

From Slavery to Superwoman: cooking, cleaning and eating 1850-1960

Study Day composed of six papers, at the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture, Middlesex University.

7th June 2003.

The Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture (MoDA) is an archive of materials related to the design and decoration of the home. For visitors, MoDA is represented largely by two galleries, housing a permanent display and temporary exhibitions respectively, and a small library or study room. The permanent display is distinguished from related treatments of domestic design and architecture such as that at the Geffrye Museum in East London by its focus on the twentieth century (the Geffrye deals with several centuries of changing tastes), by an emphasis on designs and artefacts in two-dimensions (the Geffrye displays centre upon the three dimensions of the living room and the furniture within it), by an interest in the material culture and practices of working class consumers (the Geffrye makes clear its focus on the middle class home) and by an emphasis on the choices available to consumers in fashioning their homes (less the case at the Geffrye where a room serves for each period).

On the occasion of *From Slavery to Superwoman: cooking, cleaning and eating 1850-1960*, the temporary exhibition was *Stitch! The Art and Craft of Homemaking*, which has been the subject of its own study day held at the Museum. 'Stitch!' continues until August 24th, and displays a variety of items produced in the home for domestic use such as rugs, tablecloths, quilts and lampshades along with ancillary artefacts such as a workbox, patterns, and a video loop of television coverage of textile crafting. Each item is shown to be the locus of personal value, whether the rugs made from kits by husband and wife during courtship, the crochet of cannons and warships made to welcome home family members from the war, or the felt bowls formed within a different craft lexicon by a contemporary maker. *Stitch!* has the important function of displaying the sort of artefacts rarely exhibited in extra-domestic contexts and situated them as the product of particular North London embroidery, knitting & crochet and patchwork guilds, groups and classes. Significantly, *Stitch!* names the makers exhibited, and through textual quotation and audio facilities provides a forum for comment on their work.

Unlike the permanent gallery which attempts to foreground the importance of consumer choices in constructing domesticity, and the temporary exhibition which took the trouble to examine artefacts and producers too often overlooked in treatments of domestic material culture, 'From Slavery to Superwoman: cooking, cleaning and eating 1850-1960' offered some studies of the mediators of an important aspect of domesticity - cooking - through the eyes of another group of mediators - curators and writers.

Three of the papers were by collectors of various kinds. In the opening presentation 'Cooking the Books: the Pleasures of Collecting', the 'publisher, lecturer and enthusiast' Phoebe Philips explained the importance of cookery books in her own life from the initial purchase of *The Joy of Cooking* as an American bride moving to the UK to the enormous collection which eventually, and somewhat ironically, needed a home from home in an archival context. Next, Antonia Byatt offered her survey 'Kitchen Cupboards and Queen-like Closets: 400 Years of the Household Manual' based on the collection at The Women's Library, which she directs. Byatt noted the continuity of discourse separated by centuries; Isabella Beeton's advice has parallels in Nigella Lawson's *How to be a Domestic Goddess* and Jocasta Innes's *Home Time*. As Principal Reference Librarian at the Guildhall Library, Irene Gilchrist demonstrated the strength of the collection in the field of food writing. The Guildhall library not only contains the collections of the celebrated food writers Elizabeth David and Jane Grigson, but also a large number of less well known and rare examples of recipe books and food writing. Gilchrist considered the difficulty of retrieving cooking and household advice given to working class readers. Such material is relatively scarce, partly because of low literacy levels prior to the introduction of universal education in the UK, and partly because of a tendency in advice writers to extend beyond the means of working class readers as Charles Francatelli did in his *Plain Cookery Book for the Working Classes* (1852). Gilchrist's discussion implicitly demonstrated the dangers of using advice as evidence of practice.

The two academic speakers used advice literature not as the subject of their papers, but as a tool in the construction of the histories they presented. In his survey 'The Servant Problem and the Problem with Servants', David Brady, of City University and New York University, rehearsed some of the issues attendant upon both the coexistence of servant and served and the difficulty in retaining service in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As well as introducing some useful secondary studies of the servant problem, Brady noted the scarcity of depictions of servants, and considered their representation in household management texts held at MoDA such as Henry Southgate's 1874 book *Things a Lady Would Like to Know*, *Pearson's Household Encyclopedia* of 1904. Rachel Rich is acutely aware of the difficulties of using advice as evidence of actual food practices, as she ably explained in her presentation "'Tomorrow we give a wild sort of supper party': dinner parties in the middle-class home, 1850-1914' which compared advice literature with diaries and letters to point out that it was by manipulating and modifying codes of etiquette rather than merely implementing them, that people shaped their own identities.

As a succession of witty, incisive anecdotes about twenty major figures in the history of food culture, the last paper of the day, 'Cookery Personalities', delivered by Hugo Dunn-Meynell, writer and former chairman of the International Wine and Food Society, had the qualities of an after dinner speech. From the speaker's own ancestor Thomas Meynell, who invested in the development of the railway, which had such an effect on food availability and freshness, to Marguerite Patten's culinary ingenuity in the face of food deprivation during World War II, via Eliza Acton, Harry Heinz and Joseph Lyons, Dunn-Meynell applauded those who have helped to make joy from mere sustenance.

This charming sentiment typifies Study Day and signals its shortcomings. The audience was composed largely of people interested in food and its history, and questions and comments from the audience displayed not inconsiderable bibliographic knowledge on food matters. The audience was undoubtedly well served by a group of speakers composed of librarians, academics and enthusiasts but with the exception of Rachel Rich's work, a more rigorous treatment of the subjects addressed was needed. The speakers offered broad surveys rather than focussed analyses, and too often advice literature was consulted as trustworthy historical evidence rather than as constructed representations of ideals.

Furthermore, given the location, the effective omission of discussions of the design of the home and especially of the kitchen, was unfortunate. While some speakers mentioned the role of technology in supporting the concept of the servantless house, and Christine Frederick's *Scientific Management in the Home* (1920), the importance of design for the preparation, presentation and consumption of food, and for the creation of a variety of environments suitable for the dining in the period 1850-1960 was not addressed. There is a wealth of information about design available in the very books of advice used by the speakers, which remained unexploited. It was a pity not to see an emphasis on, or understanding of, the importance of design for the activities that nominally formed the focus of the day, namely cooking, cleaning and eating, in a Study Day held at MoDA.

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