

# 16<sup>th</sup> Century Office Supplies

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## The Renaissance Office

By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the merchant class was firmly established throughout Europe, and the threads of commerce cast a web across lands both near and distant. The management of all these enterprises produced vast amounts of paperwork: contracts, ledgers, letters, and other instruments of bookkeeping. In turn, the creation of these documents required a wide variety of tools and materials.

A prime example of an office of this era can be seen in Hans Holbein's 1532 portrait of Georg Gisze (Fig. 1). It is likely that the portrait of the German merchant was painted as a gift for his fiancée, as well as a showcase for the painter's skill. In either case, Gisze is shown surrounded by the tools of his trade. This gives us an excellent look into the commonplace implements of such an office.

## Storage

Before looking at the individual tools, first we can examine the office itself. In the foreground is a desk, which is covered by an exotic rug as a show of wealth. This sort of conspicuous display of textiles is common, especially in Holbein's work, but is also seen in many other contexts. In any case, it seems unlikely that this would be a common covering for a desk in normal use. Various tools are arrayed on the desk, ready for use.

On the back wall are wooden rails. Letters and seal tags are tucked into the gap between the rail and the wall. A similar function for holding tools is often served by strips of leather, ribbon, or cloth affixed with tacks (Figs. 2, 3, 4).



Fig. 1 - *Portrait of Georg Gisze*, Hans Holbein, 1532



Fig. 2 - *Altarpiece from Verdu* (detail), Jaume Ferrer II - 1425-1450

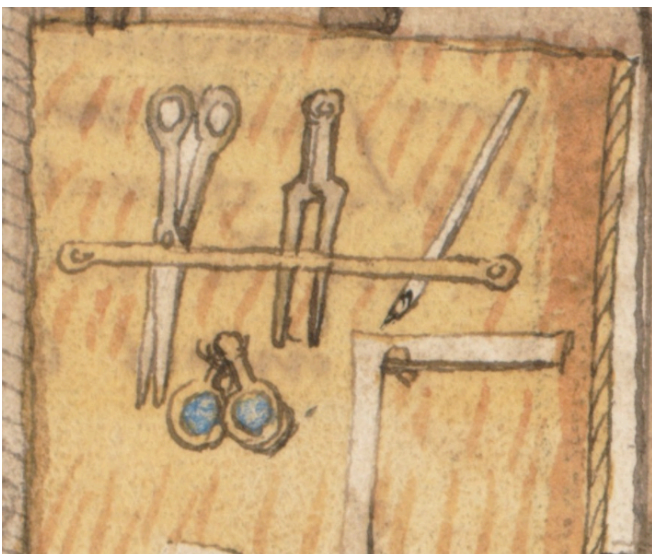


Fig. 3 - Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Mss.h.h.I.16, p. 41 (detail), 1484/85



Fig. 4 - *Saint Matthew the Evangelist* (detail), Gabriel Mälesskircher - 1478



A more familiar storage solution is shelves. As in Gisze's office, shelves are often quite high, holding various books, boxes, papers, and other assorted items (Fig. 1, 5, 6). The front edge of the shelf may feature hooks or nails from which other items may be hung.

## Files

The word "file" comes from the Latin *filium*, or "thread". A common method for organizing and storing papers was to collect them on a string, which could be used to hang them from a shelf for easy access (Figs. 6, 7). One end of the string would be tied in a knot to keep the papers from slipping off, while the other end would have a sharp metal aglet to punch through the paper (Fig. 7). A label could be used at the beginning of the stack to show what sort of papers it contained. Papers could also be collected into tied bundles or into leather bags labeled with parchment tags (Fig. 6).



Fig. 5 - *Two Tax Collectors* (detail), Marinus van Reymerswaele - first half 16th century



Fig. 6 - *The Tax Collector* (detail), Marinus van Reymerswaele - 1542

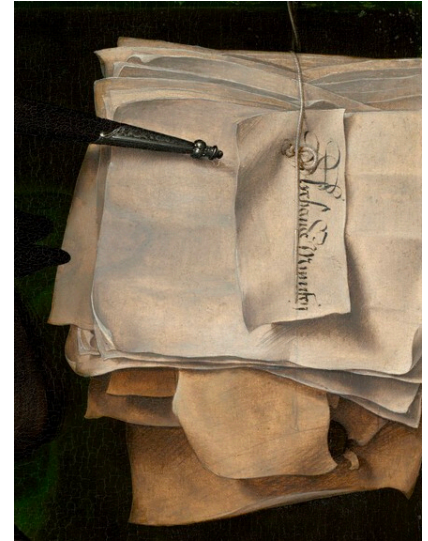


Fig. 7 - *Portrait of a Merchant* (detail), Jan Gossaert, c. 1530

## Inkstands

All of this paperwork means a lot of writing. A good way to store quills, ink, and other implements is an inkstand. These come in a variety of forms, including examples made of metal and ceramic. A typical inkstand will have an inkwell and a place to hold a quill, and may also include drawers, boxes, and other places to hold items (Figs. 8, 9, 10, 11). Many of the surviving inkstands are intricate cast bronze or brightly colored maiolica, often with sculptural or other decorative elements. The more pedestrian examples found in portraiture are functional, but unlikely to have survived intact like their more artistic contemporaries.



Fig. 8 - A 16th century Italian Renaissance bronze inkwell



Fig. 9 - Tin-glazed earthenware (maiolica) inkstand, c. 1500



Fig. 10 - *Portrait of Georg Gisze* (detail), Hans Holbein, 1532



Fig. 11 - *Portrait of a Merchant* (detail), Jan Gossaert, c. 1530



## Seals and Sealing Wax

Both letters and contracts require the use of seals for authentication and security. Wax sticks would be used to apply seals directly to letters (Figs. 10, 11, above). Cakes of wax could be softened and pressed around seal tags on documents (Fig. 12).

To make the impression in the wax, a seal matrix would be used. This might be a desk seal with a wooden handle (Figs. 12, 13, 14, 15), a conical seal matrix (Figs. 16, 17), or a signet ring (Figs. 18, 19).



Fig. 12 - *Portrait of a Man*, possibly Pieter Gerritsz Bicker (detail), Maarten van Heemskerck, 1529



Fig. 13 - *Portrait of a Merchant* possibly Hans of Antwerp (detail), Hans Holbein, 1532 - 1533



Fig. 14 - *Portrait of Georg Gisze* (detail), Hans Holbein, 1532



Fig. 15 - Seal of the Lviv Potters' Guild, 16th century, bronze and wood



Fig. 16 - *Portrait of Georg Gisze* (detail), Hans Holbein, 1532



Fig. 17 - Medieval silver seal matrix, found in Norfolk County, England



Fig. 18 - *Portrait of a Merchant* (detail), Jan Gossaert, c. 1530



Fig. 19 - A Medieval to Post-Medieval silver signet ring found in Somerset County, England