

Thuringian waterwhetstones from the J.G. Escher company in Germany

Company History

Talking about Thuringian waterwhetstones for giving a superior final finish to a straight razors edge isn't possible without mentioning one company, which has surely been the most famous among the whetstone trading companies in the Thuringian area for the last two centuries: J.G. Escher & Co.

The company was founded 1789 in Sonneberg by Johann Gottfried Escher. He was a salesman, dealing with the slate products from the Thuringian area, like slate pens and plates and began around 1800 to produce whetstones.

J.G. Escher traded different whetstones for all possible applications: Hard oilstones that were mainly used by engravers, goldsmith and jewelers, soft waterstones for barbers and straight razor users.

The soft waterwhetstones were mined in the area of Steinach/Thuringia by very small companies, often familiar business and then sold to larger trading companies like Escher, which were located mainly in Sonneberg, from the 20th century also in Steinach.

Until the end in 1953 the different companies were always hold by members of the Escher family.

In the late 19th century the company split into J.G. Escher & Co and J.G. Escher Sohn.

J.G. Escher & Co. founded together with other companies (i.e. Bösenberg & Trinks Co.) 1923 the "Deutsche Schleifmittel AG" in Sonneberg.

J.G. Escher Sohn was divided 1927 into J.G. Escher Sohn and JGES. Owner at this time was Rudolf Schwarz, a great-grandson of Johan Gottfried Escher. Rudolf Schwarz also was the last owner until the company was dispossessed in 1953.

JGES began around 1930 also with the fabrication of artificial sharpening stones because the natural stones were getting rarer and the general demand of whetstones after WW1 raised. After WW2 the mining of natural whetstones came to an end. From this time on, only artificial whetstones were produced.

The last natural whetstone miner in the thuringian area was Herman Luthardt. He ended producing whetstones in 1966.

Geological issues

Thuringian waterwhetstones are slate stones or more precisely mud slate. These slates consist of quartz – which is the abrasive material, clay, mica (glimmer) and chlorite. The soft waterwhetstones were found in upper-Devonian age deposits.



Artificial whetstones of the JGES company

Sizes and colors

The typical size of the Thuringian waterwhetstones is between 5 and 10 inch long and one to two inch in width. The most common ones are the 5 inch and 7 inch hones. Also larger stones exist (12 inches) but they are very rare.

The hones are typically classified in 4 colors:

Yellow-green
 Light-green
 Blue-green
 (Dark) Blue

The color states the different layer in the whetstone horizon from which the stones have been broken. The color of the stones themselves is determined by the amount of chlorite and other trace elements.

The yellow-green stones are more homogenous in material, the quartz-content is less and the particle size of the elements - mainly quartz - is smaller than in the blue stones. The blue color is caused by higher amounts of ore, opaque material and bitumen.

The finest and smoothest hones are those of the yellow/ green quality. These stones have also been the rarest and most difficult to mine and were therefore the more expensive hones.

As a special appearance there are stones which have two different colored layers in one stone, mostly a blue and the yellow-green layer. These stones were considered to be the most expensive stones and were sought after and sold mainly to barbers (“Barbers Delight”).



Escher natural combination stone yellow-green/blue

In some stones the layers are not perfectly separated and the colors flow into another. This leads to beautiful mixed colors in the stone and reminds from the appearance somehow like clouds in the sky.



“Cloudy” Thuringian

Also there are very special black mottled Escher hones of the late period of JGES company:



Black mottled JGES hone

The following table from an old Pike catalogue gives an overview of colors, sizes and prices at the beginning of the 20th century.

German Water Hones								
GRADE	PRICE PER DOZEN							
	6"	7"	8"	9"	10"	5x2½"	6 x 2"	EXTRA Rubbers
Dark Blue	\$1.20	\$2.40	\$3.00	\$3.50	\$4.80			\$.60
Blue Green	1.44	3.00	4.20	5.40	6.60			
Light Green	1.80	3.60	5.40	7.20	9.00			
Yellow Green	2.40	4.80	7.20	9.00	12.00			1.20
Barbers' Gem						\$7.20		
Barbers' Delight							\$9.00	

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Put up in packages containing two hones. Rubber supplied with each hone.

Labels

In the history of the Escher company the label on the hones changed a few times. Beside some very old and special labels the most common once were:

1. the blue label "celebrated water razor hone" with the Escher cup
2. the Escher & Co label, showing the razor parlor (4 people) with some variances in wording and signature
3. the Escher and sons label (razor scene with 2 people in some variations)

The labels mainly were printed in two languages, German and English for the export hones.



Most common Escher labels

There are also a lot of other different labeled thuringian waterwhetstones, either from the mining companies in Steinach themselves, from other trading companies (i.e. Deutsche Schleifmaterialien Gesellschaft DSG; Apex, ...), from Escher partner companies (i.e. Pike) and from Solingen Razor and Knife fabrication companies that also got the stones from Sonneberg and Steinach.

What is so special about Escher stones?

“The stones need no other recommendation to their quality than a single trial....” you can read on some of the old Escher labels and that’s what it is.

Thuringian waterwhetstones are used for end finishing of a straight razors edge. They can be used with or without slurry; however the last strokes should be done with water only.

The softness during honing, the sharpness of the edge after finishing and the smoothness of the razor blade while shaving is what the thuringian stones made so famous.

Thuringian sizes and colors

