

The Changing Face of the Marble World

By Bill O'Connor

Twenty two years ago this May, I stepped on a marble at the local garbage dump and thus began one of the best things ever to happen with my life.

The excitement of finding jars of marbles at yard sales, my first handmade, the evolution of the learning curve, fending off my wife, who knew I was crazy, the uncertainty of going to the first marble show and the gradual confidence that came with experience and hands on knowledge.

When I first started this nutso hobby, handmade marbles from the late 1800's were all the rage, machine made were sort of frowned upon as, oh, that stuff, and contemporary marbles were almost unheard of. The value was thought to be in the handmades and it certainly was, at times reaching four figures for sought after sulphides and other rare and beautiful examples of the glass art of making marbles.

As the production of handmade marbles died off in Germany, some of the artists moved to America and began the transition period, where marbles were half hand made and half machine made. This segued into the full machine made era, which continues in a small manner today.

In the late 1930s, in West Virginia alone, there were 30+ glass factories, a good dozen or more making machine mades. These were the ones I played with as a kid during WWII, shooting all the games at the schoolyard, making forays into the other grade schools territory, trying to make my marble bag heavier, actually mostly winning, sometimes almost losing my entire marble fortune.

Then the aftermath of WWII wiped out most of the American Manuf. and the playing hobby seriously declined. Marble King, Vitro Agate (now Jabo) and a few others managed to survive, including Vacor de Mexico, the longest continually operating marble factory, opened in 1962. Marketed with a great variety of various marbles and having some appeal for the new collector. In the meantime, a flood of very inexpensive stuff from Japan, cats eyes and the like came in the '50s and continues today. These of course, were really deplored by the serious handmade collectors.

From the first small books, late '60s and very early '70s, gradually a gush of information came about the marble collectors hobby, with great pictures and identification guides of handmade marbles. Finally, late in the '80s, mention was made about "Those Machine Made" marbles. Information and history was archaeological explored, patents uncovered, research was started at the factory sites, and a literal landslide of accurate and valuable data spewed forth.

I remember in the early stages of my collecting hearing about a couple of glass makers who were experimenting with making marbles. From handmade to transitional, machine mades and now, the resurgence of actually making handmade marbles again.

At that time, the early '90s, the collecting community

could count on one hand the glass people making contemporary marbles. At the shows, no one had examples of the soon to be burgeoning community of glass artists except for one or two of the dealers, today, it comprises at least 35/40% of the hobby, with absolutely stunning artistry being displayed and sold in some instances for lots of dollars.

At the Kansas City marble show (March 2009), there will be two separate shows, One for the Contemporary makers and one for the older marble collecting group, attended by over 60-75 dealers and makers and hundreds of marble collectors.

Unfortunately, the practice of replicating the finer examples of machine made marbles began also. Some forgeries began hitting the market and many, many new collectors were bitten by the unscrupulous works of the forgers. Personally, having seen forgeries passed off as real for big bucks and having to tell the people they were fakes, is hard. In most instances, reputable, unknowing dealers will refund the cost, but so much is done over the internet, it's impossible to stop. Also occurring is the repair and re-annealing of older marbles, some good and some bad in that. Caveat Emptor for all.

Thus have we evolved, mostly for the betterment of the hobby. But we take all the pluses and minuses in hand and enjoy the camaraderie and great friends we have accumulated over the years, all of us blessed with the marble gene, mostly to the everlasting humor of our spouses.

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