The pearl is a naturally perfect jewel that requires no cutting or polishing, and no other gemstone matches its legacy of mystery and romance. As early as 3500 B.C., Middle Eastern and Asian societies treasured pearls as symbols of purity and feminine charm. In 19th century Europe, pearls were the favorite of royalty who valued them above all other gems. American women, too, were enamored of the pearl's opalescent splendor.

From its founding in 1837, Tiffany & Co. has been internationally renowned as a purveyor of the finest pearls. Founder Charles Lewis Tiffany (1812-1902) dispatched Dr. George Frederick Kunz (1856-1932), the company's and the world's preeminent gemologist to acquire the finest pearls for Tiffany's clientele. In 1908 Dr. Kunz authored The Book of the Pearl, which is still regarded as the definitive reference source on the gem.

The discovery of American sources for pearls contributed to the organic gem's popularity in jewelry. In 1857 a spectacular freshwater pearl was discovered in Notch Brook in New Jersey. The pearl weighed nearly one-quarter of an ounce and was purchased by Charles Tiffany, who sold it to the Emperor Napoleon III and the Empress Eugénie of France in 1860. Because of its regal owner, the pearl became known as the "Queen Pearl."

Among other famous Tiffany pearls are the seed pearl bracelet, earrings, necklace and brooch given by President Abraham Lincoln to his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, on the occasion of his first inauguration. The pearl set currently resides in The Library of Congress, in Washington, D.C.

Pearls played an important role in the unprecedented recognition Tiffany received at the great world's fairs during the late 19th century. The jeweler's lavish displays showcased the work of Paulding Farnham (1859-1927), Tiffany's chief jewelry designer whose creations won more honors than that of any other jewelry designer of his time.

Farnham demonstrated consummate skill in mixing gemstones and colored pearls, and was inspired by a range of influences from nature's flora and Native American motifs to Orientalism. Tiffany's gold medal exhibit at the Paris Exposition of 1889 featured Farnham's Hupa brooch set with pearls from Ohio's Miami River and inspired by the basketwork of the Alaska Indians; the Florida Palm brooch, with pink pearls, diamonds and a Montana sapphire; and finely detailed pearl-and-diamond spider brooches.

For much of Tiffany’s history, pearl necklaces were the most expensive jewels in the company’s collections. At the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Tiffany exhibited a magnificent strand of 38 natural pearls offered at $200,000. By the end of the nineteenth century, Tiffany was selling a wealth of waist-length pearl strands to the fashionable women of America. A necklace Tiffany assembled for New York socialite Mrs. George Gould was valued at well over one million dollars.

Tiffany jewels again won the gold medal at the 1901 World’s Fair in Buffalo. Among Farnham’s creations were an Italian Renaissance-style gold pendant set with large American pearls, emeralds, rubies and diamonds; and an East Indian style brooch with a 101-grain mauve pearl, a 64.5-carat cat’s-eye, and a 28-carat ruby.

In the early 1900s, Dr. Kunz discovered an abundance of freshwater pearls in the Mississippi River valley. Elongated in shape, these “dogtooth” pearls form the petals in the Chrysanthemum brooch. This extraordinary design, sparkling with diamond studded leaves and stems in gold and platinum, was presented in 1904 to Lillian Russell, the comic opera star.

Dr. Kunz’s devotion to American gemstones was shared by Louis Comfort Tiffany, son of Charles Tiffany and the leading American designer working in the Art Nouveau style. With the encouragement of Dr. Kunz, the younger Tiffany incorporated baroque pearls in many of his jewelry designs made by Tiffany & Co. beginning in 1907. These designs introduced America to the beauty of baroque pearls in fine jewelry.

Today Tiffany incorporates several kinds of pearls in its jewelry designs, including Akoya pearls from Japan, irregular-shaped keshi pearls, freshwater pearls, mabé pearls, and pearls from the South Seas. Farmed off the coastal shores of Australia, Tahiti and the Philippines, these luminous pearls are the largest and rarest of all pearls and can occur as white, black or golden. The warm water and large size of the mother oyster increases the nacre growth producing larger pearls, which can grow to 20 millimeters or the approximate size of a cherry. A Tiffany strand of luminous pearls from the South Seas, uniformly matched for size and color, is one of fashion’s signature statements of luxury and taste.TIFFANY & CO. and TIFFANY are trademarks of Tiffany and Company.