

Item:

This is a waschetafel (wash tablet), a handheld tallying device that was used to keep track of clothing to be washed from the Nürnberg (Nuremberg) region of Germany in the late 16th and early 17th Century.

History and Use of waschetafel (wash tablets)**Tools of the cleaning trade**

Early washerwomen, just like other trades people, had a variety of tools with which they worked. These included such items as a bucking tub, pots, soap supplies, and stain removal supplies.

One of these tools is the waschetafel or wash tablet. The surviving examples located in the German National Museum in Nürnberg, are believed to be German in origin. ((Zander-Seidel p.286)

This pictorial tool allowed communication through tally marks made with chalk of what was needing to be washed and what had been washed without the need for literacy or even arithmetic, “as many of the washerwomen tended to be among the lower classes and less educated members of society” (Sim, p. 47)

According to the Textiles curator at the German National Museum, Dr. Zander-Seidel, they believe that the waschetafel was used for both recording what was sent to the laundress as well as by the laundress when she may have outsourced some of the washing to various other women. (Zander-Seidel-email). These surviving remnants were used for several centuries. As clothing changed, there is evidence that items were scratched out and painted over (Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nürnberg, p 8) These boards began to be discontinued in the 17th C. (Zander-Seidel p.94)



Original waschetafel from German National Museum Nierenberg Germany

How the item was made in period

A hardwood board was cut to shape approximately 68X42 cm. The board was blackened and then each side was divided into 4 rows. The first and third rows were twice as wide as the second and fourth row. (Zander-Seidel p.285) Then clothing items were painted onto both sides using oil paint. These were not seen

to be of great artistic acclaim but were functional and representational.
(Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nürnberg, p 11).

Blackening may have been done in a variety of methods, they are unable, without destructive testing, to ascertain this element. However there were several known methods for wood blackening in Germany which were used in this period.

An undated Padua manuscript, perhaps of the 16th or 17th century, gives the following instructions for preparing wood for blackening: When the wood has been polished with burnt pumice stone it must be well rubbed with a coarse cloth and with the said powder, bathing the work with German size that it may be more polished; it must then be cleaned with another rag. (Merrifield, pg. 710)

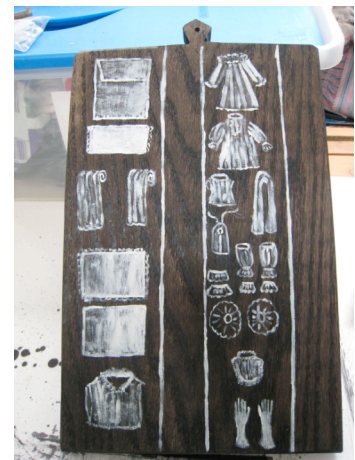
According to Master Edward le Kervere “Hide glue combined with pumice powder and rubbing sounds like a method of polishing and filling the pores of the wood. ... As to blackening wood: any wood with a high tannin content, oak, walnut, ash, hickory, can be turned black by exposing it to iron ions. The usual formula is to add some vinegar to some water, drop in a piece of steel wool for an hour and flood the surface of the project with this solution.”

For additional period blackening recipes, please see appendix A.

Materials used in period and what I used:

The table below shows how this item was constructed in period and how I made mine. The only major difference was the blackening agent. I used a modern commercial stain rather than a period stain due to time constraints. I was unable to use the vinegar and steel to make iron ions to work effectively and ran out of time before I needed to complete this project.

	Period construction	My construction
Wood	Oak	Same
Blackening	Unclear	Minwax ebony stain
Paint	Oil paint	Same
Icons	Period clothing	Same



My version of the waschetafel

The icons I used come from an original waschetafel. Beginning at the top of the left column, they are: a sheet, towel with points (lace), long pieces of linen, hankie with points (lace), hankie with plain border, sheer partlet; and in the next column: woman's chemise, man's smock, partlet, neckerchief, sheer partlet, half sleeves, men's ruffs, women's ruffs, neck ruffs, partlet with points (lace), and gloves.

Bibliography:

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Appendix A

- BulletA 15th century Bolognese manuscript provides instructions for dyeing boxwood black by boiling it in oil and sulphur⁴. Similar recipes are provided for dying bones and other materials.
- BulletIn the 1568 German "Book of Trades," the Joiner from Nuremberg is described thus: "makes fine varnished furniture with fancy moldings: chests, wardrobes, dressers, tables, beds, board games, etc. for all purses.⁵"
- BulletIn the 1558 edition of "The secretes of the reverende Maister Alexis of Piemount" there is a recipe for staining wood for use in joinery, using horse manure, alum, gum arabic, and unspecified dyes.
- BulletIn his 1594 book "The Jewel House of Art and Nature," Sir Hugh Plat wrote of a technique for staining new wood to match old (using linseed oil and walnut rinds).