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Ideas on the Table: Teaching with the Faïences Révolutionnaires

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Teaching Representations of the French Revolution

Edited by

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Ideas on the Table: Teaching with the *Faiences Révolutionnaires*

The French Revolution was a heavily mediatized event in which competing ideas and political positions were staked out in print, oratory, songs, images, and a wide variety of objects. Historians have long shown how official seals, symbols, even articles of clothing (e.g., images of Marianne, liberty trees, the tricolor cockade, the Phrygian cap) played important roles in the construction of the Republic and the performance of its citizenry. Similarly, in the early 1790s, architectural projects were designed to publicize republican values through “talking” facades, which were covered with political mottos and governmental decrees.¹

More discreet talking objects from this period were the *faiences révolutionnaires* (“revolutionary faiences”), household ceramics that were produced mainly around the city of Nevers and featured a broad variety of political emblems and written slogans.² A study of this tin-glazed, painted earthenware contributes to our understanding of the communicative and performative aspects of revolutionary culture, revealing how private individuals were able to navigate political tensions and to articulate a range of different claims for themselves. These domestic objects serve as an intriguing pendant to more usual academic discussions of the cultural initiatives of the Committee of Public Safety, for the plates’ production and circulation

were driven by consumer choice and shifting costs rather than by central governmental doctrine. The faïences also offer evidence of bourgeois tastes, ideas, and economic conditions in rural parts of France, just as they speak to the ambiguities of the revolutionary period, exposing the gap between political intentions and popular practices in everyday life.

I present these materials in French in an undergraduate seminar on the history of the Revolution and find that the accompanying images often stimulate discussion more easily than the verbal texts on my syllabus. Just as, in the eighteenth century, the faïences could speak even to the barely literate, so these ceramics now allow even intermediate-level language students to engage in debate in a topically focused, discussion-intensive seminar. The ceramics readily spark cross-cultural analyses of the political value of signs and material objects in both French revolutionary and today's (American) cultures. This unit therefore culminates with my asking students to identify other communities built or at least reinforced through the sharing or opposing of specific signs and practices (pins, T-shirts, flags, the contested French *arbres de la laïcité*, etc.). As students transpose their conclusions to a contemporary context, they actively engage these materials and recognize their ongoing relevance.

I divide my class into small discussion groups for many of the following exercises in order to maximize participation and to give language students a better opportunity to practice their communication skills. Activities are initially rather structured: students describe and classify photographs of this dishware, then analyze the plates' potential meanings and try to give an approximate date range for each object. We move on to more open-ended discussions as we assess both the significance of these ceramics for French revolutionary history and the value of visual signs of political participation today. Since my students can understand French, I require advance reading of an extract of Edith Mannoni's richly illustrated *Les faïences révolutionnaires*. I also distribute a vocabulary list that enables everyone to describe the given symbols in detail. For an anglophone class, the following introduction should allow teachers to place this dishware in context, to produce a legend identifying the meaning of each symbol, and therefore to work with these materials in English.

Until the eighteenth century, faïence was the most popular kind of ceramic produced in France. This art came to France from Italy, in particular from the city of Faenza (known as Fayence in French) where a tradition of tin-glazed and painted earthenware had flourished since the Renaissance. In the sixteenth century, the duke of Nevers, Ludovico Gonzaga, brought

numerous Italian artists to his court, including members of the Conrade family, who founded Nevers's first ceramic factory in 1580. Eleven more were established thereafter. Nevers' potters first worked with floral or geometric elements but soon turned to more figurative designs. Personalized *faïence*—objects of all kinds, painted with an individual's name and patron saint or with the tools of a trade—became a highly popular gift to commemorate special occasions. These objects were therefore made to order: a peddler would present various models to his client, and together they would decide on a particular design.

Ceramic production intensified around the turn of the eighteenth century, and many historians have explained this phenomenon by referring to Louis XIV's sumptuary laws, notably his edicts of 1689, 1699 and 1709, which decreed that silver and gold furniture and tableware be given to the royal treasury to assuage the kingdom's financial difficulties. As a result, if one chooses to believe Louis de Rouvroy, duke de Saint-Simon: "[T]out ce qu'il y eut de grand et de considérable se mit en huit jours en *faïence*" 'In eight days all those who were grand and important took up ceramics' (576). In reality, however, these edicts had little effect, and the reasons for ceramic's exceptional development at the end of the seventeenth century were both economic and social: new nobles in search of recognition needed original coats of arms and emblazoned tableware for their families, and these commissions spurred the ceramic industry throughout the country (Rosen 57). Many factories were established across the Loire region, as earthenware could circulate by boat up and down the river and along secondary canals, reaching as far as Nantes to the west, Auxerre and the Morvan to the east, and Paris and Rouen to the north.

These factories had to compete with Chinese porcelain arriving through France's East India trading company, the *Compagnie Française des Indes*, but in the eighteenth century the production and circulation of French ceramics was nonetheless boosted by the country's economic prosperity, a broad fiscal deregulation, and a burgeoning consumer culture. A rural élite of well-off farmers, artisan entrepreneurs, lawyers, notaries, and low-ranking clergy members could then afford to spend two to four sols on essentially decorative objects.³ To put this in perspective: workmen typically earned about forty sols per day (Brenot 189). Yet the ceramic industry slowed down again after 1786, when a treaty with England simplified the importation of whiter, lighter, and cheaper English porcelain. The rising costs of wood, necessary to fire the furnaces, similarly contributed to this crisis and ultimately forced many manufacturers to close.

Six of the twelve factories at Nevers were able to survive because they were well positioned on the Loire River and in the center of the country, at a good distance from British porcelain's ports of entry. They also managed to reinvent themselves strategically by creating new lines of ware decorated with rapidly changing references to current events. Having already introduced a military design to celebrate the soldiers returning from the War of Austrian Succession and the Seven Years War, in the late 1780s the factories started producing memorabilia celebrating the meeting of the Estates General and the ideal of unity that emerged from their cooperation. This new line of patriotic ceramics benefited from some state support and from the convention's blocking of English imports in 1792. Thousands of pieces were produced during the first three years of the Revolution, before the economic crisis hit the industry, causing prices to rise and individuals' purchasing power to fall. At that point even two to four sols became expensive, and the status of these objects became more and more that of a luxury item. Between 1794 and 1800 the industry was further hit by increasing social tensions and difficult salary negotiations between the directors of the Nevers manufactures and their dependents; it also struggled with outdated technology and inflexible organizational structures (Rosen 320–26, 359).

This line of patriotic ware ended under the empire and was more or less forgotten until the late nineteenth century, when collectors such as Jules-François-Félix Husson, better known as Champfleury, rediscovered these ceramic objects in the Loire valley, in the Morvan, around Beauvais and Amiens, and in Normandy. Champfleury became the curator of the porcelain museum in Sèvres, and his collection and book *Histoire des faiences patriotiques sous la Révolution* (1867; "History of the Patriotic Faiences during the Revolution") renewed the public's interest and unwittingly stimulated the production of many fakes. These ceramics found a new heyday in conjunction with the recent celebrations of the bicentennial of the Revolution. Numerous exhibits were put together to showcase these objects, and current research on the faiences was to a great extent produced at this time.⁴

My lesson opens with this brief lecture and a *PowerPoint* presentation showing photographs of a wide selection of ceramics. Students then do a short written exercise, which gets them to describe and classify the dishware's different designs. As the class shares its answers, my first goal is to observe that the faiences do not offer an exact chronicle of the Revolution. We note that the dishware is generally not dated and that it presents

relatively few references to specific events—the main exceptions being the convocation of the Estates General, the fall of the Bastille, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, the Festival of the Federation, and the new Constitution of 1791.⁵ Despite their popularity in other revolutionary media, the attack on the Tuileries, the royal executions, or other bloody moments generally were not reproduced on these essentially decorative objects. When new military decors appeared in 1792, after the outbreak of war, they focused on abstract notions of defense and vigilance, drawing on Nevers's traditional flag decor and sometimes including generic fortresses, canons, or roosters. In similar fashion, only rarely did these ceramics refer to particular individuals (e.g., Honoré-Gabriel Riqueti de Mirabeau, Camille Desmoulins).

Students will also observe that these ceramics mainly spoke of abstract ideals through emblematic or otherwise symbolic images. Objects celebrating the unity of the three estates constituted the most popular genre, not only because of the general enthusiasm provoked by this event, but also—most probably—because they were produced during the first few years of the Revolution, before French purchasing power and consequent production plummeted because of inflation and war-related economic constraints. This series generally displayed a crown or fleur-de-lis accompanied by various symbols of the three estates (a cross or crosier, a sword, and a spade or other agricultural tool). Later pieces replaced the first and second estates with symbols of liberty, such as the Phrygian cap, a bird freed from a cage, or a tree of liberty, often decorated with patriotic ribbons. On some ceramics, a sly counterrevolutionary fox threatened the bird's flight. Other pieces memorialized the nation or the Republic, as well as the notion of fidelity.

As with any sign, these emblems were—and still are—open to multiple readings: the spade representing the third estate certainly pointed to the agricultural work of the serfs, but it could also be read as a vindication of their freedom from feudal dues (Tixier 7); additionally, to the intellectual elite, the spade may have been read as a reference to current physiocratic thought, an eighteenth-century school of economics that glorified rural life and believed that land, not trade, was the source of the nation's wealth. Conversely, the same concept could be represented in different ways, depending on the ceramics' intended clientele: Liberty, for instance, could be imagined as a classical deity on pieces made for a bourgeois Jacobin, but she more typically appeared as a bird fleeing from a cage on plates destined for rural farmers (Ajalbert and Bonnet 115).

Ceramics that expressed skepticism about current affairs were relatively rare, but a good example can be found at the Musée Carnavalet, where a plate shows images of a clergyman and a noble united by the slogan “Le malheur nous réunit” ‘Misfortune unites us.’ More common were ambiguous plates, often produced by the Petit factory in Nevers, which conveniently passed as gallant discourse even when mottos such as “Le Tiers ment” ‘The Third Estate Lies’ or “Le Tiers nuit” ‘The Third Estate Is Harmful’ could be intended as more critical discourse. At least they reflected the reactionary feelings of the Petit brothers, one of whom emigrated at the beginning of the Revolution. The risk of heavy fines or worse was likewise curtailed by the adoption of vague or equivocal wording such as “Si les choses ne changent de face, nous serons bientôt à la besace” ‘If things don’t change, we will soon be beggars’ or the rebus “IL [image of a sickle, called *faux* in French] CD,” which could be read as either “il faut s’aider” or “il faut céder” ‘We must help each other out’ or ‘We must cede’: in French, both variants sound the same as reading the letters CD (Brenot 201). This ambiguity was apparently necessary, for judicial records tell the story of a Petit salad bowl whose counterrevolutionary motto “VV les émigrés français” ‘Long live the French emigrés’ was sufficient reason for confiscation by the justice of peace of Tonnerre on 23 February 1792; the ensuing inquiry sparked the flight of the other Petit brother shortly thereafter (Rosen 329).

Challenging a class to interpret these ambiguous mottos can be a fun and thought-provoking exercise. Ultimately students will realize that the faiences of the revolutionary period represented a variety of positions and that their designs sometimes make them difficult to date or fully understand. Most striking are perhaps the ceramics’ ideological ambiguities, which speak to the cultural continuities, contradictions, and appropriations of the revolutionary period. Liberal support for the new citizen-subject and a conservative resistance to dechristianization could coexist, in fact, on the same piece. A salad bowl at the Musée Carnavalet bears the inscription “Jean Duc 1793 citoyen” ‘Jean Duc 1793 citizen’ under the image of Jean’s patron saint, a freedom tree, and a compass. A plate in the Heitschel collection is marked “Anne Chérot Bonne Citoyenne 1793” ‘Anne Chérot Good Citizen 1793’ under two women with halos.

Ongoing material concerns, and not only consumer tastes and ideology, affected the design process and complicated these ceramics’ meanings. Surplus plates from a previous line of production (e.g., objects with

Louis XV-style garlands, rocaille elements, or gallant-themed earthenware that had accumulated in Nevers's warehouses after 1786, the date of the signing of the treaty with England) were cleverly updated and upcycled into revolutionary memorabilia. Conversely, the disappearance of an image was not necessarily due to ideological reasons and could precede a political event that would otherwise seem to be related to it, further complicating its dating. For instance, royal and noble iconography was certainly removed after the fall of the monarchy, but the crown's gradual disappearance even before 1791 may also be linked to its excessively labor-intensive and therefore costly design (Ajalbert and Bonnet 84–85). Along the same lines, anomalies in composition may have been due to formal or aesthetic considerations; they were not necessarily ideological choices (Delthe 240).

Overall, therefore, the significance of these objects is still open to debate. According to the historian Thierry Delthe, the ceramics indicate how little imagination the revolutionaries actually had: their images were mainly copied from preexistent political caricatures or other commemorative objects (engravings, medallions, and so forth)—the one exception being, perhaps, the design of a bird fleeing from a cage (239–40). These objects probably did not always express the opinions of their painters, who could be fined for politically incorrect work. The various decors spoke essentially to consumer tastes, but their political importance remains unclear, because we cannot assess in a quantifiable way the popularity of one decorative style over another. Faience collectors have the best sense of these numbers, but they also have their own financial reasons not to want to divulge this information (Delthe 240; Ajalbert and Bonnet 210).

When I ask my students to attribute a logical date range to select examples of this earthenware, my objective at first is simply to review the political debates and shifts that characterized the first years of the Revolution (1788–94). The presence or absence of insignia referring to the first and second estates, the increasing importance of the third estate, and the appearance of signs of war are all telling elements. This is an exciting exercise for students who have not yet thought about how a historian, working in an archive, discovers something new and must figure out what a given emblem means and when it was created. I underscore that at best the meaning and date range of a plate are only possibilities. This exercise obliges students to recognize the ambiguities that limit our interpretation of symbolic and material objects. It also encourages them to come to

terms with the intentional equivocality of counterrevolutionary slogans. Because of these difficulties—not despite them—these objects offer both a valuable perspective on the material and visual culture of the revolutionary period and an interesting methodological lesson.

If time permits, I ask students to research other revolutionary media featuring the same symbols or mottos. This comparison allows for an informed assessment of Delthe's thesis that what these ceramics really demonstrate is that the Revolution was ultimately lacking in imagination (240). Alternatively, I might ask students to design and curate a catalog of these ceramic objects or to investigate the historical realities behind some of their most popular symbols, such as the planting (and occasional uprooting) of liberty trees or the adoption of the Phrygian cap.

Above all, it is important to open up discussion so that students have an opportunity to think critically about the multiple functions of these talking objects. If they have read Lynn Hunt's essay "Symbolic Forms of Political Practice" (*Politics* 52–86), they will appreciate how these plates, like the more famous Phrygian caps and tricolor cockades, helped create and transmit new feelings of nationalism. Hunt insists in fact that the adoption of these symbolic objects "made adherence, opposition, and indifference possible" and that their use "constituted a field of political struggle." My students tend to be particularly interested in the argument that "such symbols did not simply express political opinions; they were the means by which people became aware of their positions" (53). As individuals chose between ceramics with different slogans (e.g., "Hors de la constitution point de salut" versus "Hors de l'Église point de salut" 'Outside of the constitution no salvation' versus 'Outside of the Church no salvation'), they positioned themselves in the larger revolutionary debates.

The specific interest of the faïences stems from the fact that they were never meant to be public, didactic, and therefore unequivocal signs like the Phrygian cap, the republican cockade, or even the civil uniforms that Jacques-Louis David designed for the Committee of Public Safety. They were objects freely purchased and kept in the relative privacy of one's home; they represented a range of possible political positions, and their value was sometimes linked to their ability to defy clear interpretation—and thereby to escape censorship. In France's particularly vociferous revolutionary culture, where the voice of the nation was repeatedly announced and constrained by a powerful class of political orators, these discreet talking plates may ultimately have allowed private individuals the satisfaction of articulating some more nuanced claims for themselves.

Notes

1. Nineteenth-century critics coined the term *talking architecture* to describe revolutionary buildings whose geometries and inscriptions could “speak to the eyes” (Molok 43).

2. Large collections of these ceramics can be viewed in the Musée Carnavalet in Paris, in the Musée de la Faïence in Nevers, and in the Musée de la Révolution Française at the Château de Vizille. Students can visualize hundreds of these objects through parismuseescollections.paris.fr/ by searching for “céramique révolution française” at the Musée Carnavalet. One can also use the French national museums’ database *Joconde* (www2.culture.gouv.fr/documentation/joconde/fr/pres.htm) and search for “faïences révolutionnaires” and “faïences patriotiques.”

3. Boat inventories show that people used plain white plates for domestic use (Nicoud).

4. For scholarly purposes, the most comprehensive book on the topic is the third volume of Jean Rosen’s *La faïence de Nevers, 1585–1900*.

5. Plates featuring the death of Louis XVI are late-nineteenth-century creations (Rosen 356).

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