

Flowers, Greenery, and the Decorated Table

On Anachronism, Beauty, and Knowing the Difference

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A Confession

I sometimes put flowers on my tables. I drape greenery along the edges. I set out candles even at daytime events, because candlelight makes everything warmer, and I like the way a sprig of rosemary looks tucked beside a cheese board. I do these things knowing they are not period practice, because they are beautiful, and because beauty matters when you are trying to make people feel welcome.

This piece is not an argument against any of that. It is an attempt to understand what is actually medieval, what comes from later centuries, and where the line falls, so that when we choose to cross it, we are making a choice rather than an assumption. There is a difference between placing flowers on a table because you believe medieval people did so and placing them there because you know they did not but you want them anyway. The first is a mistake. The second is a creative decision, and creative decisions are the heart of what we do.

What follows is the history of some common table decorations, where they actually come from, what medieval people did instead, and some thoughts on how to hold the tension between historical authenticity and the pull of modern beauty.

I. Flowers on the Table

When It Actually Started

Placing cut flowers in a vessel on the dining table is not a medieval practice. It is not even a Renaissance practice or an early modern one. The custom began in the early nineteenth century, part of the Neoclassical revival that looked back to ancient Roman banqueting customs for inspiration. The Romans had used flowers lavishly at feasts (scattered on floors, rained from ceilings, worn as garlands), and the Regency and Victorian periods revived the idea with a characteristically modern twist: flowers arranged in a container, placed at the center of the table.

Before that, the wealthy eighteenth-century table featured epergnes (tiered silver stands for fruit and sweets), mirrored plateaus running the length of the table, and extraordinary sugar-paste or porcelain sculptures as centerpieces. A basket of flowers might appear at a casual family dinner by the early 1800s, but this was informal and domestic. The formal practice solidified over the course of the nineteenth century. By 1884, Mrs. Beeton could advise in her *Book of Household Management* that "there

should always be flowers on the table," treating it as basic good taste. But Beeton was writing nearly four hundred years after the close of the medieval period.

No illuminated manuscript, no chronicle, no household account, and no courtesy book from the medieval period describes or depicts flowers in a vessel placed on a dining surface. The evidence is not ambiguous. It is simply absent.

Where Medieval People Put Their Flowers

This does not mean flowers were unimportant to medieval people. They cultivated them, valued them, and used them constantly, just not on the table. Flowers and fragrant herbs were woven into garlands and chaplets worn on the head and body. They were used to decorate churches for feast days. They were strewn on floors mixed with rushes to provide scent and repel insects. They were thrown during processions and scattered on streets during celebrations. Hawthorn was brought in for May Day. Roses, violets, and lilies were cultivated in gardens and associated with particular devotional meanings.

The Dutch traveler Levinus Lemnius, visiting England in 1560, wrote admiringly of rooms strewn with sweet herbs and nosegays of fragrant flowers. But the herbs were on the floor and the nosegays were carried or worn. The table was not where flowers lived.

II. Greenery, Ivy, and Garlands

Trailing greenery along a table edge, draping ivy over a serving surface, or weaving garland around candlesticks feels deeply natural at a medieval-themed event. The materials themselves are period-appropriate. Medieval people grew ivy, used rosemary and bay for everything from cooking to strewing, and wove garlands of greenery for celebrations.

The issue is not the materials but the placement. Garlands in the medieval period decorated people (worn as chaplets or around the neck), architecture (hung over doorways, draped along hall beams for feast days), and sacred spaces (church altars and choir screens). They were not arranged along or across a serving table. The convention of draping greenery along a table edge or weaving it around table objects is a Victorian and twentieth-century practice, part of the same tradition that brought flowers to the table.

This is one of the subtler anachronisms because the materials look right even when the application is wrong. Rosemary is impeccably medieval. Rosemary arranged in a line down the center of a serving table is not. The distinction matters if accuracy is the goal, but it is worth acknowledging that the visual effect is lovely and the scent is genuinely welcoming, which counts for something.

III. Candles as Table Decoration

Medieval people used candles and rushlights extensively. They were essential for indoor illumination, and beeswax candles in particular were expensive enough to be a statement of wealth. But candles on the medieval table were there to provide light, not to create ambiance. The candelabra as a decorative table-center object is an eighteenth-century development, evolving alongside the epergne and the mirrored plateau as part of the Georgian and Regency approach to table styling.

For a tournament collation, which was an outdoor daytime affair, candles would have been entirely unnecessary and therefore out of place. Evening feasts held indoors would certainly have featured candlelight, but as illumination integrated into the broader lighting of the hall, not as individual decorative elements placed on the table for visual effect.

This is another case where the material is perfectly period (beeswax candles, iron or bronze holders) but the application is not. And again, it is a case where the anachronism creates genuine warmth. Candlelight transforms a space. It softens faces and makes food look richer. That emotional effect is real even when the historical precedent is not.

IV. Figurines, Themed Objects, and Narrative Decor

The impulse to place decorative objects on a serving table, things chosen for their visual interest or thematic resonance rather than their function, is largely an eighteenth-century innovation. Porcelain figures from Meissen and Sèvres replaced the earlier tradition of edible sugar-paste subtleties and were arranged on the table in pastoral or mythological scenes. Before that, the "sculptures" on a medieval feast table were either functional (the nef, the great salt cellar) or edible (subtleties of sugar and marzipan presented between courses at formal feasts).

The idea of curating a set of objects to create a themed visual narrative on a serving table is essentially a modern event-planning concept. Medieval hosts did create themed and narrative experiences at tournaments, sometimes elaborately so. But these narratives were expressed through costuming, physical structures, role-play, and heraldic display in the broader tournament space, not through curated objects on a food table.

This is perhaps the hardest anachronism to let go of, because themed display is central to what makes immersive hospitality feel immersive to modern guests. A table that tells a story through its objects pulls people in. The question is whether the story can be told through period-appropriate means (heraldic display, the pavilion's textile program, the types and presentation of food) rather than through objects placed among the dishes.

V. What Medieval People Did Instead

Strip away the flowers, the garlands, the candles, and the figurines, and what remains is not a bare table. The medieval vocabulary of visual hospitality was different from ours, but it was not impoverished.

The cloth came first. A clean white cloth on the table was the foundational gesture of formal food service. Its quality and cleanliness communicated care and intention. The serving ware carried enormous visual and social weight: silver, pewter, gilt, fine ceramic, or carved wood. The vessels themselves were display objects, and a host who served from a good plate was making the statement that we try to make with table decoration. The abundance and arrangement of the food was itself the visual centerpiece. A table heaped with bread, wheels of cheese, bowls of fruit, dishes of nuts, cold meats, and pasties presented a rich composition of color and plenty. The food was the decoration.

Beyond the table, the surrounding space did the work that we ask table decor to do. Heraldic banners and painted shields identified the host and provided color. The pavilion's textile walls created visual richness and enclosure. Strewing herbs on the ground provided scent. At formal feasts, the dressoir against the wall, holding tiers of silver and gilt plate, served the function that centerpieces serve today: it drew the eye and communicated wealth.

The medieval host's visual message was not "I have decorated beautifully for you" but "I have provided for you without limit." The fullness of the table, the quality of the vessels, the richness of the surrounding space: these were the language of medieval generosity.

VI. Holding the Tension

So where does this leave those of us who want to create hospitality that feels both medieval and welcoming? I think it leaves us in a place of honest tension, which is not a bad place to be.

On one hand, knowing what is and is not period practice sharpens our work. When we understand that the medieval collation table's visual power came from food abundance, quality serving ware, and the surrounding environment of the pavilion rather than from objects placed among the dishes, we can lean into those elements more deliberately. We can make the food spread more generous and more visually composed. We can invest in the quality and coherence of our serving vessels. We can let the pavilion walls, the heraldic display, and the textiles do more of the visual work.

On the other hand, we are not operating in the fourteenth century. We are operating at modern events attended by modern people whose visual expectations have been shaped by centuries of table-decoration tradition they may not even be conscious of. A table that is period-perfect but reads as "unfinished" to every guest who sees it has not fully succeeded at hospitality, because hospitality is ultimately about the guest's experience, not the host's accuracy.

I do not think there is a single right answer here. What I think matters is the knowing. When I tuck a sprig of rosemary beside a cheese board, I want to do it with full awareness that I am making a modern choice, not reproducing a medieval one. When I choose not to put flowers on the table, I want to do it because I understand what the medieval table offered instead and I am confident that the food, the vessels, and the space are doing enough. When I light candles at a daytime event, I want to own that I am choosing atmosphere over accuracy, and I want to be at peace with that choice.

The goal is not purity. The goal is fluency. A host who is fluent in the medieval visual language of hospitality can make informed choices about when to speak it and when to code-switch. That fluency, that sense that the host knows what they are doing and why, is what makes the difference between a themed table and an immersive one.

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