

The Marble Maniac

Grading and Identification, Condition Issues

By Bill O'Connor

Oh, how I wish this was a cut and dried issue. If anything, it is the most subjective thing about marbles today. Everyone who sells at shows, over the counter or eBay, has their own idea of what makes a marble mint. You hear terms like, Mint, mint -, mint with minor dings, almost mint with a chigger, some pocket wear, but almost mint, nothing really bad, just a small chip or two, pretty close to mint, wet mint with flea bites, etc, etc.

There has been a concerted effort over the last 20 years to develop a uniform grading system, with some success. One of the former auction sites did fairly well with a 10.0 system, graduated into 10s, 9.0, 9.1, 9.2, etc., and it has been embraced by the reputable dealers and sellers on eBay, et al. Again, depending on the method used to employ this system, subjectivity is once again rampant. The best graders use a 20 power scope and/or magnifier to explore the surface for anything that shows up. Keep in mind that some imperfections are manufacturing issues and graded appropriately.

This brings into focus, the complexity of stating condition. We have descriptions: flea bites, pocket wear (great euphemism), chiggers, digs, dings, cold roll marks, blow-outs, surface abrasions, moons, fractures, sub-surface fragment, chips, flaws, flakes, nicks, scars, dents, scoring, scratch(es), and just plain old damage. Every one of these is in use and has a different connotation by buyers and sellers alike.

Then we have surface condition, which is used to describe the brightness or wet finish look of the glass. This also has its set of names and descriptions. When you hear "wet mint surface," you expect to see perfect glass that sparkles with clarity and no surface cloudiness or hazing. Once again, it's an oft used misrepresentation of the marble. Some handmade items in particular have a slight hazing to the surface, brought about by the annealing process, roughness caused during rounding or other issues, which sometimes can affect the overall grading of the marble. With rarity and size, these are downplayed and not as serious as with the common mibs, where they are more of an issue and will downgrade the final result.

As with all things glass, condition, condition, condition is the prime motivator for objectively considering any purchase, particularly among the rarity items. A small, (1/32") ding in a marble can cause a 20-30% drop in asking value. Items viewed with the eye will sometimes show this, most often not, hence the scope.

The other side of the condition reality, is the repair, polishing and re-annealing situation. There are reasons to polish, there are reasons to re-anneal, there are very few legitimate needs to repair marbles. This is done to cheat and fool people. Polishing, the most common method of helping with damage, is professionally done by a number of marble collectors. It is

acceptable for renewing the finish on badly scarred, hazed or pitted marbles. It is most often done with handmades, sulphides, onionskins (particularly the larger ones), swirls and other hard glass items. Clambroths, lutzes, Indians, banded opaques, etc. have a soft glass which does not lend itself to polishing repair. Indians will lose their surface color as will clams and lutzes. Machine-made marbles will often change color (mostly fading) due the heat generated by the sphere machines. As a side note, DO NOT tumble marbles in a rock tumbler or similar machine; it will make them out of round and kill the marble. Reputable dealers will always inform you if the marble has been polished as it does detract from the value, but also rescues some hard to find items from the scrap heap. It also saves rare handmade marbles which otherwise would also be discarded.

As to re-annealing, this process is where the glass is heated close to the original temperature it was manufactured at and it will remember the original shape and repair itself. Some hand finishing might be required. Errors in heating can result in glass pancakes. Marbles with fractures almost always cannot be polished or re-annealed as they will invariably break from the stress. Re-annealing is becoming more common and does a great job of restoring the marble. As a negative, they are usually too perfect and look it. The value of re-annealed marbles varies from 1/4 to 1/3 of the original.

Buffing, as opposed to polishing, is another way of enhancing the surface. This is a lesser operation than polishing and is used to remove light surface hazing and accumulated crud. All of these operations have definitive identifying characteristics and are easily spotted.

Repairing marbles is another issue. This is done to deceive people and sometimes is hard to spot. Types of repairs include matching halves, filling damage, casing the marble in polymer to erase dings and such and various other nefarious deeds. We even see some torch repair, although that's rare. Reproductions are a whole other column, which I will do later.

The common scoring system, based on a scale of 10: 10.0 unattainable perfect condition. 9.0 – 9.9 mint, takes a lot to get above 9.2. 8.0 – 8.9 near mint, 8.9 is a scratch; below that it starts to get rough. 7.0 – 7.9 very good or excellent, can have more than minor damage. 6.0 – 6.9 good, beginning to be bad news. 5.0 – 5.9 collectable, polish time. Anything below this is slingshot ammo.

Basic safeguards include buying from a reputable dealer. They will guarantee their merchandise and offer buy back guarantees - do your homework, there is no substitute for knowledge and hands-on experience. Don't forget to ask questions.

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