

Shaping the Ephemeral. Materiality on the Early Modern Table

An Interview with Deborah L. Krohn

Gabriele Schichta

At the International Medieval Congress in Leeds in 2019, Deborah Krohn presented an inspiring paper entitled “Shaping Knowledge on the Early Modern Table”. It was part of her project on Renaissance European table culture which culminated in the exhibition Staging the Table in Europe 1500-1800. In the aftermath of the presentation we asked her about her daily work at BGC, her thoughts on the relevance of researching and teaching material culture, and the significance of formgiving techniques in historical table culture.

Im Rahmen des International Medieval Congress in Leeds im Jahr 2019, der ganz im Zeichen des Themas „Materialities“ stand, hielt Deborah Krohn in der vom IMAREAL organisierten Session einen Vortrag mit dem Titel “Shaping Knowledge on the Early Modern Table”. Der Vortrag war Teil ihres laufenden Forschungsprojekt zur renaissancezeitlichen europäischen Tischkultur, der schließlich in der Ausstellung Staging the Table in Europe 1500-1800 am Bard Graduate Center mündete. Im Nachklang ihrer Präsentation am IMC sprachen wir mit Deborah Krohn über ihre Arbeit am BGC und befragten sie zur Relevanz der Erforschung materieller Kultur und der Vermittlung entsprechender Forschungsergebnisse sowie zur spezifischen Bedeutung von Formgebungspraktiken im Rahmen historischer Tischkultur.

Deborah L. Krohn is Associate Professor and Coordinator for History and Theory of Museums at the Bard Graduate Center in New York. She got her PhD in History of Art and Architecture at Harvard University. Her main areas of research are Italian Renaissance Decorative Arts and Material Culture, History and Theory of Museums, and Culinary History.

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Please describe your research perspective on the material culture of people in historical periods and especially in Renaissance Europe. Why do you think it is important to study the material culture of periods long gone by, and the relationships of past people and their things?

As a historian of early modern decorative arts and material culture, I study cultural history from a material perspective. Traditionally, the study of what we call decorative arts in English but what are also called ‘applied arts’ or ‘minor arts’ meant furniture and furnishings, and especially the luxury arts connected to court cultures and aristocratic or royal patronage. Fine porcelains, table silver, Boulle furniture and gilt-bronze hardware are some of the kinds of objects that fall into this category. The approach that we take at the Bard Graduate Center is more broad and inclusive, hence the term material culture, which comprises these high-end luxury objects, but also encompasses objects from popular culture, print culture, archaeology, ethnography, and design history as well. The integration of decorative arts and material culture studies has grown out of the Annales approach pioneered by scholars such as Marc Bloch and Fernand Braudel in the first half of the twentieth century, which combined a rigorous archival focus on economic history, with a social dimension. By shifting the object of inquiry from the patrons to the makers and the consumers, and by looking at meaning as construed by lived experience rather than solely through prescriptive sources, a new approach to the study of the material world took hold. The social revolutions of the 1960s contributed to the shift in historical research generally, making room for the participation of historical figures whose voices were harder to hear: women, slaves, indigenous peoples, etc. The seeds of the approach were sown earlier, I would argue, in the Renaissance, by the antiquarians who effectively invented archaeology and a way to study the past based on physical remains, not just from texts.

What is it like to be a researcher at the Bard Graduate Center? Do you work together a lot with colleagues from other academic fields?

At the Bard Graduate Center, we have faculty that teach across a broad temporal and geographic range, from the ancient world to the contemporary. Some of us are trained as historians of art, and continue to work within that disciplinary arc, but we also have design historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists. True interdisciplinary research draws on whatever kinds of evidence can yield a fuller picture of the topic under study, and most of us pick and choose freely based on the particular projects we are undertaking. More than interdisciplinary, I think some of us might describe our research as post-disciplinary, in acknowledgment of that it falls between established categories.

We are a graduate institute that offers an MA and PhD, with fifteen full-time faculty and a research program that invites visiting scholars to research, lecture and teach for short periods. We also have a public gallery with a robust program of exhibitions curated by both faculty and guest curators that trains students in exhibition creation.

What sparked your interest in material culture, and especially in culinary history?

There is no way to learn about the past without attempting to recreate the material world in which past humans lived. From food and clothing to furnishings and the built environment, simply reading texts yields a very limited picture of

Featured Image

From the book by Antonio Latini, *Lo Scalco alla Moderna*, Naples: Dom. Ant. Parrino e Michele Luigi Mutii, 1692-4. It depicts different techniques for slicing and serving fruit. Metropolitan Museum of Art, book accessible online: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/352981>.

literate and numerate people. I became interested in the forgotten material details while doing dissertation research in a small municipal archive in San Gimignano, near Florence. I was looking for traces of the public patronage of works of art in the form of the decoration of the collegiate church in the minutes of the government's meetings. While I did find a good deal of information that I was looking for, I also found a lot that I was not – the beauty of archival research! Side by side with commissions to artists for frescoes and sculpture, I found discussions of how these objects were to be framed, including the price of the nails and the plaster. And I found shopping lists for meals that the priors were going to eat together, which was the beginning of my interest in culinary history.

Looking at much of past and current research in material culture studies one gets the impression that the focus is on the objects while the materials are neglected, and few scholars take matter and material into account. What is your approach to the “stuff” things are made of? What role do materials – and the relationships between materials or between materials and humans – play in your research generally, and in your daily work?

My approach to culinary history comes out of an interest in food as material, as well as in the texts that transmitted food knowledge from the late middle ages up until the end of the eighteenth century. The groups of artisans who were responsible for sourcing, cooking, and serving food in upper class and royal domestic settings, about which we have the most information, of course, were generally part of the same economic and social networks that governed the creation of works of literature and art. Food was a craft with its own form of apprenticeship, training, professional identity and social organization, and food workers were sometimes formally organized into guilds like other craftsmen. Foods were materials that interacted with other materials – mostly ceramics of different kinds, metalwork, woods, and textiles. The creation of elaborate meals took place with the help of a large variety of objects that are not generally found in art museums because they are not aesthetically valued or have not survived. More frequently, these objects are found in local historical museums, historic houses, agricultural museums, and archaeological museums, and are therefore not part of most traditional ‘art’ study, though they are often featured in still life paintings from the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In fact, the way I got to recipes and cookbooks was through the idea to use these sources as a way to reconstruct the material settings of food preparation and service. In reading these sources, I realized that they were a fantastic and largely understudied resource for cultural history.

As you have already pointed out elsewhere, material culture plays an eminent part in the various practices connected to cooking, processing food, preparing and serving meals, and so on. We wondered, however, what it would mean to consider different foods as materials in the first place. Like an artisan, a cook would then produce edible products out of different materials. The fact that most of the processes involved in cooking are inducing a transformation of the materials (e.g. through heat), and that several ingredients are “melted together” and make a new substance could place cooking near medical practices or even next to alchemy. In a way, the manuals on the skillful carving of foods also point in the direction of considering these foods as materials



Folio from *Li Tre Trattati di Messer Mattia Giegher Bavaro di Mosburc*, Padua: Paolo Frambotto, 1639. New York, Metropolitan Museum. Made available online (open access) by the MET: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/350504>.

comparable to, let's say, wood. What are your thoughts concerning foods as materials (generally, and in the Renaissance cultural context)?

My recent article in the *Journal of Early Modern History* about manuals and handbooks published all over Europe that provided instructions for carving meats and other foods, and folding napkins was the rough draft for an exhibition I have curated and accompanying book at the Bard Graduate Center, "*Staging the Table in Europe 1500 – 1800*" on view until July 9th, 2023. The presentation I made at the "Shaping Matter(s)" session at the International Medieval Congress in Leeds was also part of this project. The exhibition features a number of the handbooks, together with a selection of textiles, cutlery, and other visual materials that document these traditions. The goal is to display the books alongside the materials that were used in the practices described in the texts. From the late middle ages, elaborate centerpieces for feasts and banquets were created from a variety of ephemeral materials, including sugar, butter, ice, and eventually textiles. The folding of starched linen napkins, similar to the Japanese craft of origami, was undertaken by stewards or other officers connected with food service, unlike sugar sculpture, for example, that were more frequently created in sculptor's workshops. For this reason, the manuals for carving often included sections on napkin folding. Shaping a soft material into something with corners and crisp edges probably used many tools that are not described in the manuals, such as needles, thread, presses, etc. These texts focus only on the manipulation of the textiles and move seamlessly between the first tentative efforts as portrayed in the engravings, to depictions of the finished products, napkins folded into impossibly regular forms. For example, the featured image of this interview is from *Li Tre Trattati di Messer Mattia Giegher Bavaro di Mosburc* (Padua: Paolo Frambotto, 1639). Giegher was the first, in 1629, to publish a book that illustrated the basic techniques for folding in this way. The images were subsequently copied and adapted all over Europe through the eighteenth century.

Further reading

Krohn, Deborah L.: Carving and Folding by the Book in Early Modern Europe.
In: *Journal of Early Modern History* 24 (2020), S. 17-40.

Exhibition Catalogue *Staging the Table in Europe 1500-1800* (2023) by Deborah L. Krohn.

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