

SUPPER *with* Shakespeare

— The Evolution of English Banqueting —

WITH MY LOVE'S PICTURE THEN MY EYE DOTHT FEAST,
AND TO THE PAINTED BANQUET BIDS MY HEART

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Sonnet 47*

The MIA's Tudor Room has been a favorite destination for museum visitors since its installation as the MIA's first period room in 1923. "Supper with Shakespeare: the Evolution of English Banqueting," organized in collaboration with world-renowned English culinary historian Ivan Day, is part of a new initiative to interpret the MIA's period rooms and decorative arts collections through an exploration of period culinary history and social practices.

Many people are familiar with traditional Medieval English feasts where the lord and lady of the manor hosted dozens of knights and retainers for a meal in the great hall. After the feast, guests enjoyed sweets and spiced wine while they waited for the servants to clear the table, a process known as "the void." Later, it became fashionable to employ the French word "dessert" (from *de-servir*, literally to un-serve, or

clear the table). By the 16th century, the concept of dessert had evolved to become a more elaborate event known as a banquet.

In Shakespeare's time (he died in 1616), the term "banquet" meant a visually striking collection of after-dinner sweet foods, preserves, and confections. Such displays of culinary wonder were among the most magnificent in the history of English dining. Banquets were intended to impress and delight diners while the servants cleared the remains of the main feast, so they were often held in outdoor "banqueting houses" or in an intimate chamber such as the MIA's Tudor Room.

In fact, at the end of the first act of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, Cardinal Wolsey asks the Chancellor of the Exchequer, "Sir Thomas Lovell, is the banquet ready / I' the privy chamber?" prompting the actors to move offstage.



If William Shakespeare happened to stroll into this room, he might recognize the array of luxurious sweet foods, which he and his contemporaries would have called “banqueting stuffe.”

In the bard’s lifetime (1564–1616) the word “banquet”

referred not to a large-scale formal dinner, as it does today, but to a lavish arrangement of newly fashionable sugar-based foods, such as fruit preserves, confectionery, wafers, gilt gingerbreads, and even sugar playing cards. These foods were washed down with spiced wine and liqueurs known as “cordial waters.” They were served after the main meal, often in a separate room, or even in a garden building known as a banqueting house. Today, we still offer sweets and liqueur to our guests after dinner.

This banquet table features an ornamental centerpiece known as a “standard” or “warner.” It is constructed of “sugar plate,” an edible modeling material containing powdered sugar and a binding gum known in Shakespeare’s day as “gum dragon.” To quote Gervase Markham, a playwright and culinary writer contemporary with Shakespeare, this type of sugar sculpture was “made for shew only, as Beast, Bird, Fish, Fowl, according to invention.” Frequently these sugar fantasies took architectural forms. In 1561, the surveyor of St. Paul’s in London gave a four-foot high sugar model of the cathedral to Queen Elizabeth.

The MIA’s standard is in the form of an English Renaissance banqueting house, based on a surviving example in Long Melford, Suffolk, sited only a few miles from the house that once

contained this wonderful paneled room. The Tudor flags fly above the model, while the crown and thistle, the heraldic symbols of the Stuart dynasty, embellish its lower story.

Banqueting houses were often sited on a raised mount to afford spectacular views of the host’s gardens. This sugar warner is flanked by knot gardens made of almond paste and fruit marmalades. Alongside are large decorative discs of almond paste, known as “marchpanes.” These are printed with emblems, one with a royal white hart (stag) made from a 1580s mold.

Some sugar dishes hold the actual foodstuffs of the banquet, including knotted cookies called “jumbals,” wafers, and comfits. These sweet foods were frequently depicted in Netherlandish still-life paintings, and the examples here are modeled after those in the paintings of Clara Peeters and Osias Beert. On the sideboard are some decorative pies left over from the earlier savory courses of the meal. A stack of currant cakes and a plume of rosemary tied with tiny “bride-knotted” ribbons indicate this repast is a wedding banquet.

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