

ABEGG-STIFTUNG

Media Release, April 2021

SPECIAL EXHIBITION 2021

THE DELIGHTS OF DINING HISTORICAL LINEN DAMASKS

25 APRIL – 7 NOVEMBER 2021

OPEN DAILY FROM 2 P.M. TO 5.30 P.M.



The delights of dining traditionally include not just a magnificent spread and copious quantities of wine, but also fine glassware, exquisite porcelain and gleaming silver. Another staple of any festive banquet since the early sixteenth century has been table linen made of white linen damask. These beautiful fabrics were often the most expensive item on display. The Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg owns one of the world's most important collections of historical linen damasks. These monumental tablecloths, napkins and hand towels are normally kept in storage. But this year's special exhibition will feature a selection of exceptionally fine examples dating from the sixteenth to eighteenth century.

White-in-white patterned table linen? Is there anything to see at all? The question is not unreasonable, given that on entering the exhibition, visitors at first see only rectangles of white cloth lined up along the walls. Some may even wonder if they have strayed into a minimalist art show – or would, were it not for the half-laid table and the vitrine containing flax. On closer inspection, however, the seemingly blank linen fabrics turn out to be a little experiment with “angle of vision,” which in this instance is meant quite literally, while the vitrine containing raw flax explains how it is processed to produce the linen threads out of which these same fabrics are woven.

FROM FLAX TO LINEN

These days we know linen primarily in the form of light and airy summer wear or as pleasantly cool bedclothes for the hottest days of the year. The vast array of affordable textiles now on offer makes it all too easy to forget how complicated the traditional process for turning flax into linen once was. The Abegg-Stiftung's first exhibit on this subject can be viewed even before visiting the museum; this is the bed of flax seeds sown in front of the entrance, which as spring progresses will form tender young shoots. These will eventually grow into stalks around 70 cm tall, which between June and August will produce delicate blue flowers. The seed capsule forms after flowering, when the roots die back. The plant is now ready for harvesting. Included in the exhibition is a video explaining the next steps in the linen-making process, some of which have fascinatingly antiquated names: rippling, retting, breaking, scutching, hackling and roving. Yet all these operations are necessary in order to obtain the long fine fibres that will be spun and woven into linen.

A SPECIALITY OF THE LOW COUNTRIES

Most of the linen damasks exhibited here were produced in the historical southern and northern provinces of the Low Countries. Indeed, that whole region can rightly be regarded as the cradle of European linen damask-weaving. The early centres of production were the Flemish cities of Mechelen and Kortrijk, where this highly skilled craft became established as early as the sixteenth century. Haarlem, in the province of Holland, also developed into an important place of production in the course of the seventeenth century. Fine linens from the Low Countries were a much-coveted luxury item all over Europe – not least owing to the abundance of amazing motifs that the weavers knew to weave into their fabrics.

Since the eighteenth century, linen damasks have also been produced in Ireland, Scotland, Russia, Sweden and Saxony. The manufactories in those countries, however, supplied above all a domestic clientele.

WHAT EXACTLY IS DAMASK?

A very vivid answer to this question is provided at the beginning of the exhibition. The explanation in words and pictures is supplemented by a video on the reflection of light. This is because the pattern of damask is formed on the loom by changing from warp- to weft-faced areas of the same weave and the light will be reflected back differently depending on which threads dominate in any given area. It is light, in other words, that enables us to recognize patterns even in a fabric in which both warp and weft are of the same colour.

DISCOVERIES IN RAKING LIGHT

The lighting in the exhibition presents the damasks in the best possible light, namely raking light, which reveals the hitherto unimagined visual worlds concealed within these seemingly plain white cloths. There are seafaring motifs, mythological, Biblical and historical scenes, portraits of rulers, and family coats of arms. There is much that is surprising and intriguing to be found here, especially when the scenes bursting with vitality woven into this table linen are compared with the comparatively plain sets that were to come later. Most of those were patterned only with scattered flowers, simple geometrical shapes or at most a monogram – but certainly not with skaters and hockey players, young men falling on or even through the ice, horse-drawn sleighs, winter picnics and warmly clad couples meeting for a chat. Yet there is a Netherlandish tablecloth with matching napkins adorned with just such entertaining scenes on show in the exhibition. Similarly astonishing is another napkin showing a decked table complete with everything that such a festive banquet would have entailed, including plates laden with crabs, fish and snails, artfully positioned silverware, fine glass goblets and beakers and candlesticks interspersed with bowls of cherries, single apples, pears and even onions. Linen damasks with such appetizing motifs duplicated, as it were, the delights of dining.

THE ABC OF DINING CULTURE

But it is not just the scenes and motifs woven into the table linen that are impressive; the size of the cloths is equally remarkable, especially that of the napkins. Napkins in the Netherlands were generally one ell wide (70 cm) and one and a half ells long (105 cm). Presumably this was partly because diners north of the Alps were not yet eating with a knife and fork. Their only cutlery would have been a spoon and sharp knife, and they would often have transferred the food from plate to mouth using their fingers. A large cloth laid out on their lap with which to wipe their hands clean therefore made sense. Extravagant damasks also served as a sign of prestige. They advertised the owner's wealth and prosperity and, depending on the motifs, the erudition of the lady of the house and her husband. They might even express the owner's moral probity, given that clean fold lines in a tablecloth were regarded as proof of the cleanliness of the household and hence, by extension, of its inhabitants' unimpeachable character. Almost incidentally, therefore, the exhibition offers an insight into seventeenth-century dining culture, while also telling us something about how we live today. The practice of presenting fine silverware on a buffet in the dining room and the artful folding of napkins, for example, are among the subjects touched on.

PERSONALIZED DAMASKS BY THE YARD

Table linen was acquired in sets. These typically comprised two to four tablecloths, between one and four dozen napkins and a few hand towels. The textiles, especially the smaller items, were woven by the yard and with a pattern repeat. They were then cut to length and the cut edges hemmed.

At first only princely households could afford such extravagantly patterned table linen. Starting in the seventeenth century, however, fine tablecloths and napkins made of linen damask became popular in upwardly mobile bourgeois households, too. Anyone who was socially ambitious and who had enough money would have his name, family coat of arms, and often the year of purchase woven into the whole set. Thanks to this practice, we know that the napkin with the skaters, for example, was made in 1662 for Douwe van Aylva and his wife Lucia van Meckema. A brief video in the exhibition takes a peek inside this noble Frisian couple's linen cupboard and explains the importance of the finely embroidered markings to be found in one corner of each of the cloths. From these we know that the couple owned four tablecloths and fifty-one napkins bearing this wintry pattern. Nor was that all. Between 1660 and 1663 they ordered a total of six sets of table linen showing a variety of patterns. Each ensemble comprised four tablecloths and at least forty-eight napkins. The sheer quantity of cloths gives us an inkling of the value then attached to a well-stocked linen cupboard.

Fine table linen, like family silver, was preserved and handed down from generation to generation. Some have survived for more than 300 years. They attest to a dining culture that at least in its essentials has endured to this day and that greatly adds to the pleasure of the hours we spend at the table.

Both media release and photo are available as e-mail attachments.

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Caption:

Linen damask with grapevines; northern Netherlands, 1600–1680; Abegg-Stiftung, inv. no. 3573