

IMITATION PEARLS IN FRANCE

Marie-José Opper and Howard Opper

To achieve the perfect imitation pearl has been the goal of numerous European beadmakers for over 700 years. In France, the art of making false-pearls spread rapidly after Jacquin discovered how to fill hollow glass beads with a pearl-like substance in the 17th century. Since that time, many diverse recipes have been tried and used to satisfy the French public's enormous appetite for affordable, yet elegant, imitations of fine pearls. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, these types of beads became even more popular than before, as they emerged as the principal components of costume jewelry worn by celebrated stage personalities.

EARLY IMITATION PEARLS

Desired not only for their beauty and worn as jewelry in France, fine pearls were also sold by apothecary shops as medicine several centuries ago. A liqueur was made with them and used to cure various illnesses. On his doctor's orders, Louis XIV took tablets mixed with pearls and gold as medication in the mid 17th century (Franklin 1905:409). For whatever purpose, only the wealthiest could afford fine pearls. However, this did not detract in the least from the general population's unabating desire for faux pearls. The beauty and status these imitations convey have served to assure an ongoing and enormous demand for them over many hundreds of years in France. Imitation pearls were mentioned as early as the 13th century in *Le livre des métiers*, a compilation of corporate by-laws in which, for unknown reasons, sale by mercers of these items was forbidden (Boileau 1270:Article 6, Title LXXV). Unfortunately, there is no known contemporary documentation that describes these beads or their method of manufacture.

Before Jacquin's important discovery in 1686, mercury was used to give hollow clear-glass beads a pearl-like luster. As a merchant dealing in these beads, Jacquin was well aware of the toxicity of the substance and the health hazards for both makers and wearers. It was his daughter-in-law's request for a necklace of false pearls that prompted Jacquin to develop a method for making the beads without the use of mercury. He found that mixing ammonia with the scales of the bleak, an European freshwater fish, produced a paste that well imitated the luster of pearls (Sauzay 1884:223-225). The use of this paste, called *essence d'orient*, to coat the inside surface of clear blown-glass beads spread rapidly throughout France. The interior was then filled with wax.

Glass was not the only material used to make imitation pearls toward the end of the 17th century. According to Haudiquier de Blancourt (1697), there were several recipes which utilized other substances. He considered glass to be an inferior material for this type of bead, due not only to its fragility, but also to the dangers of using mercury to color it. De Blancourt also downplayed the bleak-paste method, because both the paste and the wax melted in warm temperatures.

De Blancourt offers two different recipes in his 17th-century work on the secrets and curiosities of the art of glassworking. The techniques are interesting in their method of producing large beads from very small pearls. In the first, a mixture of vinegar and turpentine is distilled. Small seed-sized pearls, strung on silver or gold wire, are suspended over the distilled solution, and all of this is placed in a double boiler (*bain-marie*) for 15 days. A paste is made from the softened pearls which is formed into beads in silver molds lined with gold. The beads are dried in the sun, suspended once again on silver or gold wire. After drying, they are



Figure 1. Eighteenth-century workshop with women filling hollow glass beads with *essence d'orient* (Diderot and d'Alembert 1751-1752:Pl. iii).

placed in a stream for 20 days, where they become as hard as they were originally. Next, the beads are soaked in a solution based on mercury and slaked lime for 15 days. Finally, they are placed in a hermetically sealed container that is lowered into a well for 80 days (de Blancourt 1697:544-547).

The second method is faster. Seed-sized pearls are crushed into a fine powder which is dissolved in alum water. The resulting paste is washed with distilled water, then with bean water. The paste is double boiled for 15 days. It is then formed into beads in gold-lined silver molds and dried. The beads are next wrapped in a sheet of silver foil and stuffed into the body cavity of a barbel, a large freshwater fish. The fish itself is covered all over with a barley paste and cooked in an oven like a loaf of bread. To make the beads lustrous, they are then cooked in a mixture of herb juices, *gratuli*, alum, a small amount of powdered pearls, saltpeter and lead oxide. If the beads are not hard enough after drying,

they are cooked once again, this time in a mixture of calamine, sulfuric acid and egg whites. The final step is to wrap them in barley paste and bake them in an oven (de Blancourt 1697:552-555).

The production of false pearls continued to grow in the 18th century. A mid-century encyclopedia covering handicrafts and manual trades includes a three-page segment illustrating the process (Diderot and d'Alembert 1751-1772:*l'émailleur*, Pls. i-iii). Plate iii in the series (Fig. 1) describes the manner in which blown glass beads were filled with *essence d'orient*. The *essence* was sucked into a pipette and then blown into the bead which was then attached to a waxed stick and plunged into a bowl of melted wax. The final step involved piercing the wax core to produce the hole. To further enhance their luster, false-pearl beads were made using a special opale-scent French glass called *girasol* (Barrelet 1954:119). Traditionally, men were responsible for blowing the glass beads, while women filled them.

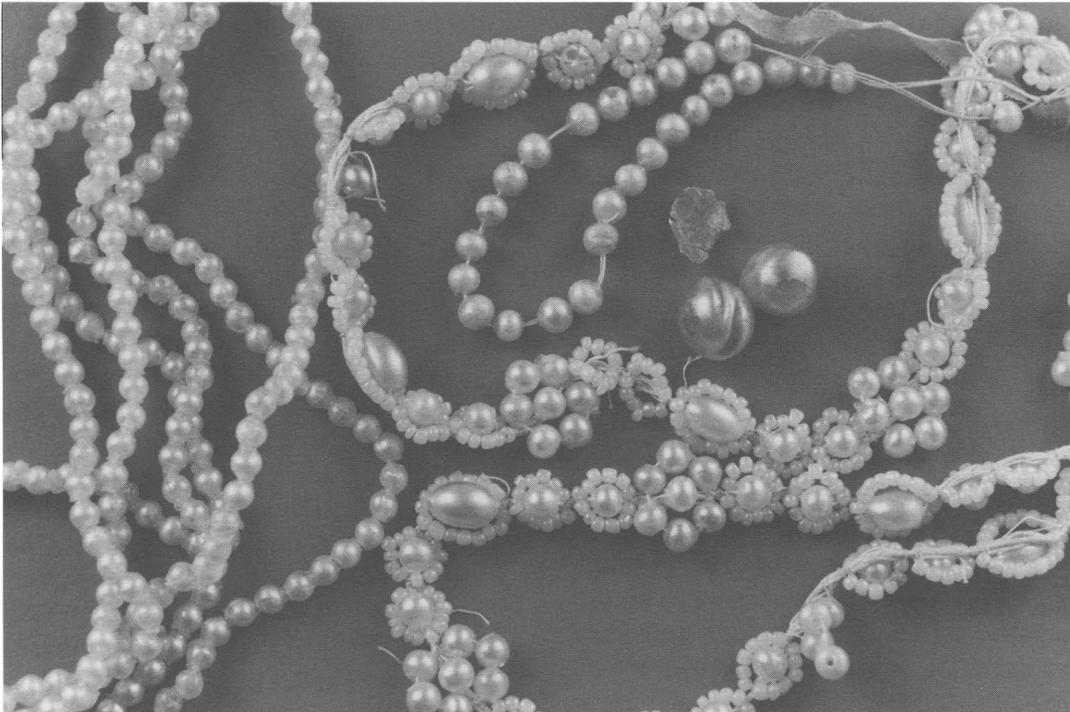


Figure 2. Examples of wax-filled glass beads, late 19th century (Opper collection).

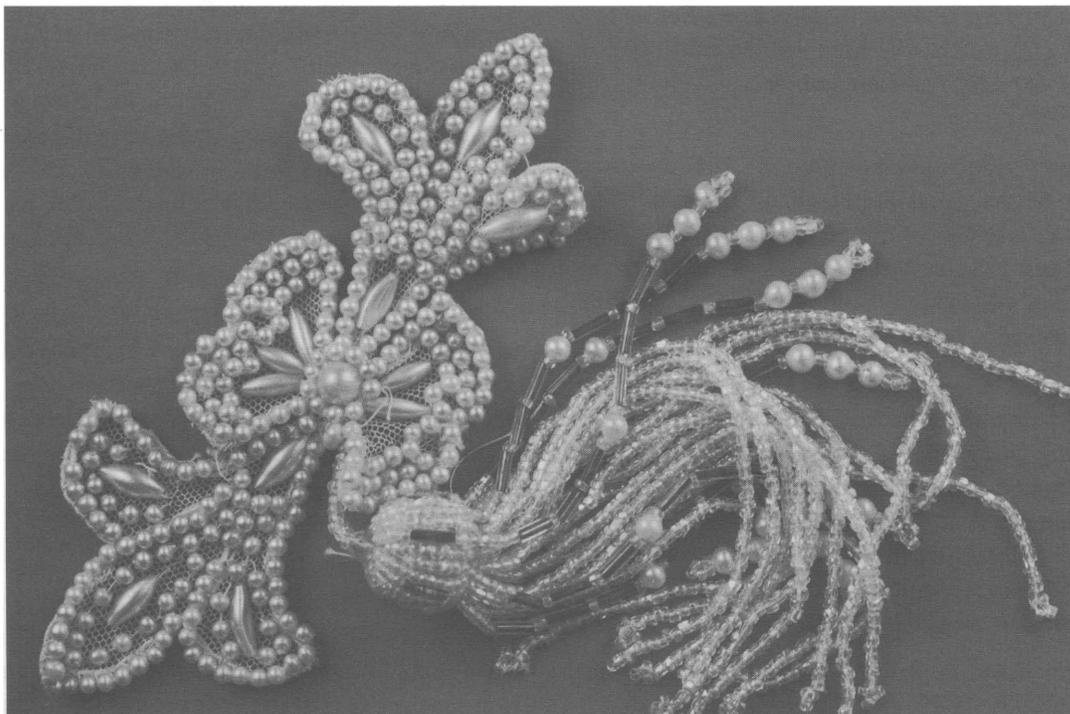


Figure 3. Ornaments fashioned from wax-filled glass beads, late 19th century (Opper collection).

FALSE PEARLS IN THE 19TH CENTURY

The techniques for making faux pearls remained essentially the same through the 19th century. Beadmakers continued to imitate nature by creating irregular as well as perfect shapes (Figs. 2-3). An experienced lampworker could make up to 300 hollow glass beads in one day (Sauzay 1884:220-221). Although somewhat difficult to imagine, Sauzay (1884:226) also reported that a good worker was capable of filling 40,000 beads per day.

Under the rubric of "beads," 19th-century trade almanacs provide a wealth of information concerning the names and addresses of beadmaking workshops. In 1805, a man named Truchy is mentioned as Jacquin's grandson and inheritor of the business which continued to make high-quality imitation pearls for export as well as for the French market (*Almanach du commerce de Paris* 1805-1806). Truchy's address is given as 10, rue du Petit-lion Saint Sauveur, Paris, which is the same street mentioned by du Pradel (1692,I:248) as the location of several vendors of Jacquin's false pearls in the 17th century. In 1842, Truchy purchased a second workshop on the same street. He named his two studios *Aux Trois Perles* and *La Grosse Perle*, and it was here that he continued to make beads for the Parisian public as well as for export.

The Truchy name appears again in 1865, this time in the form of the great-grandson of Jacquin. The workshops won several prestigious international awards between 1851 and 1862, and it is probably the great-grandson who provided information about the life and legend of Jacquin to Sauzay (1884:221-225).

Other imitation-pearl beadmakers found in 19th-century almanacs include Audy, Tiby, Bouche, Bourguignon, Dumeniel, Fenet, Genielle, Hedelin, Lebrun, Touguant, Topart and Rouyer. Among these names, those of Audy, Bourguignon and Topart continued on into the next century (*Annuaire-almanach du commerce* 1900:2222). Topart's name eventually became a registered trademark.

An advertisement for a shop where imitation pearls were sold in 1865, describes in romantic detail the new trend toward free-spirited, more-whimsical

jewelry and attire. Aptly named *A l'Ombre du Vrai* (In the Shadow of the Real), the shop was located in the heart of Paris:

There exists a pretty and almost mysterious small shop on the rue Vivienne that is illuminated night and day, and where one can see the richest and most elegant women slipping in and out. What is this stylish little shop? It is one of the temples of coquetry, a salon where one can experiment with the shadow of the real. It is the place in Paris with the most glitter, where "diamonds and pearls" are the least expensive, because *l'Ombre du Vrai*, as its name implies, offers the sparkle and the allure but not the value. Here can be found a thousand new inexpensive items that are such perfect imitations of the real that even the rich wear them, fooling all but those who know their secret (Mereau 1865:63).

THE 20th CENTURY

In the 20th century, others took out registered trademarks including Biardot in Paris, and the Société Anonyme des perles Leuret, located in Proverville, Troyes and Ferte sur Aube. Other trademark companies dealing in false pearls had their workshops outside France, including Gablonz and Venice. These include Scheidel, Schindler, Schwonk, Strauss, Veit, Zeller, Fried (who still exists in Paris), Heusch (Société des Perles des Indes) and Huck (*Annuaire-almanach du commerce* 1900:2221-2222).

Paiseau-Feil, another Parisian beadmaker, was responsible for several patents both in France and outside. In fact, the Archives de l'Institut National de la Propriété Industrielle (France 1904-1949) contain a large number of patents from the beginning of the 20th century concerning the process of making imitation pearls:

1904: Patent 339.171 was issued to Paul Perdrizet for fabricating false pearls from gelatin into which a cotton core was introduced. As the gelatin dried, irregular forms resembling real pearls were obtained.

1906: Patent 360.545 allowed Elias Maalouf to produce celluloid beads soaked in a solution of nitro-cellulose mixed with *essence d'orient*.

1910: Patent 408.041 went to K. Wirth to make press-molded gelatin beads using grooved molds.

1912: Patent 442.196 to Marcel Kraus for the application of *essence d'orient* and then of gelatin onto the surface of glass, opal or nacreous beads. The gelatin layer was iridized and rendered waterproof and wear-proof. In this particular patent, it is of interest to note that the core of certain false pearls was made of opal, which lent an iridized effect to the outer layers of *essence d'orient* and gelatin.

1913: Patent 463.060 issued to Aimé Potiez to use a wooden core covered with *essence d'orient*, gelatin, then varnish. Several diverse names given to imitation pearls are mentioned in this patent, including *primes-perles*, *blues-perles* and *soufflures*. Interestingly, *soufflure fine* is also the name given to real Baroque pearls that are hollow.

1913: Patent 473.533 to J. Paiseau for a beadmaking procedure.

1921: Patent 521.126 to J. Paiseau for a substance replacing *essence d'orient*.

1924: Patent 570.208 to J. Paiseau for the fabrication of a nacreous material. Paiseau called this Nacrolaque, which was widely used in costume jewelry, furniture and other decorations. (Pl. IVA-IVB depict necklaces made by Louis Rousselet, using beads made from Paiseau's Nacrolaque.)

1924: Patent 583.457 to J. Paiseau for diverse products imitating pearls and nacre.

1927: Patent 634.408 to J. Paiseau for working condensed resins into beads using a lampworking torch.

1930: Patent 684.956 to Robert Schneider, in association with Poelman Battut and Laurent, for the fabrication of perfumed imitation pearls. (Although the idea never seems to have caught on, the beadmaker was able to add different per-

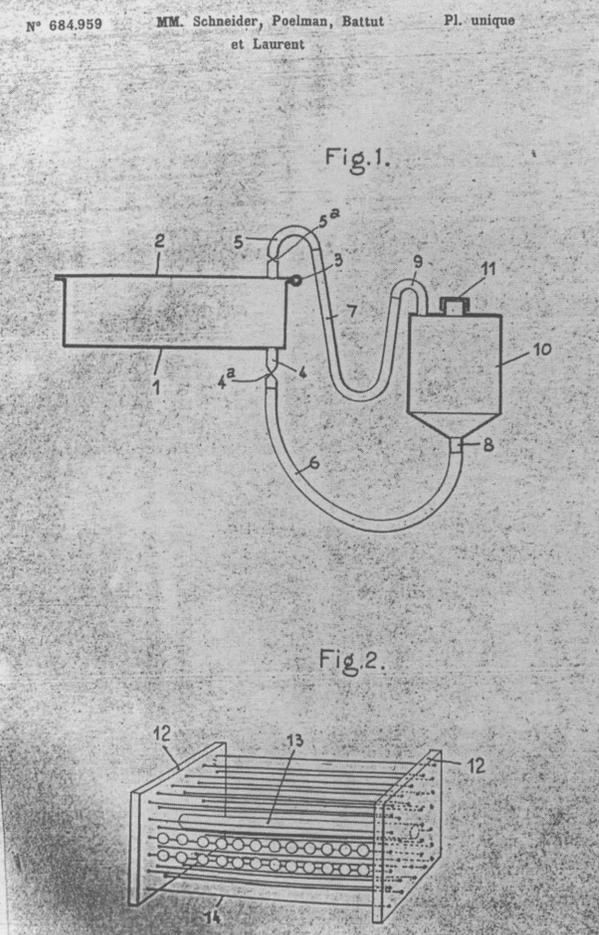


Figure 4. Robert Schneider's patent no. 684.959 for varnishing beads (Archives de l'Institut National de la Propriété Industrielle).

fumes to his mix, giving the beads a distinct aroma.)

1930: Patent 684.958 to Robert Schneider and associates for a process to iridize beads.

1930: Patent 684.959 to Robert Schneider and associates for a device to varnish beads (Fig. 4).

1949: Patent 948.442 to Poelman for improving the fabrication of imitation pearls by reducing labor time and economizing on the varnishing process.

1949: Patent 1.000.763 to Jean Barracas for a new product imitating pearls which consisted of fish eyes boiled in a solution of sodium chloride. After drying, they were soaked in vegeta-



Figure 5. Mademoiselle Chylda, French turn-of-the-century actress, wearing several strands of false pearls (postcard).

ble oil, dried once again, thus obtaining “practically unbreakable beads of great beauty.”

The attraction of faux pearls expanded rapidly during the first quarter of the 20th century. An increasing number of small and medium-sized workshops were established to meet the public’s growing demand. In addition to those already mentioned for their patents, the following individuals who operated workshops also deserve recognition: Fernand Petit (the family still runs an antique jewelry store in Paris called La Licorne), Vincent Alexanian, Boucher, Gillot, Gauthier, Stichelbaut, Van Laar, Gripoix and Rousselet. Numerous postcards of the 1900-1912 period reveal not only the popularity of



Figure 6. Mademoiselle Cassive, French actress, turn of the century, wearing a choker of false pearls (postcard).

imitation-pearl jewelry and trimmings, but also provide insight as to the fashions of the time (Figs. 5-7; Pl. IVC).

Gripoix, like most other workshops, was a family-run business handed down from generation to generation. The House of Gripoix was an important supplier to the high-fashion industry, particularly to Chanel. In fact, Coco Chanel initially ordered copies of certain pieces of her own original jewelry, and it was from this time on that Gripoix began furnishing her with the nacreous glass-bead jewelry that became her trademark (Opper and Opper 1991:53).

Another important beadmaker was Louis Rousselet, whose Paris workshop employed up to 800 persons in Paris during the period between the



Figure 7. “La belle Faguette,” turn of the century, wearing strands of false pearls in various ways (postcard).

two world wars (Figs. 8-9). Like his contemporary Gripoix, Rousselet made costume jewelry for the high-fashion industry, as well as for performers at the famous Paris cabarets of the time such as the Casino de Paris, Moulin Rouge and Folies Bergère (Fig. 10; Gumpert 1988:5). Josephine Baker and Mistinguett, the most noted of the cabaret stars, were among Rousselet’s best customers. Although the workshop closed its doors in 1975, the beadmaker’s creations can still be purchased at the boutique Jeanne Danjou, owned by Rousselet’s daughter and grandson, on the Pont Neuf in Paris (Fig. 11; Pl. IVD).

Mistinguett was considered the queen of the Roaring Twenties in France, becoming a symbol of the sumptuous luxury displayed in the entertainment world of the time (Coquart and Huet 1996:152-153). From the midst of equally fabulous and glittering settings, she would enter the stage in wildly incredible costumes, resplendent with feathers and, of course, false pearls. Mistinguett was a frequent visitor to Rousselet’s workshop (Fig. 12) where, at one point, she actually sat at a torch and attempted to make a bead (Fig. 13).

In 1927, J. de Valmont described the current attraction and vogue of beads (Fig. 14). Given the past success of traditional necklaces made exclusively of imitation pearls in rose, jade green, violet and burgundy, the new and more innovative approaches combined these iridized beads and pendants with other components, such as crystal, coral and jade, to create more capricious necklaces to go with coordinated bracelets and dangling earrings. The beads were also widely used to make decorated hair pieces for evening wear (de Valmont 1927:10-12).

CONCLUSION

The centuries-old French love affair with imitation-pearl beads and pendants is attested to by the number of beadmakers who have specialized in their manufacture. From the 13th century, when Venetian beadmakers brought their lampworking techniques to France, to the invention of *essence d’orient* in the 17th century, and on to the free-spirited time between the two world wars, beadmakers continued to create new methods and techniques in order to keep up with the public’s demand for high-quality imitations. The popularity of different kinds of faux-pearl jewelry reached its zenith in the 1920s and 1930s, when famous stage personalities such as Mistinguett and Josephine Baker paraded their fabulous costumes and baubles before an adoring public. Although imitation pearls are still a popular component in jewelry, there are currently fewer and fewer French beadmakers who make these time-honored imitations of one of nature’s finest natural materials.

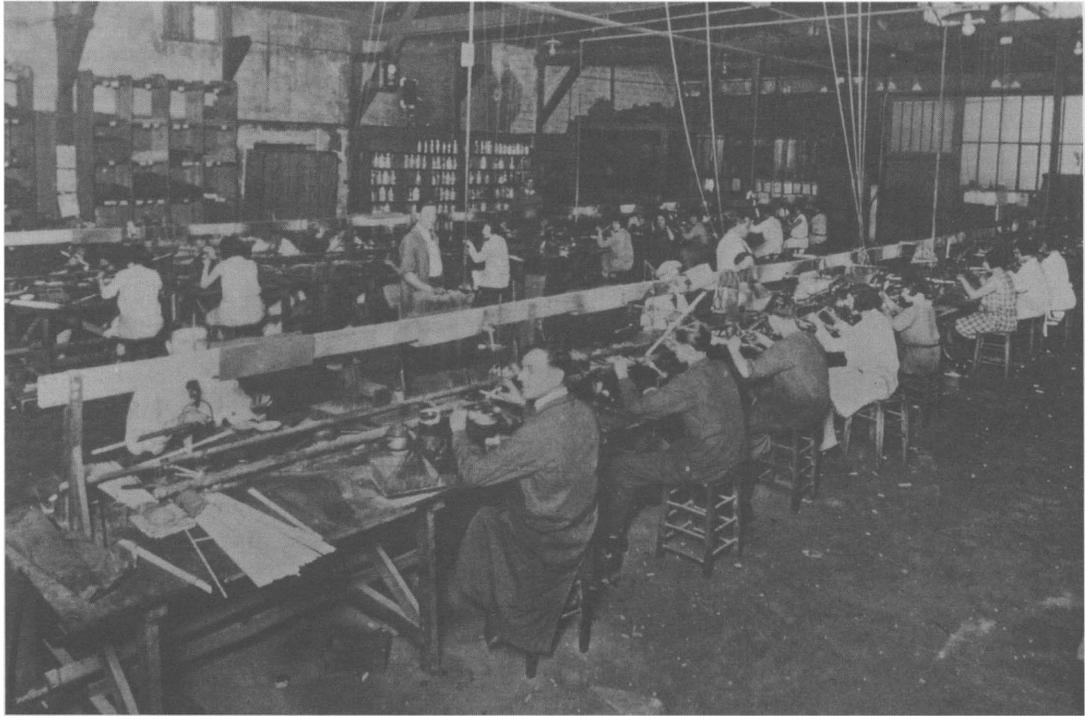


Figure 8. Louis Rousselet's glass beadmaking workshop, early 1930s (courtesy of Denise and Jean Claude Rousselet).



Figure 9. Another section of Louis Rousselet's workshop complex, early 1930s (courtesy of Denise and Jean Claude Rousselet).



Figure 10. Parisian cabaret performer festooned with false pearls (*Paris-Plaisirs* 1926:82).



Figure 11. Several of Rousselet's necklaces (photo: H. Opper).



Figure 12. Louis Rousselet's beadmakers showing off their imitation pearl necklaces, early 1930s (courtesy of Denise and Jean Claude Rousselet).

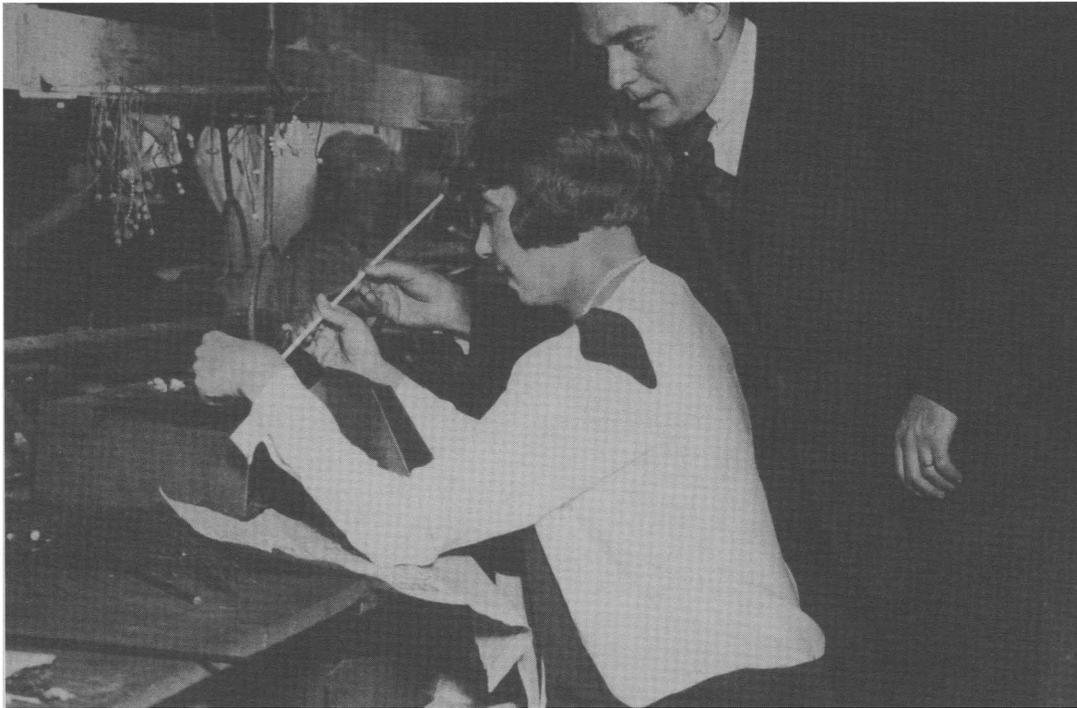


Figure 13. Mistinguett making a glass bead with Louis Rousselet looking on, early 1930s (courtesy of Denise and Jean Claude Rousselet).



Figure 14. Advertisement for Schneider's imitation-pearl jewelry (*Parures* 1926, no. 29).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the Bead Society of Greater Washington and The Bead Society of Los Angeles for their grants which allowed us to conduct much of the research for this project. Special thanks also to Denise and Jean Claude Rousselet for the photographs of Louis' workshops and of Mistinguett.

REFERENCES CITED

- Almanach du commerce de Paris, des départements de l'Empire français et des principales villes de l'Europe, An XIII*
1805-06 Paris.
- Annuaire-almanach du commerce*
1900 Vol. 2. Dido Bottin, Paris.
- Barrelet, James**
1954 *La verrerie en France de l'époque gallo-romaine à nos jours*. Larousse, Paris.
- de Blancourt, Haudiquet**
1697 *De l'art de la verrerie*. Jean Jombert, Paris.
- Boileau, Etienne**
1270 *Le livre des métiers recueil des règlements des corporations*. Paris.
- Coquart, Elizabeth and Philippe Huet**
1996 *Mistinguett, la reine des Années folles*. Albin Michel, Paris.
- Diderot, Denis and Jean d'Alembert**
1751-72 *L'Encyclopédie*. Paris and Amsterdam.
- France. Archives de l'Institut National de la Propriété Industrielle**
1904-49 XVII: Arts industriels, no. 5, Bijouterie, and GR17-CL5. Paris.
- Franklin, Alfred**
1905 *Dictionnaire historique des arts métiers et professions exercés dans Paris depuis le XIIIème siècle*. 2 vols. Leipzy, Paris.
- Gumpert, Anita**
1988 Fifty-three Years of Paris Beadmaking. *The Bead Society of Greater Washington Newsletter* 5(1).
- La Vie Parisienne**
1926 Accord en genre et en nombre. *La Vie Parisienne* 28:590 (April). Paris.
- Mereau, Jules**
1865 *Almanach des commerçants ou l'indicateur des fabricants et marchands en gros*. Paris.
- du Pradel, Abraham**
1692 *Le livre commode, contenant les adresses de Paris, et le trésor des Almanachs pour l'année bissextile 1692*. Paris.
- Opper, Marie-José and Howard Opper**
1991 French Beadmaking: An Historical Perspective Emphasizing the 19th and 20th Centuries. *Beads: Journal of the Society of Bead Researchers* 3:47-59.
- Paris-Plaisirs**
1926 Paris en fleurs. *Paris-Plaisirs* 46:82 (April). Paris.
- Parures, revue des industries de la mode**
1926 Advertisement. *Parures* 29. Edition de la Société des Publications Corporatives, Paris.
- 1927 Advertisement. *Parures* 10:28. Edition de la Société des Publications Corporatives, Paris.
- Sauzay, A.**
1884 *La verrerie depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu'à nos jours*. Hachette, Paris.
- de Valmont, J.**
1927 La Vogue et l'Attrait des Perles. *Parures, revue des industries de la mode* 11:10-12. Edition de la Société des Publications Corporatives, Paris.

Marie-José Opper
Howard Opper
9 Rue de la Faneille
66190 Collioure
France