



## HARMONY ON THE TABLE: PORCELAIN DINNERWARE IN USE

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### ABSTRACT

For many years, both in Europe and in Turkey porcelain dinnerware was identified with wealth and aristocracy. Today porcelain is an indispensable material for tableware products. While the production methods and technologies were developed, new clay deposits were discovered, and the knowledge about material are widespread; porcelain products became reachable for any consumer in any market for a broad range of price. Consequently, the meaning of the material and product has evolved. Beyond mentioning the symbolic meaning of porcelain dinnerware or semiotic significance of ownership, this paper attempts to draw a map in order to understand how porcelain dinnerware fit into existing ways of life, frameworks of meaning, and contexts of practice of Turkish family.

**Keywords:** Porcelain Dinnerware, Everyday Life, Culture

### INTRODUCTION

The ideas that societies consist of both humans and artifacts; and sociology not only consist of the interaction between humans but also the interaction between humans and objects are widespread among interrelated disciplines. As Riggins indicated, objects are a cause, a medium, and a consequence of social relationships and the only context that artifacts can be observed is their relation to humans (1994).

Dant uses the term “quasi-social” in order to explain the relationship that has been established by people with objects:

“It is through these quasi social relationships with things that individuals both express their social identity and experience their location within society. The things that we relate to have embodied within them the social relations that gave rise to them through their design, the work of producing them, their prior use, the intention to communicate through them and their place within an existing cultural system of objects.” (Dant 1999: 2)

Considering an object only as a commodity with exchange value or emphasizing only the social and cultural attribution of symbolic meaning, or the semiotic significance of ownership means saying little about how objects actually are used in practice (Ingram et. al., 2007). Objects are used and lived with and as Dant (1992) stated their importance emerges through grasping the way that objects are fitted into ways of living.

As Miller (1998) stated, it is possible to unpick the subtler connections with cultural lives and values through dwelling upon the more mundane sensual and material qualities of object.

Kopytoff (1986) indicated that objects would have different biographies in different cultural contexts and those different biographies of objects would reveal the qualities of environments through which they pass. From this perspective it can be asserted that a porcelain dinnerware set is fitted into everyday practices of Turkish people differently than of American people; or life story of a porcelain dinnerware set in Turkey would reveal different cultural data from that in Europe.

In this study about porcelain dinnerware it is attempted to draw a map in order to understand how these objects fit into existing ways of life, frameworks of meaning, and contexts of practice of Turkish family. Beyond its symbolic meaning, it is aimed to represent the relationship between the porcelain dinnerware objects and daily practices of eating and entertaining guests. The question “How does these objects mediate the self-expression of identity not only by its ownership but also its use?” is also enquired.

Accordingly, face-to-face interviews with women were conducted. 15 respondents - including both middle-aged married women and young engaged women preparing for marriage - ranged in age from late twenties and late forties. Respondents were invited to talk about their frequency and patterns of usage of dinnerware, place of storage and opinions about ideal table setting. The reason behind conducting interviews with only women respondents is the fact that porcelain tableware is a part of woman dowry in Turkish culture and table setting or hospitality activities are widely associated with women.

After giving short information about the history and perception of porcelain tableware in western societies, the findings of the study are represented under three concepts. First under the title of “a component of the living room” the way that porcelain dinner sets are appropriated in context of table setting and hosting practices among Turkish families is addressed. The second concept accounts for how the idea of completeness unfolds among users. At the last section the use of porcelain dinner sets together with other table setting equipment is interpreted under the notions of orchestration, assembly, upgrading and complexity.

### **FROM PALACES TO MIDDLE CLASS APARTMENTS: A SHORT HISTORY OF PORCELAIN DINNER SETS**

For centuries, the Chinese made the world's finest porcelain. As early as the 1100's, traders brought Chinese porcelain to Europe, where it became greatly admired. However, it was so rare and expensive that only wealthy people could afford it. As trade with the Orient grew during the 1600's, porcelain became popular with the general public. The custom of drinking tea, coffee, and chocolate became widespread and created a huge demand for porcelain cups and saucers. In many European kingdoms, porcelain tableware production was financed by royalty.

Especially in eighteenth century, a “china fever” swept England. The word “china” is synonymous with the word “porcelain”. Being the first to expand into the east, the Portuguese gave china the name porcelain. In her study of consumer culture in eighteenth century in England, Kowaleski-Wallace (1995-96) states that despite becoming a commodity of unprecedented popularity for nearly everyone in England in Eighteenth century, porcelain or china appealed to the upper and lower classes alike:

“While the upper class followed the craze for expensive and elegant porcelain, often in the form of chinoiserie, the lower class saw a ‘revolution’ in tableware. Thus, the history of china in eighteenth century England unfolds in two ways – as

an aesthetic object and as an item for everyday use.” (Kowaleski-Wallace 1995-96: 115)

While being a precious and coveted commodity, porcelain tableware was widely associated with women and female taste. Besides having a desire for porcelain and an inclination to collect, women are associated with porcelain tableware because of their daily routines (Weaterhill, 1986).

After the discovery of kaolin beds in their home continent, Europeans started to produce porcelain and get skilled in making fine tableware. In late nineteenth and early twentieth century it was a source of pride to owe European porcelain in America. Ownership of European porcelain evinced social, financial, and material accomplishments. The china's associations with France - the continental locus of good taste - undoubtedly impressed guests, who admired the glittering porcelain dinner table (Błaszczuk, 2000).

Ottoman palace was introduced porcelain tableware by means of the presents coming from Far East. In twentieth century a royal porcelain tableware factory was founded in Yıldız with the support and under the expertise of French manufacturers. After the middle of 21st century, as production of porcelain tableware become widespread, products of aristocracy became available for middle class Turkish consumer and took its place among the dowry as an indispensable element.

In Turkey, the big set is purchased as a piece of dowry and used occasionally. Additionally, at least one smaller and cheaper set is purchased for everyday use.

## **FINDINGS**

### **A Component of the Living Room**

In Turkey the purchase of porcelain dinner sets is directly associated with marriage. Porcelain dinner sets are indispensable pieces of dowry and should be brought to the new house by women.

As indicated above, porcelain dinner sets are not purchased for everyday but occasional use. All of the respondents stated that they use their dinner set only at dinner invitations or special day dinners like anniversaries, birthdays or holidays and they owe everyday dishes for daily meals, which are generally made of porcelain, ceramic or glass. This pattern of use can be associated with the understanding of parlor among middle class Turkish families. Tunç (2001) mentions the parlor as being the restricted zone of the house in seventies:

“... The parlor was the biggest and the best decorated room of the house. Its door was kept locked unless there is a guest and it was not heated in winter. In parlors, there is always a nice set of couches and the most valuable objects of household were kept in there. Cleanness of parlor was crucially important.” (Tunç, 2001: 272)

Today this understanding is not very common in big cities and both the daily lives of household and activity of entertaining guests is conducted in the living room. None of the respondents have separate parlors for guests. However, occasional use of certain objects – porcelain dinner set, knives and forks, tablecloths, napkins, bedclothes - still continues.

The frequency of usage is not often than twice a month and some of the respondents even don't remember when their last use was.

When respondents asked where they keep their porcelain dinner set, their answers introduce a perspective about the patterns of use. All respondents, except one, reports that they keep their dinner set inside the china cabinets or sideboards in living room. The set is stored with occasional forks and knives, tablecloths, napkins, and other service equipment. It is not a piece of crockery, part of kitchen or daily routine of eating but an object of occasional use, entertaining guests and takes its place at the hearth of living room.

Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley (1992) suggests that prior routines and patterns of life structure the way in which artifacts are used and these processes give material artifacts shape and form, determining what they “are” and what they might become in different social and domestic situations. Ingram et. al. (2007), contributes that suggestion by highlighting the active part that users play in fitting technologies and commodities into existing ways of life, frameworks of meaning and contexts of practice. With respect to these suggestions, it can be asserted that porcelain dinnerware was “re-appropriated” into Turkish cultural context and transferred from being component of kitchen and daily meals into a component of living room and occasional dinners and invitations.

The notion of being occasional reflects the decoration of porcelain dinner sets. Reliefs, gilds and classical motifs are the popular elements decoration. On the contrary, everyday sets are decorated with more colorful and trendy patterns.

### **Completeness of the Set**

Second concept emerging from the study is “the completeness of the set”. Today, a wide range of porcelain dinnerware is available for a wide range of price. Sets consist of three or four size of dishes, bowls for soup and salad, service dishes, soup tureen, cups and saucers. Set is for 12 people and generally includes more than 65 pieces. In the past, when porcelain dinner sets were quite expensive and rare items, completeness of the set was a very important issue and breakage of a piece would evoke great sadness among housewives. Today sets are available for more affordable prices and producers guarantee the supply of spare items in case of damage. However, respondents’ answers reveal that completeness of the set is still a very important issue.

“I remember that my mother used to get very sad when a piece of the set is broken because it was impossible to replace the broken pieces and when I was a child we were forbidden to touch the occasional dinner set. (Aygün, 34)

“A small piece had broken away from the edge of one dish. I felt sorry of course because the set would be incomplete. But it was not a great damage and it can be only recognized when you look carefully so I thought that maybe I can use it for myself in a dinner invitation.” (Meziyet, 33)

The idea of completeness of the set unfolds in two ways among the consumers. First is making a great effort to avoid any damage or incompleteness and, in doing so, overcharging the object with value.

“Until now I didn’t break any piece of my dinner set but if have had broken I would be really sorry because I know that I cannot find it anywhere.” (Gül, 51)

Second is guaranteeing the replacement of a broken item either by purchasing prestigious brands that provides spare parts for several years or buying cheap and simple products so that additional or spare items can be easily found and afforded.

“Some pieces of my set were broken. I didn’t worry because I knew that the company could provide spare items. I contact with the company and they sent me the missing pieces.” (Gaye, 50)

“I didn’t want to feel sorry about any breakage so I bought a cheap porcelain set from Ikea. If one piece is broken or damaged, I go to the store and buy a new one.” (Aygün, 34)

Unless some of the pieces are never used (soup tureen or saucers) and some are rarely used (tea cups), having a complete set assures the competency and confidence for organizing a dinner invitation for twelve people. What would happen when a thirteenth guest appears at the front door still remains as a mystery.

### **Harmony on the Table: Orchestration of Complementary Items.**

The third concept that arises from the interview data is harmony on the table and the orchestration of complementary items. When the relational quality of utility considered, it can be asserted that many consumer goods are only of value when brought together in conjunction with each other. Porcelain tableware set can be considered as beautiful pieces of art or display of talented craftsmanship, it is useless without being accompanied by forks and knives. Similar relationships and forms of necessity arise with respect to all manner of everyday consumables (Shove *et al.*, 2007).

Ingram *et al.* (2007) explains the ways in which suites or complexes of artifacts relate to each other – at design stage or more commonly when put to use –by the notion of “assembly” and in order to conceptualized these processes of bringing together and controlling the interrelated objects, Hand and Shove (2004) uses the term “orchestrating”. In terms of dinner sets, setting the table is not only consists of putting right the dishes on the table in right order, but also bringing them and other accessories together in a manner or a style. Thus, “orchestration of table” requires not only competence but also a good taste.

“If you host a dinner invitation, the arrangement of the table should be special. The pieces you use can be old, cheap or even plastic but it is important how you bring them together. They should be in a harmony. You shouldn’t only think about the combination of accessories but also the arrangement of the food on the plate.” (Nesrin, 40)

“My mother is a little different than me. Everything on the table should be the pieces of one set according to her. She always uses white tablecloth and white and good quality porcelain and never thinks of putting some flower on the table. It looks like hospital. I like color and I think what you put on the table should fit the decoration of the entire living room.” (Gaye, 50)

Ingram *et al.* indicates that notions of symbolic coherence are equally important and they drive sequences of “upgrading” – as when the acquisition of a new carpet prompts the purchase of a new sofa or a round of redecoration. The case is similar when porcelain dinnerware sets are considered.

“I have a very old dinner set. My mother had purchased when I am at secondary school. It is a giant, relief and gilded set and really out of my style. I would like to buy a new set but then I will have to buy new forks and knives, tablecloths, napkins, candleholders etc. in order to combine with.” (Ayşe, 39)

Another concept that can be interpreted under the title of harmony and orchestration is the care – the effort made for entertaining guests. The exceptional care, which is taken for dinner invitations, makes the orchestration process much more complex. This can be explained by Douglas's (1994) assertion that the complexity of a meal is a service to others, not a statement about a relationship, but an example of what the relationship is, and that is why it has to be a lot of work in the relationship is important.

“If the dish of every guest is pieces of different sets or pieces are cracked of course I get angry. It shows that the host doesn't care about the guest. I get prepared when I am attending an invitation. I dress up, put make over and bring present for that reason I expect the same care from host. If you invite people you should make them feel special.” (Özge, 29)

The amount of work, as well as the quality of object, is relative to the statuses created. Therefore, a person who has a low level of complexity in use of objects – porcelain dinnerware is an example – likely to have low level of involvement with other people. The measure of complexity would also be an independent measure of atomization of social life (Douglas, 1994).

## CONCLUSION

While being an indispensable component of dowry and a product that loaded with several meaning, interpreting porcelain dinnerware as an object in use reveals how Turkish families appropriated these objects into their everyday life, frameworks of meaning and contexts of practice. First, occasional use and storage inside the china cabinets rather than kitchen, not only makes this set of objects a part of living room but also an actor of living room practices like entertaining guests and celebration of special days.

Second, the understanding of completeness of the set reflects to consumption and practices in two ways: Either purchasing replaceable and cheap or guaranteed and good quality products in terms of providing the completeness or making a considerable effort for keeping the set as a whole and overcharging the objects with value.

Third practice of table setting, combining different table accessories with style and using them in relation to each other can be associated with the notion of orchestrating and assembly. From this point of view, it reveals that while accomplishing all of those practices, users express self-identity not only by ownership of the tableware set, but also use of it. And the level of complexity in those activities addresses the level of involvement with other people.

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