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Tea-table

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Abstract

The tea-table is an object, an event, and an idea, the context of which is the emergence of tea drinking in Britain in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries. As an item of furniture, the tea-table is a small table, imported from Asia or of domestic manufacture, whose purpose was to facilitate tea drinking. As an event, the practice of tea drinking was a polite and sociable encounter staged around the tea-table. In media representations (visual culture, poetry, essays) the term 'tea-table' increasingly served as a synecdoche for the sociable assembly. As an idea, the tea-table referred to a sociable encounter, including both men and women, occasioned by the consumption of tea, and typically characterized as focused on conversation and gossip.

The tea-table is an object, an event, and an idea: that is to say, it is at once an item of furniture, a gathering at which tea is consumed, and a hybrid form of polite heterosocial sociability that occupies a liminal zone between public and private spheres. Each of these aspects is closely embedded in the discourse of sociability as it was practised and understood in the British Enlightenment. The context for tea-table sociability is the emergence of the consumption of tea, the hot infusion of the oxidized and prepared leaves of *Camellia sinensis*, in Britain in the late seventeenth century. While coffee drinking had become almost ubiquitous in London and provincial cities by the 1670s, the same was not true for tea, even though tea was also available for public sale from the 1650s. Tea drinking was not commonplace in Britain until the second decade of the eighteenth century or later. While coffee consumption was closely associated with the public socializing of the coffee-house, tea was strongly marked, from its inception, by its association with high status socializing, with women and the royal court, and with the domestic or private sphere. It is also worth noting that all tea consumed in Britain in this period was imported from China and Japan: at first, mostly sourced through Amsterdam and the sales of the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC), and later, in rapidly increasing quantities imported by the English East India Company (EIC) from Canton and other factory ports in China.¹

Tea-table as object

A tea-table is an item of furniture, specifically identifying a table on which the tea-equipage is placed to facilitate tea consumption. It is distinct from the common form of the table, typically by being small, and of a light and elegant make. Surviving evidence suggests the first tea-tables so designated were imported from China or India, by the East India Companies of both England (EIC) and the Netherlands (VOC). Such tables resembled a tray, set upon legs, made of highly prized exotic hardwoods, and often lacquered or decorated with mother of pearl. Some may have been repurposed or retrofitted from the Chinese repertoire of tea utensils: primarily this took the form of adding or elongating legs to bring the tray to the height required by European chairs. London furniture-makers began making their own forms for the luxury market in the first decades of the eighteenth century, often using exotic and luxurious materials such as mahogany embellished with brass inlay. Although such tea-tables were expensive, they were a central part of the polite equipment of tea service, alongside porcelain teacups and slop bowls, silver teapots and teaspoons, and the tea itself. An item of furniture, in this sense the tea-table was also a tea-preparation utensil. The form of and market for tea-tables importantly reflected women's taste and patterns of consumption, and in this way they were distinctive.²

Tea-table as event

The item of furniture of the tea-table was literally central to making tea: on it was placed the equipage or utensils for tea preparation. Unlike the consumption of almost all other comestibles by those in the middle and upper stations of life, tea preparation was undertaken by the hands of the ranking women of the family, who made the tea-drink in the presence of the company assembled to drink it. While servants would undertake the labour of setting up the equipage and heating the water, the woman host would take the required quantity of tea-leaves from a tea chest, and add them and later the hot water to the teapot. The tea-table was an item of furniture closely allied to this women's labour. Its small size and low height further helped create an intimate space within the drawing room, bringing people together around the table. A comparative approach would locate the model or at least coincident examples of this sociable behaviour in the Dutch republic, although habits of tea consumption soon took on distinctively British qualities by the mid-eighteenth century. Tea drinking had broader appeal in Britain than in France, where tea drinking and its paraphernalia was understood as much an English custom, '*le thé à l'anglaise*', as it was an exotic Asian import.

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From the early eighteenth century, literary representations of tea consumption helped shape understanding of the tea-table experience. In poems (Nahum Tate's *Panacea: a Poem upon Tea* [1700], and Peter Motteux's *A Poem in Praise of Tea* [1712]), as well as plays (Congreve, *Way of the World* [1700]), the tea-table was repeatedly represented as a synecdoche for the sociable event of tea service. In other words, the term 'the tea-table' increasingly referred not only to the piece of furniture, but also the company assembled at tea, the kind of conversation established there, and the social gathering in general.

Tea-table as idea

The tea-table as an idea is invoked by philosophical reflections on the event of the tea-table. Amongst the most sophisticated expressions of this was [Joseph Addison](#)'s in *The Spectator*. Addison suggested that the purpose of his new periodical was to urbanise moral philosophy: 'to bring Philosophy out of Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-tables, and in Coffee-houses'.⁴ In this list, Addison identified the tea-table as the equal, and most innovative, of the other significant institutions that characterized public culture in the period, such as [coffeehouses](#) and clubs. Accordingly Addison says:

'I would therefore in a very particular Manner recommend these my Speculations to all well-regulated Families, that set apart an Hour in every Morning for Tea and Bread and Butter; and would earnestly advise them for their Good to order this Paper to be punctually served up, and to be looked upon as a Part of the Tea Equipage.' (*The Spectator*, No 10)

[Addison](#) conceived of the tea-table as a form of sociability at which conversation and periodical reading, as well as tea, were central. Thirteen further essays (Nos 92, 140, 158, 212, 216, 246, 276, 300, 323, 395, 488, 536, 606) in *The Spectator* reinforce this trope of the convivial tea-table discussion, at which family members and friends would read *The Spectator* while they consumed tea and bread and butter. In *The Spectator*, the tea-table was a social space, located between the domestic sphere and the public world, at which women were invited to participate in discussion about topics that mattered (moral philosophy, political events, religion, criticism) as well as gossip and rumour. Repeated representations of the tea-table in the early eighteenth century dwell on these aspects of its sociability: that it was a place where women took part in polite sociability, in the company of men and women, for the purpose of conversation, gossip and debate.

What was distinctive about the tea-table as a model of sociability in the period 1688-1750 was that sociable discourse occurred in mixed company, or amongst women alone. Imagining that women were present at a form of sociability that was also serious, learned, political and public in its discursive agenda was a distinctive and innovative gesture. The association with the domestic culture of women, however, also meant that this conversation and debate were repeatedly scapegoated as ephemeral, vulgar, and scandalous: nothing better than gossip.⁵

1. Markman Ellis, Richard Coulton, and Matthew Mauger, *Empire of Tea* (London: Reaktion, 2015), p. 14-90.
2. Ann Martin, 'Tea Tables Overturned: Rituals of Power and Place in Colonial America', in *Furnishing the Eighteenth Century: What Furniture can tell us about the European and American Past*, ed. Dena Goodman and Kathryn Norberg (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 169-181.
3. Ann Eatwell, 'Tea à la Mode: The Fashion for Tea and the Tea Equipage in London and Paris', in *Boucher & Chardin: Masters of Modern Manners*, ed. Anna Dulau (London: Paul Holberton, 2008), p. 50-76.
4. Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, No 10, March 12 1711.
5. Max Gluckman, 'Gossip and Scandal', *Current Anthropology* 4:3 (1963), p. 307-316; Markman Ellis, 'The Tea-table, Women, and Gossip in Early Eighteenth-Century Britain', in *British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century: Challenging the Anglo-French Connection*, ed. Valérie Capdeville and Alain Kerhervé (London: Boydell and Brewer, 2019).

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[The Spectator, No. 10 \(12 March 1711\)](#)

[A Poem upon Tea \(1712\)](#)