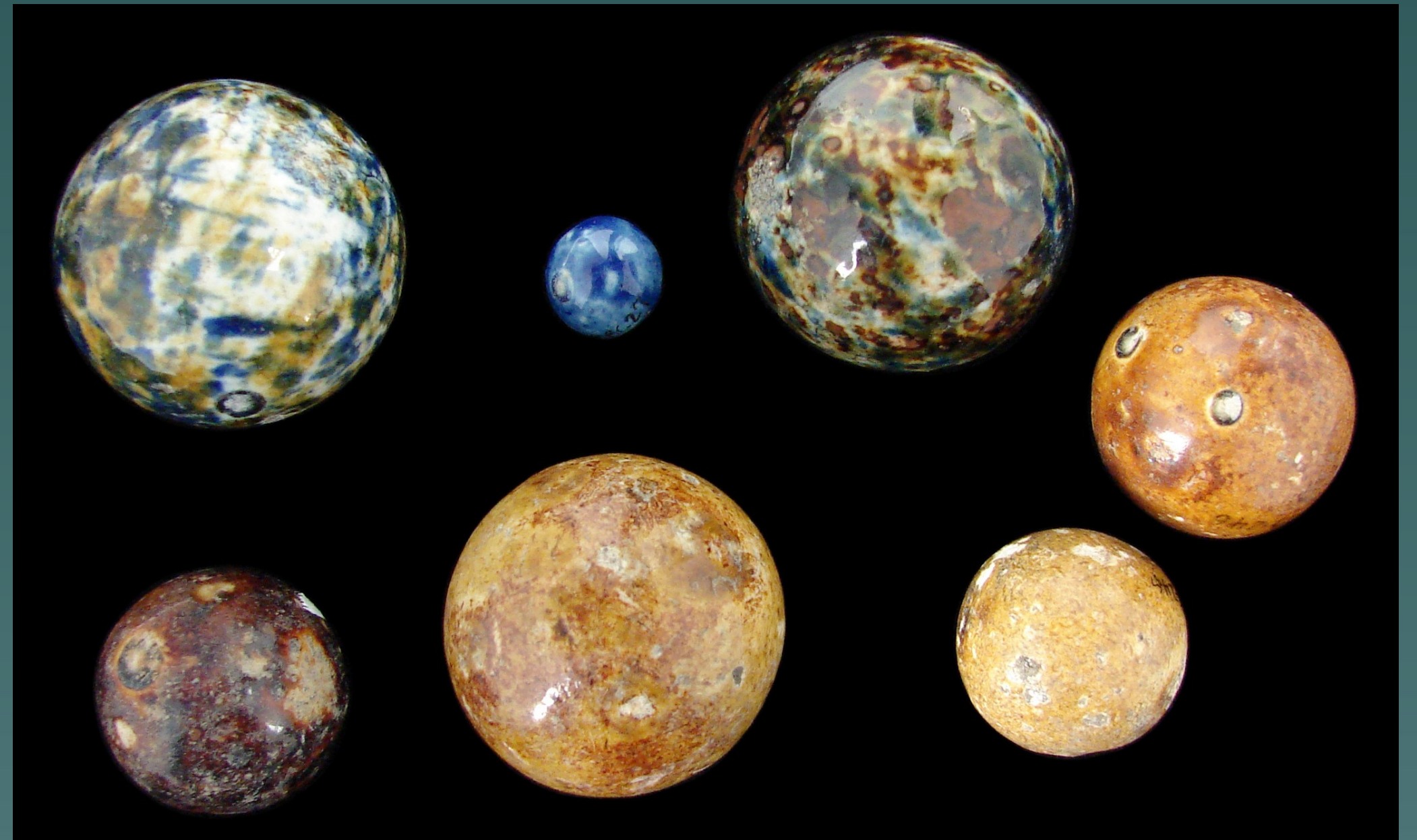


# Curator's Choice

## Anyone for a Game of Ring Taw?

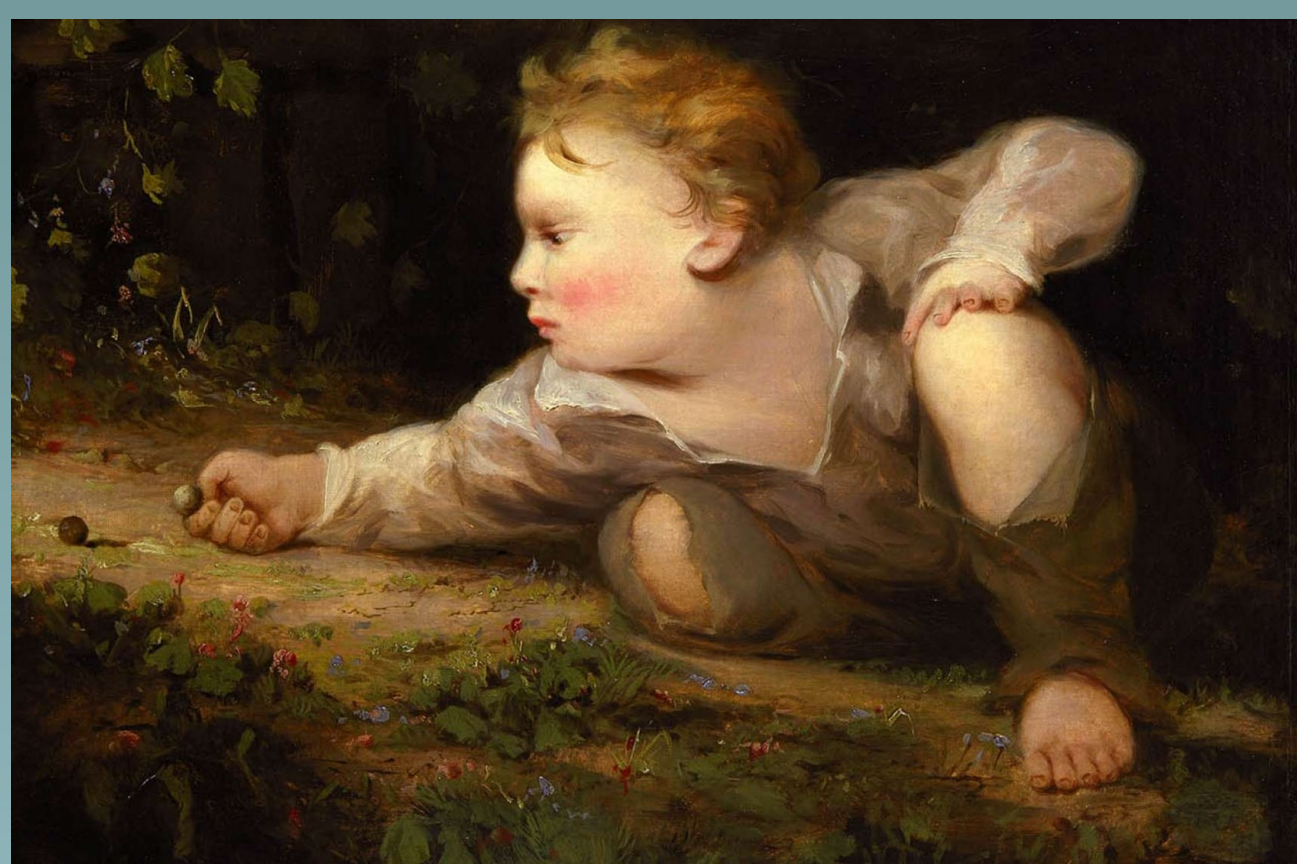
By: Patricia Samford, Director, MAC Lab

**T**aw, boulder, bumboozer, commies, masher, popper, marrididdles, shooter, bumbo, crock, bowler, tonk, godfather, tom bowler and biggie. All of these words—some commonplace, everyday nouns and the others quite curious terms—are part of a lexicon that has largely disappeared from our language. They are names once used to describe marbles.



Collection of stoneware marbles found among the collapsed timbers filling a late 19<sup>th</sup>-century cellar at the Federal Reserve Site (18BC27) in Baltimore.

**I**n this age of fast-paced digital entertainment, games with marbles must seem archaic to today's plugged-in youth. This was not always the case, though. Marbles are one of the most common children's toys found on colonial and post-colonial archaeological sites in North America. Paintings and prints of children—usually boys kneeling in a circle in the dirt playing ringers or standing in a group trading their finest specimens—abound in western art, starting as early as Pieter Brueghel the Elder's painting *Children's Games* (1560). Marbles were used in a variety of games; the only game that seemed to have been played primarily by girls was five stones, a game similar to jacks that involved a marble and four sheep talus (ankle) bones (Gartley and Carskadden 1998:23).



Boy Playing Marbles. David Gilmout Blythe, ca. 1858. National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC.

**O**ver the years, marbles were made from a number of materials, including stone, unglazed earthenware, glazed stoneware, porcelain, and glass (Block 1999; Gartley and Carskadden 1998; Randall and Webb 1988). Many marbles were made and imported from Germany, but North American production really took off in the early twentieth century (Carskadden and Gartley 1990:55).

**A**nice collection of stoneware marbles was found among the collapsed timbers filling a late 19<sup>th</sup>-century cellar at the Federal Reserve Site (18BC27) in Baltimore. These white bodied stoneware marbles, finished with a colorful glaze, are what collectors call "Benningtons" or "Bennies". Benningtons were produced during last three decades of nineteenth century and first decade of twentieth century (Gartley and Carskadden 1998:135). Typical of Benningtons, the Federal Reserve marbles have circular bare spots in the glaze, caused by the marbles resting against one another in the kiln. Some of them display pock marks on their glazed surfaces; damage typical of heavy use. They range in diameter from .5" to 1.5", with the larger marbles probably serving as shooters.

**W**hile marbles are a relatively common find on nineteenth-century archaeological sites, what makes these marbles a bit unusual is that all seven of them were found together. It is easy to imagine them nestled in a leather or cloth bag, awaiting their next game.



A British alphabet plate, probably last quarter of the 19th century, showing boys playing marbles on summer holiday. 6" in diameter. Private collection. (close-up bottom left).



David Hardy 1855. Boys Playing Marbles. Victoria Art Gallery, Bath, England.

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10515 Mackall Road  
St. Leonard, Maryland 20685

410-586-8501 [www.jefpat.org](http://www.jefpat.org)  
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