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Dining in aristocratic households of nineteenth-century France

A study of female authority

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Nothing is more delightful than the view of a table well laid, brilliantly lit, luxuriously decorated with flowers and surrounded by a ravishing swarm of pretty women. If the eyes are charmed, so too must be the spirit, that the gathering is composed solely of people happy to meet one another whose reciprocal feeling creates an atmosphere of friendly gaiety. The hosts must use great diplomacy to assemble these elements and fit them together so perfectly. Then the mistress of the house will have achieved complete success.¹

In her French etiquette guide for bourgeois readers, the baronne d'Orval's description of an ideal dinner party depicts only the visual and spiritual pleasures for which hosts in nineteenth-century aristocratic households were responsible. With a chef to provide gastronomic delights, and servants to work the table, the hosts directed their energies toward aesthetic and diplomatic tasks, creating a feast for the eyes and harmony among the assembled company. Like Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, who felt 'the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested upon her,' a hostess bore special responsibility to make the dinner enjoyable. She was the lead figure in displaying and promoting her family's social status.²

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- 1 Baronne d'Orval, *Usages mondains. Guide du savoir-vivre moderne dans toutes les circonstances de la vie* (third edition; Paris, 1901) 161.
 - 2 V. Woolf, *To the lighthouse* (London, 1990) 78; B. Masters, *Great hostesses* (London, 1982).

This ‘atmosphere of friendly gaiety’ conjured by d’Orval contrasts with another account of a dinner party penned by Dutch noblewoman the baroness Cornelia van Boetzelaer. In her diary for December 1900 Cornelia wrote aserbicly: ‘Not only the ministers, but also their dear better halves had been invited. It was curious to watch those tarted-up burgesses.’ Yme Kuiper points to this diary entry as evidence of the baroness van Boetzelaer’s ‘remarkable enmity’ to women from the haute bourgeoisie in the Netherlands: ‘the term “burgess” had a very negative connotation in aristocratic circles.’³

The two descriptions of dinners illustrate a theme of longstanding interest to scholars concerned with the formation of a European upper class during the long nineteenth century. Bourgeois strategies for emulating noble practices, and noble tactics for selectively appropriating bourgeois practices whilst cultivating social difference from commoners, have been widely discussed by historians responding to Arno Mayer’s thesis.⁴ In the 2000s scholars engaged in collaborative efforts to compare nobilities in modern Europe continue to raise fresh questions about ‘noble’ identity and many deploy theoretical tools from the social sciences for a conceptual framework.⁵

Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu undertook pioneering work on the relationship between food consumption and class. In *The Civilising Process* (1939) Elias interpreted etiquette guides to show the significance of table manners in the context of early modern court culture. Individuals with habitual exposure to court culture had to meet the requirements for self-restraint and continuous self-improvement in civility to demonstrate commitment to the royal family and nation-state. Refinement of manners signified aristocratic closeness to the centre of power. Nobles’ response to newcomers or occasional visitors trying to infiltrate their circles was to enforce strict etiquette. They exerted ‘reciprocal supervision’ of behaviour in order to retain the ‘important instruments of their dominance’, the ‘marks of distinction and prestige’.⁶

In *Distinction. A social critique of the judgement of taste* (1979) Bourdieu devoted a section to analysis of food consumption in late twentieth-century France. He showed that eating habits are among the elements of lifestyle where individuals are disposed

3 Y. Kuiper, ‘Memory, residence and profession. Aspects of the process of reconversion of a Dutch noble family in the twentieth century’, in: Y. Kuiper, N. Bijleveld, and J. Dronkers, ed., *Nobilities in Europe in the twentieth century. Reconversion strategies, memory culture and elite formation* (Leuven, 2015) 127. On ‘bourgeois’ as a pejorative term in France see B. Le Wita, *French bourgeois culture* (Cambridge, 1994) 26-27, 53-56.

4 A.J. Mayer, *The persistence of the Old Regime. Europe to the Great War* (New York, 1981); W.M. Reddy, ‘The concept of class’, in: M.L. Bush, ed., *Social orders and social classes in Europe since 1500. Studies in social stratification* (London, 1992) 13-25.

5 M. de Saint Martin, *L’Espace de la noblesse* (Paris, 1993); E. Wasson, *Aristocracy and the modern world* (New York, 2006); K. Urbach, ed., *European aristocracies and the radical right 1918-1939* (Oxford, 2007); D. Lancien and M. de Saint Martin, ed., *Anciennes et nouvelles aristocraties de 1800 à nos jours* (Paris, 2007); J. Leonhard and C. Wieland, ed., *What makes the nobility noble? Comparative perspectives from the sixteenth to the twentieth century* (Göttingen, 2011); Kuiper et al., *Nobilities in Europe in the twentieth century*.

6 N. Elias, *The civilising process*, trans. E. Jephcott (2 vols; Oxford, 1982), I, 49; II, 254.

toward certain attitudes and behaviour because of the influence of their ‘cultural trajectory’ made up of movement across different ‘cultural fields’.⁷ People who share a similar cultural trajectory are subject to similar conditioning that results from a particular type of existence, and from this conditioning is produced their habitus. In this way, ‘habitus is certainly informed by, without being entirely explicable in terms of, class affiliations.’⁸

Elias and Bourdieu did not say a great deal about gender in their respective analyses of power relations negotiated and embodied in behaviour around the dinner table. In the flourishing of food studies that has come after their work, however, issues of gender and ethnicity are widely examined.⁹ Priscilla Ferguson explored such issues in her article on gastronomy in nineteenth-century France as a cultural field. Ferguson argues that ‘French’ cuisine emerged in the early 1800s when culinary arts that had formerly been associated with court and aristocracy began to be associated with the nation. Culinary institutions and texts made gastronomy both a masculine affair and ‘a prime touchstone of national identity’. ‘Beyond the fact that men held the purse strings and haute cuisine was a very expensive pursuit, the public culinary sphere was inhospitable to women.’¹⁰

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This article presents a different interpretation of gendered ‘knowledge’ and expertise in dining, as a form of cultural capital, during the long nineteenth century in France. My argument is that prior to 1914 it was not the experience of restaurants, but rather the experience of being invited to dine in the homes of nobility, that represented a summit in haut bourgeois aspirations. The favourite haunts of male gastronomes were accessible to anyone with sufficient wealth, which explains why restaurant dining (a late eighteenth-century innovation) became associated with dubious morality and the demi-monde – it was a pleasure that was ‘bought’.¹¹ Far more difficult to obtain was an invitation to enter the *salle à manger* as a guest in the Faubourg Saint Germain. Dining in aristocratic households of nineteenth-century France served as a benchmark for exclusiveness, quality and refinement among the well to do.

7 P. Bourdieu, *Distinction. A social critique of the judgement of taste*, trans. R. Nice (London, 1984) 177–199; P. Bourdieu, *The field of cultural production. Essays on art and literature*, ed. R. Johnson (New York, 1993).

8 J. Webb, T. Schirato, and G. Danaher, *Understanding Bourdieu* (Crows Nest, 2002) x-xi, 36–38, 40.

9 S. Mennell, *All manners of food. Eating and taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the present* (London, 1985); J. M. Pilcher, ed., *The Oxford handbook of food history* (Oxford, 2012); K. Claflin and P. Scholliers, ed., *Writing food history. A global perspective* (London, 2012); J.M. Pilcher, ‘The embodied imagination in recent writings on food history’, *American Historical Review*, XII (2016) 861–887.

10 P.P. Ferguson, ‘A cultural field in the making. Gastronomy in 19th-century France’, *American Journal of Sociology*, CIV (1998) 597–641. See also J.-R. Pitte, *Gastronomie française. Histoire et géographie d’une passion* (Paris, 1991); A. B. Trubek, *Haute cuisine. How the French invented the culinary profession* (Philadelphia, 2000); S.J. Terrio, *Crafting the culture and history of French chocolate* (Berkeley, 2000); C. Garnier, ‘Les Petits Français à l’école du goût’, *The French Review*, LXXIV (2001) 496–504; M. de Soucy, *Contested tastes. Foie gras and the politics of food* (Princeton, 2016).

11 Ferguson, ‘A cultural field’, 603 (note 7), 626 (note 27), 628.

The gastronomic field, as it emerged in nineteenth-century France, intersected with the established cultural field of hospitality. Its impact combined with 'heteronomous forces' – those associated with economics, market and commoditisation – eventually contributed to a transformation in hospitality.¹² In this process of transformation the positions and capital configuration of individuals within both fields gradually changed. Male chefs, sommeliers and food critics came to be understood as the most authoritative figures in the professionalisation of the culinary arts, a position of dominance men retained in the France of the 1990s.¹³ The situation was beginning to show instability right at the end of the long nineteenth century and through to the interwar decades when the intersection of fields created symbolic struggles in the power relations connected with elite dining.¹⁴ Prior to 1914, the activity of hosting dinners placed noblewomen ahead of male chefs, sommeliers and food critics in the field of social power.

108 To understand how noblewomen reproduced this position of power, we need to examine where dining fitted into broader practices of hospitality, which in nineteenth-century France took place in a variety of gendered spaces within the home. There was some overlap in the traditions pursued by the upper and middle classes; the *jour* and the salon, for example, were occasions hosted by noblewomen and bourgeois.¹⁵ The domestic environments of the nobility and bourgeoisie, however, were arranged and furnished rather differently. Whereas the desire for comfort and privacy informed the decoration of nineteenth-century bourgeois interiors, space functioned in aristocratic residences for conspicuous consumption and display, even when entertaining 'privately'. Most rooms in châteaux and hôtel particuliers were neither strictly private nor public. Activities that ranged from interior decorating to participating in hospitality blurred the boundary between 'consumption' and 'production' for the nobility.¹⁶ At a dinner party nobles enjoyed fine food and drink, indulged in gossip and conversation, and received attention from servants. Simultaneously, the hostess and guests perpetuated social traditions, consolidated friendships and kin networks, and reproduced the gendered bodily practices associated with aristocratic distinction.

Discourse on nineteenth-century hospitality is found across a range of sources. Some of the genres of writing about female authority in this field overlap with the

12 Webb et al. *Understanding Bourdieu*, 107-109.

13 Ferguson, 'A cultural field', 611-612 (note 15).

14 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 244-256.

15 W. Walton, 'Feminine hospitality in the bourgeois home of nineteenth-century France', *Proceedings of the annual meeting of the Western Society for French History* (1987) 197-203; S. Kale, *French salons. High society and political sociability from the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848* (Baltimore, 2004); E. Macknight, 'Cake and conversation. The women's *jour* in Parisian high society, 1880-1914', *French History*, IXX (2005) 342-363.

16 E. Macknight, 'A touch of distinction. Furnishing French aristocratic homes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries', in: B.F. Tobin and M.D. Goggin, ed., *Material women. Consuming desires and collecting practices 1750-1950* (Farnham, 2009) 75-91.

genres of writing about gastronomy. Ferguson identifies a 'textual archive' produced by five men: the journalist Grimod de la Reynière, the chef Carême, the cultural commentator Brillat-Savarin, the political philosopher Fourier, and the novelist Balzac.¹⁷ These men's writings about fine food were contemporaneous with and no more widely read than publications about feminine social influence. In journalism, restaurant reviews for bourgeois consumers appeared in a century when the Society columns of major daily newspapers and the provincial press reported noblewomen's charity fundraising, artistic patronage, and hosting of receptions. In fiction, Balzac's novel *Cousin Pons* (1846) about a male bourgeois gourmand can be set alongside portrayals of Society rituals by authors such as Bourget, Sand, France, Gyp, and Proust. In memoirs there are numerous flattering descriptions of aristocratic hostesses. Etiquette manuals are rich in information about the prescriptions for practices and these volumes were generally published under a female pseudonym.¹⁸ Their commercial success shows how the idea of distinction, as something contained in the 'ideal' embodied practices and attitudes of the nobility, exerted its grip on the imagination of the middle class.

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Ferguson emphasises the importance of the written word in the cultural field of gastronomy, but for hospitality there is also a visual archive encompassing paintings by artists such as Béraud, Helleu, Boldini, Bonnat, Tissot, and Chabas. Noblewomen's commissioning of artwork is a subject beyond the scope of this article but paintings that depict Society gatherings are evidence of the interconnections between the field of hospitality and the field of art.¹⁹ Artefacts like clothing and tableware include a complete set of Sèvres porcelain in the 'Buffon' design held by the Musée Camondo in Paris. The kitchen in this former residence of the Camondo family was constructed between 1911 and 1914 according to the architect René Sergent's design and features an oven and *rôtisserie* from Maison Cubain.²⁰

Rituals of sociability

Dinner in aristocratic homes in nineteenth-century France had a separate social meaning from a noblewoman's *jour* in terms of what it signalled about relations between the hostess and her guests. It was not that dinner was more important than the *jour* as a form of sociability, for an invitation to a woman's *jour*, after the exchange of cards, was taken very seriously as the step to consolidate acquaintance.²¹ Rather, dinner was a more exclusive event. Only select people, from among those who left their

17 Ferguson, 'A cultural field', 611-612.

18 Marie-Fanny de Lamarque de Lagarrigue, for example, wrote under the pseudonyms the Baronne d'Orval and the Comtesse de Tramar.

19 Macknight, 'A touch of distinction', 75-91.

20 M.-N. de Gary and G. Plum, *Les cuisines de l'hôtel Camondo* (Paris, 1999).

21 Macknight, 'Cake and conversation', 342-363.



Card case formerly belonging to Mrs John Stanley Cumming. The intertwining initials on the back are E M W, for Mrs Cumming's maiden name: Ethel May Wragge. Dimensions when closed: 105 mm x 75 mm (photo by Charles Campbell Macknight)

card and attended a noblewoman's *jour*, were invited into the home for a meal. *Dîner* for nineteenth-century Parisians referred to the evening meal, unlike in the provinces where one 'dined' in the middle of the day and 'supped' in the evening. In upper-class circles the midday meal was *déjeuner* or, occasionally, 'lunch' (it was fashionable to use the English word).²² As Gabriel-Louis Pringué remarked in his memoirs, 'to be invited to dine proved that one was an intimate, within the circle of friends and on the most stable social level.'²³

During the Paris 'Season' dinner commenced between eight and nine o'clock and was only the start of the night's sociability. Around ten o'clock, 'the streets from the Faubourg Saint-Germain to the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, [and] the surrounding areas

22 K. Denéchaud, *Plaisirs de la table. L'art de recevoir d'hier à aujourd'hui* (Paris, 2000) 17; S. Freeman, *Mutton and oysters. The Victorians and their food* (London, 1989) 178-210; J.-P. Aron, *Essai sur la sensibilité alimentaire à Paris au 19e siècle* (Paris, 1967) 40-48.

23 G.L. Pringué, *Trente ans de dîners en ville* (Paris, 1950) 43.

of the Étoile and the avenue du Bois, were full of magnificent carriages with drivers and footmen on the seat. ... On every corner of these streets, one passed men in white cravats and top hats who were making the round of salons.²⁴ To go to bed at this hour, or even at midnight, was looked down upon as bourgeois.²⁵ After a large dinner party in Paris (hostesses held one per week to which thirty to forty people were invited) the salons were thrown open to guests and it was traditional to pay a call on the noblewoman in whose home one had dined the previous week. Nobles who resided in the capital during the Season also attended theatres and the Opéra in the evening, so some women received afterwards at midnight, a practice that princess Metternich from Austria had made fashionable during the Second Empire.²⁶ In the early hours of morning nobles often proceeded to a ball or to supper with companions, and a man might go alone to his club or call on a friend if he had made prior arrangement.

Given the extent of nobles' socialising, it certainly helped to be an enthusiastic and gregarious diner but there were individuals for whom the obligation to change into dinner dress, converse amiably, eat rich food, and stay until after coffee and cigars, was tedious and repetitive. In Proust's *Guermantes Way*, as the comte and comtesse Guermantes prepare to leave by carriage to the home of Madame de Saint-Euverte, Oriane complains to Swann, "Oh, my dear Charles," she went on with a languishing air, "what a bore it can be, dining out. There are evenings when one would sooner die! It's true that dying may be perhaps just as great a bore, because we don't know what it's like."²⁷ A journalist for *La Vie Parisienne*, who was interested in the unique tones of households at mealtime, compared six consecutive dinners in 1901. 'Fred' concluded that, although 'dinner is the best type of gathering there is,' it had its disadvantages: 'the cooking is often bad' whilst one's male companions could be 'torpid' and female ones 'too chatty'. By the end of the meal it was possible to feel less animosity against unpleasant people and virtual tenderness for those who seem agreeable: 'the explanation must lie in the chemistry.'²⁸

The notion of chemistry at work in a meal was not new to French thought at the turn of the century. When Brillat-Savarin's book, *La Physiologie du goût ou Méditations de gastronomie transcendante*, was published in 1825 its author was hailed as the founder of the 'science' of gastronomy. The thesis Brillat-Savarin espoused was that a meal should do more than satisfy the cravings of hunger ('gastronomy' comes

²⁴ Ibidem, 41.

²⁵ Sending the Narrator home by carriage at midnight, the Baron de Charlus remarks 'it is the moment when, as Whistler says, the bourgeois go to bed'. M. Proust, *In search of lost time*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and T. Kilmartin, revised by D.J. Enright (6 vols; London, 1993), III, *The Guermantes way*, 652.

²⁶ Pringué, *Trente ans*, 41.

²⁷ Proust, *The Guermantes way*, 679.

²⁸ 'Article de Paris', *La vie parisienne* 23 Nov. 1901.

from the Greek *gastêr* meaning stomach).²⁹ All five senses are stimulated when one sits down to eat properly. Our eyes are attracted to the sight of the decorated table and the presentation of the food on the plates in which colours harmonise. Our ears are soothed by pleasant music, conversation, the breaking of crusty bread, and the gurgle of wine poured from the bottle into a glass. Our nose is tantalised by the aromas of cooking, the scent of flowers, and the smells of the dishes before us. Our tongue tastes and distinguishes between sweet, bitter, salty and sour. Our hands appreciate the feel of implements enabling us to test ripeness of a fruit or the texture of a cheese. Declared Brillat-Savarin, 'Animals feed, man eats, the man of spirit alone knows how to eat.'³⁰

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Across the nineteenth century the balance of sensory pleasures at meals in aristocratic households altered slightly. This was owing to the introduction of *service à la russe* that gradually took over from *service à la française* in France. With most aristocratic households taking their meals *à la russe* by the 1880s, French writers had further cause to boast of having superior eating habits to the British who preserved for longer, and to their detriment, *service à la française*.³¹ There was one basic difference between the two types of meal presentation. In *service à la française* all the dishes for each 'service' (roughly equivalent to 'courses' for modern Anglophones) were laid on the table at once. Meats were then carved by the host and laid by him on individual plates. In *service à la russe*, meats were carved in the kitchen by servants, and the dishes were brought consecutively to diners by the *maître d'hôtel*.³²

The new style of presentation accentuated the sensory pleasures of a meal. *Service à la russe* increased the chances of food which was intended to be hot actually staying hot, and because of the attention paid to each dish in turn it called for a more sophisticated standard of cooking.³³ While the visual impact of seeing all the dishes laid out together was lost in *service à la russe*, more room on the table meant that flowers and fruits were increasingly used in decoration. It was important to have skilled footmen who could 'slide like shadows around the guests' and ensure no breakage disturbed the atmosphere.³⁴

Invitations to midday and evening meals in aristocratic households were generally issued by post eight to ten days in advance. This was certainly the case for *grand dîners* or *dîners de demi-cérémonie*, but invitations could be issued verbally for *dîners*

29 Denéchaud, *Plaisirs*, 13.

30 Ibidem, 24.

31 Orval, *Usages mondains*, 180-1; Freeman, *Mutton and oysters*, 184, 189-91; A.V. Kirwan, *Host and guest. A book about dinners, wines, and desserts* (London, 1864) 91-93.

32 A. Dumas, *Dumas on food. Selections from Le Grand Dictionnaire de Cuisine*, trans. A. and J. Davidson (London, 1978) 27-28; Aron, *Essai*, 48-55; N. Beauthéae, J. Laiter and L. Fasoli, *L'Art de vivre au temps de Proust* (Paris, 1999) 122-123.

33 Freeman, *Mutton and oysters*, 184, 189-191; Dumas, *Dumas on food*, 28.

34 Orval, *Usages mondains*, 181; Kirwan, *Host and guest*, 91-93.

intimes.³⁵ When the comtesse de La Feronnays hosted a dinner for twenty guests at her home in January 1886 the invitations specified that black must be worn because the duc de Bragançe, guest of honour, was in mourning following the death of his grandfather.³⁶ *Grand dîners* required the most luxurious dress, like that worn to a ball. For a noblewoman that meant a very ornate, *grand décolleté* gown with a train decorated with lace and embroidery; long light-coloured suede gloves; gems, pearls or feathers to decorate the hair; her finest jewels; and silk slippers of a shade to match her dress.³⁷ *Dîners de demi-cérémonie*, which were held in most aristocratic homes once a fortnight, required less sumptuous clothing and jewellery; dress was the same as for a soirée so that guests did not need to return home to change before entertainment began. Even for *dîners intimes*, self-presentation had to be at a higher standard than during the day so dressing for dinner required some effort.

Noblewomen often exchanged invitations to intimate dinners when they visited one another. When a husband asked a person to dine in the family home he did so in the name of his wife. For all types of dinners it was deemed best to organise equal numbers of males and females so that each guest could be paired with the opposite sex for entry into the dining room. Exception was made for the custom known as *le repas d'hommes* where only the male friends of the husband were invited to dine with the married couple.³⁸

Correct behaviour at a dinner was underpinned by a number of principles, the chief being that men must show respect to women. 'In Society, woman is considered superior to man; it is she who takes precedence in everything.'³⁹ The second principle was respect toward elders, followed by the principle of respect toward social superiors and clergy. These principles, when manifest in bodily practices, demonstrated one's 'knowledge' of manners and of the 'rules' of comportment.

Seating was notoriously difficult to plan for a dinner party in aristocratic homes because of the protocols of placement. The place of honour for a male was directly to the right of the hostess (held by a cleric if one was present), and the place of honour for a female directly to the right of the host. Guests were seated hierarchically according to title (rank and date mattered for nobles), age, and marital status (a married person took precedence over a single person).⁴⁰ Even the most well-meaning hostess with a good understanding of the rules and a copy of the *Almanach de Gotha* to check the dating of noble titles, made 'mistakes'. Placement was to some degree

35 Orval, *Usages mondains*, 185-189; 'Article de Paris', *La vie parisienne*, 23 Nov. 1901.

36 E. Mension-Rigau, ed., *Journal de Constance de Castelbajac, marquise de Breteuil 1885-1886* (Paris, 2003) 161.

37 The Duc de Guermantes will not allow his wife to wear black slippers with her red dress to dinner at the Saint-Euvertes. Proust, *The Guermantes way*, 682. On dress see Comtesse de Tamar, *L'Évangile profane. Rite feminine* (Paris, 1905) 78-80, 99-100, 121-122, 195-198, 238-240, 305-306, 321-322, 387-388, 411-412, 431-432.

38 Beauthéae et al., *L'Art de vivre*, 131.

39 Orval, *Usages mondains*, 122.

40 *Ibidem*, 163-167.

subjective, so there was always the risk, especially at large dinner parties, of offending guests who believed they had been placed incorrectly. Without naming names, Pringué remarks that there were ‘striking personalities’ from the *ancienne noblesse* and the *noblesse d’Empire* whom it was not possible to bring together at dinner parties without creating separate tables.⁴¹

The seriousness with which some nobles treated the issue of seating was a source of humour and anxiety. The comte Aimery de La Rochefoucauld was renowned for fastidiousness over seating, particularly his own seat, but thankfully when he and his wife attended a meal the charm of the comtesse compensated for her husband’s ‘despotic intransigence’.⁴² On one occasion when an unfortunate hostess had been unable to place the comte on her right, he remarked rudely, ‘Will all dishes be served from the place where I am?’⁴³ Complaining to his cousin, the comte Robert de Montesquiou, about being grossly snubbed by an error of seating, Montesquiou admonished him: ‘Why should place matter to you, the place that I occupy at the table is always the first. Do as I do.’ Aimery was irrepensible. Whenever a marriage was announced he could be seen counting on his fingers to work out the placement of each spouse. Once, upon realising the groom was socially inferior to the bride, he quipped, ‘one night of love and forty years at the foot of the table.’⁴⁴

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Like the concern for placement, concern for punctuality gave rise to displays of ego. Most hostesses were very particular about the time lunch and dinner were to be served in their household and with good reason because, if the quality of the cooking was not to be spoiled, the chef and servants needed to time the preparation and serving with precision. Punctuality was not a priority, however, for the American-born princesse de Broglie who, according a close family friend and frequent guest, detested every sort of rule or discipline. At the Broglie château, Chaumont-sur-Loire, it was ordered that dinner be served at a quarter to eight. The princesse is reported to have rarely descended the staircase before ten o’clock having kept her husband, guests, and staff waiting. The Romanian-born comtesse Anna de Noailles was another person who invariably came late, consistently by an hour and a half. From the moment she arrived, Anna mesmerised guests with a stream of chatter and gesticulation that brooked no interruption. When Lucien Corpechot bravely tried to get a word in he was cut off by her rebuke, ‘Later, when I’ve left.’⁴⁵

As guests assembled for dinner it was the duty of the hosts to present or introduce them to one another. At this point, ‘a word to indicate that M. X... is not of the same religion as M. H... will not go astray and could prevent any regrettable allusion

41 Pringué, *Trente ans*, 45.

42 M. Proust, ‘Le salon de la comtesse Aimery de La Rochefoucauld’, in: idem, *Essais et articles*, eds P. Clarrac and Y. Sandre (Paris, 1994) 132-135.

43 A. de Fouquières, *Cinquante ans de panache* (Paris, 1951) 79-80.

44 Pringué, *Trente ans*, 45.

45 Ibidem, 27, 100.

being made.’⁴⁶ Then came the momentous announcement for which we may call on Proust’s description.

[W]ith a vast gyrotory whirr, multiple and simultaneous, the double doors of the dining room swung apart; a butler with the air of a court chamberlain ... announced the tidings ‘Madame is served,’ in a tone such as he would have employed to say ‘Madame is dead,’ which, however, cast no gloom over the assembly.⁴⁷

The precedence of women and respect for seniority appear in the comtesse Pauline de Pange’s memoirs where she describes the procession into the dining room that took place at every family meal: ‘my grandmother walked at the head enveloped in her shawls and black lace. Then my mother, my father, and I would follow in order.’⁴⁸ Guests at a *grand dîner* always knew the seating plan in advance because copies were placed in envelopes on a small tray in the antechamber for them to collect on the way in. Footservants were stationed around the table in order to assist guests.

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At the table

What was the sight of the dinner table like for nobles in France? White linen was always used to dress a table (cotton had largely replaced damask by the nineteenth century and colours did not come into fashion until after the First World War). Table dressing was considered a mark of respect toward guests and traditionally the quality of the linen indicated the value of a noblewoman’s dowry. The embroidery of table linen in aristocratic households was exceptionally fine; hence the practice of folding serviettes into complicated shapes, popular in the eighteenth century, became discouraged as the size and weight of the serviette decreased and concerns about hygiene grew. Around 1900 a serviette resembled a tissue and fell easily from the lap.⁴⁹ On celebratory occasions each place at the table had a menu engraved or printed with the date and often a sketch or photograph of the family château, plus a small bouquet of flowers that noblewomen could remove and affix to their corsage. To the right of the place were various types of glasses, whilst directly at the centre were plates and a shallow soup bowl in china, porcelain or silver, placed one on top of another at the start of the meal.

The nineteenth century was also the great age of crystal: master firms such as Baccarat, Saint-Louis, and Daum (later Lalique) began experimenting with colours and

⁴⁶ Orval, *Usages mondains*, 162. M. Cartier was given ‘positive roasting’ when he made a joke about Zola’s trial in front of Mme Alphonse de Rothschild. M. Proust, *In search of lost time*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and T. Kilmartin, revised by D. J. Enright (6 vols; London, 1993), V, *The captive*, 44-45.

⁴⁷ Proust, *The Guermantes way*, 501.

⁴⁸ Comtesse Jean de Pange, *Comment j’ai vu 1900* (Paris, 1999) 25.

⁴⁹ Denéchaud, *Plaisirs*, 114-125; A. Corbin, *Time, desire, and horror*, trans. J. Birrell (Cambridge, 1995) 13-38.

toward the end of the century were producing a lighter, finer range of glass- and crystal-ware than the heavy designs of the Second Empire. Separate glasses for different types of beverage was a nineteenth-century innovation and resulted in a standard service comprising multiple carafes, glasses and goblets in eight sizes (for water, beer, wine, madeira, and liqueurs), plus champagne cups and flutes. (This was before the era of cocktails!)⁵⁰ China and porcelain sets were commonly embossed in gold and decorated with birds, floral designs or the family crest; Sèvres, the royal manufacturer, produced some of the most elegant designs. Silver items found on the table were sets of cutlery, pots for mustard and pickles, wine-holders, pepper grinders and salt cellars, candelabras, and the *corbeilles* used for fruit and floral decorations. In *service à la russe* the use of meat covers was necessary, to keep the dishes hot while they were brought from the kitchen, but unpopular with the ladies who complained that when covers were lifted condensation dripped on to their bare shoulders.⁵¹

116 The extensive, and to our eyes bewildering, array of cutlery and utensils used in the course of a dinner came with a complex code of etiquette attached that prescribed the way nobles ate. During the nineteenth century a battery of implements were introduced to France from Britain where ‘the excess of comfort threatens to become a nuisance.’⁵² New items included the grape scissors, the butter spatula, the straining spoon for olives, the two-pronged fork for pickles, the palette for caviar, the grating knife for truffles, and the tongs for prawns and crayfish. It was crucial to know which implement to use for each foodstuff, how to use it, and of course how to handle a knife and fork correctly. Meat was to be detached from the bone and cut into pieces as one ate, not all at once or using fingers; vegetables were to be pushed on to the fork, not mashed; and bread was to be torn in the hand, not cut with a knife or dipped in sauce. Before and after sipping from a glass one raised the edges of a serviette to the lips, and one never asked for second helpings of soup, or thanked the servants during the course of a meal. The custom of passing around the *rince-bouche*, a bowl of water to rinse out the mouth, fell out of favour in the nineteenth century and was replaced by toothpicks, although bowls of water (*rince-doigts*) were still provided to wash one’s fingers.

Etiquette, along with religion and social custom, determined what types of food were appropriate to have on certain occasions. Whole artichokes were served only at the family table since they were somewhat messy to eat. Similarly, eggs, steaks, chops, and any meat reheated from the previous day, were served in *l’intimité*, never at ceremonial dinners.⁵³ In Catholic households, Fridays were ‘meatless’ (*maigre*) days although it was possible for Catholics to eat fish. The self-restraint of nobles not

50 Denéchaud, *Plaisirs*, 158-171.

51 Freeman, *Mutton and oysters*, 188.

52 Orval, *Usages mondains*, 177.

53 Aron, *Essai*, 55. These foods were staples of bourgeois households, see M. Proust, *Swann’s way*, trans. J. Grieve (Canberra, 1982) 54.

eating meat served as a mark of distinction that nineteenth-century chefs and their employers worked in partnership to make known. Carême praised the table of the princesse Caroline Murat for splendid *maigre* cuisine which revealed ‘the cleverness of the cook’.⁵⁴ The comtesse Cornet, a rather austere person descended from a Belgian family, decided, by dint of originality and to display her chef’s culinary prowess, to choose Friday as the day she hosted a weekly dinner at her apartment on the boulevard Haussmann in Paris. Since meat was off the menu, and smoking was banned because there was no *fumoir* and smoke in the salons would inflame the comtesse’s bronchial tubes, people who accepted the comtesse’s invitations were considered martyrs.⁵⁵

Sunday in aristocratic as well as bourgeois homes was the day when all family members came together for the *déjeuner*, while special occasions such as weddings and baptisms were traditionally celebrated with a ‘lunch’ for family and guests after the ceremony.⁵⁶ The *réveillon*, a Catholic custom of taking supper after midnight mass on Christmas Eve, became a widespread non-religious ceremony in France during the second half of the nineteenth century and on Christmas Day and New Year’s Day nobles tended to dine with relatives at the family château. The full menu for Christmas dinner 1899 in the Murat household comprised *Potage à la Royal*, followed by a *relevé de Filets de Bars à l’Italienne*, and two entrées: *Gigot de Mouton aux Flageolets* and *Ailerons de Dindes aux Salsifis*, then a roast: *Canard à la Sibérienne*, then two *entremets*: *Choux Fleurs Sauce au beurre* and Plum Pudding Brandy Butter (English spelling was used in the original), and finally, *Salade, Dessert, Café, Liqueurs*.⁵⁷

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Staffing and purchases

All meals in aristocratic homes, from *petit déjeuner* through to *souper* late at night, were the product of much domestic labour. Servants spent innumerable hours in and around the kitchen from which glorious dishes emerged and to which plates returned to be scrubbed along with every pan. The Murat family archives provide documentation of this household management on a large scale; there were eight family members to cater for, as well as about thirty regular servants and occasional extras. Joseph Théis, who was appointed *maître d’* in September 1908, kept records of everything to do with the kitchen, dining room, and cellar at the Murat’s rue Monceau property as well as at the estate of Roquencourt. Taking a sample month, April

54 Kirwan, *Host and guest*, 155-157; Pange, *Comment j’ai vu 1900*, 27; J.-L. Flandrin and M. Montanari, eds, *Histoire de l’alimentation* (Paris, 1996) 721-722.

55 Fouquières, *Cinquante ans*, 77.

56 A. Martin-Fugier, ‘Bourgeois rituals’, in: M. Perrot, ed., *A history of private life, IV. From the fires of revolution to the Great War* (Cambridge, MA, 1994) 274.

57 *Livre des dîners* 2 May 1899-11 Sept. 1900 in Archives Nationales, Paris, Archives Privées (hereafter AN, AP) Murat, 31/95.

1909, from the Murat *feuilles des dîners* we can establish that over the month some seven family members, plus the governess and the *abbé*, ate around fifteen to twenty lunches and fifteen to twenty dinners cooked and served by their staff. Once or twice a week a couple of guests came to lunch, while the number of guests who came to dinner ranged from two on 3 April to 43 on 15 April.⁵⁸ Regular staff who took *le repas du personnel* during April 1909 comprised nine women, fifteen men, and some extras in the kitchen and office. There were also the princesse Cécile Murat's two *couturières* (who appear on the records for lunch and dinner every day) and the princesse Marguerite's *couturier* (who appears on the records once or twice a week).

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Joseph Théis tallied the Murats' spending on food every fortnight. The average fortnightly total during the spring was more than double that for autumn and summer when the family were mostly at Deauville or Rocquencourt. For the first fortnight of May 1909 the costs recorded for foodstuffs were: *boucherie* (1274 francs), *volaille* (437.75 francs), *charcuterie* (438.80 francs), *crêmerie* (296.35 francs), *épicerie* (184.30 francs), *poisson* (187.40 francs) *léger* (204.10 francs) and *triperie* (71.25 francs). Payment for an *homme de journée* and an extra suggests that some or all of the groceries were delivered, and every so often a stray item appears on the list such as apricots, fifteen francs, for the first fortnight of September 1910.⁵⁹

The Murat cellar books reveal what this family and their staff drank in terms of alcoholic beverages, although unfortunately the wines do not appear in the menu books so we do not know how they were matched to services of the meal. A sample month, May 1900, includes thirty-two bottles of *vin blanc d'office* per week and twenty bottles of *vin rouge d'office* per day for the servants to drink at their meals. Four bottles of *vin blanc de table* (vintage 1899) per day, and two bottles of *blanc ordinaire* per day, were drunk at the family table (no red table wines are listed). Among the more superior wines served over the month were: four bottles of Blanc Mouton (1864); two bottles of Château Lafitte (1875); eight bottles of Château Larose (1875) and two bottles of Champagne Périer. Spirits and liqueurs that appear in the *livres du cave* are port, cognac, curaçao, anisette, rum and whisky. These were high quality, aged products; in 1896 two bottles of port vintage 1815 were consumed each month over the entire year.⁶⁰

Outside Paris typical items of kitchen expenditure at the château de Mailleraye (Seine-Maritime) around 1800 included fish, butter, salt, and hams, while other edibles such as chocolate, fine oil, sugar, lemons, and fruits were listed under office expenditure. Wines encompassed products from particular makers, M. Limiville and M. Banneville, as well as wines from Anjou, Muscat, Malaga, Navarre, and Burgundy, plus Ximenez sherry, *eau de vie*, cider, and *vin ordinaire*. There was also purchase of

⁵⁸ April 1909 from *Feuilles des dîners 1908-1931* in AN, AP Murat 31/95.

⁵⁹ AN, AP Murat 31/95, 285-292, 480-489.

⁶⁰ *Livres du cave* in AN, AP Murat 31/480.



Soirée (painting by Jean Béraud (1849-1936), exhibited at the Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts in 1911; coll. RMN-Grand Palais, Paris, photo by François Vizzavona)

items such as little pots for *jus* and a coffee grinder.⁶¹ Meats, dairy produce, fruit and vegetables came from markets, shops and street-vendors and but nobles also ate the game shot on country estates. The comtesse de Guermantes willingly accepted the six brace of pheasants (one dozen) that M. de Grouchy offers her from ‘the good bag’ he had taken that day. The comtesse de Pange’s grandmother ‘only liked the game that the game-keepers of Normandy and Anjou sent each week in winter.’⁶² Extant recipes and menus in archives show the regionalism of French cooking was upheld. At their property in Tarn-et-Garonne, for example, the Tournier-Vaillac family enjoyed

61 Archives départementales de Seine-Maritime, Rouen, 2031/34, Chartrier de l’ancien marquisat de La Mailleraye.

62 Proust, *The Guermantes way*, 558; Pange, *Comment j’ai vu 1900*, 27; S. King, *Dining with Marcel Proust. A practical guide to French cuisine of the Belle Époque* (London, 1979), 45, 61, 71, 84, 90, 101, 104, 138, 151; Aron, *Essai*, 57-71; ‘Monologues de Saison’, *La Vie Parisienne*, 29 April 1899.

the south-western French dish of *confit de canard*.⁶³ Some non-French nobles living in France made an effort to eat the food familiar to them. In Russian households ‘one serves [before the soup] hors-d’oeuvres of fish, oysters, [and] caviar’.⁶⁴

Conversation and music

Amid the consumption of fine food and wine, what was conversation like at dinners in aristocratic homes? Writers of memoirs portrayed conversation as an art still shaped by women in the nineteenth century, as it had been in eighteenth-century salons. Jokes and witticisms, particularly of a sexual nature, entered into nobles’ talk and were repeated in salons over following days. The abbé Mugnier, renowned for his own wit, wrote in his journal that he had visited Madame Craven, an elderly woman confined to her bed, expressly to amuse her with his latest anecdote. It concerned the neckline on a gown worn by the comtesse de Montalembert. ‘My *décolletage* is an invention’, the comtesse announced at dinner. ‘It is a discovery,’ replied the ambassador.⁶⁵ Unfortunately, because jokes and witticisms were traded like calling cards it is often impossible to be sure that the authors of memoirs heard them first hand. The wording of a punch-line often differs slightly between sources; sometimes it is attributed to a variety of people, and there is seldom any mention of how a joke was received.⁶⁶

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Diaries reveal nobles’ curiosity and pleasure in sharing thoughts on Europe when chatting with foreign guests at dinners. In Paris during May 1885 Constance de Castelbajac, marquise de Breteuil, took the opportunity to question the young marquise d’Adda Salvaterra about Society in Milan, Florence and Rome. A month later she enjoyed a dinner conversation with the Italian-born Marc-Antoine, prince Borghèse, whom she found ‘French in aspect and manners’ because of his mother, Adèle de La Rochefoucauld. In June 1886 the marquise de Breteuil praised the French spoken ‘with Russian grace’ by grand-duc Wladimir, but deplored that this man was ‘under his wife’s paw and that the German influence dominated in the household.’⁶⁷

After dinner men and women separated to the *petit salon* and *fumoir* for sex-specific activities. In the ‘masculine’ space of the *fumoir* liqueurs were savoured and cigars were smoked.⁶⁸ Cards or other games were often played when men and women reunited in the ‘feminine’ space of the *petit salon*. A favourite game in some social cir-

63 AN, AP Murat 31/95; Archives départementales de Tarn-et-Garonne, Toulouse, 43| Fonds Granié (not yet classed at time of consultation).

64 Orval, *Usages mondains*, 171.

65 24 June 1889, in AN, AP Mugnier 258/2.

66 A. Meyer, *Ce que je peux dire* (Paris, 1912) 88; A. Germain, *Les fous de 1900* (Paris, 1954) 75, 156; Fouquières, *Cinquante ans*, 52, 60-62, 80, 99, 127-129; Pringué, *Trente ans*, 18, 31-32, 45, 154-156.

67 Mension-Rigau, *Journal*, 35, 43, 232-233.

68 *Feuilles des dîners*, AN, AP Murat 31/95; Ph. Perrot, ‘Quand le tabac conquiert la France’, *Histoire* (1982) 98-104.

cles was *les petits papiers*, celebrated in the comtesse Diane's *Livre d'or* from the 1890s; it was said that the game was played at the court of Charlemagne. Players wrote a question on a scrap of paper with their name, folded the paper, and placed it in the basket; the hostess then dealt out the papers randomly so that replies could be written. The *papiers* in the *Livre d'or* reveal the charm of the game for enthusiasts: 'Do you believe in presentiments? Afterwards.' 'Where does one find happy people? Together.'⁶⁹

Musical performances were another form of after-dinner entertainment as noblewomen 'consecrated' composers and artists in the hierarchy of taste by featuring their work at private receptions. Compositions by Chabrier, Fauré, Debussy, Ravel, Hahn, Falla, and Milhaud were first heard in the home of the prince and princesse de Polignac where a harpsichord was installed in the salon.⁷⁰ At Mme Porgès' home the comte de Kevenhüller-Metsch, Austro-Hungarian ambassador, introduced his compatriot, the soprano Selma Kurz, who dazzled the audience with a rendition of the 'Bell Song' from Delibes' *Lakmé*. The pianist Arthur Rubenstein accompanied, at the home of baronne Gustave de Rothschild, the Czech soprano Emmy Destinn who sang as her finale, Butterfly's aria 'One fine day' from the opera by Puccini.⁷¹ Extant programmes show that nobles also played and sang with one another. On 19 March 1884, *chez* Greffulhe, the works consisted of the Andante from a sonata by Schumann, a Beethoven trio, a piece entitled *Simple Aveu*, excerpts from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, and the Andante from a Romance by Mendelssohn. Performers included the comtesse Greffulhe and her father the prince de Caraman-Chimay.⁷²

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Conclusion

The exclusiveness, quality and refinement that made an invitation to dine in the homes of nobility an aspiration for haut bourgeois prior to 1914 reposed on configurations of capital that determined individuals' positions in the field of hospitality. In the role of hostess noblewomen were acknowledged leaders in hospitality, and dinner parties were occasions for deploying their social, cultural, economic and symbolic capital in consumption and production. Employment of household staff, including a chef, kitchenhands and footservants as well as a nanny to look after children, meant the hostess was able to focus on displaying and promoting her family's social status. Invitations to dine in the home were issued in the name of the mistress of the household. It was in recognition of her control of the occasion that the *maître d'* announced 'Madame is served'.

⁶⁹ *Le livre d'or de la Comtesse Diane* (1897) (Paris, 1993), xxiv, 33, 41.

⁷⁰ AN, AP Astruc 409/35; M. de Cossart, *The food of love. Princesse Edmond de Polignac (1865-1953) and her salon* (London, 1978) 26-27, 31-35, 56, 61-64, 89-90, 106, 134-135.

⁷¹ G. Astruc, *Le pavillon des fantômes* (Paris, 1974) 218-221; J. Gallois, ed., *Musiques et musiciens au faubourg Saint-Germain* (Paris, 1996) 89-101.

⁷² AN, AP Gramont 101 (II)/118, 128.

‘The more fields in which an individual occupies a position, and the more central those positions, the more symbolic power or capital at that person’s disposal.’⁷³ Noblewomen were not solely powerful players in hospitality, for through the long nineteenth century they also deployed capital in cultural fields ranging from charity work and fashion to interior decorating and arts patronage. In so doing noblewomen were able to wield influence out of all proportion to their numbers and to set the tone for high culture for the wealthy.⁷⁴ Features like the art of conversation and knowledge of dress code formed an ‘autonomous pole’ in the field of hospitality – that part which operated according to principles and values derived from the field itself. ‘Heteronomous forces’ came from the fact that hospitality was bound up with other fields in society, and therefore affected by economic change, commoditisation and market values. Rising salary costs and insurance for staff, which contributed to the decline of domestic service in aristocratic households particularly after the First World War, provide an illustration of those forces.⁷⁵ Hospitality in the twentieth century very gradually, and by no means completely, shifted from its location in the home to become a separate ‘industry’ run in commercial venues.

Even as hospitality and gastronomy intersected, and transformation took place in these cultural fields, the nobility showed capacity for adaptation to the new social conditions. Around 1900 restaurant dining became popular for nobles as well as bourgeois as the selection of upmarket eating venues expanded. Discerning diners knew that for oysters one went to Prunier’s (which from 1906 also sold seafood for home catering) and that woodcock *flambée* was a speciality *chez* Lucas.⁷⁶ At *Le train bleu*, which opened at the Gare de Lyon in 1901, diners could imagine themselves transported to the Riviera amid the sumptuous décor. When C  zar Ritz teamed up with the chef, Auguste Escoffier, the pair marketed the internationalism of fine dining by setting up hotel restaurants of excellence. Among the nobles who attended the opening of the Paris Ritz hotel in 1898, in what was then called place Louis-Le-Grand (now place Vend  me), were the comte Boni de Castellane, the princesse Murat and the duchesse d’Uz  s.⁷⁷

As scholars continue to collaborate in comparing nobilities in modern Europe, we may yet see new research on nobles in the cultural field of international travel, including institutions like upmarket hotels. This is another subject where attention to gender has a place in the investigation of power relations.

73 Ferguson, ‘A cultural field’, 629.

74 Macknight, ‘Cake and conversation’, 342-363; A. Bravard, *Le Grand monde parisien 1900-1939. La persistance du mod  le aristocratique* (Rennes, 2013).

75 E.C. Macknight, ‘A “Theatre of Rule”? Domestic service in aristocratic households under the Third Republic’, *French History*, XXII (2008) 316-336.

76 Madame Prunier, *La Maison. The history of Prunier’s* (London, 1957) 58-64, 74-81.

77 Pitte, *Gastronomie fran  aise*, 169-178.

Elizabeth C. Macknight

Dining in aristocratic households of nineteenth-century France

A study of female authority

During the long nineteenth century gastronomy emerged as a cultural field in France and intersected with the established cultural field of hospitality. In the role of hostess noblewomen were acknowledged leaders in hospitality, but the gradual transformation of this field led to an evolution in their position relative to that of men in professions such as chef, sommelier and food critic. This article examines the consumption and production involved in dining among the nobility. At a dinner party nobles enjoyed fine food and drink, indulged in gossip and conversation, and received attention from servants. Simultaneously, the hostess and guests perpetuated social traditions, consolidated friendships and kin networks, and reproduced the gendered bodily practices associated with aristocratic distinction. Prior to 1914 the activity of hosting dinners placed noblewomen ahead of male chefs, sommeliers and food critics in the field of social power.

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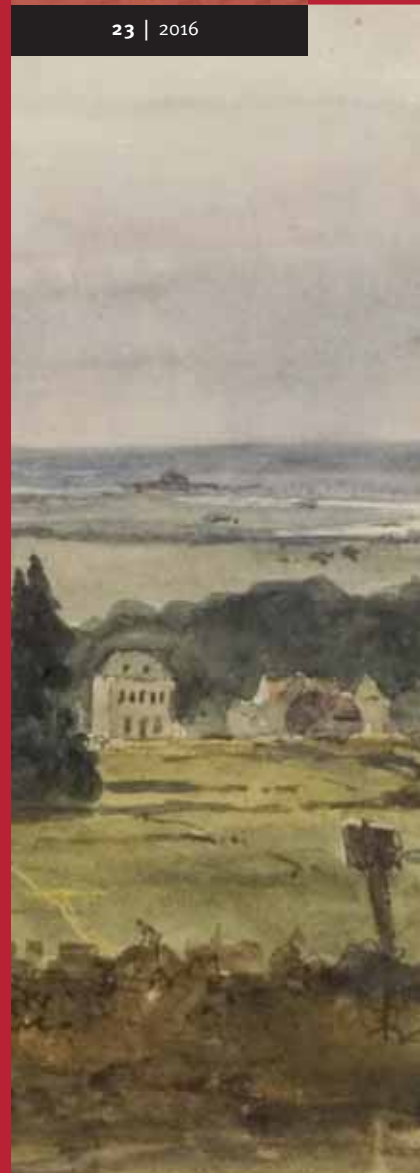
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