

# The wax whisperers

*Rose Camara*

Divination, while spiritual in nature, is also a material practice. Among the many diverse methods that have existed, both historically and today, are osteomancy (the examination of bones), xylomancy (based on patterns in wood), tasseomancy (reading tea leaves) and hydromancy (studying currents in water). Another particularly ancient form of divination is ceromancy: pouring molten wax into water and then analyzing the solidified wax nugget, or alternatively, observing wax drippings as they descend on a candlestick. This practice may have stemmed from a similar form of





divination involving the pouring of molten lead or tin into water. The essential information is in the wax itself, and the images that it manifests.

Ceromancy is found in belief systems across the world, including modern paganism, witchcraft, Wicca, Hoodoo, and traditional healing practices such as the *Pagtatawas* ritual of the Philippines. It is also popular in Eastern Europe, where pagan magic intermingles with Christianity. In the Polish Catholic folk calendar, St. Andrew's Day or *Andrzejki* (November 29th) marks a time of liminality, an auspicious moment of fortune telling. One of the most popular *Andrzejki* activities, especially among unmarried women and girls, is a form of ceromancy focused on marriage prospects.

The ritual (*lanie wosku*, “wax pouring”) consists of breaking up a candle, *heating wax* in a pot and pouring it into cold water through the hole of a skeleton key, straw, or the bristles of a broom. Once the wax has solidified, it is removed from the water and held up to a light in order to cast a shadow on a wall or stretched piece of cloth. The wax's shadow may suggest the likeness of a cat, signifying spinsterhood; a man, indicating a successful match with a partner; a bird, presaging a wedding sometime soon.

Orthodox Christianity in Eastern Europe also has a place for diviners, many of them being elderly women. In the Podlasie region of Poland, people travel from all over the country to visit *szeptuchy* (“whisperers”), so named because of the prayers that are said during their rituals. Echoing the timeless struggle between good and evil, the role of the *szeptucha* is primarily that of a healer, but also to fight against witchcraft or “black magic.” With the aid of ceromancy, she can treat all manner of afflictions such as skin diseases (*róża*, or “rose”, a rash) and pain (*przewianie* or “the chills”, shivers or

physical pain caused by a cold wind), as well as fright and anxiety disorders (*przestrach* and *nerw-koltun*).

The candles used in these rituals are often blessed in churches during the celebration of Candlemas. It is traditionally maintained that candles used in churches and by the congregation are made of 100% pure beeswax, which symbolizes the purity of the soul. Krzysztof Ulanowski, lecturer at the University of Gdańsk describes the healing ritual like this:

The head of the person who is scared is sometimes covered with a handkerchief, a pot of cool water is placed on it and melted wax is poured into it to solidify immediately. This is important because the healer can take it out of the water and guess from its shape who the perpetrator of the affliction was. Finally, in many cases, the disease can be overcome and abandoned at a special place, preferably 'at a crossroads.'

The wax is seen as the embodiment of the ailment, drawing the illness out of the body. The discovery of "who" is the cause of illness or misfortune stems from an old belief that diseases and ailments are curses cast by witches or the "evil eye." In addition to offering prayers, ritualistic guidance, and a healing touch, this wax-based divination is empathetic, providing those in need with a caring listener.

Swedish anthropologist Galina Lindquist observes that "folk medicine" so defined has been called to treat not primarily biomedically defined diseases but a much broader



range of social, psychological, and existential afflictions, of which physical ailments were only a small part.” Despite the positive impact that traditional *szeptuchy* can have on a community, and their frequent cooperation with local priests, or *batuszka*, their reputation can turn negative when misfortune occurs elsewhere in the community. The healer is then cast as a witch, her work blamed on the bidding of the Devil.

As seen in Polish folk practices, ceromancy is hope rendered in physical form. The wax pouring rituals encapsulate the intergenerational power of women, which has persisted for thousands of years, bridging the gap between ancient and contemporary knowledge. Seeking answers, healing, and help is, and always has been, a natural human tendency.

# Credits

IV. Natural honeycombs, honey, and beeswax in an empty box, 2016.

Photo: Imagic Elements / Alamy.

VI. Detail, Charles-Louis Bagniet (1814–1886), *The Letter*, ca. 1870.

Photo: 916 collection / Alamy.

1. Master of Herculaneum (1st century), A young woman with book and stylus (so-called Sappho), ca. 50. Found in the collection of the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli. Photo: © Fine Art Images / Heritage Images, Heritage Image Partnership Ltd / Alamy.

10. UNESCO World Heritage, Thebes in Egypt, Assassif (part of the Valley of the Nobles), Tomb of Pabasa. A rare scene of beekeeping: pouring milk, 2015. Photo: Alain Guilleux / Alamy.

11. Medardo Ross, *Behold the Boy (Ecce Puer)*, 1906 / cast ca. 1958–1959. Beeswax over plaster. 17 1/4" x 13 3/4" x 10 3/8". Gift of Joseph H. Hirschhorn, 1966.

12. Henry Cros (French, 1840–1907), *The Beautiful Viola*, 1874. Painted and gilded wax relief on slate. 10 1/4 in. (diam). Purchase, 2015 © Orsay Museum, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Patrice Schmidt. (The Chipstone Foundation made best efforts to contact the Orsay Museum. Failing to do so, we have posted this image in accordance with the Fair Use doctrine.)

14–15. Front and back, Henry Cros, (French, 1840–1907), *Woman with a Mandore*, between 1868 and 1870. Wax relief painted on slate in a wooden frame protected by a glass. 13 9/16" x 12 3/16" x 2". (Dimensions of the wax before destruction). Don Charles Hayem, 1899 © RMN-Grand Palais (Orsay Museum) / Tony Querrec. (The Chipstone Foundation made best efforts to contact the Orsay Museum. Failing to do so, we have posted this image in accordance with the Fair Use doctrine.)

17. Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1928), *Study in the Nude of Little Dancer Aged Fourteen (Nude Little Dancer)*, ca. 1878–1881. Pigmented beeswax, plaster core, metal and wood armatures, on plaster and wooden bases.

84 (overall, without base): 27 3/8" x 11 9/16" x 11 15/16". Courtesy National



Gallery of Art, Washington, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, 1985.64.46.

18. Ray Leighton (Australian, 1917–2002), *Surf Sirens, Manly Beach, New South Wales*, ca. 1940. Gelatin silver and selenium toned print on archival paper. National Library of Australia, PIC Drawer PM 3491 #PIC/P2092/4.

19. A waxwork mould of an equestrian statue section, before casting. Moule en cire d'une portion de statue équestre avant coulée, 2007. Photo: Emmanuel LATTES / Alamy.

20. Viennese, Set of nine wax plaques showing fetal development and female anatomy, 1801–1830. Wax. Science Museum Group Collection, © The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum, A600051 Pt2. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license. <https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/objects/co96249/wax-plaque-showing-foetus-in-the-womb>.

21. Magical disc, 16th century. Wax. 9 1/8" (diam.). Wax disc engraved with magical figures and names; used by Doctor Dee when consulting “shew stones” or magic mirror. © The Trustees of the British Museum, 1838, 1232.90.a. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.

23. Petrus van Schendel (Dutch, 1806–1870), *Reading by Candlelight*, date unknown [ca. 1840s–1850s]. Oil on wood. 10 5/8" x 8 7/8". Hampel Kunstauktionen/Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.

24. English, *Various Stages in the Process of Candle Making and Machinery Used*, 1700–1799. Engraving. (image): 7 1/16" x 8 11/16". Wellcome Collection. <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/npq52ypp>.

27. Birthday candles that have just been blown out with smoke on black background, March 19, 2015. Photo: Constantinos Zorbas / Alamy.

28. James Usher, Royal wax seal for Usher's steam plough model, 1849. Wax. Science Museum Group, © The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum, 1960–213/3. Credit: J. H. Shackle. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license. <https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/objects/co8640070/royal-wax-seal-for-ushers-steam-plough-model>.

29. Wax jack owned by the Dennis Family, early 19th century. Britannia metal, silver, beeswax, and cotton. 6 3/4" x 5 1/8". Collection



of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of M. Denise Dennis, in honor of the Dennis Family, 2014.273.1.

30. Ukrainian, The Easter egg is decorated with a pattern using a wax-resist method and bleaching, 2017. Photo: OlegMit / Alamy.

31. Mix of eggs with traditional designs, 2013. Photo: Miroslava Lipa / Alamy.

33. *Szeptucha Artemiuk Paraskiewa. Parczew, 2010. Szeptucha Artemiuk Paraskiewa zamawia choroby. Modli sie i pali len.* 0429916031 - Andrzej Sidor / Forum.

34. *Warszawa, 1976. Andrzejki w klubie, lanie wosku. (Warsaw, 1976. St. Andrew's Day in the club, pouring wax).* 0458059334 - Jacek Barcz / Forum.

37. *Wróżby Andrzejkowe (St. Andrew's Day fortune telling).* © rozentuzjzmowany / Adobe Stock.

38. Science Museum Group, Wax vanitas (wax model of a female head depicting life and death), Europe, 1701–1800. Science Museum Group Collection, © The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum, A99821. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share-Alike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license. <https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/objects/co77703/wax-vanitas-europe-1701-1800>

39. German School (19th century), Death mask of Ludwig van Beethoven, 1827. Wax. Bridgeman Images.

42. Binney and Smith, Box of Crayons (open), 1903–1909. Division of Home and Community Life, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, 1998.0068.

40. L.C. Handy Studio, Hendley, John. *Wax worker, Agriculture Dept.* (His art died with him), published between 1890 and 1910. Digital file from original wet collodion glass negative. Brady-Handy photograph collection, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. Purchase; Alice H. Cox and Mary H. Evans; 1954, LC-BH833- 44 [P&P].

44. H. Armstrong Roberts, 1940s, *Two Children Coloring in Book*, 1945. Archival photograph. Photo: H. Armstrong Roberts / ClassicStock / Alamy.

45. Aurelien Guichard (London, United Kingdom), “A pound of flesh for 50p (The Melting House)” by Alex Chinneck, Merge Festival, 2014; image taken 2014. Digital image of paraffin wax, terracotta, and roofing

materials. Photo: Aurelien Guichard. CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=63445375>

47. Inspecting Crayons At Binney & Smith (Crayola Crayons), Easton, Pennsylvania (Northampton County), USA. Photo: H. Mark Weidman Photography / Alamy.

48. Yellow lava lamp, 2019. Photo: Dennis Pommès / Alamy.

49. Cheeses piled high on a shelf in a market in Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2010. Photo: Yehoshua Halevi / Alamy.

50. Portrait of adult skier using equipment from 1950's or earlier. Location: Julian Alps, Slovenia, Europe. Platinum toned.

52. Jessie Diggins, USA, in action during the Women's 10 km classic FIS World Cup skiing competition in Falun, Sweden March 16, 2024, 2024. Photo: Anders Wiklund / TT News Agency / Alamy.

53. Franz Klammer, Mens Downhill World Cup Tour Competition, St Anton, Austria, February 1983, 2015. Image courtesy: Hans Bézard. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>

54. Technician Waxing a Ski at Northern Ski Works, Killington, VT, 2025. Image courtesy: Rick Gaspar and Wynne Patterson.

56. Thanapol Kuptanisakorn, *Swan*, showing texture from Thai carving candle festival, 2012. Photo: Thanapol Kuptanisakorn / Alamy.

58. Image courtesy: Austin Kerr.

62. Unwaxed and Waxed Mahogany, 2025. Image courtesy: Jon Prown.

64. A historic ceiling restored with hand-applied wax, Miami, FL. Image courtesy: Austin Kerr.

66. Thread for leather craft, 2013. Photo: leungchopan, AY Media AS / Alamy.

67. Edison Record phonograph cylinder in cardboard tube, 'Secret Love Gavotte' performed by Albert Benzler, by the National Phonograph Co., 1900–1902. Cylindrical phonograph record, one of ten. Science Museum Group, © The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum, 1973–324/9. Mrs. M. Elliott. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.

68. Andreas Roth, *Picture of Frederick III.* or Frederick I, end of 17th century. Wax and glass. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Skulpturensammlung

69. Rashid Johnson, *Cosmic Slop "Prospect Park,"* 2013. Black soap, wax. 247.7 x 308.6 x 8.3 cm / 97 1/2 x 121 1/2 x 3 1/4 inches. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Gift of Amoli Foundation Ltd (M.2021.86).  
© Rashid Johnson. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.
70. *Santa Maria della Vittoria Church*, Rome, Italy. December 26, 2017: The wax effigy and relics of St. Victoria. iStock.com / Runoman.
72. Stefano Maderno (1570–1636), *St. Cecilia*, 1600. Marble sculpture, main altar, Church of St Cecilia in Trastevere, Rome, Lazio, Italy.  
© NPL - DeA Picture Library / G. Nimatallah / Bridgeman Images.
74. Isabelle Albuquerque, *Orgy For Ten People In One Body: Two*, 2020–2022. Plaster, beeswax, mattress, and flame. (figure): 26" x 23" x 32"; (plinth): 16" x 38" x 74". Ed. of 3, 2 AP's. Photo by Genevieve Hanson. Courtesy of the artist and Jeffrey Deitch Gallery.
75. Isabelle Albuquerque, *Orgy For Ten People In One Body: Ten*, 2022. Beeswax, human hair, gold wedding ring, rope, and walnut tree. 28" x 42" x 95". Photo by Genevieve Hanson. Courtesy of the artist and Jeffrey Deitch Gallery.
76. Pierre Imans (French, 20th century), *Bust*, ca.1910. Wax, painted, residual hair, silk ribbon, cotton net, and resin. Credit: Fashion Museum Bath. © Fashion Museum Bath / Bridgeman Images.
77. Tim Kramer, *5x World Champion, Patrick Fete and his perfect English mustache, after getting a perfect score from the judges at the 2023 World Beard and Mustache Championship in Burghausen, Germany*, 2023. Image courtesy of Tim Kramer and Death Grip Wax.
82. Possibly Kassian Cephas (Javanese, 1845–1912), *Three Javanese Women Drawing Batik Designs on Cloth*. Ca. 1867–1910. Albumen print on pasteboard. 6 3/16" x 8 9/16". Rijks Museum, Gift of J.H. Marmelstein, 2005. RP-F-2001-17-71.
83. Local batik workshop, artist demonstration on how to paint cloth with hot wax on copper, Banjul, Gambia, 2010. Photos: Cindy Hopkins / Alamy.
86. Wax paper, 2025. Image courtesy: Wynne Patterson.
90. *Miner*, Little Cottonwood Canyon, Wasatch Mountains, Utah. Photo, private collection.