Glass Balls as Artifacts and Archetypes

Shortly after applying for a job opening at BYU-Hawaii three years ago, I went to the city library in Bloomington, Indiana to learn what I could about the community of Laie. My research turned up a description of Laie as a "sleepy" little community on the northeast shore of Oahu. After having lived for years in larger cities, my wife and I were encouraged by this description, but since it came from a book that was 20 years old, we feared that things had changed—that Laie was no longer a sleepy little community but a bustling metropolis. Needless to say, our fears were put to rest when we visited Laie shortly thereafter. In fact, it seemed to us that Laie was a little too sleepy. But small-town isolation has its rewards and one that is often overlooked in Laie is the opportunity to hunt for glass balls.

By glass balls I mean glass fishing floats that wash up on the beaches. In this paper I first want to talk about where these balls come from—where, how, and why they were made and how they come to drift up on our shores. Then I want to talk about the attraction they offer to the people who hunt for them. They are simple objects but some people find them almost irresistible. Why this fascination?

Most of the millions of glass balls that presently float around in the Pacific Ocean come from Japan. There they are mass-produced in factories and sold to fishing companies. It is estimated that a fishing vessel loses half its fishing gear every year. Hence a huge flotsam of nets and glass balls. The larger balls—ones as big as basketballs or
bigger--are often used to support tuna fishing lines. The smaller ones, mostly about the size of an orange, are generally used to float nets.

Balls are normally blue-green in color. Thus they roughly match the color of the water, but this is not by design. The blue-green color arises from copper additives (copper carbonate and copper oxide) that are common to the glass-mixing process. Other additives will produce glass balls of other colors, colors like yellow, brown, and purple, but these are seen less often.

It might seem that Hawaii, situated as it is in the middle of the Pacific, would be the ideal place for hunting glass balls. This is not the case. Although in theory any Pacific beach may capture a glass ball, the ocean currents favor the coastline that runs from northern California up to Alaska. The Black Stream or Kuroshio moves across the Pacific from Japan to this stretch of coastline and there deposits thousands of glass balls along with a huge quantity of other flotsam. Trade winds and storms which blow from the northeast may intercept the Black Stream and blow some of this flotsam to our beaches. Or, if it is not deposited along the American-Canadian coast, it may be pushed southward down the coast of California and Mexico to end up in the north equatorial current. This current runs back toward Asia and just barely misses the southern latitude of the Hawaiian Islands. However, if Kona winds are blowing from the southeast, some flotsam will be pushed up to lodge on our beaches.

Beyond the question of how glass balls make their way to Hawaii is the question of why many people find them fascinating. They are, after all, fairly ordinary objects. A piece of pretty glass will
attract a child, but most of us outgrow this attraction. Similarly, balls are generally more interesting and important to children than they are to adults. But I know a fifty year-old woman who dreams about glass balls. I have been told of a man who swam out into the ocean fully-clothed to retrieve a glass ball which he saw from his car. I remember taking a visitor from Utah glass-ball hunting early one morning along Temple Beach. She was normally a very able conversationalist but her gift for the gab disappeared the moment she, almost in a frenzy, began combing the beach with her flashlight. Under other circumstances I would have thought her rude, but as one who had once suffered from the same affliction, I could overlook this sudden personality change.

I believe glass balls excite our fancy for several reasons. First, in a world of standardized artifacts, they offer refreshing irregularity. Though they share some obvious common properties, they are not perfect clones of each other a la light bulbs, soda cans, and beer bottles. Each one invites inspection, for each one is different in size, color, and clarity. Some have tiny bubbles in them, a feature of old fashioned glass. Some are cloudy, almost opaque, others are brilliantly clear. Some are not even very round, but are slightly squashed and bumpy.

A second reason glass balls fire the imagination has to do with a certain element of serendipity and mystery which clings to them. One can buy a glass ball at a flea market or a tourist shop but one cannot buy the excitement of finding a glass ball near the ocean which deposited it. (The difference is tantamount to buying trout in a store and catching them in a stream.) It has been said that desert
Bedouins instinctively realize that life goes on forever simply because, travel as they may, they never reach the horizon. Evidently the constant experience of seeing the horizon recede as you advance toward it becomes a prism through which life itself is understood. In a similar fashion the vast ocean operates on the mind to expand if not break the frame of everyday reality. When therefore we find a glass ball on the beach, we feel we have tapped into the large unknown. And while it is true that many things come to us from far-away places, nearly all of them come by design, not by chance. Programmed as they are to enter our lives, they carry no magic, resonate no mystery. But glass balls reach us by circuitous, indeterminate means, and it is easy to imagine that a larger power has guided them to us, and us to them.

Moreover, the artifacts that greets us in a store or in a merchandise catalog nearly always come with a particular function. Consequently we see their purpose before we see their beauty. O.B. Hardison observes that as long as things are useful, they're hard to see because they hide themselves under a veil of utility.

A piece of silverware is more interesting and beautiful to a person who eats with her fingers than it is to a person who uses it to shove food in his mouth. By using it as an eating utensil one mingles its intrinsic beauty with a routine activity. Likewise, glass balls are most interesting to people who have not been educated to see their purpose. This leaves us free to see their beauty.

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1 O.B. Hardison, Disappearing Through the Skylight: Culture and Technology in the Twentieth Century (New York: Viking, 1989), p. 84.
I believe glass balls fascinate us for one more reason. Nearly everything I have said so far can be applied to other man-made artifacts that wash up on the beach--bottles, lumber, tires, plastic containers of various sorts. But these objects do not possess the dual property of being round and being translucent. If we look about us, roundness or circularity seems to be an almost redundant feature of the natural world. To the naked eye, the sun and moon are perfect spheres, and the ancient Greeks inferred that the earth is also spherical after watching its rounded shadow move across the face of the moon during lunar eclipse. But the Greeks found even more reason to venerate roundness as they developed geometry and cosmology. Long before Joseph Smith remarked that the wedding band connotes eternal marriage by virtue of its neverending circularity, Aristotle argued that the universe must be eternal for much the same reason: the circular orbits of planets and stars are completed figures; they have no end, beginning, or middle.

Building upon a long tradition which saw circles and spheres as perfect shapes, Aristotle canonized roundness. Only in the last three or four centuries has Western culture been able to break away from the Aristotelian thesis of a round universe. But we should not give Aristotle too much credit, for he merely nailed down with logic what every ancient culture knew instinctively: life is round, events repeat themselves, the seasons are a merry-go-round which carry us through the year, through our lives, and as we pass on others step onto the treadmill of human existence to repeat our experiences, for, according to the author of Ecclesiastes, there is nothing new under the sun. This older outlook strikes us as odd, for we have imbibed
the idea of progress like mother's milk and think that we are an upwardly mobile culture able to escape the past. But nearly every pre-Renaissance culture that I know of operated on the assumption that space and time are round. That is, the universe is a sphere, time is cyclical, and as stars and planets return to earlier positions the present coalesces with or melts into the past.

Add to the quality of roundness the quality of translucence and one has a powerful admixture which evokes a couple of very obvious religious images. First, the Liahona, which was a small, round ball and a medium, if not of physical light, then at least of spiritual light. Second, the celestialized earth, which scripture represents as a sea of glass and defines as a great Urim and Thummim. This latter image sets off all sorts of mental fireworks when it is linked with glass balls. There is the practice of gazing into a sphere to see into the great beyond, a habit most of us associate with gypsies and crystal balls. The crystal ball tradition is derivative of crystal gazing, the art of looking into a crystal or stone to acquire higher understanding. This practice sounds an odd, even eerie note to modern ears, but Mormons are not in a position to reject it out of hand, for Joseph Smith received divine revelation by means of physical objects like the urim and thummim and seerstones. My more immediate concern, however, is with the proposition that the celestialized earth will be something like a great glass sphere. If this is the case and if one is willing to give one's imagination free reign, a glass ball can be seen as a microcosm of the earth in its celestialized state. This, I will admit, is a lot imagery to heap upon a simple glass ball, but I will try to sustain it with a few personal reflections.
When I look at a glass ball, I see three metaphorical possibilities trying to collapse into a single reality. The scriptures tell us that one day the knowledge of God will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. Glass balls connote the earth because of their roundness. They further bespeak the sea not only in their origin but also in their blue and green appearance. And by virtue of their translucence, they give us occasion to think about light, which is the physical phenomenon most often invoked when trying to describe how the knowledge of God affects us. One simple artifact invites us to think about the earth, about the sea, and about the light which breaks into this world from a higher realm. Now, given the tremendous religious voltage which runs through glass balls and the opportunity to plug into that voltage, who among us can remain in bed in the early morning darkness? Only the most slothful will neglect the chance to comb the beach with a flashlight, looking for these spiritually-charged, almost otherworldly objects that have washed in overnight with the tide. Happy Hunting!