



MAK

Eating and Drinking

Eating and drinking are an essential part of (everyday) culture and are more than merely a question of taste and good design. People have always paid a great deal of attention to the design of meals, a ritual that is repeated several times a day. What they eat and drink with, out of, and on reveals a great deal about the people sitting around the table or on the floor, about their social standing and their culture. Beyond their practical value, tableware and cutlery are regarded as a status symbol, but also as a reflection of the food available. Time and again, new food and drinks inspire craftspeople and designers to create newly shaped receptacles and cutlery. On the basis of the MAK's considerable collection of sophisticated table culture objects, the MAK DESIGN LAB invites you to come on a historical journey through the different styles of laying the table in Europe: from the "liftable" table in the Middle Ages to examples of contemporary table culture.

Until well into the High Middle Ages, Europeans ate with their fingers. It was in the Middle Ages that noble guests to a feast dined for the first time on tables that had no fixed position in the room and could be set up and dismantled without much difficulty. The fact that the table top was easy to remove from the supporting trestle led to the phrase "to rise from table" (in German literally "to lift the table"), which is still used today. At that time, people ate and drank with—often optically mismatching—equipment such as knives and spoons, from wooden boards and out of bowls, as well as out of glass and clay drinking vessels. It was not unusual for several people to share the same crockery and cutlery.

Things became more cultivated in the Renaissance: the age of discoveries and increased international trade brought new materials, forms, food, and spices to table. For the first time, decoration became a focus of table culture. The host's rank was no longer exclusively deducible from the tableware used, but also from the so-called "Schaubuffet" [show buffet], which flanked the table. Depending on the host's fortune, it would be decorated with either work by goldsmiths or valuable glass and ceramic objects.

In the 17th century new hot drinks like chocolate, tea, and coffee came to Europe. Initially drunk in small doses as "medicine," they were soon accepted as drinks at the domestic table. New, appropriate receptacles were adapted from Japanese and Chinese examples. The Japanese sake flask and the Chinese rice wine jug were transformed into tea and coffee pots, while the Chinese teacup developed into the various forms of tea, coffee, and hot chocolate cups that can be found across Europe.

The uniformly designed service is an invention of the Baroque period. In the "service à la française" all dishes eaten per course were brought to table simultaneously in the appropriate bowls, terrines, and on platters. The guest then helped himself. The wine now drunk in our culture was at that time still so saturated with sediment that, alt-

though it would have been brought in a goblet or glass by the servants if requested, it would have been cleared away again after a single sip.

At the beginning of the 19th century the dining ritual changed with the advent of the “service à la russe.” Dishes were portioned in advance in the kitchen and presented already on the plates. The soup was served in “deep” plates from the terrine. Subsequently the servants would bring one plate per course with carved meat or fish, sauces, and side dishes. Glasses standing on the table completed the table service. Table decorations would be draped in the middle of the table: confectionary articles, fruit *étagères*, vases with flowers, and candlesticks. Terrines, bowls, and platters stood on the sideboard or credenza ready to refill the diners’ plates. In simple households, they were positioned in the center of the table and the guests would serve each other.

Beginning in Scandinavia in the second half of the 20th century designers fashioned cookware out of cast iron or steel. For want of domestic staff, who by this time had been long out of fashion, the housewife simply took the pots and pans straight from the oven to the table to serve.

In the East, it was (and in some cases still is today) customary for all social classes to eat meals while sitting on the floor, using their thumb, index, and middle finger to transfer food from the bowls directly into their mouths. The bowls containing the food are lined up on mats or spreads on the floor so that everyone can reach them with their hands. Bowls with water and towels for drying make it possible for the diners to frequently clean their fingers. Among the rural population in Europe it was common to sit around the table and use separate spoons to eat from a shared bowl until well into the 20th century. The fondue pot has brought this custom into the city.

Across cultures, ceremonial drinks consumed during rituals have influenced receptacles such as chalices in the Christian West or *chawan* bowls in the Japanese tea ceremony. The shape of the chalice, which contains wine as a symbol of the blood of Christ and which was derived from an ordinary drinking cup, has barely altered since the Middle Ages. Equally timeless are the receptacles used in the tea ceremony: during this ritual, the host and guests should draw closer to the principles of harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility through meditative actions. The equipment used should correspond to and reflect these four ideals.

The MAK Collection also addresses contemporary artistic examinations of the issue of eating and drinking and shows examples of Austrian contemporary design. The work

FEMME FATALE No.4 was produced especially for the MAK by the designer and artist Nina Levett (*1973 in Vienna). Tableware arranged for six people comprises the matrix of Levett's pictorial fiction of a "disastrous woman." The Eat Artists Sonja Stummerer and Martin Hablesreiter's table installation is a response to objects in the MAK Collection and places them in the context of disposable tableware culture and outdated table manners.

Tablecloths and napkins, table decorations made of tragacanth or porcelain, graphic representations of show dinners, "Tischzuchten" (poems instructing readers of the correct behavior at table) and menu cards complete this journey through European table culture.

–**Rainald Franz**

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