By Karla Klein Albertson

WINTERTHUR, DEL. — The moving spirit behind “Dining by Design,” a major exhibition at the Winterthur Museum through January 6, was to celebrate “how hosts and hostesses brought the natural world into their dining rooms.” The visual link between diners and the greater world from which they gathered their food parallels human history. Examples can be cited from the Renaissance, medieval period and the ancient world. The sea-bound Minoan culture decorated storage vessels with growing plants and the marine life that formed their diet. The concept surely dates back to the first prehistoric man who painted an image of what’s-for-supper on the cave wall next to his favorite dining rock.

For this exhibition, Winterthur’s extensive permanent collection yielded around 550 objects owned by or promised as gifts to the museum. The time range stretches from Sixteenth Century examples to the present, for the popularity of flowers, animals and scenic views on dinnerware has never faded. Individual exhibits explore when, where and how pieces were used with the help of period instructions for the placement and deportments of serving vessels. Thus, this display features several tureens inspired by nature. Perhaps more than any other dish, tureens imitating natural shapes expressed consumers’ desire to bring the outdoors into their homes. Just imagine a stately goose tureen and her little goslings dominating a table overflowing with leaf-shape serving dishes, fresh or silk flowers in vases and food in shapes and flavors to delight the senses.

Winterthur Brings The Outdoors Into The Galleries For A Year-Long Exhibition
Nature Displayed On The Dinner Table

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show objects that visitors wouldn’t normally get to see. For one thing, that extensive dinner service that you see, it was drawn from a service of about 250 objects spread over nine floors in the museum. You’d see little clusters of them stacked together, but I went through that entire group and found examples that would match a particular mid-Eighteenth Century table plan that was from a cookbook by a woman named Elizabeth Raffald. It took us about a month and a half to get everything picked and find out if it was in good condition with matching enamel colors. The service the curator selected was Chinese export porcelain in what is known as the Saxon flower pattern, 1760-80. The pieces are mounted on the wall in replication of an enlarged illustration of “1st Course” from Raffald’s The Experienced English Housekeeper, a practical picture guide published in Manchester in 1769. Housekeepers never merely settled on, “Oh, that looks pretty.” There was a seating plan and an eating plan for every occasion. The majority of the pieces displayed are from England, European countries and China. For wealthy and middle-income families, imported dinnerware was the standard until the approach of the Twentieth Century. A long list of presidents favored French porcelain for the White House table. Ulysses S. Grant used Haviland, but he also ordered Chinese export porcelain, including the fish-pattern plate in the exhibition. Even with the hazardous sea voyage and lengthy turnaround time, economies favored imports. A few of the animal examples are very much post-nature, for the subject is portrayed deceased and pre pared for supper. Grigsby noted, “I do love the boar’s head tureen, and, in fact, it’s pretty gruesome. We wouldn’t want it on today’s table. The stand has a little sheaf of arrows and big long knife that would have been used for beheading it. It’s so wonderful ly horrible that I find it pretty irresistible — when you put the hot stew in, steam would have come out of the nose.” The example in question was made at the Chelsea Porcelain Manufactory in London, 1750-60, and belongs to the Campbell collection given by John T. Dorrance Jr in 1996. The object is paired with The Encyclopaedia of Practical Housekeeping.

Today’s hosts and hostesses would never dream of omitting knives, forks and spoons from the dinner table when entertaining guests, but the practice was common until the late 1800s. Through the mid-1700s, most guests who were invited for a meal took their own eating utensils. This display features a variety of flatware.
Cookery, published in Philadelphia around 1898, where four pages are devoted to preparing your boar for a meal.

While elaborate tureens and services hand painted with flowers and bees could only be purchased by the upper classes, techniques for decoration that arose in the Nineteenth Century, such as transfer-printing, made domestic and exotic themes from nature affordable for the middle classes. Grigsby explained, “You could say something about your understanding of the world by bringing in a set of transfer-printed ware with pink imagery showing views of the London zoo or birds and flowers identified on the back. It was a way to show your taste, but cheaper than buying a sculpture or a painting. The Clews, Wood and Adams factories in Staffordshire enjoyed great success selling Americans sets of earthenware printed with scenic views of their own landscape. Householders who had never seen Niagara Falls in person could buy plates for the table with the dramatic image under the entree.

Grigsby concluded, “I’ve been giving lectures based on how the exhibition was created, because it was done in such a different way. For example, if you look at that nature scene made of soup tureens, I really wanted to create the sense of the outdoors being brought inside, and this was a novel way to show that theme. So, the lectures I’ve been doing so far are about what we went through to try and create what I hope looks like a carefree and easy display, but one which took many months and over 50 people to accomplish. One thing that inspired the show, and my choice of ‘nature’ as the design aspect, is that Winterthur also has an exhibition out in the gardens about follies. I thought it would be nice to do an interplay of indoors and outdoors at Winterthur. The theme just demanded that I pursue it.”

Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library is at 5105 Kennett Pike. For information, www.winterthur.org or 302-888-4600.

Journalist Karla Klein Albertson writes about decorative arts and design.

Gallery of Western nature designs in “Dining by Design.”

Through the mid-1800s, when fashionable society sat down to an elegant dinner, meals were arranged in symmetrical (mirror-image) patterns. Both the dishes and the food had to reflect a visual balance, and instructions on how to achieve this symmetry were provided in texts and diagrams in cookbooks and other publications. This unique wall display shows this to visitors.