Koopman Rare Art

With the Autumn season truly underway, we will be soon exhibiting at both [Frieze Masters](#) 14th - 18th October 2020 at The Regent's Park London and the [LAPADA Fair](#) 27th October – 1st November 2020 at Berkeley Square, Mayfair, London W1.

Director's Choice – Timo Koopman
The Rise of the Refined Sauce



A Pair of George II Sauce Boats
London, 1733
Maker's mark of Charles Kandler
Available at Koopman Rare Art

Towards the end of the 17th and throughout the 18th century, French cuisine moved away from the heavily spiced medieval sauces of vinegar, cloves, cinnamon, and other strong seasonings. Instead, cooks emphasised stocks, butter, cream, herbs, and carefully seasoned flavours. This movement was associated with the emerging French noun/adjective cuisine of the period and the growing interest in culinary refinement.

Sauces became an important component of elite dining. Rather than merely disguising food, they were intended to complement it. Early versions of sauces such as béchamel, velouté, and brown stock-based sauces gained prominence and became markers of sophisticated cooking.

With their increased status, sauces created a new demand for specialised serving pieces. The silver sauce boat or gravy boat became fashionable at aristocratic tables. French trade books spawned by the late 17th century and quickly spread across Europe. They featured elegant families, pouring lips, and often two spouts in elaborate Rococo decoration.



A pair of George I double-lipped sauce boats
London, 1726
Maker's mark of Thomas Tearle
Available at Koopman Rare Art

English silversmiths eagerly followed French fashion in creating the designs during the 18th century. These boats were not merely practical, but displayed wealth and taste, becoming elegant vessels and an essential part of the theatre of the dining room. A major turning point came with Marie-Antoine Carême (1784-1833), often called the "King of Chefs," the organized French cooking into a systematic framework and identified four fundamental "mother sauces": Béchamel, Velouté, Espagnole, and Allemande. Carême's influence elevated sauces from accompaniments to the intellectual foundation of haute cuisine. Grand dinners often featured multiple courses, each paired with a distinct sauce.

As sauce varieties multiplied, dining services required multiple sauce boats. Separate silver sauce ladles were introduced for precise serving, and complete dining services would include matching sauce tureens, sauce boats, and accompanying trays.



A pair of George III Neo-Classical sauce tureens
Birmingham, 1780
Maker's mark of Matthew Boulton & John Fothergill
Available at Koopman Rare Art

Silversmiths created boats specifically suited to different sauce consistencies, from light, delicate to richer brown sauces. Later in the century, Auguste Escoffier refined Carême's system and helped establish the five classic mother sauces recognised today: Béchamel, Velouté, Espagnole, Hollandaise, and Tomate.

Dining styles also changed. The older French practice of placing many dishes on the table at once gave way to service à la russe, where courses arrived sequentially. The French

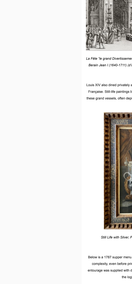
Service à la Française was theatre, and the table was the stage. For centuries, 'Service à la Française' defined elite dining across Europe. Born in medieval French courts, it resembled what we might now call an extravagant buffet. Dozens of dishes appeared on the table at the same time (meat, fish, pastry, and fruits) arranged with symmetry and dramatic flair. Guests helped themselves from whatever was closest.

But this style was never just about eating. It was about visibility. About abundance. About sending a message without saying a word. The fuller the table, the more powerful the host appeared. The meal unfolded as a spectacle, with ornate tableware, towering centrepieces, and servants surrounding the scene.

The downside became clear over time. Food cooled as conversations lingered, and guests tasted only a fraction of what was prepared, as many dishes were placed inconveniently out of reach. Large amounts went untouched. The beauty was undeniable, but the experience was uneven.

Louis XIV, the Sun King, promoted refined dining practices at the opulent Palace of Versailles. The silver dinner service became a symbol of status, showcasing the host's wealth and discerning taste.

Versailles Palace was the ultimate stage for culinary theatre. At the royal court, it was not just a way to serve food. It was a political performance. A visual assertion of power, and a celebration of abundance.



Louis XIV, the Sun King's royal table was laid out with multiple dishes presented simultaneously, arranged in symmetrical waves. These comprised of soups, roasts, pastries, fruits, all in ornate gold and silver vessels. The king stood in front of an audience. High-ranking ladies sat in the front row, while courtiers and passersby stood behind them. The sheer number of dishes and the opulence of the tableware reinforced the king's status. Dishes were brought in successive waves, but still laid out together, creating a feast for the eyes and palate. Versailles didn't just feed royalty, it entertained them.



Le Fête "le grand Divertissement Royal" donné par Louis XIV à Versailles, le 18 juillet 1668 *Berain dess.* (1640-1711) *d'après Lepautre dess.* (1618-1682) Versailles: *chalcographie de Versailles et de Trianon*

Louis XIV also dined privately at Trianon or Marly, but even then, the service remained a la Française. Still life paintings by artists like Chardin and Desportes helped to immortalise these grand viewers, often depicted alongside game and silverware to showcase domestic luxury.



Still Life with Silver, Porcelain and Fruit, Alexandre François Desportes 1661 – 1743

Below is a 1787 supper menu from Versailles which revealed a royal feast of staggering complexity, even before printed menus were common. In 1884, Louis XIV's hunting entourage was supplied with detailed food lists for each of the twice-campaign «small of the logistical mastery behind these feasts.



Menus Service au Roi par Hebert. Ecuyer-cuisinier de la bouche de Madame la Dauphine *par J. Hebert*, 1743-1795 *© Château de Versailles, Dist. RMN / © Christophe Fouin*

It is interesting to note that while England also embraced service à la Française, it did so with less theatricality and more functionality. English royalty and nobility preferred private meals over public display. Banquets were social but not staged as power rituals. The English tables though lavish, were less symmetrical and less rigidly choreographed. 18th century England and Georgian dining was a blend of social ambition, French influence, and British practicality.

Multiple dishes were laid out simultaneously in two grand courses, followed by dessert. Dinner parties were extravagant affairs. Even modest clergy like Parson Woodforde recorded meals with over twenty dishes per course, including stewed carp, venison, turkey pouts, and syllabubs. Interestingly meal timing shifted, and dinner crept later from noon to 7 p.m. as the upper classes distanced themselves from labourers.

Breakfast parlours emerged mid-century, offering tea, coffee, cakes, and cold meats over a leisurely 2–3 hours. Supper was informal but still elegant serving dishes like oysters, pheasant, and soups served in porcelain or silver. Cards, Carlsera, as in France, dining was a status performance. The number and variety of dishes served mirrored wealth. French chefs were prized in elite homes, but many British farm such as game pies, hams and puddings remained a treasured culinar

The dining room became a defined space, separating formal meals from casual gatherings.



A George III Argyle Sauce Pot
London, 1797
Maker's Mark of Harry Green
Available at Koopman Rare Art

In both England and France toward the end of the 18th century dining. Service à la Russe became the fashion. This latest service once more placed a starting role in the transition from serving all dishes at once to presenting meals in courses. With the new style of dining, each dish was prepared and portioned in the kitchen, then served individually. The chef became the star, crafting each plate for optimal flavour and fresh and warm, one course at a time which in turn allowed for better temperature and portion control and elevated culinary artistry and pacing. However, this perhaps meant the formal was less communal and visually dramatic and certainly would depend on more staged staff and timing. It mirrored broader changes in society with less celebration and more focus on the individual experience.

"There never perhaps was an occasion when more plate was brought together in one place," recalled George Fox, Rundell's shopman, writing of the 1840s on the banquet given by the Corporation of London for the Prince Albert, the Queen of Russia and the King of Prussia on 14 June 1844. Fox was the last surviving member of Rundell, Bridge & Rundell.

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When Victoria ascended the throne in 1837, everything changed. And underneath Service à la russe, revolutionising British dining. Marcus became standardized and listed each course, elevating the chef's role and the time's banquets. They arguably intensified which in turn made dining more formal, with strict seating plans, dress codes, and gendered rituals.

Ledgers from Carlton House and Kew show thousands of dishes served to distinct social groups, from aristocrats to servants. Health and dexterity were tied to food and menus often reflected age, gender, and medical status. This shift mirrored broader national changes of industrialization, nationalism, and the rise of the middle class.

Service à la Russe was a different way of thinking, and the change arrived quietly. In the early 1800s, guests at dinners hosted by Prince Alexander Kurakine, the Russian ambassador to France, noticed something unusual. The table was no longer crowded with dishes. Instead, servants brought food to each guest, one course at a time.

According to historical accounts, Kurakin adopted this method after suffering serious burns in a fire in 1810, which limited his mobility. Unable to serve himself easily from distant platters, he adopted the system where servers presented each dish directly to guests, course after course.

What began as a practical adjustment revealed an entirely new dining experience. Food arrived hot. Everyone tasted everything. The meal unfolded with rhythm rather than excess. The table no longer needed to overwhelm; it needed to guide.

At first, French society was hesitant. The restrained table seemed modest compared to the grandeur they were used to. But practicality has a way of persuading. By the mid-19th century, Service à la Russe gained momentum. Influential chefs and writers praised its logic and elegance. In 1864, a Russian court chef published a book outlining its advantages, accelerating its acceptance.

The evolution of fashionable sauces from richly spiced medieval mixtures to the refined, clarified sauces of French haute cuisine transformed dining culture. As sauces became central to sophisticated cooking, silversmiths responded by creating elegant sauce boats, gravy boats, sauceboats, ladles, and tureens. In many ways, the famous silver sauce boat is a direct material expression of the growing importance of sauces that occurred in 18th and 19th century European cuisine.

A Pair double-lipped sauce boats
London, 1750
Maker's mark of Edward Wakelin
Available at Koopman Rare Art

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