

Handmade Chinese Marbles

There has been very little written about marble-making in China, prior to the introduction of contemporary Chinese marbles in the 1990s (eyeball, etc.). The production of marbles in China began in the early 1930s. Most of what we know about Chinese marble-making from this period is derived from research related to paperweight making in China.



Modern Chinese Handmade Marbles

While China has a history of glassmaking stretching back to almost 500 BC, glass paperweights were not produced in China until the 1930s. By that time, glassmaking in China had centered in the Shandong province in the North and the Suzhou environs (just west of Shanghai) in the South. By the 1920s, the collecting of mid-19th Century French paperweights (and to a lesser extent, American paperweights) as miniature works of art had coalesced



Glassmaking Regions of China

into an established hobby. American importers took note of this, and taking advantage of the cheap industrial workforce in the Chinese glassmaking industry, they had several types of collectible French (Baccarat and Clichy) and American (Sandwich and New England glass) paperweights reproduced and imported to the United States in several styles (floral and millefiori). The floral are quite rare and have become collectible in their own right. The millefiori are common and can be found at most sizeable antique shows and malls.



Baccarat circa 1850



Chinese circa 1930

There are six types of marbles that have been identified as antique handmade Chinese marbles: Millefiori, Birdcage, Sulphide, Confetti, Banded Opaque, and Transitional.



Clichy circa 1850



Chinese circa 1930

Significant differences exist between Western glass of this period and Chinese glass. Chinese glass tends to be less clear than Western glass, with numerous air bubbles and detritus floating in it. In addition, Chinese glass of this time period is a different soda ash composition from Western glass, resulting in it having less clarity and a distinctive yellowish tinge. Chinese millefiori cane of this time period can be easily identified

because the colors are duller and not as vibrant as European and American cane.

An examination of known 1930s Chinese millefiori paperweights reveals that the canes used in these marbles are the same as the canes used in some marbles that have been identified as Paperweight or Millefiori marbles. This is not to say that all Millefiori or Paperweight marbles are Chinese. Two types of Millefiori marbles exist. One type (shown here) is Chinese. The other type is German or Bohemian. The German type exhibit the same millefiori canes used in Bohemian paperweights of the 1920s and 1930s.



Chinese paperweight (middle) and 2 views of a Millefiori marble. Compare the blue canes. Also, note detritus in the third image.

The second type of marble produced in China are the Birdcage marbles. These are very rare. Paperweight examples exist as well. The glass is similar to 1930s millefiori marbles and paperweights, with air bubbles, detritus and a yellowish tinge. In addition, the colored strands that comprise the cage exhibit similar casing techniques to those found in the more complex millefiori canes.



Birdcage marble. Note detritus in the marble.



The third type of marble produced in China are the Bird/Firetree Sulphide marbles. These consist of one or two handpainted "sulphide" birds perched on branches of red glass, occasionally on a ground of colored frit, encased in clear glass. The pontil has a cold roll twisted style to it. While marbles in this motif are quite rare, there are a sizeable number of examples of paperweights, aquarium ornaments and chopstick-rests known and these are identified as 1930s



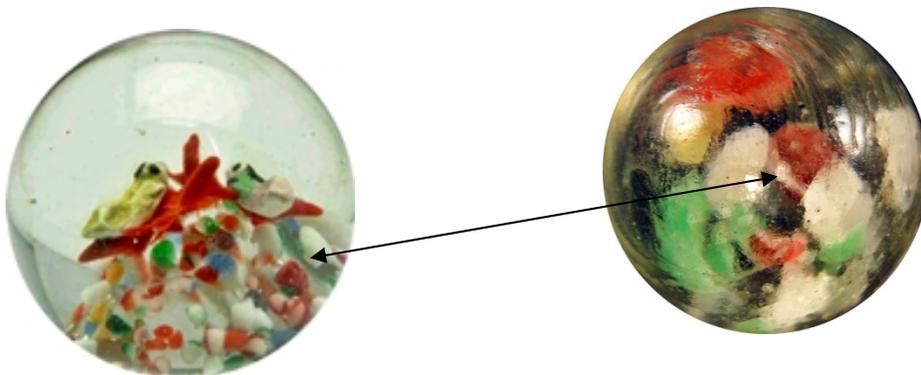
vintage. Additional handpainted "sulphide" figures have been found in paperweights and aquarium ornaments, notably fish, pandas, Buddhas and other human figures. The "sulphide" figures and their painting is almost cartoonish. It has been pointed out by some paperweight writers that the material and painting style is very similar to water-color painted Chalkware mass-produced by the Japanese during the 1930s. These "sulphides" do not exhibit the silvering seen on German sulphides, indicating that they are made of a different substance. It is generally believed that the 1930s "sulphide" paperweights were also used as aquarium ornaments. They tend to be non-

symmetrical and have “lumpy”, characteristics that would have disappeared when the glass was put into the aquarium (because the glass becomes invisible in water). Examples that are marbles are very hard to find, much rarer than paperweight examples.



Chinese paperweights or aquarium ornaments

The fourth type of marble produced in China during the 1930s are the Confetti marbles. These marbles contain the same frit seen in some Bird/Firetree Sulphide marbles and paperweights, and they exhibit the same twisted cold roll pontil that is seen on the Bird/Firetree Sulphide marbles.



Confetti marbles (right). Chinese Bird/Firetree Sulphide (left)

The fifth type of marble produced in China are the Banded Opaque. These have been found in both “leaf” and “speckled” pattern. The age and manufacture of these is unknown. Most of the examples that have turned up seem to trace back to a Shanghai dump dig site. Some marble collectors have suggested that Lightning Strike marbles are also Chinese. However, Lightning Strikes exhibit far more advanced skill than Chinese Banded Opaques and I am not aware of any ever being found at the Shanghai dump sites.



The final type of marble produced in China are Transitionals. These are transparent and opaque handgathered slag type with a twisted pontil. Again, the age and manufacture of these is not known. The twisted cold roll pontils are very similar to those found on some Bird/Firetree sulphides, and the marbles have been found at the same Shanghai dig sites as the Banded Opaques.



As you can see, much still needs to be researched about the manufacture and distribution of marbles in China during the mid-20th Century. The opening of the Shanghai Museum of Glass in March 2013 will hopefully provide answers that can fill in this chapter of marble history.

