A Consciously Civilized Setting

THESIS

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By

Lindsay Allison Scypta

Graduate Program in Art

The Ohio State University

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Master's Examination Committee:

Rebecca Harvey, Advisor

Jeff Haase

Steven Thurston
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Abstract

The table comes first, everything else follows: the dishes, the food, individuals and conversation. There is trust and fear that comes with the meal—a trust that with an honest conversation knives will not be raised in anger, a fear that customs and rituals are not universally understood. Taste is our most intimate sense, and the table is where we experience it socially. We gather for family dinner, for coffee with friends, for business meetings; all centered around this table that civilizes us. We sanctify life’s most treasured moments with food, and with some degree of grace we dine together, not alone. Bringing art into the everyday, the vessels and utensils which adorn the table are then brought to our lips, where we intimately experience food through taste and the vessels through touch. My studio practice pivots around these notions of the table, and leading people back to this place of social intimacy.
Dedication

For my parents who believed I was never too young to sit at the dining room table.

And for Keith who has stood beside me unconditionally.
Acknowledgments

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Thank you!
Vita

2004 .......................................................... Cranbrook Kingswood School

2008 .......................................................... B.F.A. Art & Design, New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University

2011-2012 .................................................. Graduate Administrative Assistant, Department of Art, The Ohio State University

2012 to present ........................................... Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of Art, The Ohio State University

Publications


Fields of Study

Major Field: Art
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Taste is the most intimate of the senses, and the food we taste at the table becomes the socializing act. We sanctify with food life’s most treasured moments, and with grace and civility we dine together, not alone. Bringing art into the everyday, the vessels and utensils which adorn the table are then brought to our lips, where we intimately experience not only the coffee within through taste, but the sensation of our lips meeting the cup. The table is a place of intimacy where all senses are simultaneously engaged. Therefore, it seems fitting to begin with the table. A place to sit, to read, to converse, to share information, and to learn. Adam Gopnik so eloquently describes the table as “the place where a need becomes a want. Something we have to do—eat—becomes something we care to do—dine, and then something we care to do becomes something we try to do with grace. Eating together is the civilizing act, we take urges and tame them into tastes” (Gopnik 39). There is one question that becomes so very clear after considering Gopnik’s book, The Table Comes First. Has the table become entirely irrelevant in American culture? Trendy food trucks are competing with the restaurant lunch crowd; the cancelation of many local daily newspapers has left traditional morning coffee dull and in need of a Starbucks; and the need to over-entertain our children has left the dinner table empty. Will we return to the table or is American culture evolving beyond it, and at what risk?
Chapter 2: Practice

As a maker of tableware, I began to question table etiquette—where it began and how it has shifted and changed to fit the modern culture. I began with the table, and my mind immediately returned to the Santa Maria della Grazie, in Milan, where the Last Supper fresco can be seen. Seated at one side of the table only, the host or most important guest sat in the center. This continued to be the fashion through the Middle Ages, where banquets required the main table (where only men were permitted to sit) to be elevated on risers for all the lesser guests to observe. As the world modernized, women were invited and quests were permitted to dine on both sides. These evolutions of the table widened my ideas about my own dining expectations, yielding new possibilities for my vessels that would complement my idealized meal.

In 1533 Catherine de Medici of Florence married Henry II, joining Italian and French cuisine and manners forever. This historical fact is so intriguing to me, that at the altar (table) two people made the commitment of marriage, joining their native tables, foods and civilized behavior. In 1608, Italian dinning etiquette introduced the modern fork; suddenly fingers were no longer permitted to touch the meat (Schollander). The fork ushered in other changes as well, it slowed down the meal allowing and encouraging advanced flavors to be introduced to the palette (Murphy). After all, the pace of the meal determines the experience of the food, and the personal intimacies allowed at the table.
The French enhanced the food and the Italians brought the manners, and this beautiful marriage created my idealized modern table: where cocktails are served and pleasantries enjoyed, the table is set and guests are seated for what could be an all evening affair—at the table, with food, guests, and libations.

The French Revolution resulted in many cooks finding themselves no longer employed. With the dismantling of French nobility, cooks were enabled (or forced) to open restaurants and cafes. This is the origin of our modern restaurants, but also possibly the only place where the table and the meal are now experienced in an extensively intimate way.

This meal was not about simply nourishing the body with food and drink, rather it was about the spectacle. Dishes were brought out by footmen beginning with the lesser foods and crescendoing into the *Pièce de résistance*. As a result, this way of eating required larger tables enabling more real estate for serve-ware, but as a consequence culminated in cold food for the admiring guests. The pre-revolutionary period served the meal in two courses beginning with guests arriving to tables fully set with food in order of status. The host served the soup and the footmen would pass, weaving in and out around the table. Then, the fish would arrive in a grand procession on massive platters. The host would carve the fish and the guests would help themselves to the entrees around them, passing and sharing if they felt inclined, meaning your status determined which entree you experienced (Schollander).
In the United States, in 1840, the Van Buren administration hosted a party with French-style cooking at the White House which consisted of five luxurious courses. This meal was so controversial that the menu was placed in the *Congressional Record*, and it included a first course of soups, followed by fish, entrees, entrees & joint, sweets & game, and finally fruit & sweets. It is said this extravagant event lost Van Buren the election to William Harrison who was a champion of simple things. For my purposes, this historical meal serves as a reference as it is well documented. This event, contrasted with the previous style of dining is where my ideas of the table began to shift. I could imagine the meal as a dance, where the footmen would weave and bob, dip, reach and bow. The guests became peripheral for me, the host, the footmen, the cook, table and dishes were the necessary participants in this dance. This untethered my preconceived notions of the meal and allowed me to image it more freely as a thoughtfully choreographed performance. Considering the meal as a dance reminded me of the modern architects Sarah Wigglesworth and Jeremy Till’s drawing *Increasing Disorder at The Dining Table*,

![Figure 1. Table Settings circa 1760 (Schollander 8)](image-url)
showcasing the perfectly laid table, the disaster which then ensues, and finally the aftermath left for the host. This is the reality of a meal without footmen, although the dance is gone, the movements have become more contained, captured within the table as a documentation of the success of the meal.

Figure 2. Increasing Disorder at The Dining Table, Wigglesworth & Till (Nicola)
Chapter 3: Taste—Fashion

It is impossible to get away from taste at the table, both taste as flavor and taste as quality. “Taste is an intimate sense, we can’t trust things at a distance. And how we taste things, as well as the exact makeup of our saliva, may be as individual as our fingerprints” (Ackerman, 128). This quotation takes me back to the first time I tasted star fruit, that squeamishness, excitement, and intrigue, but more specifically that moment when the molars crunched down and the mind processed the foreign taste. I imagine this happened often as lands with exotic fruits and spices were discovered, and cooking evolved to incorporate new ingredients.

I wish to reference this memory of new tastes within my work, encouraging the ignition of excitement at the table. I do this by over-ornamenting parts of my functional vessels. That way, the particular space draws viewers’ imagination, slowing down their experience as their visual senses are heightened. Dissimilarly, the exterior is considered much like clothes layered on a figure: the skin contrasts with the shirt, belt, pants, and shoes. This layering of textures is enhanced by considering what is to be hidden and what is to be exposed, much like lingerie. After several visits to the Ohio State University Costume & Textile Museum, focusing in particular on the 1800-1900 period gown section, what became so obvious to me was the immense detail in the fabric, the interior and exterior stitching, the buttons, bows, and frills. Many of these dresses were
constructed with more fabric than necessary so that they could be reworked as the fashion changed. This versatility encouraged my own investigation with the towers I intended to make, considering further how would they unstack and how they could take shape again in an alternative way.

Figure 3. OSU Costume & Textiles Museum 19th Century gown detail

Historically, the meal has been included in the fashion world through advertisements in magazines like Harper’s Bazaar, and in the 1880s dinnerware was advertised to women just like high fashion, where the table was the mannequin that needed to be dressed. From the fork to the napkin, new styles of serving, the progression of the meal can be followed through history. The meal, just as social etiquette, became a trend where those of high society (or those desiring to be a part of high society) were expected to follow the trends of the table and aspirational social behavior. Magazines would highlight the current table trends and educate women on becoming the perfect
hostess. These are conversations which have been left in the past, along with much of the food specific serve-ware.

Figure 4. Hill’s Manual of Social Business Forms 1892

As a child I recall standing in department stores examining the great walls of china, and considering the small sugar spoons and ultra-specific serving dishes in upscale antique stores. This brings me back to the modern meal: without footmen or cooks, the host is expected to plan the menu, prepare and cook the meal, serve each course and bus the table. There is no time for the grand procession of the fish or “flying dishes” because the modern host has become a one-man show. I began making work to highlight this reality, work that would be stacked as a centerpiece when the guests arrived, and would unfold as the meal progressed. I became interested in how an individual could create a meal without the need for a footman, a meal that could be choreographed so that the host required her guests to participate without the guests even realizing it. Margaret Visser defines so clearly that “a meal can be thought of as a ritual and a work of art, with limits
laid down, desires aroused & fulfilled, enticements, variety, patterning, and plot. As in a work of art, not only the overall form but also the details matter intensely” (Visser 18). There are expectations of manners, politeness, and table etiquette, and although each culture defines these rules differently, the clues set within the table explain and define the way the meal will unfold. It is exciting to sit down at a thoughtfully set dining room table, and just like a scavenger hunt, one can never predict what twists and turns the meal will take from the opening cocktail to the concluding coffee. I am interested in transforming the notion of the grand entrance with the opportunity for unexpected details hidden within each eight person tower. By stacking each course these towers become monolithic, they reference the totem, and architectural hierarchy. As each course is stacked higher and higher, they create a skyline, where lighting creates shadows which shift the viewers perspective and illuminate the silhouettes. At my ideal party, the host would prepare the meal and set the table in advance, the vessels keeping the food warm or cold for the length of the meal, however long that may be— as this dinner party is not rushed.
Figure 5. *Soup, Salad, Sorbet, Seafood, Cake.* MFA Thesis Exhibition
Chapter 4: Studio Process

I suppose it all began with mark making—not drawing, but pressing. I recall the push pin station in Montessori, where I would sit and pierce small holes along the outlined shape printed on craft paper until the shape could be pushed through. In some respects not much has changed, the clay is pushed and pulled in ways that create negative and positive space, and color is used to emphasize and outline. The intentionality and monotony within my ceramic process consistently returns to these beginnings. Creating ideas through clay has become a two-step process, first creating the canvas where opportunities are established for mark making: the functional pot, and second altering the canvas through impressions and additions.

An investigation of pattern came next, focusing on Victorian tufted sitting room chairs, and the voluptuousness of each tuft. They are chairs where one experiences comfort as they embrace us with their volume, creating a place of social intimacy. This voluptuousness applied to the vessel begins to mimic the plasticity of skin when pushed or pulled. As vessels are discussed in relation to the body, ornamentation must be considered much like fabric draped around a form. Victorian wallpaper mixed with William Morris woodblock prints inspired my application of thin ceramic sprig molded appliques to the work. These sprig molds inspired me to travel to Stoke-on-Trent, England to study the elegance of Josiah Wedgwood’s consideration for space, the
negative and the positive, foreground and background, and pattern studies. I was also interested in the progression of the meal through time and how Wedgwood’s promotional material demonstrated these shifts in fashion. Although upon my arrival, what really struck me was not the specificity of the creamware, or the beautifully colored pattern books, but the contrast of the white sprig appliques and the brilliant blue Jasper clay body. My research became a visual study of the objects, regardless of their function, taking note of how decoration was used to emphasize or distract from practicalities. Here I was able to view the work as it was being made in the factory.

Figure 6. Image of Jasperware Lemonade Cup (Wedgwood)

My trip continued to the Victoria & Albert Museum, where I was visually overwhelmed with dinnerware from across the ages and around the world, stacked from floor to ceiling. This highlighted the object, the specificity of objects in a time and place, but also showed the progression of the objects over time.
Finally the Royal Pavilion in Brighton, built by George Prince of Wales from 1787-1823, who was said to be the ultimate host and extravagant party planner. He requested that the renovations to the original farmhouse be in an Indo-Saracenic Revival architecture, where I was reminded again of the many opportunities for layered detail within architecture, and inspired by the onion shaped domes of the Pavilion. The thoughtful application of stone tracery to the Pavilion architecture was addressed in ways that inspired me to reconsider my applications of pattern, and necessitated the use of personalized stamping tools.
The Royal Pavilion exterior was far less ornamented than that of the interior which reflected chinoiserie flair. The Prince’s attention to detail and the applied interior facade mirrors the application of sprig molded appliques found on Wedgwood’s Jasperware. The great banquet room has a massive central dining table set for a feast, with a gas lit dragon chandelier hung with dramatic iridescent flair. The chandelier is suspended from the center of the scaled dome, imitating the skin of the dragons which hold the lotus flower light shades in their mouths. This overwhelming visual exploration brought my research full circle, placing teacup on the table of the king, in the great banquet room of his palace. Seeing the work as it was experienced historically was pivotal to my processes of making. It solidified my desire to make work that could be experienced at the table of the king that would boast thoughtful decoration, and compliment elegant eating.
As a result, I was able to define my intentions as a functional ceramic artist not interested in making work for the peasant, but the king in the banquet room of the palace. There is a freedom in making work for this hypothetical king where the ornamentation can be sumptuous, elegant and detailed in a particular but time consuming way.

Ornamentation still exists in modern society, within history and within our home. It begins with visual pleasure, empowering the object to have a voice by adding value. I am interested in functional objects where the art of engagement completes the action. This interest in ornamentation came with an understanding of ornament as excess and ornament as status. The Victorian era saw an exploitation of ornament as industry was able to press-mold and stamp decorative motifs quickly and inexpensively. This removed the craftsman, and removed the presence of added ornament as value. When I set out to make tools to begin impressing ornamentation into my work, I looked to Victorian
fretwork, ironwork and scroll patterns. It seemed strange that I was using technology to create these tools that were assisting me to replicate my impressions of pattern by hand. Utilizing the laser cutter I was able to cut with accuracy various shapes in multiple sizes until the ideal patterns were achieved. The imagery used to create these patterns reference a very specific time and place, but through the application process they become my own. As the components join together, the negative spaces change creating new repeating patterns, and my own pattern begins to take shape.

Figure 10. Laser cut acrylic stamping tools

My biggest hurdle was not the engineering of the towers but the application of color to its bisqued surface. Early on I had identified colors that referenced the Victorian Era and the Arts & Crafts Movement in a deep mahogany brown, turquoise blue, cream and a hint of sherbet orange. After visiting the Royal Pavilion I believed my colors needed to shift into the colors of pageantry. Red and purple became staple slip colors, allowing me to add a subtle dot or jewel or color to the stamped detail. But additions of slip trailing weren’t the solution to my problem; not only were my colors not conveying
the message I was looking for: but they were often hiding the ornamentation I had spent so much time applying. Finally, after months and months of testing, I discovered just what I was looking for, a glaze to boast the detail of the vessels, and a glaze with movement and sparkle. This mauve crystal matt glaze shimmers under the light, exaggerating the depth of the ornament, and breaking around the colored slip accent jewels. The white counterpart glaze allowed me to apply color where the ornament required, and the glaze would pull the color emphasizing the intentionality of the marks made.

Figure 11. *Salad For Eight*
Figure 12. *Cake For Eight*
Chapter 5: A Grand Table in a Grand Space

As this body of work came together it became clear that a very special table would be required. I wanted these towers to have the opportunity to unfold, but also to be seen from many angles. After some exploration with the towers, I realized they were strongest when shown staggered and not in a linear fashion. This confirmed the need for an unconventional table, one that had a bend to highlight the towers, and one that could showcase a small vignette, where one tower could be shown as a place setting. I imagined this table much like the table at the Royal Pavilion in Brighton, where the guests sat in fear and excitement below the fire-breathing dragon chandelier, knowing the meal would be extravagant. I was also focused on the notion of a treasure hunt or maze, where clues help guide you, yet with anticipation and excitement you move across the board.

Figure 13. MFA Exhibition detail
The process of installation yielded a different result, but one that still reflects on these goals. I believe the gallery lighting allowed these structures to become more architectural than expected, it highlighted their height and weight, and the sparkle of the brown crystal matt glaze. The table became dramatic not in terms of the celebration of a meal, but in its own right, as an architectural structure. I believe it continued to reference dining traditions, etiquette, and intimate interactions, but it also focused quite specifically on the objects, how they come apart, and their intended use. The table stood 42” tall, making much of the work at eye level, the central stacks of dishes towered over the viewer in dramatic form. The exhibition highlighted my conceptual ideas of the table, and placed the functionality of the work on the back burner.

Figure 14. MFA Exhibition shadows

In retrospect, I should have addressed the table in the gallery space as the installation it became, emphasizing the theatrics of meal, focused on the visual experience, allowing the viewer to image the meal unfolding, not actually knowing how
each piece comes apart. While creating the work for the show, I discovered that as a craftsman I was unable to remove myself from my self-prescribed duties as a functional potter. It was so important to me that all the work come apart, that the pieces fit in very specific ways, and exhibition had versatile showing options. If I were to take on a project like this again, I would re-examine those notions I have as a maker of dinnerware, and let go of some of my idiosyncrasies for the greater good of the installation. I would consider if a tower could begin on the floor and travel up through the table, creating stability and instability as the table is set or as the meal is enjoyed. I would also consider the skyline the work created, the shadows reflected on the wall behind the table. Could these towers be crafted in ways which would enhance that skyline? Could I emphasize the architectural elements within each tower? These are the questions that will begin to inform my next body of work.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

This exploration of the table as a place of social intimacy has led me to an understanding of a past which perhaps utilized this space for much more than simple conversation. Etiquette, costume, table linens, silverware, dishware and the cuisine itself were all used to accrue and cement ones status, ones place in the world. The meal was boastful, although in retrospect any meal at a table with guests seems far superior to no intimate social interaction at all. Through my research of the historical table, my visual exploration of the Wedgwood museum and the Victoria & Albert museum, and my architectural investigation of the Royal Pavilion in Brighton, I established a foundation from which my work could evolve. The use of the laser cutter helped me to impress pattern into my work by creating custom tools, yielding endless possibilities for personalized pattern. And finally my discovery of colored slip paired with a crystal matt shimmering glaze as the perfect combination fused to the skin of my embellished vessels, rendering them luscious in appearance.

I am grateful for this journey for which I was afforded the opportunity to immerse myself in clay, visual research, and new technologies. I am concerned that the table is becoming a trend of the past, and my desire with this work is to focus on the individuals who dine, to organize and choreograph the meal in a way that conversation begins with the towers but quickly billows around them. As they unfold, the conversation grows and
the centerpieces again become dishes which simply adorn the civilizing table.
References


Murphy, Claudia Quigley. (1921). *The Art of Table Setting*. New York: The De Vinne Press.


Reading List


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