

The Art of Ingenious Table Furniture

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by Lucy Lethbridge

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Everyday dining tastes and fashions have changed so much in the last two centuries that it may be hard to imagine the amount of effort that once went into opulent table displays of wealth and opulence. Flower arrangements are probably the one decorative constant – medieval feasting tables were often strewn with sweet smelling blooms – but mere posies were for the cash-strapped. In seventeenth-century Holland, tulips, the most valuable commodity of the time were displayed in towering Delftware tulipiers where each flower could be seen in its magnificence.

And why limit oneself to real flowers? In 1694, the Duchess of Brunswick’s birthday table was spread with an entire landscape made of sugar, with fields and parterres containing tiny sugar crops made of marzipan or parterres of fruit and flowers in coloured jellies. In 1756, a dinner at the Duchess of Norfolk’s was spread with an edible feast involving a parkland, a plantation of flowering shrubs and in the middle a ‘Fine piece of water with Dolphins Spouting out water, and Deer dispersed Irregularly over the Lawn.’ Horace Walpole joked in 1750 that ‘all the geniuses of the age are employed in designing new plans for dessert.’





Detail of Apollo standing holding a lyre from A Monumental Porcelain Figural Group of Apollo and the Muses on Mount Parnassus. Germany, Circa 1880.
Courtesy of [Adrian Alan](#).

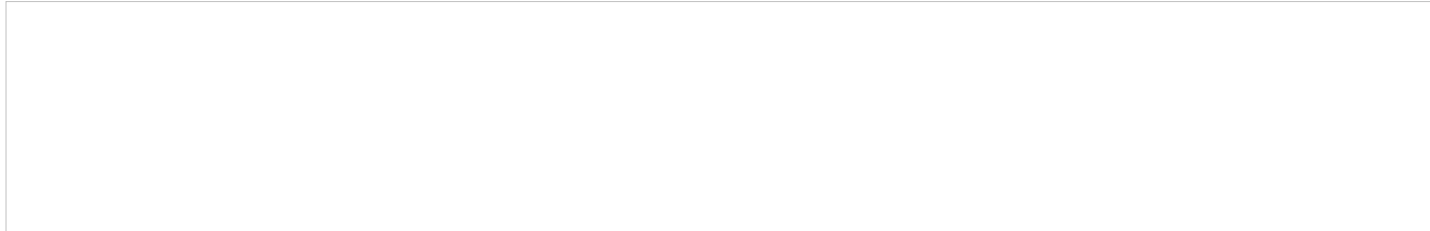
Table furniture became an artform of staggering ingenuity and imagination: candelabras, fruit baskets, animals, figures and ornamental landscapes presented diners with fantastical scenes and skills. The dining table became a kind of stage in which eating was only one of the entertainments on offer. The fashion for tables decorated with complicated pastry or sugar-paste pastoral or classical tableaux was the forerunner of the enormous and complicated porcelain centrepieces that were made by Sèvres and Meissen in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And with the increasing popularity of dining 'à la russe', or having courses brought sequentially to the table rather than having everything spread out at once, the more permanent table centrepiece became particularly desirable. Errol Manners of E&H Manners notes how by the eighteenth century, 'a lot of figures were designed specifically for the dining room.' And Manners also observes how, showing its closeness to the sugar-paste tradition, 'a lot of porcelain was actually held by the court pantries' where the skilled sugar-workers were employed. Decorative pieces by Johann Joachim Kändler (1706-1775), celebrated modeller at the Meissen factory, were particularly sought after. Kändler was the master of the diverting table scene: he created a vast range of birds, stag beetles, monkeys, rhinoceroses as well as groups of figures, including pastoral compositions with shepherds or classical figures and, perhaps most popular of all, characters from the Commedia del Arte.

Dealers Adrian Alan are currently selling a rare Meissen centrepiece, a wondrously rich and complicated scene designed by Kändler and composed of sixteen interlocking pieces – Apollo and the Nine Muses on Mount Parnassus. It was made in 1880 from Kändler's original models (and using exactly the same methods that would have been used a century earlier) and only two from this date are known to be in existence. One of the only two contemporaneous with Kändler himself, who designed the piece for the Elector of Saxony, would be, says Giles Forster of Adrian Alan, 'priceless.' This one (with a £190,000 asking price) is, Forster says, 'the most important piece of nineteenth century Meissen on the market today.'



A Monumental Porcelain Figural Group of Apollo and the Muses on Mount Parnassus. Germany, Circa 1880
Courtesy of [Adrian Alan](#)

He adds: 'Meissen was the first European manufactory to discover the secret of Chinese porcelain prized for its white, almost translucent quality. Porcelain figurines replaced table ornaments made in sugar and pastry. Centrepieces of such scale were impossibly valuable, with only two being recorded in the 18th century; one supplied to Frederick the Great of Prussia and one other to St. Petersburg. This example is part of a reissue in the 19th century, made by Meissen employing the original moulds. It is equally rare with only one other example known. Beyond the obvious wow factor, it really is beyond comprehension how they managed to sculpt and fire such a remarkable and delicate creation, made from sixteen interlocking pieces. Placed at the centre of a table it would be quite the conversation piece, as it tells the myth, familiar to Baroque and Rococo art, of how Apollo at Mount Parnassus inspired the nine muses representing poetry, music, and learning. Knowledge literally springs from Pegasus' hoof. It is one of, if not the most, rare and impressive example of 19th century Meissen in existence.' It is certainly lovely – full of entrancing detail and colour: Perseus on the gold-winged Pegasus, Apollo with his lyre and the muses seated below him with the symbols of their arts. As Forster observes, 'It has everything to show off your classical knowledge.'





Detail of the Goddess Calliope, seated and shown writing, representing eloquence and epic poetry from A Monumental Porcelain Figural Group of Apollo and the Muses on Mount Parnassus. Germany, Circa 1880.
Courtesy of [Adrian Alan](#).

Nowadays, centrepieces will usually be brought for display not necessarily on the dining table. Though as Forster puts it, not everyone ‘is eating at a breakfast bar’: for the rich collector, a dining room still needs a dramatic central focus. And if the table is big enough, there is really no end to the flights of imagination it can carry. Those in search of inspiration might try a visit to Apsley House and see the extraordinary Sèvres dinner service commissioned by the Empress Josephine in 1809 and presented to Wellington by Louis XVIII in 1818. In celebration of Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt and the wild popularity of all things ancient Egyptian and archaeological, it contains a vast centrepiece organised around three temples and four obelisks connected by an avenue of ram-headed sphinxes.

Surely neither food, conversation nor company could ever compete.