

Necessary Accoutrements

THUNDER MUGS, PISSPOTS, LOOKING GLASSES AND GUZUNDERS - OH MY

Chamber pots were used indoors when people couldn't or wouldn't make it outdoors to the privy, especially at night or in bad weather. Chamber pots—nicknamed thunder mugs, pisspots, looking glasses, or guzunders (because they went under the bed)—could be plain or fancy, but many were made of simple red earthenware. They survive today as plastic potties used to toilet train toddlers.

Red earthenware chamber pots were popular because they were cheap, and also probably because their dark glazes masked any stains left after cleaning. Some families chose to buy more expensive light-colored vessels and even tried to repair them when broken. Another family chose to buy a pretty painted chamber pot, possibly for the bedroom of the head of the household. Chamber pots did not have lids until the middle of the nineteenth century, when people—including Florence Nightingale—began to worry about the unhealthy vapors that oozed out of full pots. After this time, many chamber pots were made with matching lids in gleaming white, costly, and fashionable ironstone. - Meta F. Janowitz

Meta F. Janowitz is a Senior Material Specialist. She has a doctorate from the City University of New York and has worked as a historical archaeologist and ceramic historian for over 35 years.

(From top down)

Plain redware chamber pot with handle.

Plain creamware chamber pot with repaired hole.

Fancy, hand-painted pearlware chamber pot with handle.

Molded, white granite chamber pot in the New York shape, with handle.

Photographs by Thomas J. Kutys, 2016.

