

Curator's Choice

The Sulphide, the Most Prized Marble of Them All

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Marbles in some form date back thousands of years. The ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans all played with marbles, the earliest of which were made of stone or clay (Museum of Play 2021). In the mid-19th century, the Germans were producing glass marbles in cottage workshops or small factories and, by the 1880s, were the primary exporter of these marbles to the United States (Randall and Webb 1988: 21; Chervenka n.d.).

One type of glass marble that Germany was particularly well-known for was called a "Sulphide." Sulphides are large transparent marbles with a figure of an animal, person, or object inside (Block and Payne 2001: 6; Randall and Webb 1988: 25) (Figures 1 and 2). These individually hand-made marbles ranged from 1 to 3 inches in diameter.

Early collectors mistakenly thought these figures were made from sulfur, hence the name sulphide, but they were, in fact, made from ceramic (Block and Payne 2001: 6). Making these marbles was a multi-stepped process beginning with creating the molded ceramic figure to be placed at the marble's center. This figure would need to be able to withstand the temperature of molten glass if it was to survive the marble manufacturing process intact.



Figure 1: Sulphide marble with a rooster in the center from the James Holliday House site in Annapolis. Photograph by Michael G. Block.



Figure 2: Examples of sulphide marbles in pristine condition (Federation of Historical Bottle Collectors 2012).

The marble was then created by one of two processes, the blown method or the weld method. The blown method required a glassblower to use a metal tube to blow a hollow in a gather of glass, snip an opening in the glass, and place the preheated ceramic figure inside the opening before pressing the opening closed. The air was then sucked out of the hollow causing the glass to collapse around the figure. A silvery sheen was achieved by trapping a thin layer of air between the figure and the glass. The weld method required the preheated ceramic figure to be placed in a small container and molten glass poured over it. The glass encrusted figure was then picked up on rod and encased in a thick layer of glass and shaped into a marble or simply reheated, rounded, and annealed (Block and Payne 2001: 7).

Not surprisingly, these unique marbles were valued for their size and beauty and were considered the most prized of all marbles (Bavin 1994: 10).

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