"To Play Properly with a Glass Ball"
An Unusual Object in The University Museum

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A curious glass ball (Figs. 1, 3, 4) housed in the Mediterranean Section of The University Museum helps us to understand one aspect of Roman sport, and at the same time sheds light on the activities of the lower classes of Roman society. The interpretation of this artifact is based on two 1st century A.D. poets and on a 2nd century A.D. tombstone.

The glass ball was donated to the Museum in 1916 by Miss L. T. Morris as part of the Thompson bequest, a number of antiquities that Miss Morris and her brother, Mr. John Thompson Morris, had collected in Greece, Egypt, and elsewhere. The ball is spherical, measuring 5.5 centimeters in diameter, and is broken on one side (Fig. 1).

While perhaps it is regrettable that the ball is not in its pristine state, the break is in fact fortunate because it enables us to see how the ball had been manufactured. It is entirely composed of remelted cullet (pieces of broken glass), most of which is the green type that is the most commonly used in early blown glass. The color results from the naturally occurring presence of small amounts of iron. Figure 2 (left) shows a typical 2nd century A.D. candlestick  

uncreamium (container for oils or perfumes) in the University Museum's collection made of the same type of glass. A small part of the ball is composed of a transparent purple glass, the same type used to form a mold-blown vessel (Fig. 2, right) of the early 2nd century A.D., also in the Museum's collection.

A close-up examination of the outside of the ball shows that it is composed of a thin shell of millefiori ("thousand-flowers") glass (Fig. 3). Most of this is formed with opaque yellow rods in a translucent green matrix, the same type of glass used to make the fragments shown on the lower right in Figure 1, a piece of a plate and a diamond-shaped tessera (piece of a mosaic). On the outside of the ball there is also a small bit of a twist composed of opaque white and translucent blue trails, a common feature of the rims and bodies of mosaic glass vessels (see Fig. 1, upper right). The green matrix millefiori glass and the blue and white twist mosaic glass are of types that can be dated to the mid-1st century A.D.

What are we to make of this curious object? One clue comes from the 1st century A.D. poets Martial and Statius, both of whom mention the poor folk who trade sulphur for broken glass:

What are you then? You are a buffoon, just like the wandering hawker from across the Tiber, who exchanges brimstone matches for
Excavation

The glass ball in the University Museum is not unique. There is a similar ball in Düsseldorf that is slightly smaller and has both yellow and red rods in its miltefilli glass covering (Heinemeyer 1966:20). The two glass balls could easily have been made by the same craftsman.

"Ursus, the first Roman citizen to play properly with a glass ball...

What then, were these small balls used for? Again we can get a clue by turning to the abundant written records of the Romans. This time a 2nd century A.D. epitaph tells us how a glass ball may have been used:

Ursus, the first Roman citizen to play properly with a glass ball with my papyri, to the great amazement of the approaching crowd in the baths of Trajan. As they were playing especially in the baths of Nero, if you still believe me—that's my word!

A pair of glass balls, still in use by the 2nd century A.D., are depicted in a fresco in the southeast building at the sanctuary of Apollo Hylates at Kourion, Cyprus (Epigraphic Museum, Kourion, excavation no. 5:154). Note that the young boy can hold two balls in one hand.

A marble statue of a papyrus, perhaps a tragic player, found in a niche of the southwest building at the sanctuary of Apollo Hylates at Kourion, Cyprus (Epigraphic Museum, Kourion, excavation no. 5:154). Note that the young boy can hold two balls in one hand.

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