

BETHLEHEM PEARL BUTTONS

By Dale Parkhurst

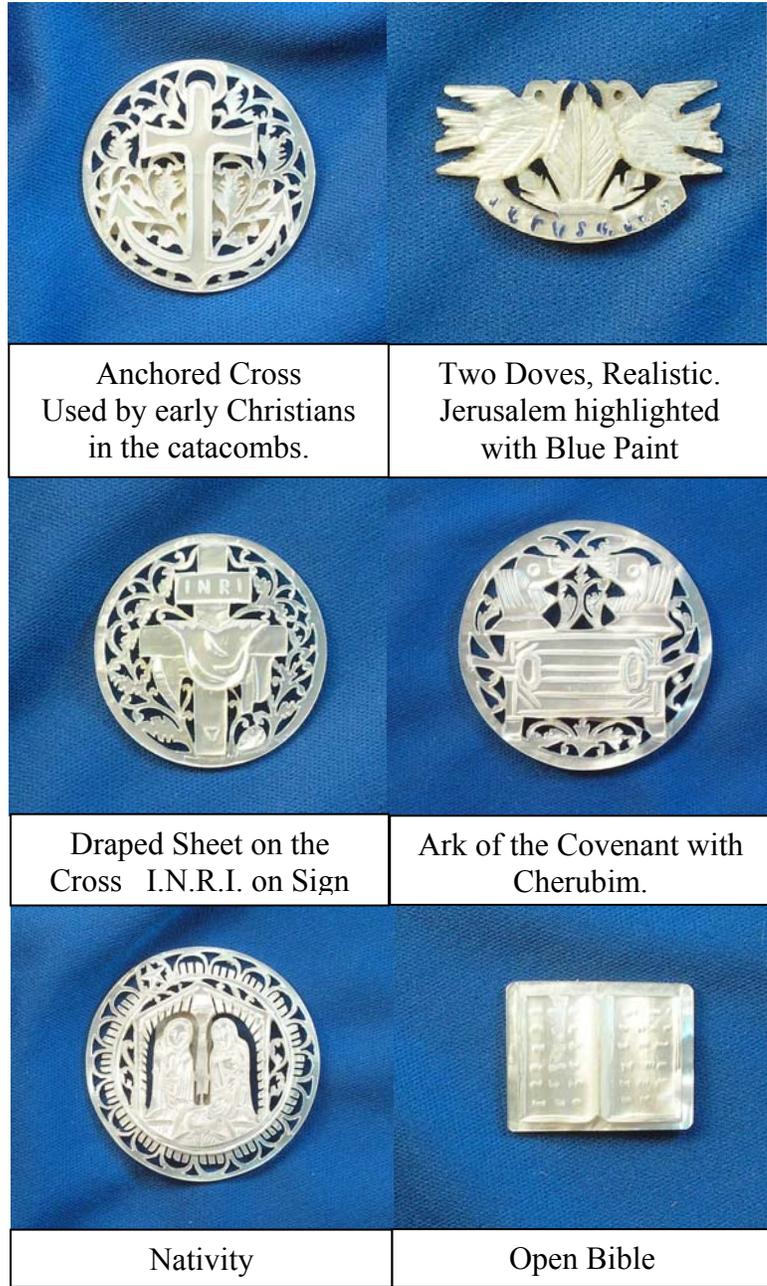
Bethlehem Pearl buttons started becoming popular in the United States when “Just Buttons” started importing them in the 1950s.

Artisans in the Holy Land have been carving religious items for centuries. Olive wood has been a favorite. Apparently the idea of hand carving pearl shells was introduced to the Christian community in Bethlehem by the Crusaders in the 12th Century.

This carving has been handed down from father to son for centuries. Using a set of primitive hand tools such as piercing saws, chisels and files, some of these buttons required as many as 1,000 strikes before completion.

These craftsmen carved the buttons from imported mother of pearl shell, originally from Australia.

According to an article in “Just Buttons,” October 1965, the Jordan Pearl buttons were made in an assembly line fashion. One person would work out the design and soak the shell in water so that it would not chip as easily when carved. Then another person would do the filigree part of the carving and another person would finish up the carving. I have a question as to how the quality of the carving was maintained with more than one person carving on each button.



The article was first printed in the Washington State Button Society Bulletin. WRBA is grateful to Dale Parkhurst and Washington State Button Society for sharing this information with us. Western Regional Button Association is pleased to share our educational articles with the button collecting community. This article appeared in the August 2007 WRBA *Territorial News*. Enjoy! Please join WRBA! Go to www.WRBA.us WRBA gladly offers our articles for reprint, as long as credit is given to WRBA as the source.

According to “Just Buttons,” Bethlehem Pearl buttons were primarily made in the 1940s and 1950s with some being made as early as the 1920’s and as late as in the 1970s. You can definitely see a difference in quality and techniques when comparing the older ones with the later ones. For the most part the older buttons are more intricately carved and pierced.

Most of the early buttons were of a religious theme from both the Old Testament and the Life of Christ. Over the years other designs were added such as flowers, fans, birds, and other animals. However, most of these designs still have a religious meaning.

There are a variety of different crosses, from ones depicting Jesus hanging on them to other varieties such as the Papal Cross and the Maltese Cross. There are also many different designs of fans, as well as snowflakes. Since these buttons were hand made there are no two that are identical even though the basic design is the same.



Symbol of St. Mark: a Winged Lion

Return of the Holy Family from Egypt



Crown of Thorns
I.N.R.I. Initial letters for Latin superscription on the cross



Gemini, part of a Zodiac set. Writing is highlighted with Blue Paint. Shank is off center at button top.



Crescent and Star with inlaid Abalone



Star of Bethlehem with Inlaid Abalone



Original Card of sew-through Star of David buttons. Dated 1943. The two center buttons are size small, 5/8 inch. The other four are about 3/4 inch. Some of these also actually measure small. Both sew-through and small Bethlehem Pearl buttons are very rare.



Back of button showing “Hand Made in Bethlehem” label and tool marks that are typical of older buttons

		
<p>Gemini, part of the Zodiac set. Probably more recent than the pierced set.</p>	<p>Newer button with polished native stone, probably limestone. (This is possibly a make up with the stone glued on an existing button.)</p>	<p>Heart, Pierced by a Dagger. Symbol for Mary the Mother of Jesus.</p>
		
<p>Seven Tongue Flame</p>	<p>Fan</p>	<p>Olive Branch</p>

There are at least two different sets of Bethlehem Pearl Zodiac buttons. One is quite intricately pierced with blue paint in some of the writing. The other set is plainer and has the Zodiac figures carved on the front with the Greek symbols.

“Just Buttons” at one time listed more than 200 designs of Bethlehem Pearl buttons. Today it is possible to find even more.

Bethlehem Pearl buttons that have abalone inlay and abalone on the surface are quite rare, as are those with paint on the surface, mainly in the lettering. Realistic shapes are also a little hard to come by. Sew-throughs made in the 1940’s or earlier are very rare, especially those that measure size “small.”

Traditionally, abalone was the only material used as embellishments, but we do own what looks like a genuine Bethlehem Pearl that has an orange stone, probably polished limestone, set on the surface. A button friend also has a button that has what looks like a piece of orange dyed

		
<p>Eagle Symbol of St John</p>	<p>Serpent and Apple in the Garden of Eden</p>	<p>Lily, Symbol of Easter and Immortality</p>

Mother of Pearl set on the front. This button also has a computer printed label that says “Made in Bethlehem” on the back. Apparently on some of the more recent buttons the carvers are adding materials other than Abalone.

So what makes them different and how can we tell we have a Bethlehem Pearl button?

Most of them are quite flat and fairly thin. The back has been cut flat and typically on the older buttons you can see striations or tool marks. The newer ones have been more polished on the back and may or may not have striations.

The carving on the front looks quite rough in that it was done with hand tools. Their size is between about ¾ of an inch to about 2 ½ inches.

Most of the older buttons have imbedded metal shanks, but since they aren’t glued in, some of them have come out and have been replaced with a variety of shanks. The newer ones have small glued-on metal shanks. Because of the design of the button, the shank may be placed off center.

Originally, most of the Bethlehem Pearls had paper labels on the back saying “Hand Made in Bethlehem Jordan” or “Hand Made in Bethlehem.” Many of the older buttons still have these labels. Some of the newer



St. Andrew's Cross

Menorah with Cross

David's Harp

Jesus Blessing the Little Children

Realistic Camel

Dove and Abalone

Ship with Cross

Jerusalem or Crusader's Cross

ones also have paper labels that appear to be written using a computer with a dot matrix printer. This would date them probably in the 1980's or more recent.

A good source of the old and vintage buttons was "Bethlehem Buttons and More." They were located in Israel and could be found on the web. I think they have since gone out of business but you might check the web site.

There are modern carved Mother of Pearl buttons that look similar to Bethlehem Pearl but they are convex and not flat and some have self-shanks. As far as I can determine none of the Bethlehem Pearl buttons were made with self shanks and they are all flat.

Noble Drake, in the 1940's, created some great buttons that are often mistaken for Bethlehem Pearl. The ones I've seen are a little thicker and are sew-throughs. They have polished backs and some are also made of colored shell.

The buttons illustrating this article come from the collections of Betty Parkhurst, Barbara Johnson, and Judy Schwenk and Jim Nolan.

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Bethlehem Buttons and More,

<http://stores.ebay.com/BETHLEHEMBUTTONSandMORE>



Abalone Cross



Hand of God. Symbol of the Father as Blessor

Bag of Silver Coins given to Judas

The Crowing Cock

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