

Cutlery , Italy XVI th Century
Coral , brass, silver , Iron , Gold
2010. 29. 1,2
G350 (I call this the Treasury room)

Key Points :

Use of silverware relatively recent development in our western Society - People ate with bare hands - until the XVIth C – for instance Caterina de Medici went to France to marry Henry second son of King Francis I – in her dowry she brought her own fork and spoon enclosed in a box called a cadena - This was something new for the French but in Italy the fork arrived around XI th C – before that people were reliant on simple spoons and knives that were both weapons and utensils. Guests would each bring their own utensils.

Ancient Greeks used the fork but then the use fell out of custom. Byzantine Empire use developed during the first millennium but common use not until XVIIIth C in western world, North America XIXth....early use mainly as cooking utensil (Rome)

Fun fact : Lorenzo de Medici's estate included 18 forks... all for his private use.

People would bring their own silverware if they had any to a banquet

Use of fork in 1600's regarded as unmanly Italian affectation and frowned upon by Roman Catholic Church – “ god in his wisdom has provided man with natural forks ...his hands..” but mentioned in Bible...

Before use of cutlery it was common to wipe own's hands on any available material – hence no upholstery on chairs until development of silverware...

This set of cutlery would have belonged to a high ranking individual such as nobleman, ambassador or Ruler.

Would be regarded as a luxury item – expensive metal and rare coral handles (precious dark red) Coral possibly from Sicily

Decorations inspired by Islamic metalwork - Niello (

Niello is a black mixture of copper, silver, and lead sulphides, used as an inlay on engraved or etched metal. It can be used for filling in designs cut from metal.)

or damascening possibly of Spanish (Moorish influence) – silver or gold engraved into brass.

Elector of Saxony was know to have a collection of similar coral – handled cutlery in 1579. Agents in foreign countries would help sell work of Genoese Coral carvers and dealers (Battista de NEgrone Viale)

Coral seen as antidote for poison – having symbolic representation .

Refer the painting of the Madonna Enthroned. by Nicola d'Ancona – Baby (ugly)
Christ wears a necklace with a coral branch to protect him from Evil Eye, also
thought to promote growth of teeth , and guarantee good health.

Knife was always pointed –still very much a dagger

not until 18th C does knife become rounded and more likely to be used as spreader
than stabber

Possible questions :

How would this set of cutlery feel in your hand if you were using it ?

What do you notice about the shape of the implements ?

(fork had two tines, knife still very pointed, very straight not ergonomic at all)

Photo prop Picture of Marriage feast at Cana (1562-1563) Paolo Veronese

shows banquet style and absence of silverware at table . Great picture from Louvre.

Bibliography – Metropolitan Museum Journal Vol 15 – (1980 PP 183-4)