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ANTIQUE MARBLES

by LINDA McGRATH

MRS. WILLIAM McGRATH
55 THUNDERBIRD RD.
SEDONA, ARIZONA, 86336

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Marbles have an extremely old origin and represent one of the earliest games played. The Mound Builders, a race of people who lived on the American Continent before the Indians arrived, built earthen monuments which contained marbles along with other artifacts. These early marbles were made of clay or flint. They were crude in form and whether they were used in a game or in a religious ceremony is not known today.

Two thousand years ago the literature of the Greeks and the Romans recorded their use of marbles. Excavations have yielded the marbles that were written about. There are frequent references to the use of marbles in various games and sports in Roman writings a century before Christianity.

The Romans spread the use of marbles in their games throughout their conquered territories. Around the first century A.D. the writings of Britain reveal that both children and grownups used marbles made of stone in their games. As marbles became more popular in Britain, they were made from real marble, common stones and baked or dried clay.

Some of the early terms used to describe different types of marbles or parts of the game are still used today. In the earliest period there were two main types of marbles with which people played games. The first was the common clay marble or commoneys. They were inferior to the alley-tor, alleys or taws which were the prize shooters. Marble was used to make these alleys. There are two theories of how the alleys were named. One was that alabaster used to make these marbles was shortened to alley-tor and then to alley or taws. The second theory is that the name came from the word "tor", which is celtic for stone or rock.

Besides clay and marble there were china marbles with rings painted on them and they were referred to as "Bulls Eyes." Many gem stones were also used, such as carnelian agate, moonstone, flint and quartz. The Bowlers were the large glass marbles with spirals and swirls.

Many of the crockery marbles, called Bennington by dealers and collectors, were not produced in quantities by the potters of Bennington, Vermont. Therefore it is believed that most of the blue and brown glazed pottery marbles were made in Germany.

The terminology of the present time is confusing, due to the collectors' terms to describe antique marbles. There are the German spirals, swirls and candy stripes plus the solid color inside instead of stripes. These last are called onionskins or end-of-day. The glass marbles with figures inside them are called sulphides.

Germany produced the marbles made from gem stones and one of the most famous places was Idar-Oberstein. The exact date when the agate marbles were produced here is not definite but it is known that production reached its peak between 1880 and 1890. The town of Idar-Oberstein is still very famous today for its jewelry. They took a block of agate and squared it off at the corners and ground it to a round on a stone wheel with water running on it to keep the agate cool. Agates have beautiful bandings and the craftsmen knew how to cut and shape in order to have eyes in the center. They also knew how to dye or heat-treat the agate to improve the ganding.

When and where the first glass marble was made is unknown, but it is believed they were made in Venice by the old Venetian glass blowers. Actual records reveal that glass marble production began in the province of Thuringen which is now East Germany.

Glass cottages, or small factories which produced glass items, began making marbles after a glass worker invented a new work tool in 1846. The tool was called the "Marbelschere" or marble scissors. This tool made it possible for the rapid production of marbles in uniform quality. Glass rods of different colors were placed in groves on a grooved iron sheet. The glass blower blew a glass mass approximately six inches long and then the molten mass was rolled

over the colored rods. The colored rods attached themselves to the mass. By arranging the colored rods in attractive patterns and twisting the hot glass, the finished product produced beautiful swirls. Pieces were cut off the glass rod by the scissors, at the end of which was a cup and the cut section was pressed into the cup to form a ball or marble.

There were two popular methods for polishing the marbles. One was in an acid solution and the other was tumbling the marbles in rotating drums which contained a mixture of water and polishing compound.

Some American companies produced the swirls, but the finest and most beautiful were made in Germany. During World War I the supply of marbles from Germany was cut off and machines were invented in America to mass-produce marbles. This forced the companies making marbles by hand out of business.

The Spirals and Swirls come in a wide variety of styles, sizes and colors. The variety is so large it is difficult to describe the antique marbles because the terms for description are so limited. All spiral marbles have their decoration either as an inner core or color, or as a color near the surface, or as a combination of both.

Therefore, the first step is to identify the core:

1. Net type core (a large group of fine threads)
2. Solid core
3. Divided core
4. Ribbon core
5. No core

Next step is to identify the outer surface or just beneath-the-surface coloration. This coloration is composed of groups of glass threads of one color or different colors, some narrow -- some wide -- or a combination of both; some evenly spaced or unevenly spaced or anything else you can imagine.

By now you can see that the possibilities are almost endless and it is almost impossible to find two marbles with the same design. But a marble collector doesn't give up easily and the search goes on.

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COLLECTING ANTIQUE MARBLES

by Paul Baumann

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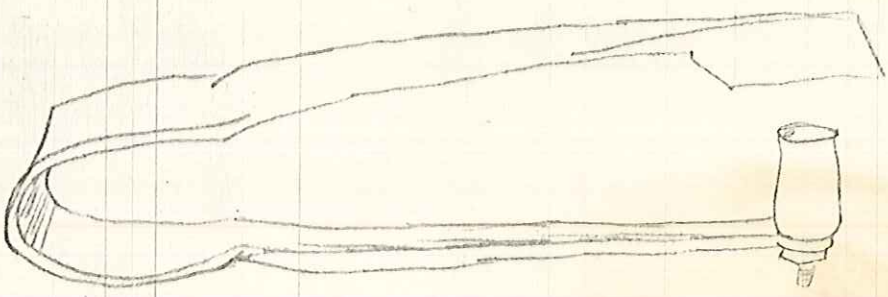
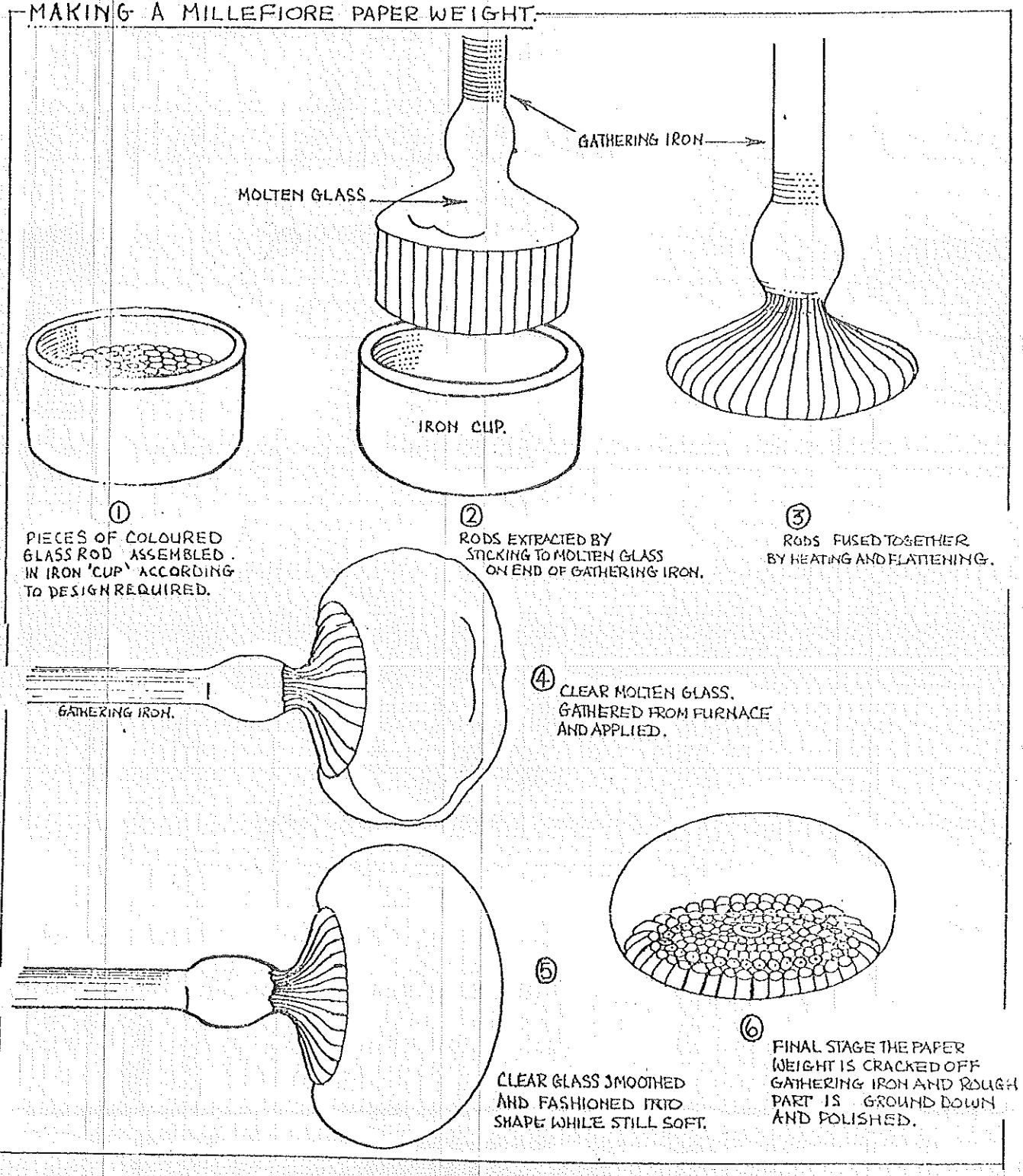


MARBLE SCISSORS

The marble cup or bowl was attached with a screw. Cups of different sizes could be interchanged with each other to make a variety of marbles.



This diagram was prepared by Whitefriars, Ltd., for use at a Trades Fair in England in 1967 or 1968. It came to ADDENDA through the courtesy of Mr. Evan Pancake, Bellaire, Texas, to whom it was given when he visited the Whitefriars factory in 1968.