

# The Marble Maniac

Over the next few columns, I would like to talk about marble identification, grading, condition issues, fakes (re-worked marbles) and reproductions. Identification is the major hurdle facing the marble enthusiast, be he experienced or an amateur. Numerous books and online facilities are readily available and certainly used to a great extent, but the best way is still personally handling and examining the marble.

Handmades, those produced from 1870 thru the very early 1900s, are the most often dug and brought to me for identification. By far the vast majority of these were produced in Lauscha, Germany at one of the several glass factories in operation there. Some of the so-called China marbles, those glazed and non-glazed and decorated with different scenes, rings, bullseyes, flowers, etc., did come from the U.S., but that is an exception. The Lauscha (East Germany) factories have been very thoroughly explored since the wall came down and much was learned, as well as thousands of marbles dug at the factory being made available.

There are many categories and divisions of categories in handmades. As follows, stone marble, clay and crockery, china, German swirls, colored glass, mist and mica, Lutz marbles, solid colored swirls, (including onionskin, Joseph swirls, peppermints and mints), opaque glass, (including ballot marbles, melonballs, clambroths, banded opaques and Indians) and sulphides were some of them and there are other miscellaneous varieties. Following after were the transition or hand-gathered types, individually handmade and partially machine made. The Navarre Glass Marble and Specialty Company and James Leighton were the pioneers of these.

Then came the machine-made varieties: M.F. Christensen & Son Co., Akro Agate, Christensen Agate Co. and Peltier Glass Co. These were the major machine-made marble manufacturers and the most sought after examples. These companies alone produced close to 300 varieties, with variations on a theme abounding. The Akro Agate corkscrew pattern, arguably the most common of

the machine-made collectables, is known to have at least 1,500-plus different color combinations. At one time in the 1930s, there were at least 35 glass companies operating in West Virginia alone and a lot of them also made marbles. Keeping in mind that the early manufacturers bought and sold from each other and at one point Akro Agate, selling for a couple of years the back stock of slags from M. F. Christensen, you can imagine the confusion. We are fortunate that the factories have been very well documented and extensive knowledge exists.

Another interesting category exists, with a bit of a subculture surrounding the carpet ball or bowl genre. These date from the 1840s, coming out of Scotland and England, with some games still being played today. They are named for the game being played on carpet in the living room and on special outdoor lawn courts in Scotland (very competitive leagues still) and England. Looking somewhat like large ceramic marbles, they are also known as Taws, Parlour Alleys and Parlour Bowls. (My thanks to Paul Baumann for this info.)

Even today, with the thousands of marbles I see, the unknown still pops up, mostly in the machine-made areas, almost defying identification. What with the new German swirl now being produced and marbles flowing in from at least 10 to 12 foreign countries, it becomes a frantic chase to keep up. I would encourage anyone with questions to seek out a serious and experienced marble collector for advice and counsel. It is super easy to be fooled and certainly buyer bewareness is vital. With prices ranging from 2 cents to over a \$1,000 for individual machine-mades, with \$2 and \$200 lookalikes, proper identification is crucial. For those interested, I strongly recommend the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of Paul Baumann's book, "Collecting Antique Marbles, Identification and Price Guide," published by Krause Publications, [www.krausebooks.com](http://www.krausebooks.com). It is comprehensive and thorough.

Bill O'Connor  
"The Marble Maniac"