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Punch bowls

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Abstract

Punch bowls were made from a range of materials and contained a drink that was accessible to a range of social ranks. These bowls were associated with a particular mode of convivial sociability. A richly symbolic object, the physical qualities of the punchbowl played a material role in generating encounters marked by good fellowship. Punch parties, for example, enabled men of different ranks to join together in manly fraternity. Punch was consumed at other kinds of gatherings, both in domestic and non-domestic spaces. The punch bowl brought together disparate individuals for a ritual encounter and structured sociability.

Punch was a drink made from a blend of alcohol spirit, fruit, sugar, spices and water. There were many different recipes and the ratio of the various ingredients could be changed according to taste and cost. The price of punch varied, but evidence suggests this was a mid-range drink accessible to a range of social ranks, including those in the middling and elite ranks who might be associated with wine and those in the lower and plebeian ranks who would drink beer.¹

The punch bowl itself was an object that straddled distinctions in the market of drinking objects. In the early eighteenth century the bowls were made from silver, pewter, glass and a range of ceramics, but increasingly punchbowls were manufactured in ceramic. The quality could vary considerably, with bowls produced in both fine porcelain and creamware, as well as simpler and cheaper earthenware. Whereas ale, wine and spirits were served in glass, stoneware and rougher delftware, and the refined hot drinks [tea](#), coffee and chocolate were consumed in porcelain and fine earthenware, punch was served in a bowl which blended the associations of rowdy, refined, associational and polite drinking cultures.² That bowls were produced in many different sizes also made them accessible to groups small and large.

Regardless of size, though, punch bowls were designed for sharing. A lone drinker partaking of punch directly from the vessel would be uncouth and impolite (Harvey, 'Barbarity in a tea-cup?', 212). The decoration of the many thousands of extant bowls shows a clear link between bowls and celebration. Rarely these appear to have related to personal events such as christenings or weddings. The interior of a blue and white delftware bowl depicted a group gathered around a large punch bowl, and towards which a woman carries a baby.³ A creamware bowl, made by Wedgwood and decorated with a transfer print by Guy Green, celebrated the wedding of Jurry and Elisabeth Parker in 1779.⁴

Much more common were the legion of bowls decorated to mark significant public or corporate entities. Mottos such as 'Trade and Navigation' and 'Success to ye Navy' were typical.

Image



Legend

'Tin-glazed earthenware bowl', Manchester City Art Gallery, 1923.241, 1780-1790.

Indeed, the link between punch, sailors and ships was longstanding, echoed in the expanse of liquid that filled the bowl itself (Harvey, 'Ritual encounters', 193-6). Such painted mottos on a bowl would become toasts for the drinkers around the bowl. In this way, punch bowls were associated with a particular mode of convivial sociability.

This association of punch bowl was underscored in William Hogarth's image, *A Midnight Modern Conversation*. The painting of c.1732 was first printed the following year and was subsequently reproduced on a range of objects including punch bowls themselves.

Image



Legend

William Hogarth, 'A Midnight Modern Conversation', Yale Center for British Art, B1981.25.351, c.1732.

Hogarth's image treads a fine line between moral critique and gentle affection: these men are out of control and Hogarth's exaggeration of the size of the bowl in the print version underscores this, yet the circle of good fellowship remains intact and they perform a classic form of masculine license for excess. That many bowls were decorated with this and other images of punch parties, as well as bowls appearing in several contemporary depictions of homosocial gatherings, indicates a particular association between the punch bowl and masculinity. Punch parties around a punch bowl enabled men of different ranks to join together in manly fraternity. It is clear from visual culture – not least Hogarth's depiction – that at times these occasions could unite the elite and vulgar, the bawdy and polite, and in this way they were part of a rich and multi-faceted sociable world.⁴ A richly symbolic object, the physical qualities of the punchbowl played a material role in generating encounters marked by good fellowship.

This kind of sociability was, arguably, distinctive in eighteenth-century society. It was free-flowing but the group was tightly bound together around the object of the circular bowl. The circularity of both the punch bowl itself helped produce the circular formation of punch bowl sociability, as represented in visual culture. This distinctive form of sociability can be understood as an example of what Erving Goffman called 'an encounter or focused gathering', one which produces a circle of solidarity.⁵ According to Goffman, such encounters may or may not be ritualized. Yet the punch party can be understood as a ritualized encounter of *communitas*. According to Victor Turner, rituals of *communitas* bring together people who elsewhere might be divided, but who in the ritual encounter are transformed into a unified group.⁶ Objects are important agents in rituals, and the centrally placed punch bowl with its invitation to huddle, share, sing and celebrate was a potent and

agentive object.

Punch was consumed at other kinds of gatherings, both in domestic and non-domestic spaces. The extant bowls which suggest public places of sociability – [taverns](#), clubs and associations – were surely matched by many bowls of different styles designed for the home. Certainly, other evidence demonstrates that punch bowls were used alongside other ceramic objects in domestic spaces, though often without women present.⁷ The integration of punch drinking into the domestic interior is evidenced from the middle of the eighteenth century by the punch pot. Distinguished from the teapot mainly by its larger size, the punch pot nonetheless drew on the civilized and refined connotations of the tea ceremony. The lid was a prophylactic against the excesses of the openly accessible punch bowl. Such objects survive in relatively small numbers and the documentary record yields few references (Harvey, ‘Barbarity in a tea-cup?’, 214-216). The punch pot was a much rarer object than the punch bowl.

Nonetheless, both the punch bowl and the punch pot were designed as centrepieces to a sociable occasion. In contrast to the refined pot, punch bowls in particular were intended to bring together disparate individuals in good fellowship and conviviality. Merry and raucous, patriotic and celebratory, considered and thoughtful: the associations of the punch bowl linked these events to homosocial encounters that ritualized punch party sociability.

1. Karen Harvey, ‘Ritual encounters: punch parties and masculinity in the eighteenth century’, *Past and Present*, (no. 214, 2012), pp. 174-180.
2. Karen Harvey, ‘Barbarity in a tea-cup? Punch, domesticity and gender in the eighteenth century’, *Journal of Design History*, (vol. 21, no. 3, 2008), p. 206.
3. See Grigsby, *Longridge Collection of English Slipware and Delftware*, ii, 348-9, no. D315; Lipski, *Dated English Delftware*, p. 266, no. 1.
4. Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London* (London: Atlantic, 2006)
5. Erving Goffman, *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961)
6. Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), pp. 94-130.
7. Sarah Richards, *Eighteenth-Century Ceramics: Products for a Civilised Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 105, 143.

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Further Reading

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Burnett, John, *Liquid Pleasures: A Social History of Drinks in Modern Britain* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

Grigsby, Leslie B., "'Drink Fair Don't Swear': Winterthur's Punch Bowls and Punch Drinking in America', *Magazine Antiques* (n° 214, 2002), p.176–83.

[The Juice of the Grape \(1724\)](#)