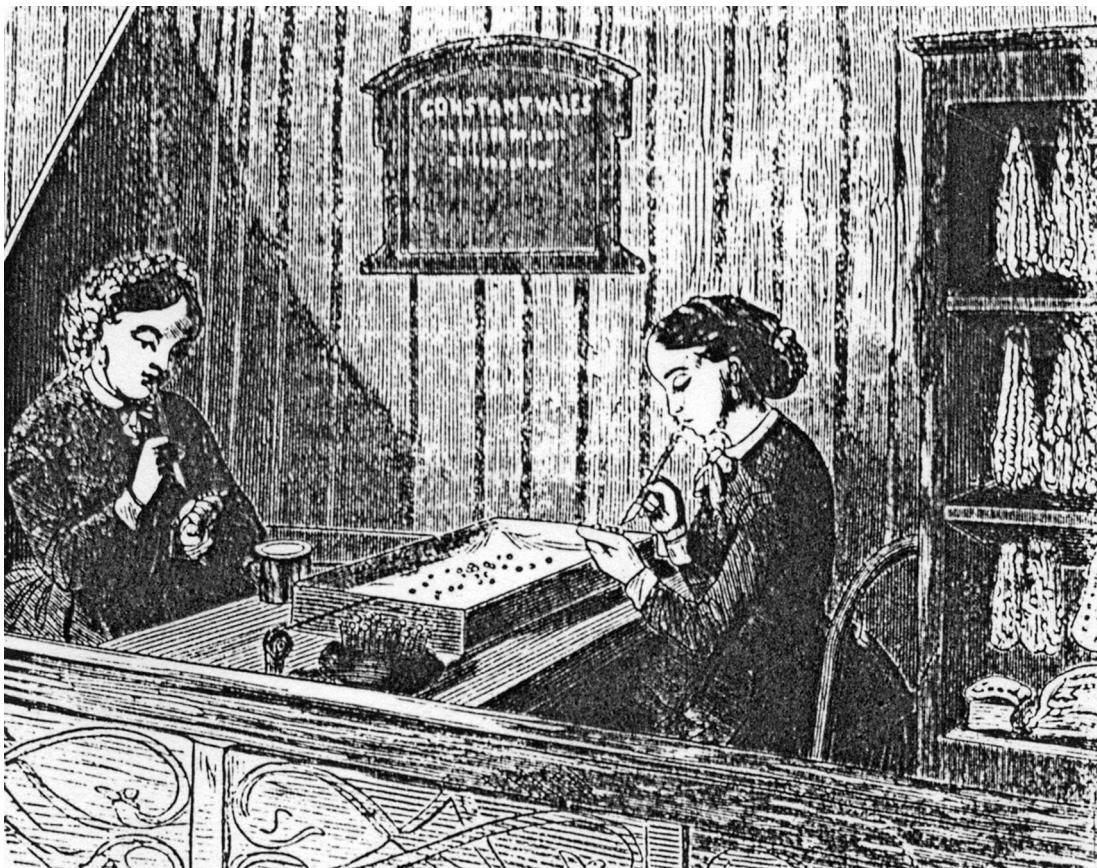


ARTIFICIAL PEARL MAKING: EMPLOYMENT FOR WOMEN

[This item appeared in the January 1871 issue of *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine* (Vol. 82, No. 487, pp. 65-67), published in Philadelphia. It provides a relatively detailed description of the production of faux pearls as practiced in France, highlighting the role women played in their creation. The plaque on the wall in the illustration mentions Constant Vales, possibly a familial member of the M. Valez & Co. mentioned below.]

A considerable portion of the various operations of pearl-blowing, as of fan making, is carried out by women. Although this work is but poorly remunerated, yet, as affording employment to many hundreds of women, it would be a useful introduction into America.

The first mention of artificial pearls is found in 1318. M. Lazari, in his "Notizie delle opere, d'arte e d'antichità," tells us that the makers of them, called "chaplet makers" and pearl makers," were established at Vienna and Murano, and formed a sufficiently numerous body to require an express statute for their regulation. Although even at that time the large export of pearls to the East brought large sums of money to the Venetian republic, it would appear that it had not yet reached its apogee for the same author adds: "The fabrication of artificial pearls, by means of the glassblower's lamp, confers immortality on the name of Andrea Vidoare, to whom we owe, if not the inventing, at least the perfecting, of this process in 1528." The manufacture is now carried on chiefly in Rome, Venice, and Paris, and in those cities it



has reached a dangerous excellence. So perfect beyond all others are the French imitation pearls that it is difficult for the practiced eye of a jeweller to distinguish the true from the false. The French are very happy in the production of black pearls. The perfection of these imitations renders them all but indistinguishable from the real pearls. The process of the manufacture of these charming little articles is carried out in the following manner:—

The pearl-blower's workshop is of the simplest character. It is composed of a little table almost a yard long, on which is placed a lamp with a thick wick, which, fed either with oil or lard, gives forth a long jet of flame—this flame being regulated by a bellows arranged under the table, and moved by the foot of the operator. On this table are placed some hollow glass tubes of different kinds. Some of ordinary glass, which are used to make the common kinds of pearls; others of a slightly iridescent tint are only employed for the best description, known commercially as "Oriental pearls." The secret of the composition of the latter kind of glass, due to the researches of the chemist, M. Pierrelot, who died some years ago, now belongs to the house of M. Valez & Co.

We will now describe how the pearl-maker, with the aid only of a tube of hollow glass (precisely the same as a child's peashooter), is enabled to produce pearls of all kinds, some of which, by the beauty of their form and their opaline lustre, can with difficulty be distinguished from the finest Oriental variety. The pearl-blower, seated at the table, has the lamp before him. On the right are placed tubes of very small dimensions; the size of the tube employed naturally is in proportion to the size of the pearls required. The first operation of the workman is to draw out the tube—that is to say, to increase its length, to diminish its diameter. The tube being drawn out to the required dimensions, he breaks it into minute fragments; he then takes up one of these fragments, and presents one end of it to the lamp. As soon as the glass begins to liquefy, he blows softly into the tube, which, though drawn out, retains the internal passage, and the air dilating the warmed end, a globule is formed. This globule will eventually be the perfect pearl; at present it is incomplete, for in order that it should assume a faultless form three operations are indispensable—firstly, the piercing, which consists of two holes if the blower is making round pearls for necklaces or of one hole only if he is making round or pear-shaped pearls for ear-rings, buttons, etc.; secondly, the required form, whether round or pear-shaped; thirdly, the coloring of the interior of the pearl.

The double piercing necessary to admit the string, which is to unite the pearls, and form them into a necklace, is done at the moment when the glass, still of a spheroidal form, and adherent to the tube, is yet ductile. The first hole

is made in the lower half of the pearl by the breath only of the blower, and the second is the natural result of the hollow of the tube at the point where the pearl is separated from it by means of a sharp tap.

All artificial pearls are made in the manner here described; but what are termed "Oriental pearls," being the most exact imitation possible of the real article, require a still further application of the pearl blower's art. Although the method of manufacture is precisely similar in both cases, the so-called Oriental pearls are distinguished from the commoner kinds, not only by their being made of an opalescent glass, but by the care the blower bestows on their form, as well as on their varied internal tints.

Every pearl buyer knows the difficulty of finding a pearl without defect, not in the material of which it is composed, but in shape and color. The art of the pearl blower, then, consists in the production of the best possible imitation of Nature; his talent is evinced not only by his neutralizing the exact regularity obtained by blowing the pearl, but he must produce on it the effects usually found in natural specimens. The work requires long practice, and is the fruit of careful and patient observation. An artist in pearl blowing ought to be sufficiently acquainted with the appearance of real pearls, only to place on his own productions such defects as shall, by the aid of skilfully devised reflected lights, enhance the beauty of the work he has completed. In order to obtain this important result, the blower, taking advantage of the instant while the pearl yet adheres to the tube, takes a small iron instrument, with which he strikes lightly on certain portions of the pearl that are yet malleable. It is this last labor which, producing on it here an elevation, there an almost imperceptible depression, ends by forming a pearl which, losing its mathematical regularity, becomes a perfect imitation of nature. At this point the blower has finished his work. The pearls, which as yet are only morsels of colorless glass, will now pass into the hands of workmen whose business it is to give them the requisite coloring.

Although the work of coloring which will now be described is the same in all pearls, yet as the manufactured pearls are divided into two categories neutralizing—neutralizing ordinary pearls and oriental pearls neutralizing—neutralizing it is evident that two kinds of workwomen are necessary to finish them off. One undertakes the coloring of the ordinary ones; the other of the finer kinds. We shall only detail the method of coloring the latter sort; it merely differs from the other process by requiring a larger amount of finish. Our illustration exhibits the process of finishing. It will be observed that each workwoman has before her a series of small compartments, containing altogether several millions of pearls, so arranged that the side with the hole left by the blower is on its upper surface. Before

introducing into it the coloring matter, which would be too easily detached from the glass if it were not consolidated by some fixing medium, each pearl receives inside it a very thin layer of a quite colorless glue made from parchment. This layer being spread over the internal cavity of each pearl, the workwoman takes advantage of the moment while it is yet wet to commence the real coloring operation.

The workwoman, taking up her slender hollow tube of glass, dips it into a paste composed of the scales of a tiny fish called bleak, of which she blows a certain small quantity into each of the pearls. Reference to the illustration will show the figure on the left hand in the act of performing this operation. The pearls are now finished, and have to be sorted and packed for the purpose of commerce. The fish-scale paste now used in filling the pearls is said to be the discovery of a Parisian chaplet maker, named Maître Jacquin, in 1686. It was a most useful and fortunate discovery for up to that period artificial pearls were colored by quicksilver, and its emanations proved most deleterious to the health of the workpeople employed in the manufacture.

Colored pearls are made in precisely the same manner as the white varieties, except that instead of the bleak-scale paste a compound of the color desired in the pearl is blown into it.

It has already been stated that the women practisers of this art gain but a poor livelihood; in order to earn from three and a half francs to four francs per diem, they must color forty thousand pearls. Still, even this rate of pay contrasts favorably with that obtained by needlewomen, and induces us to wish for the introduction of this branch of industry, into our own fields of labor.

Introduction paragraph by
Karlis Karklins
Independent Researcher
Ottawa, Ontario
Canada
karlis4444@gmail.com