues. Extraordinarily rare and only affordable to the ultra-wealthy, they quickly became symbols of status and excess. They became known as *crotalia*, or cymbals, for the sounds they made as they dangled from the ears of aristocratic women. There are countless stories that warn about the dangers of the luxuriant self-indulgence associated with pearls, including the one Cleopatra allegedly drank in order to win a bet. When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, pearls received a new meaning opposite to their prior association with reckless opulence. Jesus and Mary became pearls personified due to the connotations they had with baptism and the Immaculate Conception. Today, pearls still enjoy a reputation as pure and modest adornments, acclaimed for their lustrous beauty and natural perfection. Now cultivated and mass produced, humans have gained possession of the only gemstone perfected by nature, the gems which used to belong to the gods.

Illustrations

Fig. 1. *Susa Necklace*, ca. 350 BC, natural pearls, gold wire, and gold disks, Louvre Museum, Paris, France. Photo: Kari, <https://www.karipearls.com/susa-pearls.html>, accessed October 13, 2019.

Fig. 2. *Paphos Pin*, 3rd-century BC, natural pearls and gold-covered bronze, The British Museum, London, England.
https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=464578&partId=1, accessed October 13, 2019.

Fig. 3. Gabriel de Saint-Aubin, *The Triumph of Pompey*, 1765, watercolor, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, New York.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/366090>, accessed October 13, 2019.

Fig. 4. *Figurine of Capitoline Aphrodite*, 1st-century BC or 1st-2nd-century AD, bronze statue with pearl and gold earrings, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts.

<https://collections.mfa.org/objects/152705>, accessed October 13, 2019.

Fig. 5. *Head of Venus*, ca 100 AD, bronze with gold and pearl, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California. <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/7033/unknown-maker-head-of-venus-roman-about-ad-100/?dz=>, accessed October 13, 2019.

Fig. 6. *Pearl earrings from Herculaneum and Pompeii*, illustration, in *The Book of the Pearl: Its History, Art, Science, and Industry*, New York: Dover Publications, 2001.

Fig. 7. *Gold and Pearl Earrings*, 1st-century AD, gold and pearl, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, New York. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/250984>, accessed October 13, 2019.

Fig. 8. *Mummy Portrait of a Woman*, 161-192 AD, encaustic portrait on wood, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. Photo: Carole Raddato, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/carolemage/21039802435/>, accessed October 13, 2019.

Fig. 9. *Theodora and Her Attendants*, detail, ca. 547 AD, mosaic, Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy.

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f8/Meister_von_San_Vitale_in_Ravenna_008.jpg, accessed October 13, 2019.

Fig. 10 *The Holy Crown of Hungary*, ca. 1000 AD, pearls, semi-precious stones, gold, and enamel, Hungarian Parliament Building, Budapest, Hungary.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A_Szent_Korona_el%C3%B6l%C5%91l_2.jpg, accessed November 4, 2019.

Works Cited

- Avail-Chicharro, Lucía. "Romans prized these jewels more than diamonds." *National Geographic*. Last modified April 2, 2019.
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/archaeology-and-history/magazine/2019/03-04/roman-republics-captivation-with-pearls/>.
- Dirlam, Donna M., Elise B. Misorowski, and Sally A. Thomas. "Pearl Fashion Through the Ages." *Gems and Gemology* 21, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 63-78.
<https://www.gia.edu/doc/Pearl-Fashion-Through-the-Agesv.pdf>.
- Flory, Marleen B. "Pearls for Venus." *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 37, no. 4 (1988): 498-504. https://0-www-jstor-org.library.scad.edu/stable/4436082?read-now=1&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.
- Kunz, George Frederick and Charles Hugh Stevenson. *The Book of the Pearl: Its History, Art, Science, and Industry*. New York, NY: Dover Publications, 2001.
- Malaguzzi, Silvia. *The Pearl*. New York: Rizzoli, 2001.
- Pliny the Elder. *Pliny's Natural History in Thirty-Seven Books*. Translated by Philemon Holland. Edited by the Wernerian Club. London: George Barclay, 1847-1848.
- Plutarch. *Plutarch's Lives*. Translated by John and William Langhorne. London: William Tegg and Company, 1848.
- Suetonius. "The Life of Julius Caesar." In *The Lives of the Caesars*, edited by Jeffrey Henderson, 3-119. Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1913.
- Violatti, Cristian. "The Vedas." Ancient History Encyclopedia. Last modified May 8, 2018.
https://www.ancient.eu/The_Vedas/.