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Carving and folding, the banquet as a spectacle

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Deborah L. Krohn, *Staging the table in Europe: 1500-1800* (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2023, xx + 215 p., ill.)

In recent decades, interest in the history of food, cooking and banqueting has seen a steady increase, sparking a flurry of studies and opportunities for dialogue that have led to important results and progress in the knowledge of cultural and social contexts of the past. The in-depth study of these themes has also confirmed that they were profoundly linked to a whole series of practices proper to the courtly milieu. The system of culture, etiquette and education of the elite was largely grounded in personal interactions related to the table and the various scenographic, intellectual, economic and diplomatic aspects connected with it.

Over the years, therefore, there have been in-depth and philological studies on all aspects of cookery, including food production, cookbooks, table preparation and presentation, the rules governing the complex structure of courtly etiquette and the rituals related to the person of the prince at the moment of the banquet. (Some of these rituals were performed by the person serving as *trinciante*, the carver, to whom Deborah L. Krohn dedicated the exhibition *Staging the table*.) These studies were complemented by fascinating events of both a scholarly and educational character, re-enactments of some of the sophisticated practices in use on the most important occasions. This has not only made it possible to appreciate the beauty and refinement of objects, furniture and works of art linked to the world of banquets, to read some of the pages of manuscripts and printed books devoted to recipes or event organisation, but even to discover the decorations by which banquets were accompanied. Among these, the ones that have the greatest impact on the modern public, turn out to

be sugar sculptures and folded napkins, the result of very complicated processes that mixed manual skills and knowledge of materials. The past years have seen some spectacular exhibitions among which the most important are *Le magnificenze a tavola del banchetto rinascimentale* (Tivoli, Villa d'Este 2012), *Dolci trionfi e finissime piegature: sculture in zucchero e tovaglioli per le nozze fiorentine di Maria de' Medici* (Florence, Palazzo Pitti, 2015) and *The edible monument: the art of food for festivals* (Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2015-2016). But, in fact, important table-related events date back to the 1980s-90s, with the celebrations at Ferrara dedicated to the courtly table that were accompanied by the exhibition *A tavola con il principe: materiali per una mostra su alimentazione e cultura nella Ferrara degli Estensi* (Castello Estense, 1988-1989) or the exhibition *Plaisirs et manières de table aux XIVe et XVe siècles*, held in Toulouse in 1992 (Musée des Augustins).

The exhibition entitled *Staging the table*, held in New York during the first half of 2023 under the direction of Krohn, belongs to this series of events. The exhibition (which has a virtual presence on <https://exhibitions.bgc.bard.edu/stagingthetable/>) was accompanied by the present volume, which more than a catalogue can be called a true monograph. It recounts and shows how certain practices proper to Renaissance banqueting were carried out, what objects were used to perform them, but above all the books that taught how best to perform such activities, as well as the cultural, intellectual, and editorial context in which they emerged. The book is divided into five chapters preceded by an introduction, that contextualizes the inclusion of manuals devoted to table culture in cultural and literary history, and followed by a succinct catalogue. The first two chapters of the book offer a quick overview of the works written between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, also defining the figure of the carver and the skills that this figure necessarily had to possess. The other three focus on three of the most interesting treatises of the early seventeenth century, the cultural context in which they were composed, and their impact on the subsequent editorial production of manuals on the art of the table, mainly in the German-speaking lands but also in the rest of Europe.

While those who were not able to visit the exhibition might have appreciated a larger section devoted to the items on display, which are treated rather briefly, the richness of the information contained in the various chapters and the author's careful and detailed treatment of each topic are certainly striking. The work builds on Krohn's previous studies on the world of publishing related to Renaissance banqueting and her deep knowledge of the universe of gastronomic culture in the sixteenth century (see, for instance, her *Food and knowledge in Renaissance Italy: Bartolomeo Scappi's paper kitchen* [Farnham, 2015]). She particularly expands on her previous research on the custom of carving meat ('Carving and Folding by the Book in Early Modern Europe', *Journal of Early Modern History* 24, 1 [2020], 17-40) by offering an extended overview of what was one of the main moments of banqueting since antiquity, carving, and of one of the most sophisticated forms of decoration of the time, napkin folding. The two activities are discussed together in the five chapters, because they are part of the same scenographic and symbolic aspect of the banquet. They were also treated together in a fundamental early seventeenth-century manual comprising the three well-known treatises written by the *trinciante* Matthias Jäger (better known as Mattia Giegher), *Li tre trattati di messer Mattia Giegher Bavaro di Mosburc, trinciante dell' illustriss. nazione*



De cierlyke voorsnydinge aller tafel-gerechten; onderwijsende hoe allerhande spijzen, zo wel op de vork, als zonder de zelve, aardiglik kunnen voorgesneden, en in bequame ordre omgedient worden, by Hieronymus Sweerts, Amsterdam, 1664 (coll. Allard Pierson, Universiteit van Amsterdam, OK 63-2518)

Alemanna in Padova, and in its later editions. The well-chosen format of the catalogue itself recalls that of *Li tre trattati*.

The practice of carving meat was carried out by one of the main figures at early modern courts, the *trinciante* or carver. Olivier de la Marche, Burgundian chronicler and Maître d'hôtel of Charles the Bold, explained how his tasks were not only crucial to the prince's table but also to his life (he was in charge of the amulets which could detect poison in his food), and how his role was also associated with important privileges such as carrying the standard in battle. Krohn analyses the tasks of this figure in detail, considering not only the Renaissance sources, which are most relevant to the exhibition, but also earlier ones, so as also to analyse its evolution over time. Mention is made of classical sources (treated in

more detail although in a slightly more popular form in Gil Galasso's four volumes *L'art de la découpe des maitres d'hotel et du service à table* [Raleigh, 2018]), to show the ancient origins of this role. The considerable importance of the figure of the carver meant that all the techniques and all the secrets which this task held were collected in works ranging from didactic to intellectual. It is not always clear for which audience such writings were intended, but the fact that many were copied or printed in large numbers suggests considerable circulation. The formats, editions, and contents sometimes leave one in doubt as to the real purpose of such works, and *Staging the table* tries to answer some of these questions. References to contemporary bibliographical sources are in some cases rather simplified. This is certainly a choice made by the author, who assumed that the main studies were well known to scholars and that excessive zeal in citing them would have burdened the text in the eyes of the non-specialist audience.

The book initially focuses on a number of texts composed from the early fifteenth century onward: Enrique de Villena's *Arte cisoría*, John Russell's *The boke of nurture* and *The boke of Keruyng*. It then turns its attention to the Italian context, considering Francesco Colle's *Refugio de povero gentilhuomo* and especially Vincenzo Cervio's *Il trinciante*. Krohn then goes on to provide a historical and cultural contextualisation of *Li tre trattati* by Matia Giegher (a copy of which was recently sold in Paris at Christie's: *Le festin de Pierre – Bibliothèque du Baron Pierre de Crombrughe*, Prais, March 23, 2023, and is probably identical to the one currently for sale in London, at Sokol Books). This is followed by a careful analysis of the structure of the three treatises that make up the work, and of the illustrations that accompany them. The question of illustrations constantly returns in studies on texts of this type, because of their workmanship and their relation to the written text (but also because of how they might have affected the cost of the volume) and of their didactical purpose. The

author then focuses on the history, meaning and purpose of Giegher's manual, analysing its iconographic apparatus, commenting on the compositional choice of the various images in relation to the text and the practical execution of the depicted gestures.

The third chapter comments specifically on the three treatises: the *Trinciante*, the *Scalco* – with a digression on the introduction of menus and mappings of the plates on the table in the manuals that described the steward's functions – and finally the one about *Piegature* or napkin folding, which is actually the treatise that opens Giegher's volume. Krohn accompanies her comments with comparisons and a rich repertoire of images. The last two chapters propose a contextualisation of the work vis-à-vis the European publishing and cultural environment, with a particular focus on its relationship with the German world. This reaffirms its importance for the literary and scientific milieu, as well as for literature devoted to education and instruction. Indeed, the edition of the book a few years later by Georg-Philipp Harsdörffer, a key figure in the literary and scientific world of the time, turned out to be crucial. Harsdörffer, a writer, publisher and scholar known for his wide-ranging interests that extended from religious poetry to mathematics, travelled around Europe between 1626 and 1630 and probably had the opportunity to meet Matthias Giegher in person in Padua in 1629, the very year in which *Li tre trattati* was published (J. Conesa Sánchez, *Harsdörffer y su obra*, PhD dissertation, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 1979). Over the following decades, he was responsible for the publication of numerous editions of Giegher's work, enriching the original version with important revisions and additions. As reiterated in the catalogue under review, the comparison between Giegher's texts and Harsdörffer's later editions – recently studied by Carmen Abad Zardoya ('El arte de plegar servilletas. De la mesa palaciega a los conventos femeninos', *Revista online de artes decorativas y diseño* 8 [2022], 9-34) – shows how important the works were, not only for the development of table culture but also for the aesthetics and intellectual discourse on the contribution of images to the understanding of geometry and science.

Finally, the last chapter considers the whole European context, offering an interesting overview of the spread of techniques and the influences that the Italian tradition may have had on that of different countries. The author here also reflects on the change in format: different types of publications appeared, where the text occupied a smaller percentage of the volume's structure or the volume size became smaller. This change offered users a format that was more manageable and easier to read, and demonstrates how the audience for such texts diversified and expanded, to the point of arriving at original ideas such as a deck of playing cards depicting images taken from carving manuals.

The volume presents itself as a text of great utility and interest to scholars, thanks to the rich repertoire of information it brings together, and of great appeal to the general public, as introduction to a subject as rich and fascinating as the world of Renaissance table culture.

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Aristocratic collecting practices in Belgium and the Netherlands (c. 1780-1950).

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