

RESEARCH BULLETIN

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ON MAKING THE TOILET Catherine Sullivan

Abstract

A resource file on toiletries will, we hope, eventually enable Parks Canada to accurately illustrate this aspect of domestic life between the 18th and the 20th centuries. Thus far, information collected on the subject of the toilet during this period suggests that bed and dressing rooms underwent great changes, while the appearance, use, and presentation of the toilet table and many of the other artifacts associated with the toilet did not. An indication is given here of the range and variety of research material being compiled, and a summary of tentative conclusions on the toilet table from the sources.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Lynne Sussman and Eileen Woodhead for assistance with artifacts in materials with which I am unfamiliar, and to Stephen Davis, E. Ann Smith, Olive Jones and Ron Whate for information germane to my topic encountered during their own research. Olive Jones has read several versions of this seemingly-straightforward manuscript with patient enthusiasm.

Introduction

This bulletin introduces the toiletries resource file, an attempt to collect together the objects in various materials used for making the toilet.

Nowadays, "toilet" is used almost exclusively to denote a fixture in which human wastes are deposited and carried away, but this is only a recent meaning to be applied to the word. Etymologically, the word toilet is a diminutive of the French word *toile* (cloth or wrapper), especially a piece of stuff used to wrap clothing, a towel thrown over the shoulders while the hair was dressed, or the cloth cover for a dressing table. "Toilet" is also used to describe the articles required for dressing, the table on which these articles are placed, and the process of dressing itself. One additional meaning, the style of dress, comes to us from the 19th century, and another particularly North American one, a dressing room furnished with bathing facilities, from late in the 19th century (O.E.D.). As can be seen, the different activities associated with the toilet bring with them quite different types of associated articles, from things that sit on a dressing table to clothing accessories and cloth.

The resource file, based mainly on excavated artifacts, deals to a large extent with the types of objects that archaeologists excavate: objects and preparations used for care of the hair, skin, hands, and teeth, and for washing and bathing. I plan to organize these objects chronologically, as an aid to archaeologists in recognizing and



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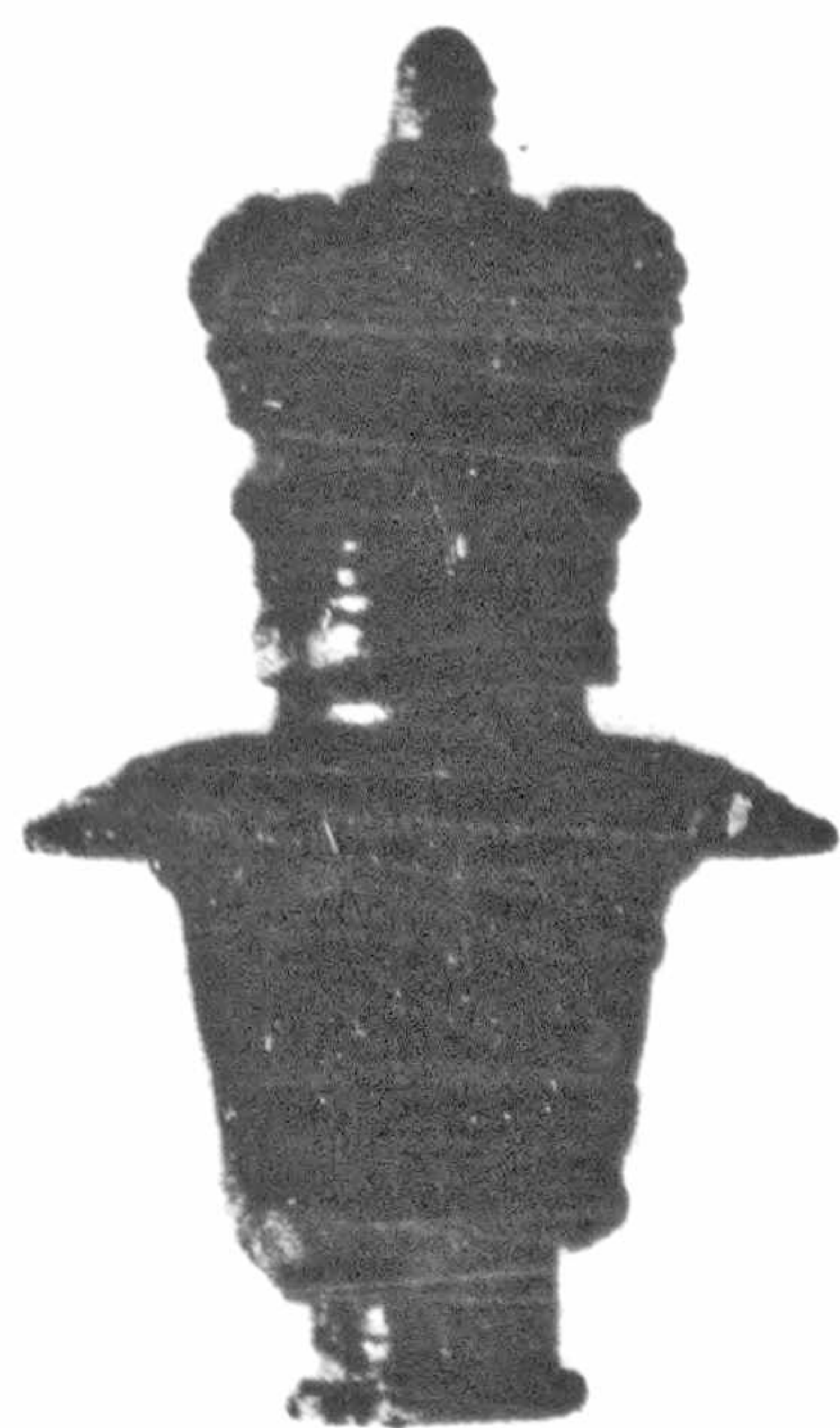
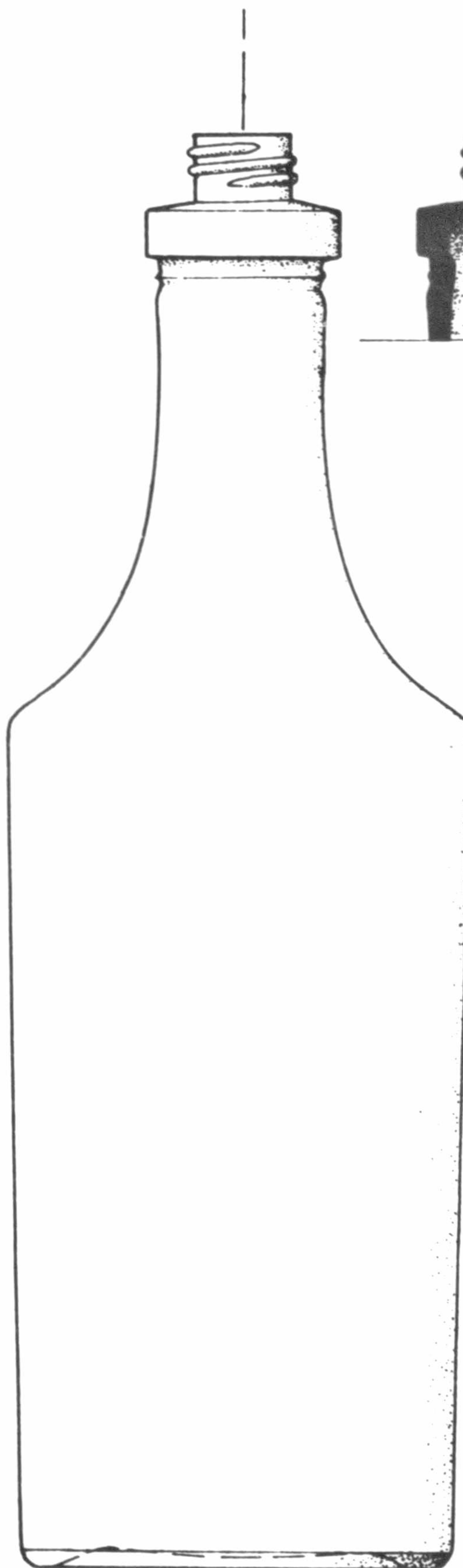
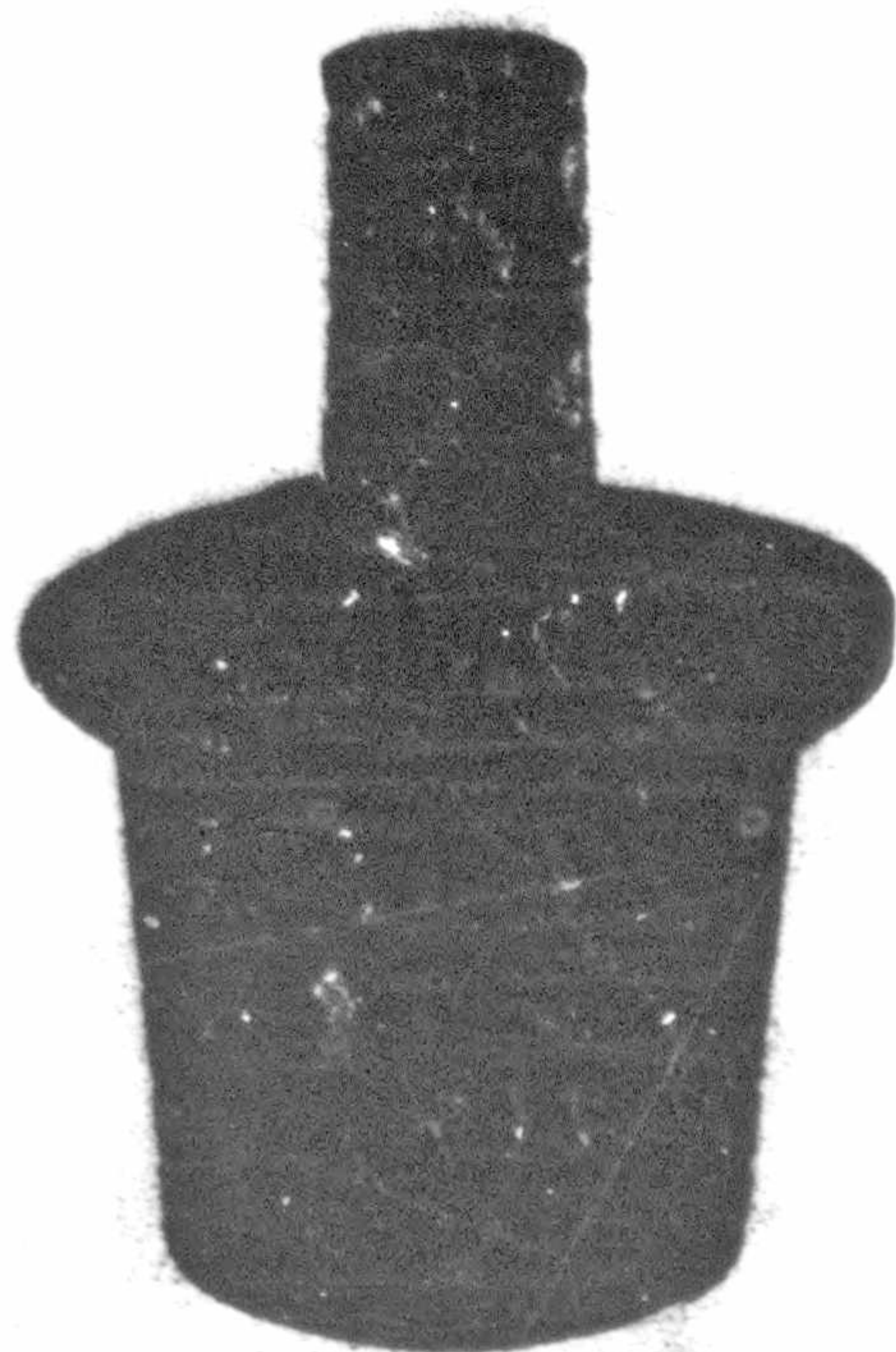
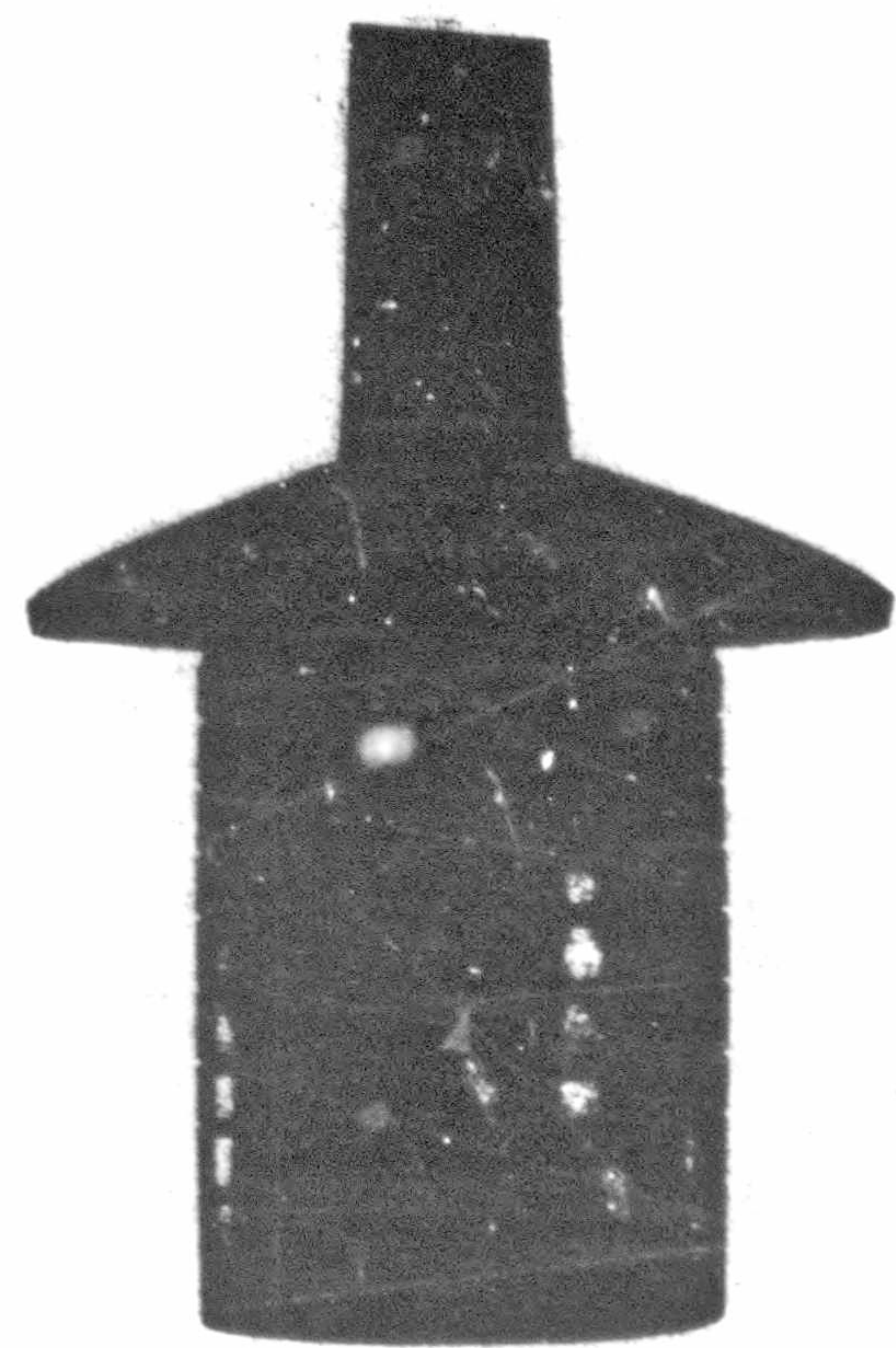


Figure 1. The wooden sprinkler tops (a), from a French ship that sank in 1760, were used in much the same way as the late 19th century examples below (b). They were inserted into the neck of a bottle containing toilet water, hair oil, or some other toilet requisite so that the user could shake out a small amount at one time. Twentieth-century technology allows bottles such as c to be made with a squirt top as part of the bottle. (Drawing by R. Hellier; photos by R. Chan)

dating their excavated materials, and to further arrange them functionally, as a guide to selecting appropriate objects for interpreting a particular period and geographical location. The toiletry items in Figure 1 demonstrate, for each of three centuries, the suitable contemporary response to the same problem. That each belongs to a specific time and is not interchangeable with another is obvious. What is not always obvious is that what appears to us a modern innovation meeting a modern requirement may be only a recent rendering of a traditional form.

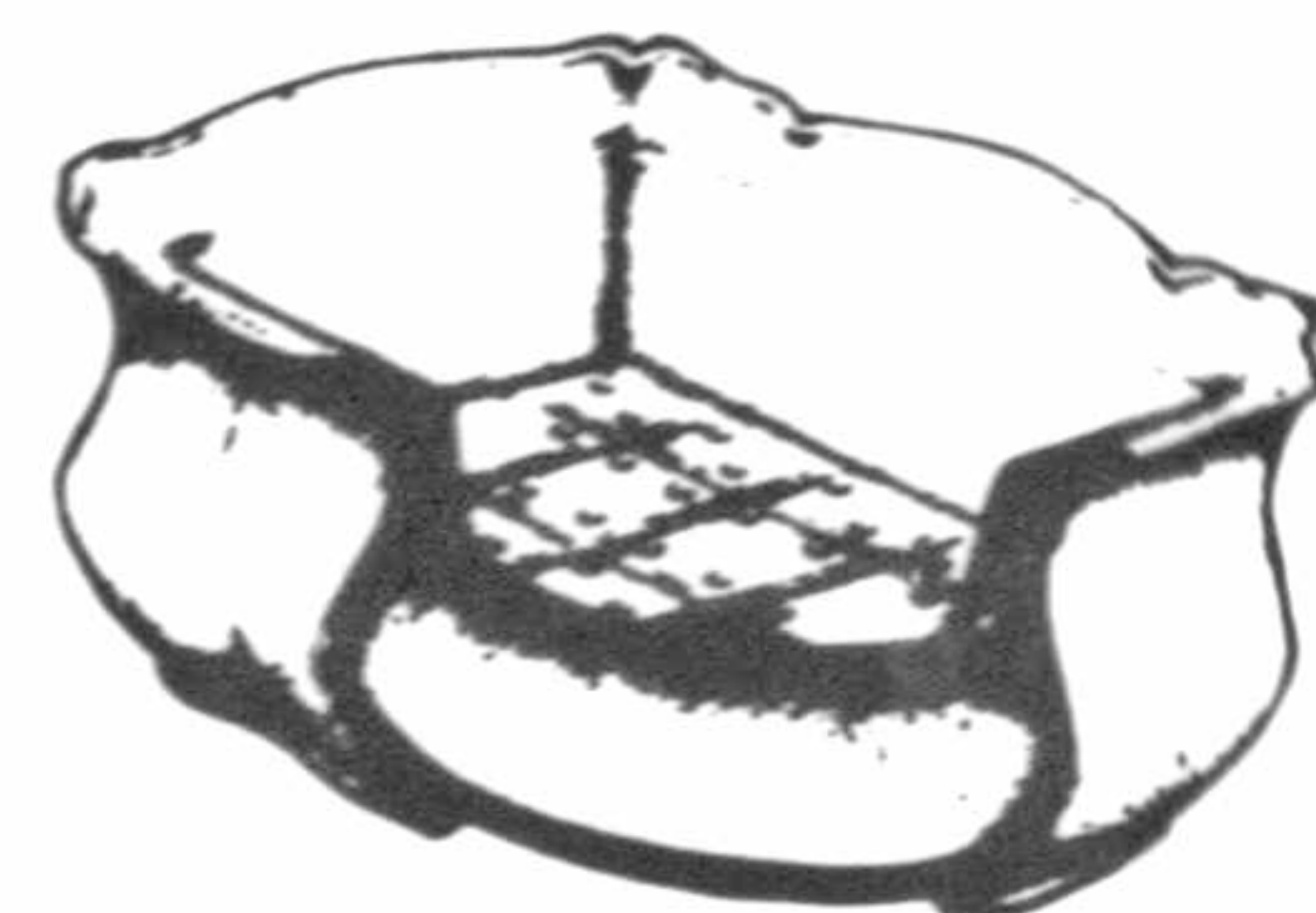
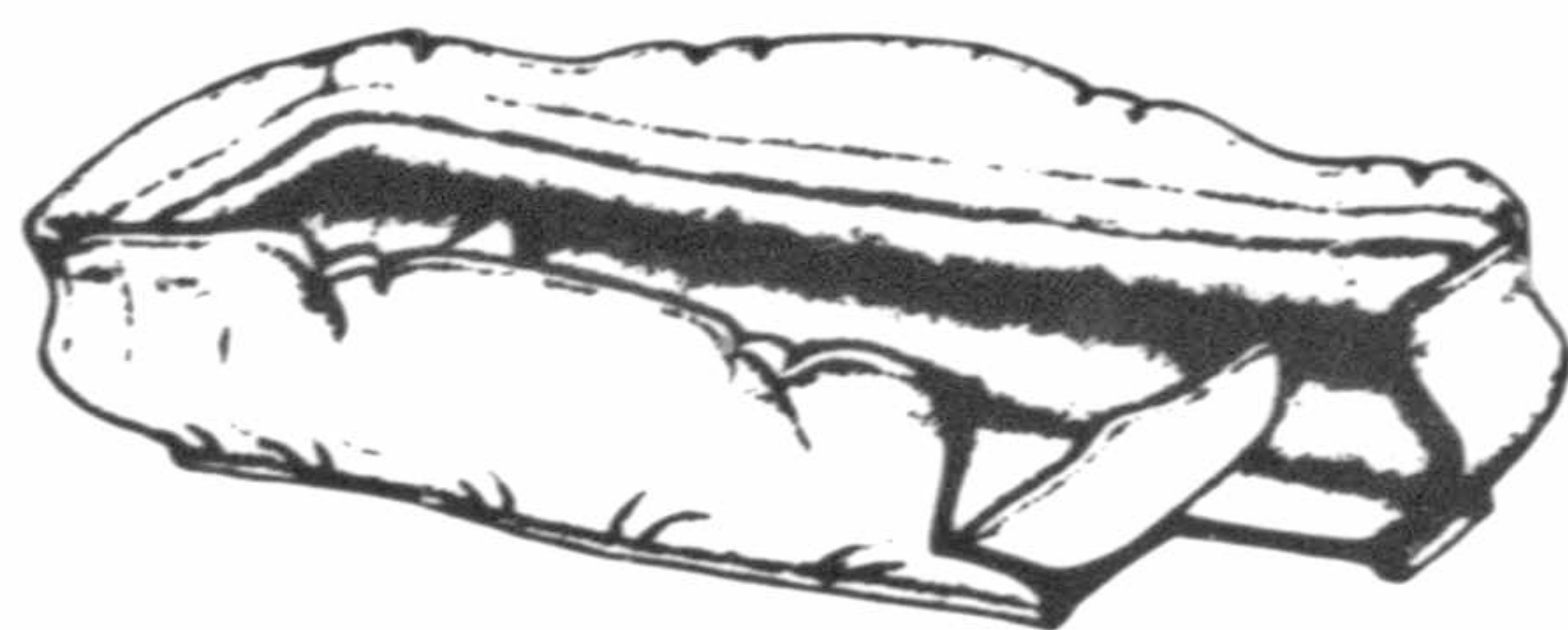
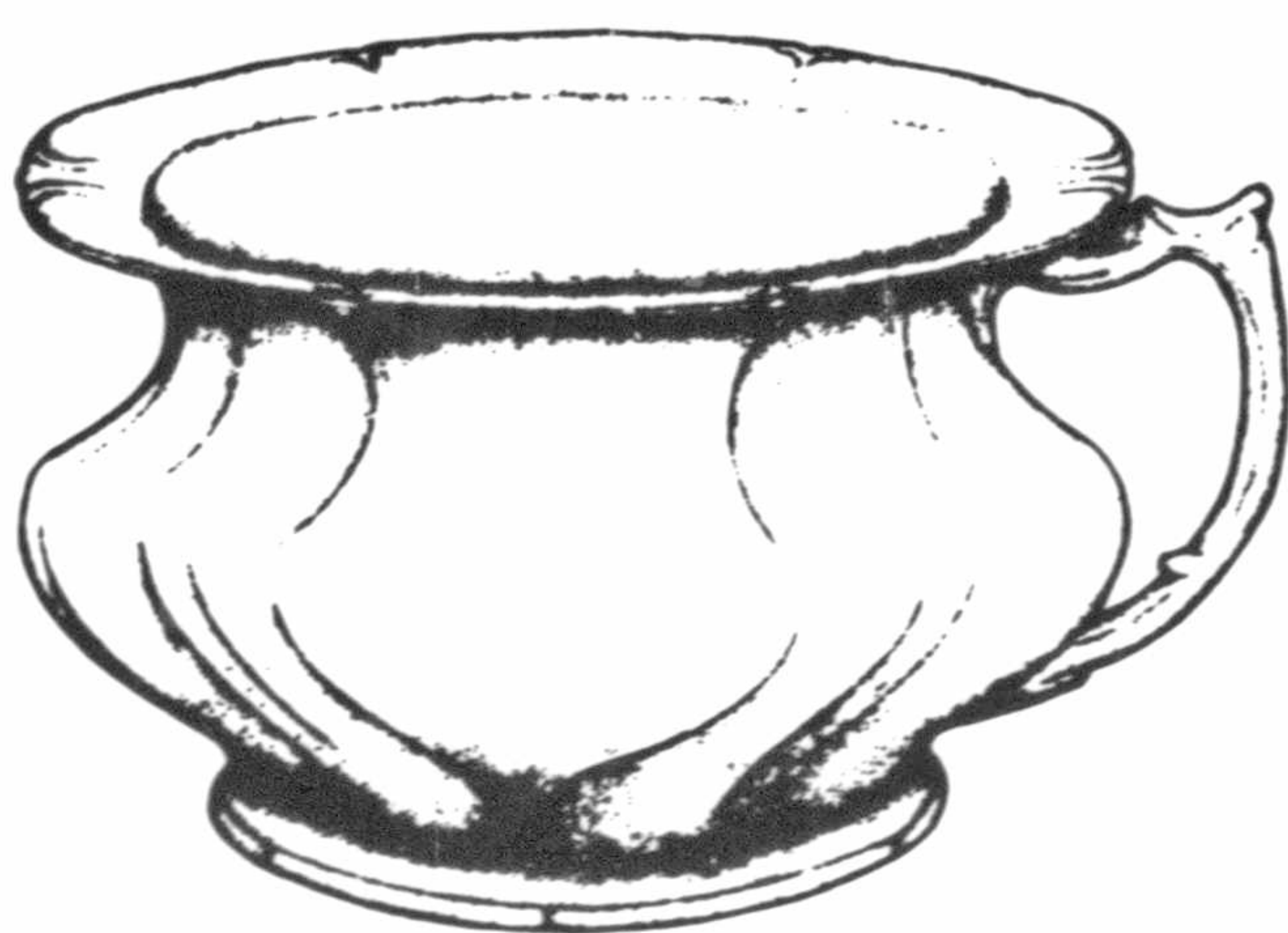
The Resources

I began compiling a toiletries resource file by gathering together 18th century illustrations of dressing rooms and toilet tables, and written sources in which dressing rooms and toilet tables were mentioned. A surprisingly large collection of visual and verbal representations was not difficult to assemble.

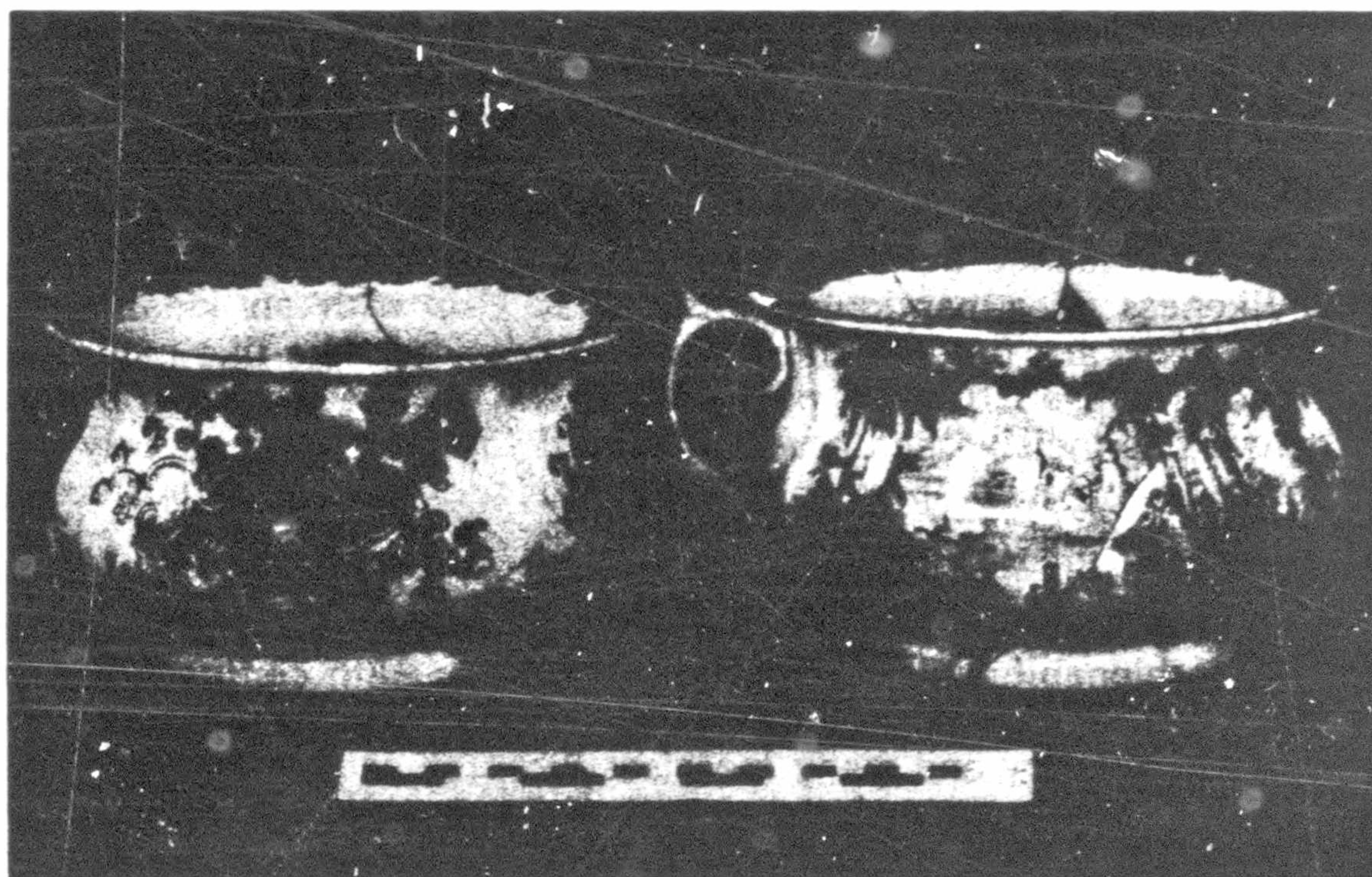
The subjects of the lady's dressing room and toilet appear to have been of recurring and genuine interest in the 18th century, and to have been depicted in three main genres: erotic paintings, featuring the charms of a pretty young woman in a pretty room; serious portraits of titled or court ladies painted at their dressing tables; caricatures, lampoons and satirical depictions set in a dressing room to make abusive observations about an individual's personal characteristics, to criticize groups of people overly concerned with appearance, or to ridicule society and its practices. Only in caricature, where a person is made to be either grotesque or just silly, do we find chamber pots, toothbrushes, and pots of cosmetics sitting on a dressing table, or, for that matter, in evidence at all. Such objects are incompatible with a flattering, romanticized likeness of a particular woman, as also with an idealized vision of feminine beauty. Nor are toothbrushes, chamber pots, and the like named elsewhere than in satire, caricature's literary parallel. However, the caricaturist's invective, perhaps recognized as incisive and cruel in his own time, not infrequently escapes the modern sensibility. Only a comparison between caricatures and serious contemporary treatments of the same subject show to what extent one is a perversion of the other.

A comparable collection of 19th century reference material was not to be found. It seems that the toilet and the dressing table lost favour as subjects for artists and their fashionable audiences by the end of the 18th century or thereabouts. However, the entire domestic structure — including bed and dressing rooms — was the subject of much enquiry and many treatises directed at the middle classes during the 19th century. The construction, arrangement of rooms, decoration and maintenance of houses were treated in several ways, from the practical — considerations of bathing facilities, efficient fuels for lighting, adequate ventilation during sleep — to such morally uplifting issues as the deleterious effect that slipshod housekeeping has on impressionable minds. Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine, a popular periodical published in Philadelphia from the 1830s, featured many different aspects of domestic life in its columns, including architecture, cooking, fashion, and home decoration applied with a view to economy, and contributed prose and poetry created to appeal to the reader with elevated sentiments. Many of Godey's needlecraft creations were for use in the bedroom or on the toilet table (see Figure 6), and recipes for toilet preparations were regularly offered well into the late 19th century.

The number of directions to servants and housekeepers, practical encyclopaedias, and periodicals, and the diverse treatment of the subject, suggests that domestic life was changing during the 19th century, that the size of the reading public — many without education in polite domestic matters — was growing, that



a



b

Figure 2.

- a) A chamber pot, basin, toothbrush box and two-part soap dish in PEACOCK, excavated at Colonel By's house in Ottawa. The house was still occupied when it burnt to the ground in ca. 1848. (Drawings by F. Ventresca)
- b) Two chamber pots from different toilet sets were both excavated from a privy at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, dating 1835-ca. 1850, where they had been dumped with other household garbage. (Photo by R. Chan)

The chamber pot in a and both chamber pots (b) are characteristic of the 1830s and 1840s (Sussman, pers. com.), and one (bottom left), is datable by its mark to between 1838 and 1848 (Godden 1964: 538). Because assemblage a was abandoned, presumably while still in use, it contributes a better impression of period toilet sets than the single pieces in b.

older ideas were giving way to new ones, in short, that what was happening then was different from what had gone before.

Objects provide evidence that is not to be found in period art and literature. Functional toilet articles are named and illustrated in 18th century sources mainly as elements of satire, and 19th century renderings preserve some reluctance to deal directly with them, preferring either to name or show them without elaboration or to name them euphemistically. Serious art and literature in both centuries avoid the material articles required for ordinary ablution, although we have ample evidence that these objects existed. This in itself provides information about the toilet at these periods.

Collections of objects are available to us through archaeological investigation, museums and private collectors, period inventories, trade and mail order catalogues, advertisements in newspapers, directories, and so on. Each type of collection has its limitations, but used together (and with other sources) can provide a much richer understanding of the activity.

Museum catalogues and collectors' guides to antiques are abundant, and can be excellent sources of complete, identified, dated artifacts. However, collections are usually assembled by institutions and private individuals with no pretensions to replicating archaeological assemblages, and experience has shown that such collections are quantifiably different from collections purposely assembled for everyday living (Sussman, pers. com.). Within museum and private collections, objects purchased or acquired by donation tend to be intact, decorated, fine quality pieces that were not subjected to the rigours and perils of everyday use, or that belonged to people whose lives were exceptional.

Archaeological collections are usually not the complete record of all that was used at a site; they are most often the part of a larger assemblage that was thrown away, lost, or abandoned for one reason or another. But archaeological specimens are tangible evidence of things and products actually used at a particular period and place. The bulk of most site assemblages consists of undecorated, utilitarian objects, worn out, broken, damaged by fire, or discarded whole because they were so common that no one thought to save them. When artifacts that are not worn out or broken or commonplace are recovered in an excavation, we either assume that they had been lost, or hypothesize that the owner fled, hid the objects and died before he could retrieve them, or met with some other disaster that explains the abandonment. Occasionally, artifacts provide evidence of their own histories: figure 2 demonstrates that what is found in excavations of domestic buildings is determined in part by the peculiar history of the site; quantities of toiletry containers — pots and lids — recovered intact from some 19th century privy excavations suggest that someone transferred the contents to more attractive containers, perhaps jars in a dressing case; carefully mended objects, sometimes very unexceptional artifacts, often from the same excavation unit as complete containers, attest to value determined by availability. In some instances, things were not easy to replace when they broke, and could continue in active service many years beyond their expected period of use. Only archaeological collections provide this kind of concrete evidence of human behaviour.

Determining how objects were used through archaeological enquiry is less certain. The need for a lathering brush with a straight razor is an association between artifacts still fairly obvious to most people, but the application of mustache wax with a toothbrush is less so. There is no guarantee that archaeological investigations will reveal either relationship, but other sources, such as trade catalogues, can provide the information.

Trade catalogues that might aid in identifying 18th century toiletry items are



Figure 3. An exploded view of a hollow-handled bone shaving or lather brush in five pieces, that attach to one another by incised screw threads. The bristle seating (the bristles have been added in this drawing), and its base, and the handle were deposited at a site at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, between 1835 and ca. 1850; the band and button that make up the base of the handle were excavated at different sites, one at Fort Beauséjour, N.B., the other at Lower Fort Garry, Manitoba. (Drawing by F. Ventresca)

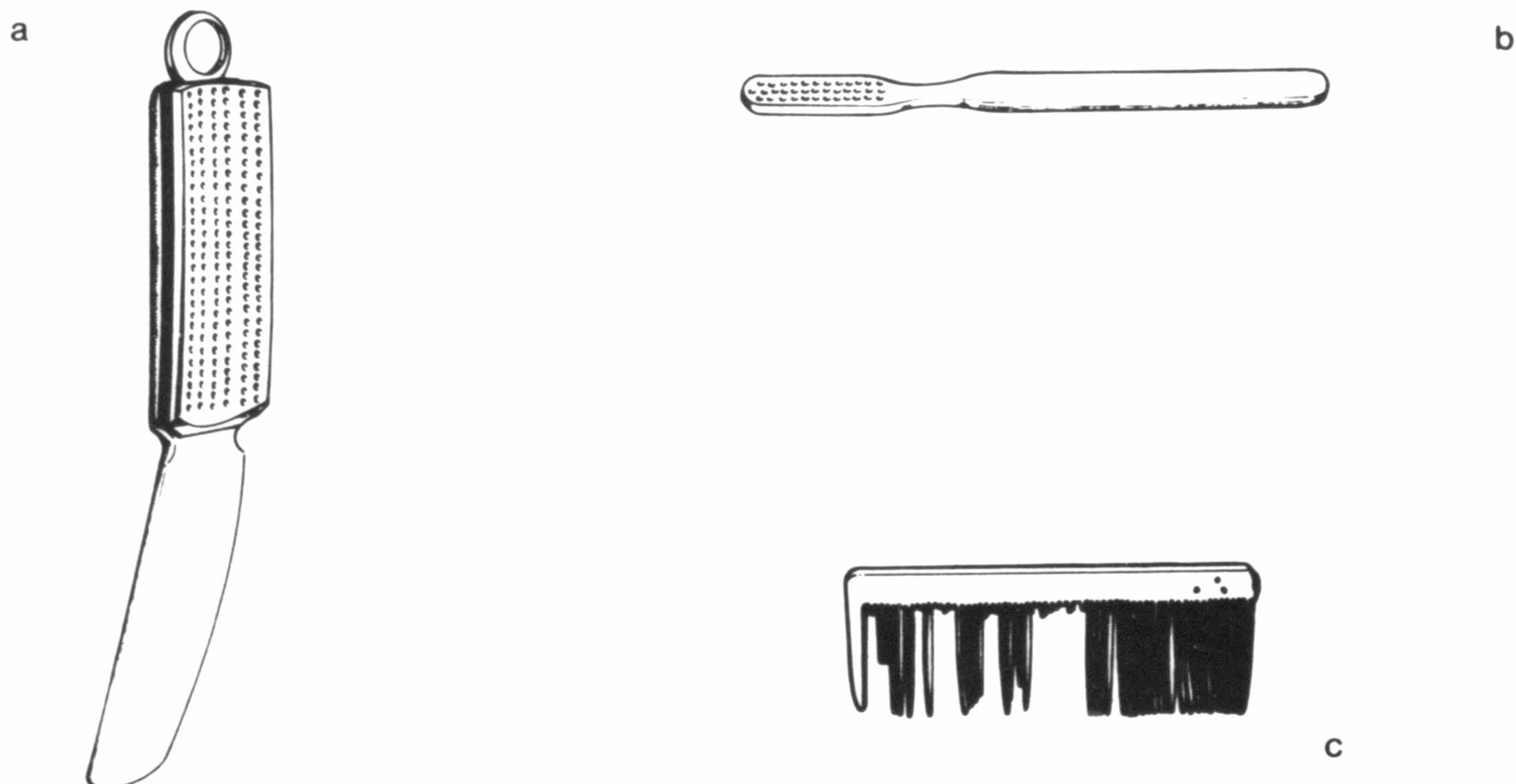


Figure 4. Bone nail brush (a) and toothbrush (b), and a tortoiseshell comb fragment (c) from a privy at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. Both the site history and the datable artifact assemblage from this lot suggest a period of use between 1835 and ca. 1850 (Beaudet 1981). All things being equal, these artifacts should date to the same period. (Drawings by F. Ventresca)

rare, and usually not illustrated. Those that are illustrated with materials about which we know a great deal show forms that do not occur on our sites, or items not similar to those that do. The most common type of 18th century catalogue, the price list, rarely includes description beyond the name of the object. Until late in the 19th century, manufacturers did not regularly include illustrations with written descriptions of the goods they were offering for sale. Late 19th century catalogues also reflect the explosion in numbers and variety of goods that were being sold, not all of which found their way into Canadian homes and institutions. Not all that was advertised in catalogues or in newspapers is applicable to Parks Canada's sites.

A small collection of archaeologically-retrieved toiletries has been assembled from a number of sites and is part of the National Reference Collection housed in Ottawa. Ceramic toilet articles are datable by their ware type, shape and decoration, and glass objects can often be dated by the way they were made combined with their shape and decoration. But, unless marked, ferrous and organic toilet articles — razors, brushes and combs — are difficult to date by such intrinsic characteristics as shape and style. Unfortunately, our collection of these artifacts is small and largely unstudied, and many of our most complete specimens come from sites with such long occupation periods that they cannot be dated by association. Although we cannot say so with certainty at this point, a major problem with dating these artifacts is an apparent tendency to extended use of many styles of this type of toilet article: the bone shaving brush in Figure 3 is an early example of a style made with nickel-plating in the 20th century (Marshall-Wells 1918: 1830), and a plastic nail brush available in some grocery stores today closely resembles the handled nail brush in Figure 4 (a). Traditional or generic artifact forms are not uncommon in many artifact categories recovered on our sites, but the extent to which toilet articles and preparations have older precedents has yet to be explored.

The Toilet Table

An artifact long associated with the toilet, but not among those excavated on sites, is the toilet table. Originally, we thought that toilet tables were the appropriate setting for many toilet articles and toiletry preparations found in excavated assemblages. However, in the 18th century sources, we found these objects only on the toilet tables created by caricaturists such as James Gillray, and named only in satirical literature, such as Jonathan Swift's. Both types of satirists seek to display and ridicule a subject, and both do so by parodying socially sanctioned forms and models of various kinds. The more easily recognized the model, the more effective the satire. The distortion of a dressing room in a caricature evokes both established traditions of titled ladies' romantically presented toilet tables and those erotically inspired. Certain types of toilet articles on lampoon dressing tables — toothbrushes, paint pots, medicines — heighten the effect of the satire by contrasting functional, everyday articles and the pretty, frivolous and sumptuous things shown on seriously rendered toilet tables.

Modern collectors' furniture guides not infrequently feature toilet tables and dressing chests that have survived intact from the 18th century. The former are elegant tables on four legs, with hinged tops that lift to reveal toilet mirrors and compartments for storing toiletry items. A particularly fine example, French, from ca. 1765, is described: "Toilet-table of mahogany, curving shape on four slightly splayed legs with bronze mounted toes. Rich coloured marquetry of flowers on the sides and on the top divided into three compartments on a ground of rosewood and



Figure 5. "Mademoiselle de Mennetoud à sa toilette; d'après une estampe de J. Mariette, 17th century" (Lacroix 1882: Figure 278).

An early depiction of a lady's dressing table embellished with draped fabric, this scene also shows a heavy dust cover hung over the dressing glass. It is obviously intended to drape over the top of the table, covering mirror and toilet articles completely, and seems to match the upholstery on the lady's chair. In appearance, the table is not remarkably different from those depicted at much later periods.

tulipwood veneer. Under the top, a rising mirror and stand" (Savage 1969: 175).

Dressing chests, resembling bureaux on long legs, also appear to have been produced in quantity during the 18th and 19th centuries. Specifications for one designed in 1811 describes the fitting out of the drawers: ".... five real and four sham drawers in front (fitted up as follows – one for a night stool, one for a square bidet, the sides and back rabbeted to receive a square tin pan, supported by a framed drop foot; one for a bason and two cups; one for a water-bottle with partition in ditto half the depth of the drawer; the other empty), a solid tea-chest top, with a lock to ditto" (*Antiques*, Nov. 1940: 231).

Nevertheless, in spite of many surviving examples, particularly of the table type, neither is shown in 18th century paintings, although occasionally the table variety is described in the household treatises of the next century. The toilet table at which 18th century portrait painters set their subjects, that conceived in the imaginations of François Boucher and others, and adopted by Cruikshank and Gillray as model in their satirical dressing room scenes, is best described by three 19th century champions of good taste, some of whom did not approve the style. In 1840, an American noted that "Dressing tables of plain, unpainted wood, with white covers, and valances of muslin made full and deep, and descending to the floor, are not yet quite out of use" (Garrett 1983: 619); as late as 1872, an English author in his American edition protested ".... the practice which exists of encircling toilet-tables with a sort of muslin petticoat generally stiffened by a crinoline of pink or blue calico. Something of the same kind may be occasionally seen twisted round the frame of the toilet-glass. They just represent a milliner's notion of the 'pretty' and nothing more" (Garrett 1983: 625); decoration for a lady's toilet table given in 1879 involved ".... pink cretonne or glazed muslin which is then covered with white sprigged muslin trimmed with Torchon lace, and draped with pink satin rosettes Handsome lace used as trimming adds very much to its beauty and elegance, and plain hemmed ruffles can be substituted for lace if it is designed to be plainer" (*Godey's*, Aug. 1879: 174).

It is not unlikely that the brocade and lace on the tables of 18th century Queens, Countesses, and other court ladies, conceal handsome pieces of furniture rather than plain, unpainted wooden tables, and the undeniably sensual effect of lavish amounts of fabric in French erotic scenes suggests stylization rather than veracity. Nevertheless, 18th century toilet tables are consistently portrayed as draped and embellished with flounced fabric descending to the floor. In the caricatures, even the men's tables look this way. It seems that a draped table was readily recognized as a toilet table by a majority of fashionable 18th century people. That so many later references to a similar appearance exist suggests that it also served as the model toilet table for the middle classes in the 19th century. For a very long time, educated people associated drapery and flounces with the prototypical toilet table, in spite of much evidence that the room around it changed a great deal. An early example of the table is reproduced in Figure 5, and a much later one described in Figure 6.

An apparent difference between early and later toilet tables reminds us that one definition for the word toilet is a cloth cover for the dressing table. Figure 5 and a handful of early 18th century depictions suggest that the definition may refer to a heavy-weight fabric dust cover. In *The Rape of the Lock* (1712-17), Alexander Pope writes of his heroine's toilet "unveil'd" for use, and Chardin shows a dust cover caught back by the mirror while the table is used in *La Toilette du matin dit aussi Le Négligé*, 1741 (Rosenberg 1979: Fig. 88). Although there is no evidence of a heavy-weight dust cover in portraits painted after mid-century, the volume of lace shown

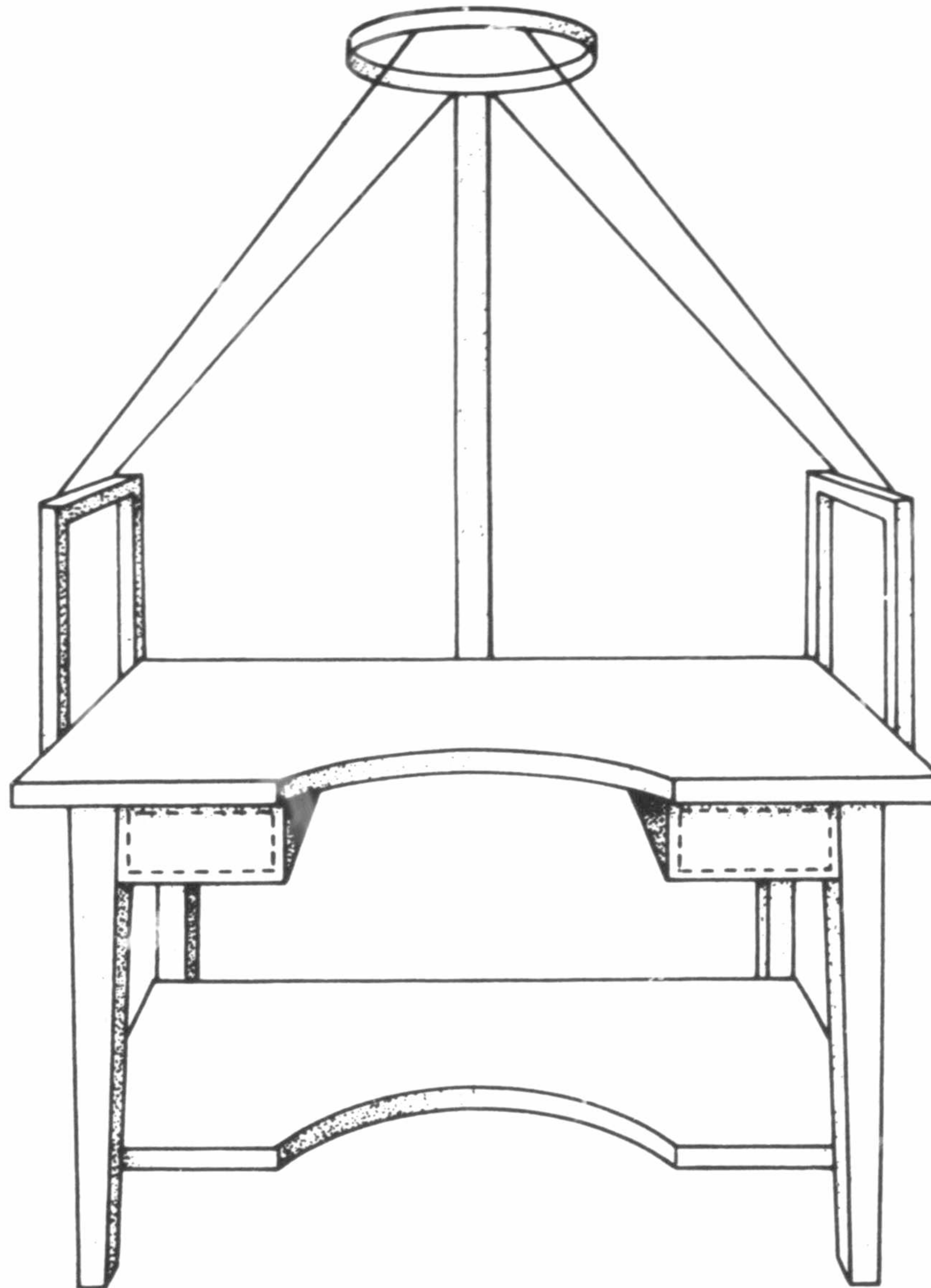


Figure 6. The frame of a toilet table recommended to its middle class American readers by Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine, July 1880 pp. 93-4. In their rendition of the completed toilet table, the toilet mirror hangs from the strip of wood at the back, rather than sitting on the table's surface; the whole resembles a tent, with the fabric's descent from the circular top controlled by supports at each of four corners. Godey's instructions for making this piece are as follows:

The frame of this table is made in ordinary pine wood, and has two drawers in it, and a shelf underneath; although an ordinary packing-box, with frame above it, will answer. The frame is covered first with pink cambric muslin, then with a curtain of spotted muslin, with ruffle trimming it; the top is covered in the same manner, with a ruffle around the edge. The back is covered to correspond, with a round looking-glass framed with a puff of muslin lined with pink, and a pink ribbon bow at the top. Full curtains of muslin are fastened upon the frame, and looped back with rosettes. (Drawing copied by D. Kappler)

attached at two sides to the tops of many mirrors could be drawn around the perimeter of the table top without disturbing the contents on the surface. Fabric attached to the coronet-shaped top of Figure 6 could serve the same purpose. The late 19th century reference to fabric twisted around the frame of the toilet glass to look pretty, shows that the form was retained as a decoration long after its original function had been lost.

There is evidence that the ways in which a lady used her toilet table remained consistent throughout the period. Designed to be sat at — rather than stood at — toilet tables all have a mirror or looking glass of some sort, usually at the back, and either propped at an angle, or on a frame that allows it to be swivelled. Because the toilet table is very frequently set in front of a window, full, natural daylight reflects from the face to the mirror, which is used to judge the effects of dressing, so as to apply the finishing touches to the hair and face and adorn the costume with jewelry. For these purposes, the items on the dressing table, close at hand, include a lady's finery: her jewelry, usually in a box or casket, her toilet service — matching brush, combs, etc., — perfume bottles, powder box, pin cushion, dressing case, and knick knacks both useful and pretty. Some things remain constant, pin cushions and jewelry boxes, for example, but some vary with the period. Alexander Pope imagines a container for patches on his early 18th century table, and the hair receiver that Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine (Dec. 1879: 567) describes would not have been appropriate when fashion decreed that natural hair was worn very short.

Information on 20th century toilet tables is sketchy, accounted for partly by their less frequent use in the majority of homes. However, it does seem that if a lady has a toilet table in her bed or dressing room even now, it continues to be used for the same purposes as it has always been used.

Conclusions

A common misconception is that the modern equivalent of the 18th century dressing room is a bathroom with vanity off the master bedroom. However, it is quite clear that what we now know as the private bedroom, used for sleeping and dressing, was once a heavily-curtained or enclosed sleeping area separated from a dressing room used for bathing, dressing, entertaining, and working. Various secondary sources conclude as much, and 18th century dressing room scenes provide ample evidence that dressing rooms were used for many purposes in former times. Scenes in which ladies oversee the work of servants, children engage in various pastimes, and people come and go at early morning receptions known as *levées*, show us to what extent the room's purpose as a sleeping area was of secondary importance. The subject is large and complicated, and application to the needs of interpretation is not conclusive at this point.

A good interpretation of an ongoing human activity, such as the toilet, translates a period's trends into a particular visual presentation. Trends are reflected in behaviour that demonstrates the conventional wisdom current with a group at a period. These commonly-held beliefs are seldom spelled out in writing of any sort, unless they differ with the author's own and are therefore a matter of novelty and surprise, or are in the process of dramatic change: the articulation of conventional wisdom requires comparison. "We are so unaccustomed in England to live in our bed-chambers, that it is at first awkward *sic* in France to find that people live no where else" was one of many observations noted in his journal by a young Englishman on his

grand tour at the end of the 18th century (Young 1976: 32). He also found the French more cleanly in their persons and the English in their houses, the French habit of dining at noon inconvenient for uninterrupted periods of study, and the like, all of which really establishes nothing more than that the leisured classes in the late 18th century spent their days differently in France and in England, and that most people who note national differences between themselves and others can be expected to express a preference for the habits of their own country. The 19th century treatises tend to present modern ways of doing things in as favourable a tone as older methods are likened to barbarity. Clearly, it is dangerous and misleading to base our understanding of period lifestyles on a small number of probably biased period observations, until we can see more clearly exactly what form the biases take and understand how to apply the information accurately and effectively to our own needs.

We are by no means ready to force conclusions about the changing nature of toilet habits in Canada over the past two centuries. But, as with all studies of human activity through material remains, the larger picture is the ultimate goal.

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