**In the Yellow Room**

It begins with a drawer, in the Yellow Room at Queens Park.

A hundred years ago, there was a museum here. Exhibitions, lectures and the Spring Flower Festival. Thousands of visitors every year. All gone now - the museum has long since closed. Only the objects remain. The *Red Room*, the *Green Room* and the *Yellow Room* – public galleries peopled by museum collections that no-one ever sees (1).

Such a still, quiet space.

In the *Yellow Room* there is a cabinet, in the cabinet a drawer. And in the drawer there are spoons. Not precious, not rare - mostly worn, damaged, blackened, bent. There are spoons made of silver, of pewter, of latten (an old name for brass). One is made of wood. It has a paper label that reads ‘'curious wooden spoon, found several feet from the surface at Bakewell, 1842'’. It looks rather ordinary.

It is 2015 in the Yellow Room. It is 1915 in the high vaulted ceiling and roof lights. It is 1842 on the back of a spoon. And somewhere inside the drawer it is another time and place, half-imagined, half-remembered. It is 9 o’clock in the morning. It is the school holidays, and I am sitting at the breakfast table. On porridge days, in the week, we use dessert spoons. They have moulded curlicues on their silver-plated handles. But for weekend grapefruit, there are special spoons, long and elegantly tapered for easing out the segments. And for eggs (on Sunday) there are spoons made of horn, because silver is no good with egg, the sulphur turns it black. Buff in colour, semi-translucent in places, warmer to the touch than metal. I like these. Best of all, though, is toast. If there is toast, then there is the marmalade spoon. This is my favourite. It has a little notch cut out of the handle, bent back like a hook, for hanging on the side of the jar.

My grandmother’s house comes whispering from inside the drawer. Last bastion of English middle-class tradition in an age of Findus Crispy Pancakes. I assumed, for a while, that the silver and napkins only came out for our benefit, the occasion of family visits. But as I grew older, I realised my grandparents ate like this every day. They are both gone now - the house sold, possessions dispersed. I don’t know what happened to the spoons. But I remember them.

The spoon is a gentle implement. Knives cut, forks pierce. The knife should never enter the mouth, and the fork only lightly so. But the spoon has no sharp edges. It is a cupped hand and an outstretched arm. According to Debrett’s *British Etiquette,* the bible of polite society since 1769, ‘food should be eaten off the side of the spoon; it should never be used at a right angle to the mouth’(2).

I disagree. The spoon fits the mouth. All rounded curves, it delivers its morsel of nourishment with a satisfying upward tilt, describing its own arc as it withdraws. Turn it over and it becomes a lollipop, tongue tucked underneath, pressed to the roof of the mouth.

The spoon is for puddings and purees and soups, easy food for the old and the young. It is the first implement, explored (as everything is at that stage) with the mouth. The soft rubber baby spoon, faded orange and green, used to feed my first-born son. Still there in the drawer, 15 years later, with the stockpile of double-ended medicine spoons. And the measuring spoons, nested together, tsp inside tbsp. Just enough and no more.

Spoons are used to sip, stir and sup.

This from contemporary guide to manners, *The Etiquette Scholar* (3). Sibilant words that echo the act, beginning with the tongue and ending with the lips. And the shapes of the letters echo the thing itself, an elemental form - circle and line. A shell attached to a twig. A stick man – or woman. The spoon is found in all cultures. Ceremonial spoons from the Ivory Coast are made in the form of the female figure. Ashanti fertility dolls from Ghana are distinctly spoon-shaped. The spoon as gift giver, a place of sanctuary and release. A pregnant belly. To spoon is to fit one’s self into another, to echo the line of their body with your own. To hold or be held, just for a while. The Welsh have a tradition of love spoons, two or more bowls on one intricately carved stem. I hold my memories in spoons.

And there is a drawer, in a cabinet, in the *Yellow Room* at Queens Park.

The contents of the drawer are an essay in circle and line. There are pear-shaped, fig-shaped, moon-shaped spoons. Spoons where the bowl hangs off the stem, heavy as a viscous drop. Spoons that are deep, and spoons that are shallow, the merest of dips in the bowl. The names for different spoons are determined not by the bowl, but by the stem. Trefid and dognose, fiddle, hoof and slip-top – a whole lexicon for the lobed, flattened or moulded ends that rest on the knuckle, between forefinger and thumb. Some are named by function, by the mundane or the bizarre - there are spoons for scooping out ear wax, for snuffing cocaine. My favourite is the mote skimmer, pierced in the bowl for sieving out the dust when making tea. You can trace the habits of a nation through its spoons. The hoof spoon dates from the 1600s and was used with a table spice box. The marrow spoon for scooping out the insides of bones, a delicacy of the 18th century. And my grandmother’s drawer full of breakfast spoons, each with its particular purpose. You could tell what day of the week it was from the way the table was laid.

End Notes

1. *Queens Park* was Manchester’s first purpose-built museum, situated in one of the two earliest municipal parks in the country, both in Manchester. From 1884 until the mid-1980s it was a local museum, housing paintings, archaeology, decorative art, dolls’ houses and militaria from the collections of Manchester City Galleries. It is now closed to the public and currently houses the Galleries’ conservation studios and low value ‘secondary’ collections.
2. *Debrett’s British Etiquette. How to Use Cutlery. [Online]* [*www.debretts.com/british-etiquette/food-drink/table-manners/how-to-use-cutlery*](http://www.debretts.com/british-etiquette/food-drink/table-manners/how-to-use-cutlery)
3. *Etiquette Scholar*, 2015. 'Spoons'. [Online] [www.etiquettescholar.com/dining\_etiquette/table\_setting/place\_setting/flatware/spoons.html](http://www.etiquettescholar.com/dining_etiquette/table_setting/place_setting/flatware/spoons.html)

**Liz Mitchell**is a freelance writer, curator and PhD researcher at Manchester School of Art. She is currently researching the history of a collection of domestic objects, clothing, children’s toys and amateur crafts at Manchester City Galleries, where she previously worked as Interpretation Manager and Decorative Art Curator. Liz is interested in the affective relationships between people and things and how this is mediated within the art museum, with a particular focus on vernacular/folk/craft objects and the everyday.

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