

Mackenzie Corbin
UC 254
Primary Source Analysis
3/28/13

The Changing Art of Dinner Parties

Dinner parties have long been an important aspect of culture. Even during the most tumultuous times in history they have existed among some aspect of society. However, changing ideals throughout the years influence the customs of the various social classes. The etiquette of hosting dinner parties reflects the particular ideals and fashions of a time.

The etiquette of giving a party comes down to the details. Table décor provides a setting and demonstrates the status and taste of the hostess. This is something that changed quite drastically over a short period of time. In 1880, from *The Art of Dinner Giving*, it is instructed that table décor be as lavish as possible. In a section titled “Dining Sumptuously,” the author describes the ornate dinner party given by a man in a New York City theatre.

The stage was entirely concealed by an arbor of evergreens and exotic plants, while the walls on either hand were gracefully adorned with grouped standards and bannerets bearing the coats of arms of various old New York families ... In the center of the room was a rich centre-piece consisting of a bust of Mr. Field, life size, flanked by exotic plants and other ornaments. (Carroll 19)

This instruction suggests that the most important part of decorating was to show off and be as grand as possible. We can conclude that emphasis was placed on exotic plants, probably because these were the most expensive. These ornate table decorations are cited throughout history. French tables in the 17th century often

featured imitation flowerbeds, representations of architecture, groups of statuary, and landscapes (Carroll 19). It was an old fashioned idea to spare no expense when it comes to a party; the more luxurious, the better. We see this kind of extravagant ornamentation as far back as Ancient Rome. In *The Art of Dinner Giving*, the banquets of Ancient Rome are talked of with awe and longing. The author explains,

The Roman *bon vivant*, supping on the brains of peacocks and pheasants, the tongues of nightingales and the roes of the most delicate fishes, swallowing in value thousands of pounds at a meal, evidences the extravagance of that period. (Carroll 10)

This book views these practices as something to learn from. It was a time notorious for indulgent and grandiose behavior. One could deduce from these references to Rome that material wealth was an important aspect of high society at the time of this publication.

The 1880s were a part of the Gilded Age, a term coined by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner to describe the era of tremendous social issues “gilded” by a thin layer of gold (Wikipedia Gilded Age). It began around the end of postwar reconstruction and continued until the turn of the twentieth century. This was a period of growth in the United States, attracting millions of people from Europe. The expansion of heavy industry and railroads provided prosperity, mostly in the North, while the South continued to suffer from social issues of race and class. Businessmen experienced newfound wealth, causing them to move up in social status. During this time, the philosopher Herbert Spencer proposed the idea of Social Darwinism. This concept, stemming from Darwin’s idea of survival of the fittest, displayed the importance of social class. It said that the fittest members of society would outcompete

others and move up in social rank. During this era, wealth could buy you into a higher class, regardless of previous standing.

Conversely, by 1907, in the book *Dinners and Luncheons*, by Paul Pierce, such ornate décor was considered gaudy and overdone.

Gorgeous ornamentation of dinner table is conceded to be bad form. The embellishment – the ornate, if you will – has been overdone, and now there is a reaction which tends to simplicity extreme expressed by a handsome centerpiece and a moderate exposition of not common flowers. (Pierce 9)

As time passed, it became vulgar to show material goods. This is a drastic change from just twenty years before, and could be seen as an expression of the historical context. The turn of the twentieth century marked the beginning of the Progressive Era. Unlike the Gilded Age, which was defined by its social issues covered by material wealth, this era was dedicated to improving the social conditions of America. Progressives were determined to improve the many social problems of the Gilded Age, such as government corruption, education, medicine, railroads, churches, industry, and more (Wikipedia Progressive Era). One of the main changes of the Progressive Era was the Efficiency Movement. This was defined by a desire to modernize things that were considered old fashioned and stressed the negativity of waste and inefficiency. One can conclude that in an era of efficiency and modernity, ornate decorations would be perceived as outdated and overdone. A simpler table was understood as more elegant and less wasteful. No longer was wealth the most influential aspect of one's standing in society.

In the Progressive Era, one sees wealth become secondary to the manners of the hostess. Pierce explains, "Three things are required to give an enjoyable dinner party ; good taste, good judgment and intuitive sense of harmony" (Pierce 9). This suggests that if a woman did not possess an air of tranquility and grace, even the most lavish dinners would not be enjoyed, and the party will not have been a success. Who is invited and where they are seated can make or break a party. A hostess who can put together a diverse group of people and seat them according to their personalities in order to encourage harmony is seen as a sensation. Additionally, the author states,

A different kind and color of china with every course is affected by those whose cabinet is crowded and who are proud of it, but this pride has its limitations among people of refinement and culture. This class does not give dinners simply to exhibit earthly treasure and create envy, and, perhaps, covetousness, too. (Pierce 10)

This reveals that it is no longer impressive to possess many material goods. In fact, unlike previously, it was poor taste to show off wealth. The author's use of "this class" hints that people who are not in the upper class would be impressed by material wealth. It implies that those who are of a high class have refinement and culture, not just affluence.

The art and execution of hosting a dinner party exemplifies the values and tastes of society throughout time. How a hostess chooses to decorate her table, and how she behaves was undeniably important. Even if the food was impeccable, without the proper behavior a dinner party could have been a complete failure. According to these sources, customs that were considered the height of fashion in 1880 changed to being in poor taste by 1907. This phenomenon, when examined in the historical context of these times, show that the changing American culture affected the home life.

Work Cited

Carroll, George D. *The Art of Dinner Giving: And Usages of Polite Society*. New York: Dempsey & Carroll, 1880. Print.

Pierce, Paul. *Dinners and Luncheons; Novel Suggestions for Social Occasions*. Chicago: Brewer, Barse &, 1907. Print.

Wikipedia contributors. "Gilded Age." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 21 Mar. 2013. Web. 28 Mar. 2013.

Wikipedia contributors. "Progressive Era." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 27 Mar. 2013. Web. 28 Mar. 2013.