

Dressing the Collation Table

Visual Presentation of Informal Hospitality at the Medieval Tournament

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Part of the Immersive Hospitality Series

I. The Evidence Problem

The previous piece in this series, "The Collation and the Feast," established that medieval tournaments operated with two distinct modes of hospitality: the formal, seated feast and the informal, ongoing collation. A natural follow-up question is: what did the collation table actually look like? Was it simply a board heaped with food, or was it dressed with decorative elements?

The honest answer is that direct evidence for the visual presentation of collation tables at medieval tournaments is extremely thin. The collation, by its very nature, was informal and unremarkable to the chroniclers and artists who documented medieval life. They recorded what was extraordinary, and the collation was meant to be ordinary, available, ambient. No one wrote a detailed description of how a collation table was laid out, because that was not the point of it.

What we can do, however, is approach the question from several angles: by examining what we know about formal feast table decoration (which is well documented), by looking at visual evidence from illuminated manuscripts depicting informal outdoor meals, by considering what the period sources tell us about decorative objects and their contexts, and by reasoning carefully about what a collation table would and would not have included based on the practical demands of the setting.

II. How the Formal Feast Table Was Decorated

The Cloth

The table was first covered with a white cloth, or *nappe*, whose cleanliness was a matter of considerable pride. Multiple cloths might be layered, both for hygiene and for the ceremony of removing soiled cloths between courses. The cloth itself was the foundational decorative element: a plain, clean expanse of white linen or damask that signaled formality and care.

The Salt Cellar

The great salt cellar was the primary decorative object on the medieval table and often its visual centerpiece. Because salt was expensive, the salt cellar functioned as both practical vessel and status display. Medieval inventories record salt cellars of extraordinary elaboration, incorporating figures of human beings, animals, and

architectural forms in silver and gold. The placement of the salt cellar organized the social space of the table: to sit "above the salt" was to sit in the place of honor. At the banquet depicted in the *Grandes Chroniques de France*, the golden salt cellars on Charles V's table are so large they rival the monarchs' crowns in visual prominence.

The Nef

Another distinctive table ornament was the nef, an extravagant vessel made of precious metals in the shape of a ship. Nefs are recorded in France as early as 1239 and could hold salt, spices, cutlery, or napkins, though by the fourteenth century the most elaborate examples had become purely decorative, crowded with miniature masts, sails, and crew figures. The *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* (c. 1413-16) shows a large nef placed beside the principal diner at the January feast. They marked the place of the host or honored guest and served as conspicuous statements of wealth.



Limbourg Brothers, "January (New Year's Feast at the Court of the Duke of Berry)," fol. 1r, from *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, c. 1412–1416. Illuminated manuscript, MS 65, Musée Condé, Chantilly, France.

Detail showing tableware (including standing gold salt cellar [nef]) at ducal feast.

The DRESSOIR: Plate on Display

Perhaps the most striking feature of formal medieval dining was the dressoir de parement, a stepped display structure placed against the wall of the dining hall. The

dressoir held the host's silver and gilt plate, cups, and vessels not currently in use at the table. It was purely a display of wealth. At the wedding of Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, and Isabella of Portugal in 1429, there was a dresser twenty feet long on either side of the room, each with five rows of plate. At the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520, the masses of English silver plate were arranged on buffets in the dining tent.

Subtleties and Edible Decoration

The food itself was the primary visual spectacle on the feast table. Subtleties (in France, *entremets*) were sculptural works of sugar, marzipan, or pastry brought out between courses, depicting animals, people, buildings, or allegorical scenes. The *Viandier de Taillevent* describes "helmeted cocks" (roasted chickens mounted on roasted piglets with paper helmets and lances) alongside painted *entremets* of wood depicting knights in swan boats. Roasted birds redressed in their own feathers, vibrantly colored dishes dyed with saffron or sandalwood, and elaborately constructed pies all contributed to a table where food and decoration were inseparable.

What Was Not on the Feast Table: Flowers

A critical point for the present inquiry: flowers in vases were not a feature of the medieval dining table. The custom of placing flower arrangements on the table as a centerpiece did not emerge until the early nineteenth century. In the medieval period, flowers had other decorative uses: they were woven into garlands worn on the body, used for altar and church decoration, scattered on floors as strewing herbs, and associated with particular feast days and seasonal celebrations. If formal feast tables did not include floral arrangements, it would be extremely unlikely that the less formal collation table did either.

III. Visual Evidence: Informal Meals in Manuscripts

The Livre de Chasse (1387-1389)

Gaston Phoebus's *Livre de Chasse*, the standard medieval text on hunting, includes illuminations of outdoor hunting meals that are our closest visual analogue to the tournament collation. The famous manuscript (BnF Ms. fr. 616) depicts scenes of hunters eating outdoors on cloths spread on the ground, with food laid out informally. Noble hunts were, as one modern scholar described them, part party, part picnic, and

part practice for war, and their outdoor food service shares the tournament collation's logic of sustaining people in the midst of physical activity. In these images, the visual presentation is simple: cloth, food, drink, and the natural outdoor setting. There are no decorative objects beyond the food and serving vessels.



Gaston III, Count of Foix (Gaston Phébus), *Livre de Chasse*, 1387–1389. Illuminated manuscript, BnF MS fr. 616, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

Other Manuscript Evidence

Additional manuscript illustrations depicting people eating outdoors in clearings or at hunting parties show a consistently stripped-down presentation: food, cloth, vessels, and little else. The decoration, such as it was, came from the setting itself (the pavilion, the field, the surrounding pageantry) rather than from objects placed on the serving surface.

IV. What We Can Reasonably Infer

The Surface

The collation would have been laid on a trestle table covered with cloth. The cloth might be plain linen rather than the fine white damask of the formal feast, but some form of covering was standard practice for any table from which food was served. The cloth

communicated that this was a deliberate act of hospitality, not a haphazard arrangement.

The Serving Ware

Serving vessels would have been the primary visual element beyond the food itself. A wealthy host's collation might feature metal serving dishes (silver, pewter, or latten), wooden trenchers and boards, ceramic jugs for wine or ale, and cups or goblets. The quality and material of these vessels was itself a form of display. Ewers and basins for handwashing may have been present as well, as offering water for hand-washing was a deeply ingrained gesture of hospitality.

The Food as Visual Display

The abundance and variety of the food was itself the decoration of the collation table. A table heaped with bread in variety, rounds of cheese, bowls of fruit (fresh and dried), dishes of nuts, cold roasted meats, pasties, and pickled vegetables would have presented a rich visual display of color and plenty. The message was one of overflowing generosity: there was always more than enough.

What Was Likely Absent

Based on the evidence from formal table practice and the practical demands of the outdoor tournament setting, several categories of decoration were almost certainly not present on the collation table. Floral arrangements in vases were not a period practice on any table, formal or informal. Subtleties or sculptural food were specific to the formal feast's theatrical sequence. Nefts, great salt cellars, or major plate display would not have been risked in an outdoor, less controlled environment. Candles or elaborate lighting were unnecessary at what was a daytime affair.

What May Have Been Present

Several decorative elements are plausible even without direct evidence. Heraldic display, including banners, painted shields, and heraldic cloths identifying the host, was a pervasive feature of tournament culture and would likely have been associated with the collation space. A host's arms on a banner near the table served the practical function of identifying whose hospitality was on offer while also functioning as decoration. Given the widespread use of strewing herbs indoors, it is plausible that cut rushes, herbs, or greenery might have been scattered on the ground around an outdoor serving area. And

for nobles who served their collation from within or adjacent to their pavilion, the pavilion itself, with its textile walls, heraldic decoration, and furnishings, was the decorative context.

V. The Abundance Was the Point

The most important conclusion from this research may be that we are asking a slightly anachronistic question when we wonder about "decorating" the collation table. The modern instinct to dress a serving table with decorative objects reflects a post-eighteenth-century sensibility about table presentation. In the medieval period, the serving table's visual impact came from different sources.

For the formal feast, the decoration came from precious metalwork, from the spectacular food itself, from the textiles, and from the ceremony of service. For the collation, the decoration came from the sheer abundance of the food, the quality of the serving ware, the surrounding environment of the pavilion and tournament field, and the heraldic display that identified the host.

A collation table that was full, continuously replenished, and offered quality food in good vessels on a clean cloth was making precisely the statement it needed to make. The food was the decoration. The generosity was the display. In a culture where hospitality was a moral virtue and feeding people was a sacred obligation, a table overflowing with bread, cheese, meat, fruit, and wine needed no flowers to communicate its message.

VI. Sources Consulted

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