

Identifying and collecting Paperweights

By Ian White

A Venetian Pietro Bigaglia is credited with making the first millefiori glass paperweight - an orb containing 'thousands of flowers' made from small coloured canes arranged like a basket or bouquet.

The French copied and extended Bigaglia's ideas and added millefiori weights to the sulphide output of ceramic medallions set in glass. Sulphides featured biblical scenes and famous persons and date from the eighteenth century. The British firms of Pellat, Ford, Kidd and Osler were famous sulphide manufacturers.

The appeal of glass paperweights requires an explanation of millefiori production. The patterned base is made by rolling molten glass on the end of a pontil rod upon an iron table. Further layers of coloured glass are added then drawn out into a thin cylinder which is cut into cross sections or canes. The cut canes are arranged using metal patterns and then cemented with clear glass. The transparent body of the paperweight is made by gathering molten glass on a pontil rod and using it to pick up the decorative pattern. Further clear glass is then gathered up forming a type of glass sandwich. The characteristic dome is shaped by rolling the pontil rod along a rail whilst holding a cup-shaped mould against the glass. Released from the pontil rod to fall on a soft surface the next stage is the annealing oven, where the paperweight is cooled gradually to avoid cracking. Words cannot describe the deft handling and clever teamwork of glassmakers and a visit to one of today's glassworks is highly recommended.

Where subjects within a paperweight stand vertical such as petals, stems, foliage or fruit they are held by tweezers before a blowlamp. Similarly animals, insects and the like are made separately then picked up and 'encased' within the dome. Millefiori paperweights may appear similar but manufacturers used their own specific designs, palettes, cutting techniques and decoration. Amongst the most expensive paperweights are the mid-nineteenth century output of the French firms of Clichy, Baccarat and Saint Louis.

Paperweights fulfil all the requirements of collecting. They are small, decorative, and useful. If you cannot afford the golden-age products of the mid-nineteenth century you can always find wonderful examples from the post-war years.

Photographs courtesy of Castle Antiques, Westerham, Kent.



Royal Doulton advertising paperweight for a Southend firm, St Ann's, who made leaded light windows. (c1930, 4in dia., £25.)



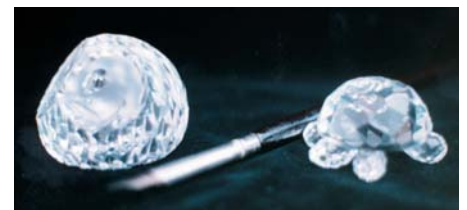
Twentieth century glass paperweights in the form of birds, snail and fish from Medina and various Scottish glassworks. Trademarks, original labels and signatures are all important. (£5-£25)



Cross sections of cables issued as advertising paperweights by Henley Cables of Woolwich. (£5-£25).



Serpentine lighthouse (£10) and sundial (£10) showing the use of natural native stone for paperweights.



Highly reflective modern glass paperweights. Swarovski paperweights carry the name, and swan trademark, and the factory has the enviable distinction of knowing that every line produced so far has risen in value. (Small animals (£40-£80).



Novelty paperweights which were multi-functional. Silver plated shoe penstand, 4in. (£20) Brass boat match striker, (£20).

Price Guide

Saint Louis (1780-1850) favoured pansies, clematis, fuschias, pears, apples, cherries and strawberries. Snakes and salamanders are particularly sought after (£2,000-£5,000). Flowers are often set against coloured, lattice or mottled grounds (£200-£500). Canes were often two coloured hollow tubes and rarely arrow heads. Tiny black and white figures included camels, dancers, devils and household animals. Particularly prized are canes carrying the initials 'SL'. Saint Louis employed heavily faceted weights and sides cut to produce octagonal weights with ground and polished windows.

Baccarat (1764-) also used black and white figures with tiny zoo animals, hunters and clowns. Rods resembling concentric stars, trefoils and quatrefoils, honey combs within flower heads, arrow heads, whirls like mini swiss-roll ends and shamrocks have also been found. Baccarat weights are often more stylised with pansies, primroses, roses, buttercups, butterflies and snakes. Small cut windows often with opaque overlays surrounding them further served to magnify the designs within. Bases can be deeply star cut. Weights marked 'B' refer to two of the factory's craftsmen, (named Battestine) not Baccarat. (Double overlay £2,000+, rare flowers or animals £1,000+, general mid Victorian output £200-£500).

Clichy (1837-) cut their paperweights in a similar way occasionally including vertical flutes between windows. Distinctive pink roses, concentric petals, stars and whorls were favoured and the letters 'C' or 'C.L.I.C.H.Y.' were picked out in some designs. Vertical flowers occur and many convolvulus, ribboned garlands and caterpillar subjects can be attributed to them. (Prices as for Baccarat).

In England the Whitefriars company made paperweights between 1848 and 1853 using concentric circles of canes under clear glass. (Early production: £300+ elaborate £100+ other).

Prized American paperweights are the products of the Sandwich Glass Company. Weights with pedestals occur and Mount Washington 'roses' (£2,000+) and 'flat bouquets' (£1,000+) are desirable.

The green and white tall bullet-shaped weights attributed to Kilner of Wakefield are commonly called 'Dumps'. The larger ones were door-stops. Heated chalk caused patterns of gas bubbles within the glass, usually multi-tiered rings of petals above a stylised plant pot. The glass was built up in layers and pressed to form trumpet shapes so a rough pontil mark is always present (£30-£100).

Modern production continues from the Scottish firms of Caithness, Perthshire and Strathearn and from the two glassworks on the Isle of Wight. All produce 'limited editions' intended to appreciate once production ends. The flood of Oriental glass paperweights are priced between 50p and £5. The clear glass appears slightly oily but some of the larger floral examples are reselling at £50-£100. The multi-faceted Swarovski crystal covers everything from animals, insects and birds to geometric designs. They are much copied but the swan trademark and quality are the key indicators of authenticity. (Mini animals £40-£80)

If glass is not to your taste try the range of paperweights made from other materials. The Victorians polished fossils and mineral samples (Ammonite £5-£10), or had multi-functional items which doubled as pen-wipers (£5-£100), ashtrays (£20-£50), string boxes (£20-£100), bells (£5-£50) and penstands (Brass stag £10-£15).

Victorian paperweights sometimes trapped scenic views under glass with a leatherette-type backing. Usually a few inches in size they may have further embellishment with glitter or mother-of-pearl (£10-£50 according to subject). For advertisers the view could be replaced by a paper advert, engraving or acid etched letters. Industrial, finance and service industries predominate. Victorian examples are the most prized (£20-£50) but food, drink and tobacco advertising is close behind. Cable manufacturers would polish and mount cross-sections to advertise their expertise (£5-£30).

Stoneware paperweights abound with advertising versions produced by Doulton (£20-£100). Amusing variations include newspaper front pages (4" x 2" £10 - £30), perpetual calendars (£10-£30) and blocks with areas left unadorned to act as message pads (£20).



Victorian marble paperweights, often finely polished with chamfered edges and central ball handle for lifting. These examples carry details of their purchaser's Italian tour. (£5-£10).



Twentieth century paperweights, two with trapped pictures, moulded zodiac sign, dandelion head trapped in resin and Giant's Causeway moulded steps. (£5 each).



Detail of millefiori paperweight showing intricate arrangement of rods. When rods are drawn tightly together at base but radiate out as they rise it is known as a 'mushroom' weight. A ring of millefiori around the edge to frame an inner design is known as a 'garland'.