

The Wine Fountain

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Fountains which pour forth champagne or wine are not only something to be found at modern weddings, they have their roots in the middle ages. Fountains of wine or scented water were among the most fantastic and spectacular elements of medieval table decoration.

While only one table fountain has survived, there is a wealth of information available from artistic and literary references. The fountain would have held an important place in the feast hall. It would have been the focal point of the decoration, immediately attracting the attention of every guest. Many fountains would have been of immense proportions, like the one described by Friar William de Rubruquis. In 1254 he was sent by the Pope to the court of the Great Khan at Karakorum. There he saw a great fountain of silver made by Guillaume Buchier, a Parisian Master Goldsmith who had been taken captive by the Mongol army at Belgrade. It took the shape of a large tree with four serpents whose tails coiled round the trunk. At its root were four lions, each of which poured out a different liquid from its mouth. These liquids issued in reality from four pipes concealed in the trunk of the tree, rising right to its top and leading backward into an outer pavilion where they were filled by servants. An angel stood at the top of the tree, holding a trumpet: by means of another pipe which passed through the trunk a man concealed in a little chamber underneath could make the angel rise and blow his trumpet whenever the Khan's seneschal so ordered. As soon as it was heard to sound, the servants in the next room poured liquid into the pipes and the seneschal filled one of four silver cups which stood between the lions with the drink demanded and then carried it to the Khan and his household and guests.⁹

Through this we can see the grand scale of these fountains. In many cases they would have required numerous servants to operate and been made of such a huge quantity of precious materials that only the richest and most powerful of lords could afford to have one made.

However, not all of these fountains were physically large. The table fountain housed in the Cleveland Museum of Art would be dwarfed by the Khan's fountain, but is no less impressive in scope. This fountain, which dates from the 14th century, is said to have been found in a garden in Constantinople. The fountain is made up of three tiers decorated with architectural motifs such as crenellations, turrets and gothic arches. The lowest tier is supported by a central column surrounded by eight smaller hexagonal columns. Resting on the bottom tier are the figures of eight naked men. Each man holds a wheel with fan like projections. The wheel is mounted on an axle which holds a jingle bell at each end. There is a small tube issuing from the mouth of the man which would have sprayed forth wine. The wine would then have hit the fan blades on the wheel thus causing it to turn and the bells to jingle. From the base of each of the turrets on the bottom tier projects the head of a serpent, a lion or a fool. Each of these would have acted as a runoff spout for the wine landing on this tier from the tier above. On the second tier there are four gargoyles with similar tubes projecting from their mouths. Like the naked men, these tubes are aimed at similar wheels which turn bells, causing them to jingle as well. The third tier has a

⁹Georgina Reynolds Smith, *Table Decoration: Yesterday Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Charles E. Tuttle, 1968) 43-44.

central turret guarded by two lions and four dragons, each of whom would have spit wine forth as well.

The overall effect of the wine cascading down the three tiers and the sound of running wine and tinkling bells must have been a very pleasant one. While not as grandiose as the Khan's fountain, it must have been very soothing and relaxing, much like sitting by a babbling brook and watching it run.

A medieval feast aimed to please **all** of the senses, not just taste. A beautiful wine fountain could delight the eye, the ear, the nose and the tongue. And could the hand ever be happier than when raised in a toast, holding a brimming cup of wine?

Bibliography

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Editor's Note: All three of these books contain good quality photographs of the wine fountain in the Cleveland Museum of Art.

