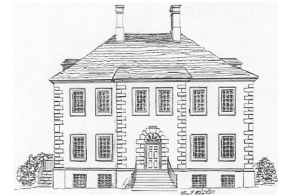




# Carlyle House Docent Dispatch



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## Setting the Scene

by Cindy Major

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Christmas season was a very social period. Events such as weddings, christenings, engagement parties, and balls were typically held in the homes of wealthy colonists from Christmas to Twelfth Night.



*Fairfax House, York England, Dessert Table, 1762*

Celebrations such as these afforded a hostess a creative outlet for arranging decorations and planning entertainments. The dessert course was the climax of the meal, which was the centerpiece of 18th-century entertainment. A hostess's reputation would rise or fall on the success of her presentation of this course. Dancing and games were also important components of social gatherings. They were carefully orchestrated affairs that appealed to the theatre loving guests.

The tradition of elaborate table decorations can be traced back to the pre-Christian Roman period. In Europe and England, during the 17th century, scenes were created by artistic chefs using sugar paste figures to depict religious and political events. Germany is often credited with being the leader in creating elaborate tableaux using confectionary figures set among architectural features in landscape settings. In the 1730's, porcelain figures made in Germany's

Meissen factory were meant to replace the more fragile sugar paste or wax decorations. Despite porcelain's popularity, sugar paste continued to be used through the 18<sup>th</sup> century and into the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One

sugar paste creation that is often seen in 18th-century prints is the parterre. These faux hedges were meant to depict a formal garden setting and were done in a variety of ways. Flat pasteboard was dipped in egg white and covered with colored sugar. Marzipan was a very popular material for these hedges and other decorations. Some tables boasted silver hedges filled with sweetmeats and colored sugar.

Another important component of these miniature scenes set on a table was the mirrored plateau. The love of light and anything that would reflect it was a strong characteristic of any type of decorative item in

### CARLYLE HOUSE

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the mid-eighteenth century. We don't know that John Carlyle had a plateau, but we do know that George Washington had one. Washington's friend Gouverneur Morris, while traveling in France, found him a mirrored plateau as well as a group of figures in fine French biscuit porcelain. The mirror, porcelain, silver, glass and sugar-coated objects in the room all added a soft glow that set the ambience for the party. The mirror also gave the effect of doubling the fruit, flowers and other treasures on the table, making it appear very bountiful indeed. When real flowers and fruit were used in the centerpiece, they were often dipped in egg white and then in sugar to add a gleam to their surface. One 18<sup>th</sup>-century book on household instruction suggests that real flowers should only be used when there are not enough artificial ones available. Artificial flowers were either ordered from France or made at home.

An advertisement in the *Boston Gazette* dated 1757 offered, "a complete Set of Dessert Frames, with Arbours, Alcoves, Hedging, China Flower Pots etc. with spare Grass and Gravel for ditto." It seems that gardens, both life size and miniature, were important to one's social status in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Wedgwood referred to the widespread interest in gardening by both men and women as "a universal madness."

During the 18th century, dessert tables reflected different styles. First the very dignified and symmetrical Palladian style, later the gayer, more exuberant rococo décor came into fashion and finally a very classical trend with references to the Greek and Roman periods. Chinoiserie or Chinese taste influences in décor are found throughout the century reflecting English and colonial fascination with the mysterious Orient. Gunston Hall is an example of how these different styles were used in combination with each other. The formal parlor is done in the Chinoiserie fashion. The formal dining room is very Palladian in design and the center passage has a classical feel. Just as in homes today, when new designs are introduced old ones are not necessarily rejected.

Dancing was always a part of any social gathering of any note in colonial Virginia. Like the table decorations, the type of dancing could vary widely.

Typically at the home of gentry, the dancing would begin with the very formal, symmetrical minuet. It was a staged event with the ladies and gentlemen each forming lines that faced each other. The couples would be in order of their importance. If Lord Fairfax was in attendance at a gathering in John Carlyle's house, he would be at the head of the line of gentlemen. All the guests would watch as his Lordship performed. He would step down the center of the two lines as guests judged his gracefulness and agility. The evening progressed with gaming and drinking, and the dancing might digress into the more informal country-dances, jigs and reels.

Board games, card games, music and other more theatrical pastimes like Blind Man's Bluff added to the drama of the evening. The main event, however, was the dinner and at center stage was the dessert course. This is clear from all the equipage that was used to decorate the table and present the food, as well as the accounts from letters and diaries. One 18<sup>th</sup>-century diner described a party she attended in a country home outside of Philadelphia. At eleven o'clock the doors of the dining room were thrown open and an elaborate scene was unveiled:

*In the middle was an orange tree with ripe fruit, (its) root....covered with evergreens (and) some natural and some artificial flowers. Nothing scarcely appeared on the table without evergreens to decorate it. You can't think how beautiful it looked..*

These elaborate scenes were the climax of a party, and the hostess would do her best to create a spectacle that would amaze and delight her guests.

#### Sources

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