

The Nef

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The nef (old French for ship) was an important element of the medieval table setting. It was a boat shaped container that was set on the table and was used to hold elements of the place settings. The use of the ship form is believed to symbolize "good fortune and fair sailing on the uncertain seas of Life."¹⁰ A nef was placed before only the most important people in the feast hall, usually being restricted to kings, princes, great lords and great men of the Church. Typically these nefs contained cutlery, napkins, and sometimes spices. An inventory of 1380 of King Charles V of France states that in his small nef of gold was his "essay (serpents' tongue), his spoon, his little knife and his little fork."¹¹ Nefs were made in a wide variety of sizes. The nef in Rheims Cathedral, for example, is 28 cm. in length and was described in 1573 as a small nef.¹² Those nefs that were described as large must have indeed been quite large. Olivier de la Marche described in 1474 the Duke of Burgundy's nef and stated that were it placed in front of him "any prince or ambassador who came to speak with him at table would not be able to see him for it."¹³

Typically these nefs were only reminiscent of boats in form, like those pictured in a miniature in the *Grandes Chroniques de France*. However, some of these were detailed models of the sailing vessels of the period. Three examples of nefs of this type survive. One, in Rheims Cathedral, has been converted into a reliquary for St. Ursula. It bears a Tour's makers mark and was probably made about the year 1500. The hull is made from cornelian and is mounted in silver, gold and enameled copper. Approximately 12 realistic figures adorn the deck, some of whom are passengers while other, smaller figures, are the sailors on the ship. These sailors are doing such things as climbing the rigging and looking off the ship's prow.

A second nef which is naturalistic in form can be found in the Victoria and Albert Museum. It is called "The Burghley Nef." It was made in Paris by Pierre le Flamand in 1482-3. Its hull was made from a nautilus shell mounted with silver. Its sails are unfurled, its pennons are flying and its sailors are working the sails and climbing the rigging. The ship is sailing on the back of a huge mermaid.

In the Cluny Museum in Paris may be found the third surviving example of a realistically formed nef. This is by far the most spectacular of all of these. It is made of silver gilt and is believed to have belonged to the Emperor Charles V (not to be confused with King Charles V mentioned earlier). It was made in the second half of the sixteenth century in Germany. What makes this nef so spectacular is not its design or its material composition, but rather the fact that it is completely mechanized. When the intricate mechanism is set in motion, the sailors work the

¹⁰Georgina Reynolds Smith, *Table Decoration: Yesterday Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Charles E. Tuttle, 1968) 48.

¹¹R. W. Lightbown, *Secular Goldsmith's Work in Medieval France: A History* (London: The Society of Antiquaries, 1978) 30.

¹²Lightbown 31.

¹³Lightbown 31.

rigging, the musicians play their instruments and a group of courtiers bow before the emperor who sits on his throne. What makes this mechanism even more spectacular is that even after almost 450 years it still functions flawlessly.

Bibliography

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