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World Archaeology, Vol. 31, No. 2, The Cultural Biography of Objects. (Oct., 1999), pp. 243-257.

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Biographies of brilliance: pearls, transformations of matter and being, c. AD 1492

Nicholas J. Saunders

Abstract

Indigenous peoples of the Americas regarded the positive spiritual and creative power of light to be manifested in many brilliant objects – from iridescent feathers to shiny minerals and metals. By contrast, Europeans valued only a few glittering objects – pearls, emeralds, gold and silver – from a commercial standpoint. By adopting a biographical approach to one of these items – pearls – it is possible to explore the ways in which these earliest of traded objects embodied, bridged and transformed the material, social and imagined worlds of Amerindians and Europeans from AD 1492 onwards.

Keywords

Brilliance; light; pearls; gold; shamanism; Pre-Columbian America.

... there were mines of gold and pearls.

[yet] there wasn't anyone on board who knew gold from pyrite or pearl from chrysoberyl.

(Christopher Columbus, First Voyage, quoted in Sale 1991: 106,12)

Introduction

For indigenous peoples of the Americas on the eve of European contact, ideas concerning the spiritual and creative power of light were inextricably bound up with its embodiment in physical forms. For millennia, this appears to have bestowed cultural significance on the production, exchange and display of brilliant objects. The momentous events which followed Columbus's Caribbean landfall demonstrated the incommensurability of Amerindian and European worldviews and valuations of 'wealth', and the extent to which

materiality acts as a bridge between mental and physical worlds (Miller 1987: 99). As contact turned to conquest, a host of shiny objects moved from west to east through geographical and symbolic space, exhibiting a creative hybridity – acting upon, and being acted on by, all with whom they came into contact.

The focus of Amerindian–European exchange from AD 1492 onwards was on objects whose glittering surfaces appeared equally attractive to both sides (Plate 1). Ultimately, however, the underlying systems of valuation were irreconcilable, and the cohesive integrity of Amerindian worldviews unravelled. The activities which characterized initial contact have, from a material culture perspective, long been passed over without due consideration of their complexities. Here, I adopt a biographical approach (*pace* Kopytoff 1986) of one major trade item – pearls – in an attempt to document the changing social and material worlds created by their re-contextualization in the wake of Columbus's arrival. This approach sees meaning shaped by context, and changing contexts altering significance; it shows not only how attitudes towards pearls changed, but also how such changes redefined relationships between indigenous and European peoples. It also



Plate 1 Mutual exchange of brilliance as Christopher Columbus is greeted by Caribbean Amerindians in AD 1492. (Engraving from Theodore de Bry, *America*, Part IV, 1594, plate IX; Reproduced by permission of the British Library).

reveals how contrasting attitudes to light and brilliance exemplify the nature and course of the contact experience (see Kopytoff 1986: 67).

Brilliant worlds

There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that indigenous Amerindians perceived their world as infused with a spiritual brilliance which manifested itself in natural phenomena – sun, moon, water, ice and rainbows; natural materials – minerals, feathers, pearls and shells, and artefacts made from such matter, as well as ceramics, textiles and metals. All, in their own way, and according to differing cultural conventions, partook of an inner sacredness displayed as surface gleaming (see Saunders 1998: 226–30, n.d.).

The philosophies, technological choices and materials which underwrote and exemplified the ‘aesthetic of brilliance’ varied through time, and from culture to culture. Yet, throughout the Americas, varying attitudes appear to have cohered around a shamanic worldview where light, dazzling colours and shiny matter indicated the presence of supernatural beings and essence (e.g. Kensinger 1995: 221; Furst 1976: 46, 131). Light brought structure and order to the Inka universe (Classen 1993: 38), was a manifestation of life for the Aztecs (López-Austin 1988: 204–5) and invigorated the physical world. Reflective lakes and snow-capped mountains glowed with light that linked sky and earth as portals through which the dead entered the spirit realm (e.g. Reichel-Dolmatoff 1981: 28; Reinhard 1988: 365–70; Townsend 1987: 373). Symbolic landscapes were similarly defined: Aztec *Tlalocan* shimmered with divine fire, its human inhabitants shone like gems (Burkhart 1992: 89); in Inka Cuzco, the Sun God’s sacred enclosure (*Coricancha*) was a gold and silver microcosm of the world (Garcilaso de la Vega 1987 [1609]: 188, 318; and see Helms 1981: 219–20).

Light infused spirituality and morality. The Aztec soul was conceived as hot and luminous (López Austin 1988: 204–6, 216), and sickness defined by the dimming of one’s (otherwise bright) reflection in water (Ruiz de Alarcon 1984: 162). Living ‘righteously’ transformed the Aztec psyche into a precious glistening turquoise or iridescent quetzal feather (Gingerich 1977: 324). The power of light to energize the physical world was evident in the glittering objects which warriors carried or wore into battle in Mesoamerica (Czitrom 1994: 193, 196) and South America (Guaman Poma quoted in González 1992: 215). In North America, Choctaw shamans used mirrors to reflect strength-giving light onto their players in the game of lacrosse, a symbolic form of war (Vennum 1994: 36). In contrast to the positive valuations of light and colour, the opposite – darkness – signified illness, death, disorder and cosmic cataclysm (e.g. Sullivan 1988: 72, 588; López Austin 1988: 245–6), especially during eclipses (Closs 1989: 390–4).

This world of bright mythical realities was fundamentally a transformational place – a universe governed by analogical reasoning, configured by shamans, priests and rulers who had mastered its dangerously ambivalent forces through knowledge and ritual. It was also a multi-sensory world, where olfactory, auditory and tactile elements of sensory experience had not been de-privileged by the atomizing effects of modernity. This appears to have lent a synaesthetic aspect to shamanic worldview (see Howes 1991: 3–5; Classen 1990), where meanings attached to the lights, sounds, smells and tastes of life were not those of European experience.

The biography of brilliance

Indigenous contexts

The implications of worldview for the investment of meaning in the production of material culture are significant. Naturally occurring materials (from minerals to shells, wood to feathers) possessed culture-specific valuations in their own right as well as by virtue of originating in landscapes conceived as animated by supernatural forces and ancestral beings. Material culture objectified these values at the same time as re-combining them into something new – revitalizing individual and society through newly manufactured identities (*pace* Hoskins 1998: 191). Making shiny objects was an act of transformative creation, converting – in a sense re-cycling – the fertilizing energy of light into brilliant solid forms via technological choices whose efficacy stemmed from a synergy of myth, ritual knowledge and individual technical skill (Saunders n.d.).

In this way, significance and meaning were given to the production, exchange and ritual display of brilliant objects, whether North American copper (Mason 1981: 180), Mesoamerican greenstones (Sahagún 1950–78, Bk 11: 221–2), Andean metalwork (Lechtman 1993), Amazonian shell beads (Whitehead 1988: 54–5) or Caribbean polished wood (*zemí*) sculptures (Helms 1986). These materials represented the accumulation of creative power which animated and regulated the universe, embodied a society's mythic identity, symbolized the efficacy of rituals and reinforced the powers of the elite who conducted them (e.g. Helms 1993: 13–27; Pagden 1993: 85; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1988). The values given to objects by indigenous contextualization objectified the individual and cultural identities of their makers to varying degrees – making objects and people a coherent unity.

European re-contextualization

European contact produced a dramatic re-contextualization of indigenous material culture, recasting cultural identity through the new valuations of certain kinds of objects – particularly gold, silver, pearls and gemstones.

For Amerindians, the varying colours, shapes and smells of gold underscored associations with shamanism and its aspects of sensorial stimulation and brilliant visions (e.g. Hosler 1994: 235, 241–3; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1981: 22–3; González 1992: 202–3, 259). What made gold indigenously valuable was less its purity than the redness and odour of the copper added to it, which signified male virility, sex and fertility (e.g. Reichel-Dolmatoff 1981: 22; and see Lechtman 1993: 269).

For Europeans, the value of gold was assayed in terms of purity which made it an index of convertible wealth. Indigenous gold-copper alloys (called *guanín* in the Caribbean, *tumbaga* in South America) were at the forefront of European-Amerindian transactions (e.g. Whitehead 1990: 20). The qualities which made them indigenously valuable made them poor quality to Europeans (e.g. Stevens Arroyo 1988: 67–9). On acquiring such objects, Europeans exercised creative agency, denying the defining qualities of the object's indigenous 'life' and revaluing it in accordance with their own system of commercial exchange. Where previously an object's value had depended on a mixture of the general and personal meanings attached to it, it was now judged by physical characteristics alone.

If, as Hoskins (1998: 195) observes, an individual's social being is determined by their relationship to the objects that represent them, then the re-contextualization of indigenous shiny objects created new identities and relationships between Amerindians and between Amerindians and Europeans (see below).

An integral but hitherto largely unacknowledged aspect of these developments is the role played by the aesthetic of brilliance. Europeans found incomprehensible the Amerindian willingness to trade gold, silver and pearls for such commonplace items as European glass (i.e. mirrors, clear and coloured beads). In Europe, glass had long since ceased to be of religious or spiritual significance, its origins a commonplace manufacturing technique. For Amerindians, its shiny-ness indicated its nature as powerful cosmological matter, its production regarded as a supernatural and magical talent (Tabeau, quoted in Rogers 1990: 75; and see Axtell 1988: 131).

As the Inka emperor Atahualpa told the conquistador Francisco Pizarro:

Of all the things that the Spanish showed him, there was none he liked more than glass, and . . . that he was very surprised that, having things of such beauty in Spain, [the Spanish] . . . would travel to distant and foreign lands looking for metals as common as gold and silver.

(Benzoni, quoted in Mester 1990: 208)

In the following analysis I have chosen pearls rather than gold or silver to illustrate the biographical approach. I aim to show how pearls, along with a range of other brilliant materials, might usefully be regarded as belonging to a meta-category of objects – those conceived by Amerindians as earthbound ‘manifestations of light and the social relationships and spiritual qualities that it embodied’ (Saunders 1998: 230). I will also illustrate how the movement and re-contextualization of these gems encapsulated the events of the early contact period, and how the ‘biography of brilliance’ charts the creation of hitherto unimagined worlds in the minds of Amerindians and Europeans.

The social lives of pearls

Wearing light: pearls in Pre-Columbian America

In Pre-Columbian America, especially valued brilliance was embodied in matter emanating from rivers, lakes and the sea (see Claasen 1998: 203–8). The whiteness of shells, gloss of fish(scales) and translucence of pearls (Plate 2) were natural qualities imbued with a sacredness magnified by their origins beneath water's mirror-like surface – the boundary between the physical and spiritual worlds (e.g. Hamell 1998: 258, 281; Roe 1998: 193–4). Ritual significance appears particularly marked for species of shells whose procurement underwater was analogous to shamanic activity – i.e. visiting the dangerous spirit realm and returning with sacred matter. Amerindians' diving abilities, and knowledgeable exploitation of mollusca are well documented (see, variously, Las Casas 1992: 93; Lovén 1935: 423 n.1; Mester 1992; Sauer 1969: 191). In one case – diving for the ritually important *Spondylus princeps* off the Ecuadorian coast – such activity was depicted in Pre-Columbian times (Cordy-Collins 1990; and see Pillsbury 1996).

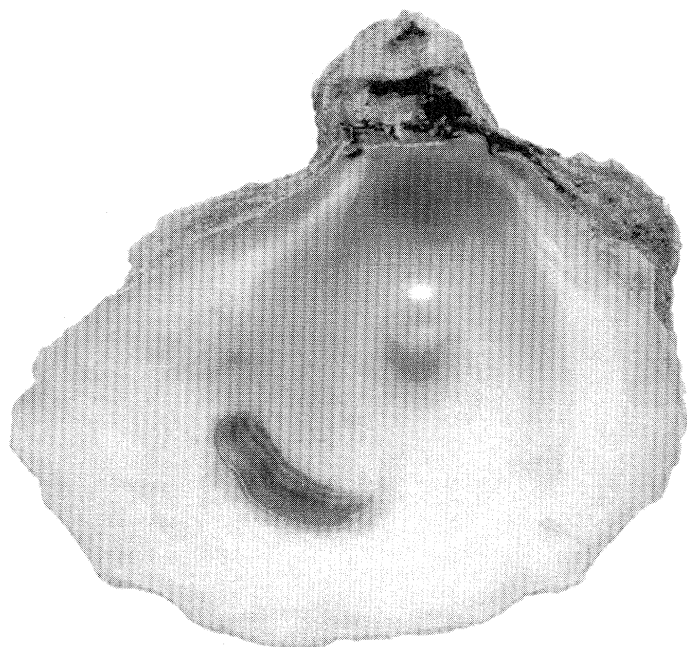


Plate 2 Symbolic worlds in shiny spaces or embodiments of the entrepreneurial spirit? Pearl in oyster. (Photo, Siede Preis, Photodisc).

Pearls were associated with water, fertility and the wider ritual and techno-economic significances of the shells which yielded them – i.e. mainly *Pinctada* and *Pteria*, but also Queen Conch (*Strombus gigas*) in the Caribbean (Olsen 1974: 96–7), Mesoamerica (Kolb 1987) and South America (Paulsen 1974; and see Morris 1973: 168). As portable embodiments of light, pearls were miniature symbols of the generative power of the sea as ‘mother of fertility’, and were votively offered as such (Kirchoff quoted in Donkin 1998: 315). In Mesoamerica, the *Relación de Michoacán*, recounts an origin myth which describes the primeval ocean home from which people emerged as ‘the jar of pearls’ (Seler 1993: 8–9). The Aztec name for pearl, *epiollotli*, associates it with human life and notions of sacred brilliance – the name coming from *eptli*/oyster and *yollotli*/heart, and described as translucent and crystalline (Sahagún 1950–78, Bk 11: 224).

In South America, similarly, the Inka term *quispe* defined pearls as like crystal and water (Mester 1990: 200). Yet, only when pearls are considered with other bright matter, such as crystals and gold, do their cosmological significance and their fertility associations with rain and rainbows become clear (ibid.: 198). The translucent whiteness of pearls was associated ideologically with high social rank by the Inkas (R.T. Zuidema, quoted in Mester 1990: 213), and particularly with women as a feminine symbol representing the royal clan (*panaca*) of the queen (*Coya*).

In North America, pearls were highly esteemed symbols of life and fertility, along with *wampum* – shell beads (Hall 1976). When Hernando de Soto entered *Cofitachequi*, capital of the Creek nation in AD 1540, he was given a string of pearls. Other early explorers observed that, in Virginia, deceased chiefs had their bowels filled with bright matter – pearls, copper and white sand – and were surrounded with baskets of pearls (Strachey, quoted in Kunz and Stevenson 1993 [1908]: 488). The antiquity of such practices is evident

from over 100,000 drilled pearls discovered in the Hopewell mounds (Moorehead 1922: 145).

Across America, the indigenous contextualization of pearls emanating from life-giving water saw them symbolically transformed into materializations of light, concentrations of cosmic life force. As their mortuary contexts indicate, pearls had the power to transform the soul (see Hamell 1983) and embody the spiritual relationships between humans and the supernatural.

Exchanging brilliance: pearls at contact

European arrival dramatically changed the indigenous contextualization of pearls. Where their indigenous biography linked them to cultural relationships with the natural world alongside other shiny matter, Europeans saw pearls as one of only a few (commercially) valuable items (see Appadurai 1986) – as set out in Columbus's *capitulación* with the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella. Amerindians traded pearls for European shiny objects on the initial understanding that the latter's brilliance embodied similar identities, physical and spiritual obligations, and cosmic power to their own (see Saunders 1998: 234–7). During Columbus's third voyage in AD 1498, on the 'Pearl Island' of Cubagua, a sailor smashed a dish of Malaga ware, exchanging its glazed fragments for a string of pearls (López de Gómara, quoted in Kunz and Stevenson 1993 [1908]: 226). Over a hundred years later, in Virginia, Amerindians offered a box full of pearls in exchange for European armour (Barlowe quoted in Donkin 1998: 317).

Pearls rather than gold or silver lay at the heart of the earliest exchanges, and drove the initial colonization at least of northern South America (Donkin 1998: 318). While precious metals in significant quantities proved elusive, pearls formed the bulk of convertible wealth from the Indies and quickly filled Spanish treasure fleets. It is telling that the first financially profitable voyage to the Americas was that of Pedro Alonso Niño, in AD 1499, who visited the Venezuelan coast and traded tin, copper bells and glass beads for 96 pounds of pearls.

Such transactions quickly became commonplace. In AD 1515, Gaspar de Morales traded mirrors, scissors and axes for 880 ounces of pearls with the Amerindians of the Gulf of Panama (Kunz and Stevenson 1993 [1908]: 236). In AD 1519, Hernan Cortés met the Aztec emperor Moctezuma at the gates of Tenochtitlán, giving pearls and glass beads in return for collars of highly esteemed red shells from each of which hung eight golden 'prawns' (Saville 1920: 40). In North America, in AD 1540, Hernando de Soto was permitted by the Creek to collect large quantities of freshwater pearls from their ancestral burials near Augusta, Georgia (Sauer 1971: 167).

These early encounters saw Europeans creating their own biography of pearls. Denying or ignoring indigenous valuations, and their grounding in local cultural and political agendas (see Thomas 1991: 88), Europeans regarded the Amerindian willingness to exchange pearls for glistening but 'worthless trifles' as indicative of their childlike foolishness and gullibility (Greenblatt 1992: 110). Such attitudes concealed the ignorance of European explorers, who often were unable to identify true pearls or pure gold (e.g. Sale 1991: 12; Saville 1920: 12–13; Kunz and Stevenson 1993 [1908]: 495) – and whose mis-identifications were further disguised by accusing Amerindians of trickery and deceit (and see Appadurai 1986: 57).

At the same time as pearls were being acquired for a pittance from Amerindians, they were changing hands for vast sums among Spanish conquistadors and colonial officials. The 'Oviedo Pearl' was a 26-carat gem bought by the chronicler Gonzalo de Oviedo for 650 times its weight in gold (Kunz and Stevenson 1993 [1908]: 451–2).

The passage of pearls from Amerindian to European hands created in the European imagination a vision of America as a land of astonishing riches inhabited by naïve and ignorant savages. Amerindians' primitive pagan existence and inability to gauge (European) worth denied them human status. More specifically, the power of European revaluation changed the relationship between pearls and Amerindians. Objects which indigenously symbolized life and fertility, now signified a cruel and painful death for many.

Along the Venezuelan Pearl Coast, the exhaustion of pearls already possessed by local Amerindians led to a shortage of indigenous pearl divers. In AD 1508, large numbers of Lucayan Amerindians were forcibly taken from the Bahamas on the other side of the Caribbean to dive off Cubagua (Fig. 1). Accustomed to diving for conch, they nevertheless were worked to death in a practice regarded as having led to their extinction (Sauer 1969: 191). The re-contextualization of pearls transformed the Lucayans into commodities, an expert diver costing upwards of 150 ducats (Kunz and Stevenson [1908] 1993:

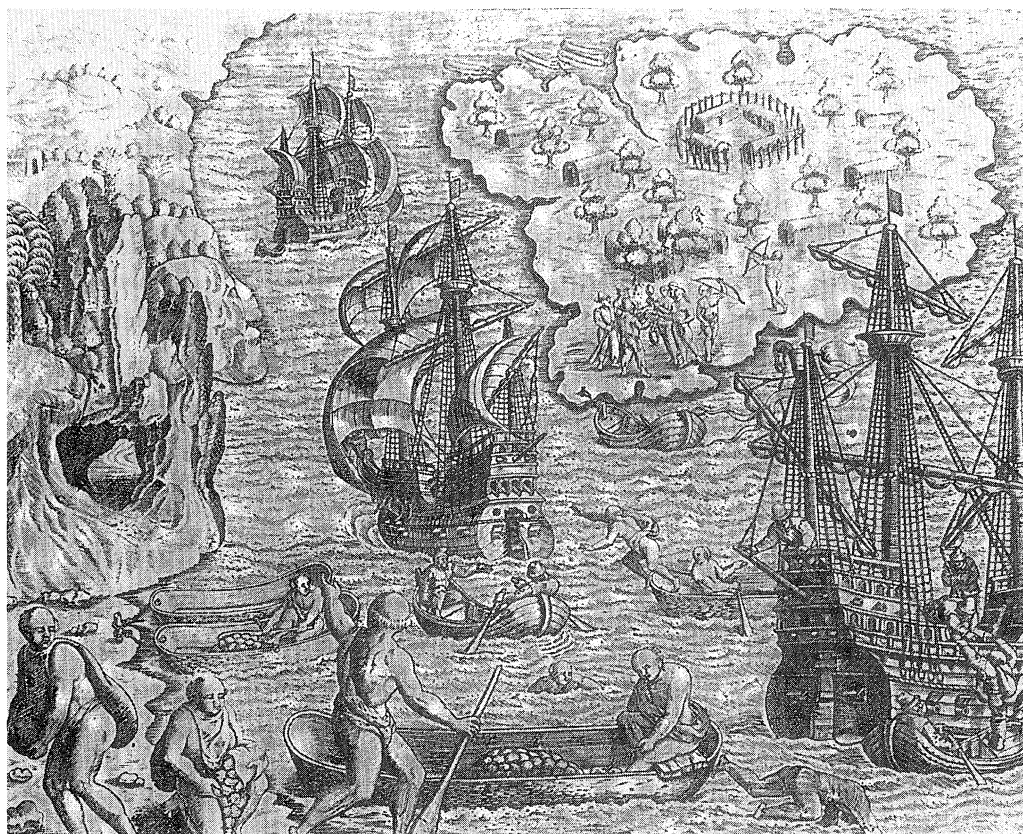


Figure 1 Pearl diving off the island of Cubagua. (Engraving from Theodore de Bry, *America*, Part IV, 1594).

228–9). As López de Gómara (quoted in Donkin 1998: 321) noted, Cubaguan pearls were obtained ‘at the cost of many Spaniards, many Negroes, and very many Indians’, despite the fact that in the *New Laws of the Indies* (1542–3), the lives of Negroes and Indians were said to be more valuable than the profits from pearls (ibid.).

The capacity of pearls to redefine the nature of European relationships with Amerindians, Negroes and each other is complex and deserving of further study. European slave trading from Guinea was partly driven by the demand for African pearl divers as Amerindians disappeared, and pearls taken by the Spanish from slave divers were in turn forcibly acquired by English corsairs on the high seas.

Wearing America: pearls in Europe

As pearls were conveyed across the Atlantic a new set of cultural values and social relationships was created, revitalizing the gems and adding to their biography. America’s ‘limitless’ supply of pearls, its exotic geography, flora and fauna, ‘bizarre’ human inhabitants and the dangers of trans-Atlantic voyages, all enhanced the mystical ‘otherness’ as well as the commercial valuation of the gems. Pearls-as-objects became vehicles for fantasy and imagination (see Hoskins 1998: 196) – Costa Rica owing its name to its pearl resources (Donkin 1998: 330). Circulating now in a world in which they did not originate, pearls became symbols of imperial possession, objectifying colonial relationships to such an extent that America became known as the ‘Land of Pearls’.

Together with other shiny objects, pearls were re-cycled for the Catholic faith. They adorned the cathedrals of Seville and Toledo, enriching the architecture and paraphernalia of Catholicism. In Seville, pearl vendors and drillers had premises close by the cathedral (Donkin 1998: 327). Pearls became metaphors for the expansion of Christendom, physical expressions of the worldly wealth of the established church and its ties to the Spanish state. Ironically, the display of pearls in European houses of religion paralleled that of Pre-Columbian America (see Berdan 1992: 317; Mester 1990: 189–90).

Pearls entered the courtly world of European royalty and nobility as the ultimate fashion accessories – embedded in a luxurious material world of silks, velvets, gold, silver and gemstones from all over the known world. The extravagance of European courts during the two centuries following the discovery of America was fuelled, in large part, by pearls whose quantity exceeded that of all other gems (Kunz and Stevenson 1993 [1908]: 23), creating new values and relationships among Europe’s elite and re-invigorating competition between the continent’s royal houses.

The noble rich vied with each other in the number and size of pearls which they wore, the evidence preserved in portraits showing Hapsburgs, Medicis, Tudors and Stuarts, wearing pearl earrings, and decoration on hats, cloaks and gloves, and, perhaps most significantly, in the ultimate imperial object, the royal crown (Kunz and Stevenson 1993 [1908]: 455). The famous pear-shaped ‘Huerfana’ pearl weighed 31 carats, and passed from Panama’s Amerindians in AD 1515 to a succession of Spanish noblewomen until acquired by Isabella, wife of the emperor Charles V (1500–58). Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603) wore large quantities of pearls (Plate 3), perhaps taking special satisfaction in the knowledge that many were taken from Spanish ships by her privateers.

The use of pearls as symbolic weapons in the English–Spanish politics of the Elizabethan



Plate 3 Wearing America. Queen Elizabeth I adorned with pearls, one hand advancing symbolically across the globe. She is flanked by her crown and images of the defeated Spanish armada. (The Armada Portrait by George Gower, c. AD 1588. By kind permission of the Marquess of Tavistock and the Trustees of the Bedford Estate).

era is highlighted by one particular case. Sir Thomas Gresham acquired a pearl allegedly worth £15,000 which he reduced to powder and drank in a glass of wine as a toast to his sovereign's health, and to astonish the Spanish ambassador by winning a wager that he could give a more expensive dinner than the Spaniards (Kunz and Stevenson 1993 [1908]: 454–5). Here the wealth of the Indies was literally consumed – although the notion that by so doing a ruler's health could be enhanced might have resonated with Amerindian beliefs of the life-giving power of brilliant objects.

On Elizabeth I's death, her body was draped with pearl necklaces, earrings and pendants (Kunz and Stevenson 1993 [1908]: 454) – an ironic parallel to the lavish mortuary use of pearls in prehistoric and early contact period North America (e.g. Moorehead 1922: 149). So central did pearls become in the rarefied world of European monarchies, and so great the passion for possession and display, that this period has been called the 'Pearl Age'.

The competitive elite relationships produced by the influx of American pearls also created new tensions between royalty, on one hand, and the nobility and aspiring upper middle class of merchants, bankers, and doctors, on the other. Not only did pearl prices

fluctuate wildly (with resulting economic instability) as Europe was flooded with the gems, but the wearing of pearls (and other jewels) was jealously guarded by royalty through the imposition of sumptuary laws. In this ironic biographical aspect, pearls, which for Amerindians had symbolized positive social values, became dangerously ambiguous objects – whose unauthorized display was perceived as destabilising the social order. In Saxony in AD 1612, it was decreed that:

the nobility are not allowed to wear any dresses of gold or silver, or garnished with pearls; neither shall . . . professors and doctors of the universities, nor their wives, wear any gold, silver or pearls for fringes, or any chains of pearls.

(Kunz and Stevenson 1993 [1908]: 25)

In AD 1609, in Venice:

pearls, or anything which imitates pearls, shall be forbidden to all . . . women, men and boys or girls of every age and condition at all times and in all places.

(Kunz and Stevenson 1993 [1908]: 26)

Such was the capacity of pearls to embody wealth, status and ambition in European and Europeanized societies, that higher-valued Persian pearls were taken to the Americas, sold to affluent Hispano-Americans, and the profits used to purchase cheaper American pearls which had a ready market in Europe among people of more modest means (Donkin 1998: 333). The complicated pattern of trade and exchange in pearls was a feature of the fact that a pearl's quality was an index of the owner's social and economic standing (*ibid.*: 334).

Conclusions

In the opalescent lustre of pearls, Amerindians and Europeans each saw symbols of beauty, 'wealth' and power. Yet, in the interpretation of the material and social worlds they embodied there was a point of fissure between two diametrically opposed world-views. For Amerindians, pearls were one of many kinds of brilliant matter – sensuous, variably coloured embodiments of bright cosmic energy that energized the universe. For Europeans during the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, the commercial, aesthetic and social value of pearls was determined by their (natural and socially controlled) availability, flawlessness, colour and symbolic use as fashion items through which elites displayed (and through sumptuary laws reinforced) their social status, competing with each other and advertising their colonial possessions. The lust for pearls, as Donkin says, epitomized 'the entrepreneurial spirit – and the unparalleled greed – of the Age of Discoveries' (1998: 333).

The biography of pearls allows us to explore hitherto unacknowledged aspects and implications of Columbus's AD 1492 encounter. It forces us to reassess the wider issues of brilliant objects in indigenous Amerindian worldview and, consequently, to construct a different framework for understanding the nature of initial contacts (Saunders 1998: 233–41). By following the movement of pearls from America to Europe we see how their re-contextualization changed the lives and relationships not only of Amerindians, but of European monarchies and societies as well. The trade in pearls produced a mystical and

seductive image of the Americas in European eyes, began unravelling the cohesive integrity of indigenous cosmologies, and illustrates the extent to which objects make and re-make people just as much as people make and re-cycle objects.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the following for their insights, help and encouragement during my researches into this topic: George Hamell, Jeffrey Quilter, Suzanne Küchler, Mary Helms, Clive Ruggles and Maggie McDonald. I would also like to acknowledge the financial support of Dumbarton Oaks (Washington), Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies (Crystal River, Florida) and the Leverhulme Foundation (London).

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