# A FEAST FOR THE EYES: 18TH-CENTURY DOCUMENTS FOR THE CREATION OF A DESSERT TABLE

*Selma Schwartz*

*Figure 1. The dessert table at Waddesdon Manor.*

WADDESDON MANOR, ALREADY RICH IN 18TH-century Sèvres services, received an exceptional loan of a 124 piece dessert service in 1998 which was the impetus for re-creating an 18th-century dessert course setting. *(fig. 1)* This service was made for the vicomte de Choiseul in 1766. Although it is now lacking its complement of biscuit porcelain, the dessert table was completed by using figures and groups recently purchased for the Starhemberg service, already in the Waddesdon collection. This service was also made in 1766 and included many of the same biscuit pieces as the Choiseul service.

The intention was to make the appearance as close to that of the 18th century as possible, for which several contemporary cookery books, particularly those aimed at Officiers (confectioners), were used as the source.[1] The work written by Gilliers, confectioner to the deposed King of Poland, was particularly useful with the publication date similar to that of the service. Not only does it provide recipes, but also detailed instructions for the design and layout of a dessert table accompanied by useful illustrations. Another important visual document was the painting by Martin van Meytens of The Wedding of Joseph II with Isabella of Parma, dated 1760.[2] From what is depicted on the table, particularly the mirrored plateau and the presence of small sculptural figures or groups, it is clear that the dessert is being served. That this painting is a realistic and accurate illustration of the meal is confirmed by the minute level of detail: the pattern painted on the plates and dishes corresponds to the rare and unusual decoration of the Sèvres



*Figure 2. Martin van Meytens,* The Wedding of Joseph II to Isabella of Parma, *1760, detail. Schloß Schönbrunn.*

dinner and dessert service presented by Louis XV to the Empress Maria-Theresia in 1758. *(fig. 2)* The gift also included a silvered *plateau* and biscuit figures and *vases*.[3] This painting, therefore, has special significance as, to the best of the author's knowledge, it is the only one showing an actual Sèvres service being used in the 18th century.

Although the painting documents a meal at the Austrian court, the layout and decoration of the table follows the French manner of dining, which had become universal throughout Europe. Massialot already noted in 1722 that the French style had been adopted in other countries: "Le plaisir de la Table est de tout Age, de tout sexe & de toute Nation; & il n'y en a aucune qui ne veüille être servie à la Françoise."[4]

Characterised by an elaborate and geometrically symmetrical layout of dishes on the table, the *service à la française* required that all the food was laid on the table before the diners sat down. Footmen served the diners with glasses of chilled wine or spirits when required, but the diners helped themselves to the dishes placed between the *plateau* and the diners' plates. This resulted in a great number of dishes for each course, the repetition of foods around the table, and the multiplication of vessels for the food. Thus the Choiseul service, which was probably intended for up to twenty-four covers, had fourteen varieties of bowls *(compotiers)*, twenty fruit stands *(plateaux Bouret)*, four sugar bowls *(sucriers)* and two large fruit baskets *(corbeilles ovale)*. Similarly, Gilliers recommends providing thirty-seven dishes for twenty-four diners.[5]

Having to pre-set the elaborate decoration and arrangement of the dessert course, it is impossible that this part of a meal took place at the same table immediately following the savoury course. Instead, the diners would move to a separate table, sometimes in a different room from the dinner.[6] It could also be served entirely independently of the dinner, as a meal in itself.

Several contemporary documents describe this fashion. The account of a dinner given by the duc de Nivernais in Rome in the late 1740s, explicitly records that the dessert was served in a different room from that in which the dinner had been served. The guests were divided into two groups for the dessert course, each entering a room off of the room in which they had had dinner, where they were greeted by tables arranged "avec profusion de fruits, de fleurs, de glaces et plats montés".[7]

Describing a visit to Chantilly in 1754, the duc de Croÿ records how the party set off in gondolas on


*Figure 3. Emy,* L'art de bien faire les glaces*, frontispiece. British Library.*

the lake, accompanied by serenading musicians. Having stopped to feed the swans, they landed at the menagerie where the dessert, consisting of fruits, ices and creams, awaited them.[8]

A 1773 newspaper account of a ball given by the Earl and Countess of Spencer in Montpellier, where they were escaping the English winter, also supports the custom that the dessert could be served as an individual meal.

> Le Lundi 18 du courant, Milord *Spincer* donna dans l'Hôtel du Gouvernement une Fête à laquelle il invita plus de deux cents cinquante Personnes, ... Cette Fête commença par un Bal qui fut exécuté dans la Salle de compagnie au rez-de-chaussée,… A onze heures Milord & Miledy conduisirent la Compagnie au premier étage, où l'on avoit placé cinq tables dans différens appartements; ... On resta jusques à une heure & demi à ce souper, où il n'y eût que la dé1icatesse qui pût égaler la profusion. Ensuite on se rendit de nouveau au rez-de-chausée, ou l'on continuea jusques à six heures du matin le Bal, … On avoit eu l'attention de placer dans cet appartement un trés-vaste gradin garni de confitures, glaces & de toutes sortes de rafraîchissemens qui ne laissoient rien à desirer aux personnes invitées."[9]

Five types of shapes determine the composition of the dessert service: bowls, stands, sugar bowls, items for ice cream and vessels for chilling drinks and glasses. The bowls are the most numerous. These were used for serving fruit which was the principal ingredient of the dessert, in a variety of guises: fresh, candied, preserved, stewed, made into compote, and fashioned in marzipan. The predominance of fruit is reflected in the fact that the correct name for the dessert course was *fruit*.[10]

Stands were used for the elaborate arrangements of fruits into pyramids. The Sèvres shape *(plateau Bouret)* was particularly suitable due to its triangular shape. Although sometimes interchangeable with another type of stand, the *soucoupe à pied*, their use is sometimes specifically defined in the sales lists: "plateau Bouret pour les confitures sèches".[11] Gilliers describes and illustrates how the pyramids were constructed. Tiered circles of clear glass, diminishing in diameter, rested on glass columns. This framework allowed the structure to remain intact when a piece of fruit was removed. The circles and columns could be purchased from specialist merchants.[12]

Whereas fruit predominated, ice cream was the special delicacy. Emy's 1768 text lists 112 different types and flavours, including some rather surprising ones such as ice cream flavoured with Parmesan or Gruyère cheese, rye bread or rice. Methods of preparation and ingredients separated them into distinct types. *Glaces rares* or *fromage à l'Angloise* were thin, semi-frozen liquids made from the juices of fruits, much like Middle Eastern sherbets. Those made with cream, like modern ice cream, were called *fromages*, from their resemblance to "beurre glacé, grasses, moëlleuses & délicates".[13] Either of these could be spooned out of the ice cream cooler *(seau à glace)* into small cups *(tasses à glace)* and served on footed stands *(soucoupes à pied)* just as illustrated in Emy's frontispiece. *(fig. 3)* The bucket-shaped cooler had a inner liner of porcelain for the ice cream, leaving the bottom half of the cooler to be filled with a mixture of ice and saltpetre. The well created by the high walls of the cooler's cover enabled this same mixture to be placed on top of the cooler, thus sandwiching the ice cream between two cooling layers and keeping it firm until it was served.[14] In households that could afford magnificent Sèvres services it was served with gold or silver-gilt ice cream trowels.[15]

*Fromages glacés*, on the other hand, are ices shaped in lead moulds to create natural-looking fruit but also, as Gilliers illustrates, bunches of asparagus, fish, lobsters or joints of meat. *(fig. 4)* Using the same natural dyes as for the confectionery, the ices were painted to appear very realistic. That surprising custom is documented by the account of a dessert served to Ferdinand IV of Naples and Sicily, his wife and sister-in-law in the 1780s:

> "[T]he company were surprised, on being led into a large parlour, to find a table covered, and every appearance of a most plentiful cold repast, consisting of several joints of meat, hams, fowl,

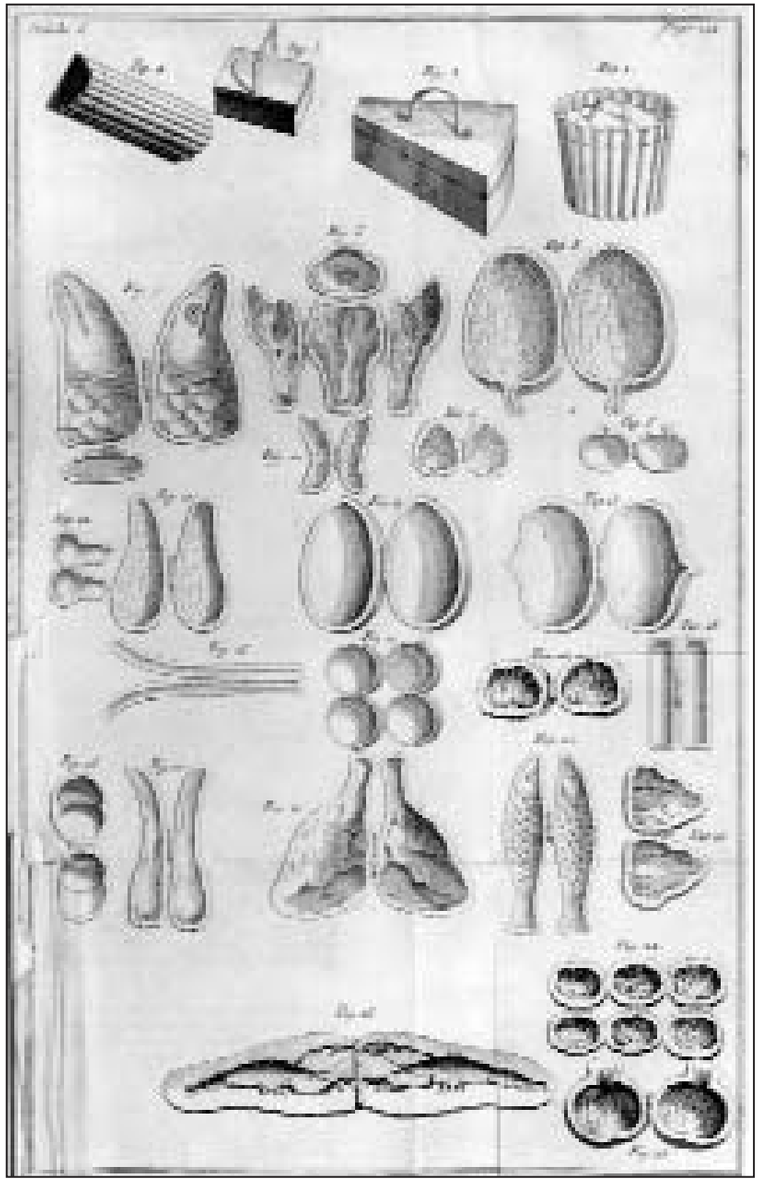

*Figure 4. Gilliers, plate 6.*

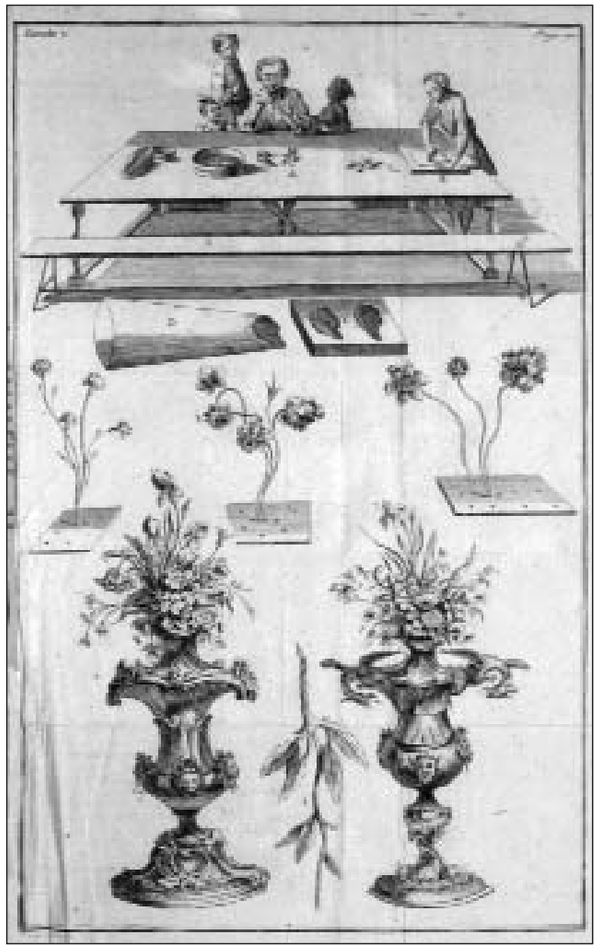

*Figure 5. Gilliers, plate 7.*

> fish, and various other dishes. It seemed rather ill-judged to have prepared a feast of such a solid nature immediately after dinner; … The Queen chose a slice of cold turkey, which, on being cut up, turned out a large piece of lemon ice, of the shape and appearance of a roasted turkey. All the other dishes were ices of various kinds, disguised under the forms of joints of meat, fish, and fowl, as above mentioned."[16]

Finally, the drinks served with the dessert were also the domain of the confectioner. He was responsible for making the highly flavoured liqueurs and distilled spirits (ratafias) for which texts such as those by Massialot and Menon provide recipes. These were drunk chilled for which Sèvres made five different sizes of bottle coolers. Glasses were also chilled with their bowls inverted into icy water in glass coolers *(seaux à verres)* and only served when a drink was desired by one of the diners.

Decoration of the dessert table and its aesthetic appearance, as much as the dessert's gastronomic success, is emphasized in the instructions for confectioners written by Gilliers:

> "Ce n'est point toujours contenter les Seigneurs, que leur servir de bonnes choses, & de confitures bien faites, (quoique cela fasse l'essentiel); mais on les voit bien plus témoigner leur contentement, lorsqu'un Officier leur sert un service décoré & orné avec goût."[17]

Both the Meytens painting and Gilliers' illustrations document how a dessert table was to be arranged. The starting point was the *plateau*, squares of mirrored glass 17 *pouces* square according to Gilliers, held within a silver or gilt-bronze framework.[18] At Versailles one of the mirrored *plateau*, with its *"cadre et pieds argentés"*, was made up of sections of mirror measuring 65 by 48 centimetres.[19] As it was composed of sections, the size of the *plateau* could be adjusted according to the number of diners.[20]

The confectioner's talents needed to be artistic as well as culinary; "… il est àpropos pour ceux qui désirent d'apprendre l'Office, d'apprendre A dessiner, & même à modeler ... je soutiens que le dessin est une chose nécessaire dans l'office" was Gilliers' advice.[21] On the mirror he had to create what might resemble a garden, complete with fountains and statues. Like the arabesques and curlicues of a formal French *parterre de broderie,* fanciful shapes were cut out of carton. These could be used as templates for sprinkling coloured sugar or ground marble to create decorative patterns *(sablés)* or edged with chenille, a wire around which the silk chenille thread was wound (similar to a modern pipe-cleaner) to create small 'hedges'. The interiors of the forms could then be filled with multi-coloured *dragées* or hundreds and thousands to resemble colourful flower beds.[22]

The Waddesdon *plateau* is decorated in the *sablé* method with sprinkled sugar coloured with the same organic dyes used in the 18th century: cochineal, derived from the dried bodies of a Mexican insect, for the pink, gum gamboge, resin from a species of east Asian tree, and spinach for the pale yellow and green. The colours and some of the motifs are inspired by the decorative patterns on the Sèvres service.

Gilliers' book provides, as do other similar texts, instructions and illustrations on how to design these complicated geometric forms. Through lack of time or talent, however, the cut shapes could be purchased ready-made from merchants who specialised in the supply of items for the dessert table. one such Parisian merchant was Delorme, who styled himself marchand "fleuriste de Roi", selling artifical flowers for the decoration of the dessert, porcelains, silvered *plateaux* and their mirrors, crystal, glass, and faience. His trade card is a fascinating document of what was required for a dessert table and what was available for purchase:

> *Delorme . Marchand Fleuriste du Roi*
> *Rue St Denis, pres l'Apport - Paris*
> *Tient magazin et fabrique de Fleurs Artificielles de toutes qualités, & de Decorations pour les Desserts des plus grandes Tables, &c. Bouquets pour la parure des Damas; vend toutes sortes de Porcelaines de France et autres, toutes sortes de Bronzes dorés en or moulu et en feuille, concernant les Appartemens, Argentaché, de toutes especes, Lanternes en cloches et a réverbères pour escalier et cours, Plateaux argentés avec Glaces de toutes grandeurs pour Dessert, Cristaux dorés et unis pour la Table, Fayance et Verrerie d'Office. Il fait aussi la Commission dans les Pays étrangers à des conditions honêtes.*[23]

Further colour was provided by the flowers which formed an integral part of the dessert decoration and are often mentioned in contemporary accounts of the meals. Flowers could be real if the season permitted, or made of silk or sugar-paste *(pastillage)*. This was another talent the confectioner needed to master: the ability to model flowers out of sugar-paste, for which Gilliers provides ample instructions and illustrations.[24] *(fig. 5)* The sugar-paste was coloured with organic dyes to create realistic flowers. It was a complicated and time-consuming process involving cutting out and moulding the petals, dyeing and drying them, then assembling the flower petal by petal around stamens made of saffron, cotton threads or strands of feathers. As each petal needed to dry on the stem before the next was added, a flower such as a full-blown rose would take up to two days to make. This lengthy procedure may explain why silk flowers were also bought in from the *marchand fleuriste*.

For a dessert in 1781, the French royal household purchased artificial flowers from a specialist flower merchant, Grivet.[25] The invoice records the purchase of nearly 350 *livres* of silk flowers for the table. A few are listed individually, being particularly expensive at six *livres* each, but the majority of the decoration came from bunches of cornflowers and pansies ("20 paquets de Barbeaux et Pensée"). These particular flowers may have been ordered to match the flowers characteristically painted on Sèvres services at this date and, in particular, the service purchased by Marie-Antoinette in April 1781, decorated with precisely these flowers.[26] Following this example, the Waddesdon sugar-paste flowers are based on the types of flowers decorating the Choiseul and Starhemberg services. *(figs. 6, 7)*

It was customary to purchase small vases of biscuit porcelain with Sèvres services for the display of flowers on the *plateau*. The Choiseul service originally had ten vases *(vase à oreilles)*, in three sizes, with the largest ones standing on biscuit pedestals.[27] With the change in dining customs in the 19th century the

*Figure 6. Sugar-paste flowers in a Sèvres biscuit basket, The Rothschild Collection, Waddesdon Manor.*

*Figure 7. Detail of flower decoration on a salad bowl, Starhemberg service, Sèvres porcelain, 1766, The Rothschild Collection, Waddesdon Manor.*

biscuit vases and figures were no longer used and were separated from their services.[28]

Biscuit figures and groups, developed from the earlier tradition of sugar-paste table sculpture, are particularly associated with the dessert table.[29] Like marble statuary, which they closely resemble, they decorate the garden created on the *plateau*. They also reinforce the link between the dessert course and some form of entertainment or spectacle. Frequently a concert, ballet or comedy was performed in the interval between the meal and the dessert course or simply accompanied the dessert on its own. This was a practice already established in the 17th century, as shown by this account of the wedding festivities of Marie de Medici to Henri IV, held in Florence in 1600:

> "As the colossal wedding banquet drew to a close, an automatically propelled table moved from in front of the new Queen of France, her uncle and their guests, to the two side walls of the great banqueting room,… to be replaced by another table which rose through the floor, fully set with one of the fantastic desserts, at the time regarded as the very summit of splendour, in which everything, from the goblets and dishes to the napkins and knives and statues, was fashioned out of sugar. No sooner had the guests finished nibbling at their confectionery than the lights were extinguished, and with a realistic clap of thunder two pillars in the great hall opened out into two grottoes lined with brilliant gems. From one grotto stepped a young girl dressed as Juno, complete with sceptre, crown, and peacocks, from the second Pallas Athene with a rainbow on her head. When the goddesses had delivered a song in honour of the nuptial pair they vanished into their grottoes, the lights were relit, and in the place of the royal confectionery table appeared another, this time set with glittering crystal and shining mirror glass. This table, in turn, so the report assures us, was transformed as if by magic into a garden with shrubs, paths, fountains, flowers, fruit, statuettes of nymphs and shepherdesses. Tame singing birds hopped about the garden, and the new Queen was able to take them in her hands and distribute them among the ladies present."[30]

Today's viewers do not recognize something which would have been very evident to 18th-century diners: the direct association between the biscuit figures and theatre. Seemingly generic pastoral groups actually represent scenes from popular comedies. Many of the names given to the Sèvres biscuit groups correspond to comedies and theatrical ballets performed at Parisian theatres and at the court. *L'Oracle, Annette et Lubin*, and *On ne s'avise jamais de tout* are all Sèvres biscuit groups as well as titles of performances given at the court in the 1770s and 1780s.[31]

Some of the figures actually portray popular contemporary actors. Writing from Paris in 1786, the 2nd Earl Spencer commented:

> "There are two small theatres open every night in the Palais Royal which is now fitted up like a perpetual fair; one of them called the Variétés Amusantes, IS really very amusing and is almost entirely supported by an Actor whom they call Jeannot, and who for low comedy seems excellent; We saw him tonight in the character in which his portrait is done in Sève biscuit and stands over my sister's chimney-piece in London.[32]

It is not surprising, therefore, that the English ambassador to the Saxon court was astonished at the spectacle presented by a dessert held at the Dresden court:"When the dessert was set on, I thought it was the most wonderful thing I ever beheld. I fancy'd myself either in a Garden or at an Opera, but I could not imagine that I was at Dinner."[33]

NOTES



1. Among these are [Massialot], *Le Nouveau Cuisinier Royal et Bourgeois, Qui apprend toute sorte de Repas en gras & en maigre, & la meilleure maniere des Ragoûts les plus délicats & les plus à la mode, & toutes sortes de Pâtisseries: avec des nouveaux desseins de Tables,* Paris, 1722; [Menon], *Le Science du maître d'hotel, confiseur, a l'usage des Officiers avec des observations sur la connoissance & les propriétés des fruits. Enrichie de Desseins en Décorations & Parterres pour les Desserts,* Paris, 1750; Emy, *L'art de bien faire les glaces d'office,* Paris, 1768; Gilliers, *Le Cannameliste français ou Nouvelle Instruction pour ceux qui desirent d'apprendre l'office, rédigé en forme de Dictionnaire, contenant Les Noms, les descriptions, les usages, les choix & les principes de tout ce qui se pratique dans l'office, l'explication de tous les termes dont on se sert; avac la maniere de dessiner, & de former toutes sortes de contours de Tables & de Dormants,* Nancy, 1768 ed.; and [Massialot], *Le Confiturier Royal ou Nouvelle Instruction pour Les Confitures, Les Liqueurs et les Fruits; Où l'on apprend à confire toutes sortes de Fruits, tant secs que liquides; la façon de faire différens Ratafias, & divers Ouvrages de Sucre qui sont du fait des Officiers & Confiseurs; avec la maniere de bien ordonner un Fruit & des Dessins de Table,* 5th ed., Paris, 1776.
2. In the collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, GG 7505, on loan to Schloß Schönbrunn.
3. The transcript from the Sèvres sales ledger is published in Dorothée Guillemé-Brulon,"De Vincennes A Sèvres: le service à rubans verts," *L'Estampille*, no. 179, March 1985, pp. 22-33. For the plateau: *Versailles et les tables royales en Europe*, exh. cat., Versailles, 1993, p.334.
4. Massialot, 1722, vol.I, p.1
5. Gilliers, p.220.
6. A painting showing a dinner at the palace of the prince de Salm, c. 1770, shows the diners at the savoury course in the centre of the room, while the dessert has been laid out on a separate table in anticipation of the diners moving there. Illustrated in Pierre Ennès, Gérard Mabille, and Philippe Thiébaut, *Histoire de la Table*, Paris, Flammarion, 1994, p.145.
7. Lucien Perry, *Un petit-neveu de Mazarin, Louis Mancini-Mazarini, duc de Nivernais*, Paris, Calmann Lévy, 1893, pp.223-4. I am grateful to John Whitehead for pointing out this reference.
8. *Journal inédit de duc de Croÿ*, ed. vte. de Grouchy and Paul Cottin, 4 vols, Paris: Ernest Flammarion, 1906, vol.I, p.269.
9. British Library, Althorp Papers, F 174.
10. The dictionary definition of 'dessert' was given as the bourgeois term for the course properly termed 'fruit'. *(Dictionnaire Universel Français et Latin*, 1771, vol. 3.) The confectionery text by Massialot, reprinted and revised throughout the 18th century, still called the dessert the *fruit* ("…la maniere de bien ordonner un Fruit") in the title of its 1776 edition. Gilliers also defines "fruit" as "ce qui comprend tout le service d'un dessert". (Gilliers, p. 96.)
11. For example, in the service presented by Louis XV to Christian VII of Denmark in 1768.
12. An invoice for items bought for a royal dessert from the merchant Delorme in December 1781 includes 48 glass circles *(ronds de verre)* of 8½ *pouces* (23 cm), 6 of 3½ *pouces* (9.47 cm) and 12 of 1½ *pouces* (4.06 cm) and three sizes of glass columns (*collonne de verre*) to go between them. Archives Nationales, $0^1$ 837, no.232.
13. Emy, p.56.
14. The shape of the porcelain ice cream cooler replicates the copper or tin type described by Emy for storing the ices before serving. Emy, p.84.
15. The 2nd Earl Spencer purchased 24 covers of silver-gilt cutlery and ice cream trowels from Auguste in 1786 for the dessert service he acquired at Sèvres. British Library, Althorp Papers, G 4.
16. Harold Acton, *The Bourbons of Naples (1734-1825)*, London, Prion Books, 1998 ed., pp.6-7, quoting Dr John Moore, *A view of Society and Manners in Italy*, London, 1790.
17. Gilliers, p.73.
18. Ibid., p.116. Equal to approximately 46 centimetres squared.
19. Archives Nationales, $0^1$ 3510. Listed with items for decoration of the table.
20. The exact spacing of the diners was dictated by court etiquette at Versailles. The King and Queen were each allocated five *pieds* (approximately one metre 62 centimetres) while other members of the royal family made do with three *pieds* (ninety-seven centimetres). Archives Nationales, $0^1$ 3791.
21. Gilliers, p.73.
22. Ibid., p.36: "Chenille,… on s'en sert pour garnir les rebords des cartons que l'on découpe, pour former des ornemens de parterre; on remplit ordinairement ces cartons de nompareille (de toute couleur) pour imiter le sable." Chenille was purchased from dealers specializing in supplies for the dessert table. An invoice for the French royal household, dated 1781, records the purchase of lengths of chenille in pink, blue and green, as well as variegated ones in pink and white, blue and white and green and white. (Archives Nationales, $0^1$ 837)
23. Archives Nationales, $0^1$ 837, no.232. For a dessert in December 1781, the court confectioner *(chef d'office)*, Chavet, purchased twenty-eight bundles of carton paper templates from Delorme.
24. Gilliers, p. 169 and plate 7.
25. Archives Nationales, $0^1$ 837.
26. *"Service Cartels en Perles, panneaux en Roses et Barbeaux",* Manufacture Nationales de Sèvres, Sales Ledgers, Vy8 f. 80. Medallions of roses alternate with pansies. while the remaining areas are decorated with cornflowers. The majority of this service is now at Waddesdon Manor.
27. For example, the Maria-Theresia service had thirty-five vases of the fourth and fifth sizes, the Bedford service (1763) had 16 vases with pedestals in two sizes, and the Starhemberg service came with sixteen vases of two models with pedestals, also in two sizes. Biscuit *vases à oreilles* are sometimes listed in royal inventories of porcelain table decoration. In one instance the measurements for three of the sizes are given: 7½ *pouces* (20.3 cms) , 5½ *pouces* (14. 88 cms) and 4½ *pouces* (12.18cms). Archives Nationales. K 506.
28. The Austrian court documents record an order of 1809 for the sale of the biscuit and its accompanying plateau because it was "unsightly", out of fashion and no longer useful, particularly as "good taste would no longer tolerate its use". Ilsebill Barta-Fliedl, in *Ehemalige Hofsilber- und Tafelkammer, Sammlungskatalog*, Vienna, 1996, vol.1, p.229.
29. In 1761, soon after the receipt of the Sèvres biscuit figures, the Empress Maria-Theresia ordained that sugar- paste flowers and figures were no longer to be made for the court table, because of the expense and that only biscuit figures and fresh flowers were to be used. Ingrid Haslinger, *Küche und Tafelkultur am Kaiserlichen Hofe zu Wien*, Bern, 1993, p.89.
30. Elizabeth David, *Harvest of the Cold Months*, ed. Jill Norman, London, 1994, p.13. Quoting a manuscript describing the festivities.
31. Archives Nationales, $0^1$ 1466.
32. British Library, Althorp Papers, F 14.
33. R.J. Charleston, *Meissen and other European Porcelain, The James A. de Rothschild Collection*, 1971, p.17.