

# Expanding Trade, Changing Customs, New Forms



THE SNITE MUSEUM OF ART

University of Notre Dame

Global trade is nothing new. There has always been some exchange of goods and resources among the nations of the world. In the 1700s, though, trade had expanded to such an extent that rare and exotic commodities once known only to the ruling classes and the wealthiest members of society made their way down the economic ladder, gradually becoming more common. Customs and rituals evolved and implements were appropriated and modified to enhance the appreciation and enjoyment of these products.



**FIGURE 1:**

*Punch Bowl*, ca. 1799–1801, Sèvres Manufactory (Sèvres, France), soft-paste porcelain, 12.75 inches, diameter.

Acquired with funds provided by the Virginia A. Marten Endowment for Decorative Arts, 2007.037.

Detail of raw sugar cane. Sugar and lemon were sometimes added to wine to make a punch. This bowl is on view in the Ashbaugh Decorative Arts Gallery on the main level.

Europe had Islamic trading partners to thank for the introduction of **sugar** (fig. 1) into its diet in the 1100s when it was grown and refined in the Middle East and imported through Venice. Once production was established in the colonies in the Caribbean (fig. 2), it was more affordable and widely available. It was regarded as a digestive aid and added to main courses of meat, fish, and vegetables until about 1651 when a French chef, François Pierre de La Varenne, published *Le Cuisinier françois*, a cookbook relegating the use of sugar to desserts. In displays of conspicuous consumption, sugar was used in the 1500s and 1600s

to make sculptural ensembles called *surtout de table* that decorated tables during the dessert course of elaborate formal dinners and festivities. The pair of Neptune figurines (fig. 3) fashioned in porcelain—sometimes called “white gold” to convey its expense and status as a luxury item—by the Cozzi Manufactory in Venice evolved from this tradition of sugar sculpture and was part of just such a group. Sugar was used to temper the bitterness of three other drinks introduced into the West in the 1600s and popularized in the 1700s: coffee, tea, and chocolate.



**FIGURE 2:**

*Portrait of Josephine de Beauharnais*, 1790, Michel Garnier (French, 1753–1819), oil on mahogany panel, 13 x 11 inches. Gift of Michael and Susie McLoughlin, 2015.079.

Josephine, who later married Napoleon Bonaparte, was the daughter of a sugar plantation owner on the island of Martinique and was known for her bad teeth.



**FIGURE 3:**

*Triumph of Neptune*, ca. 1780–85, Cozzi Manufactory (Venice, Italy), hard-paste porcelain, 10.5 x 7.3 inches.

Acquired with funds provided by the Virginia A. Marten Endowment for the Decorative Arts, 2015.030.a-b.

The subject of Neptune, ancient god of the sea, would have been appropriate for a Venetian enterprise given the maritime interests of the city.

*Among the numerous luxuries of the table...coffee may be considered as one of the most valuable. It excites cheerfulness without intoxication; and the pleasing flow of spirits which it occasions... is never followed by sadness, languor or debility.*

— Benjamin Franklin

Coffee was another product of Islamic countries and was grown mostly in the highlands of Yemen. To maintain a monopoly on this commodity, the government prohibited the sale or distribution of live plants or seeds from the Port of Mocha, the primary trading port. Initially, the British East India Company traded coffee only among other Islamic nations. The first coffee house in Italy opened in 1645 and in Britain (Oxford) in 1651. In Britain, coffee pots were more often made of silver than porcelain and had bulbous bases where the thick grounds could settle after boiling (fig. 4). The proprietor of the café Pasqua Rose in London advertised coffee's medicinal properties as a preventative for dropsy, scurvy, gout, and miscarriages among other things. If his medical claims were exaggerated, he did correctly note that "it will prevent drowsiness and make one fit for business. . . ."

Coffee was slower to catch on in France. It was sold by immigrants from Turkey or the Levant to passersby at fairs or delivered house-to-house by itinerant merchants. The first permanent café in Paris, Café Procope, opened in 1689 near the Comédie Française, and the clientele was decidedly elite. The enlightenment philosopher Voltaire was a frequent patron there and reportedly drank 40-50 cups of coffee (mixed with chocolate) a day. By the end of the 1700s, there were over 800 cafés in Paris.

The spread of coffee throughout Europe was due in part to the break up of Yemen's monopoly by the Dutch who smuggled some of the plants out of the port in 1690 and started growing them in Ceylon, Java, and Sumatra. The British, Portuguese, and French also obtained clippings and started plantations in their respective colonies in the Caribbean, Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil.

**FIGURE 4**, on the cover:

*Coffee Pot*, ca. 1770–71, John Buckett (British), London plate silver, 12 x 8.9 x 5.75 inches.

Gift of Mr. J. Peter Ritten, 1997.019.002.



**FIGURE 5:**

*Teapot*, 1779, designed by Charles Eloi Asselin for Sèvres Manufactory (Sèvres, France) porcelain, 5.75 inches high. Acquired with funds provided by Virginia A. Marten, 2009.030.

Trade with China and Japan in the 1600s introduced many new products into Europe. Chief among them was **tea** and the highly prized porcelain implements (pots, strainers, jugs, cups, and saucers) used to prepare and serve it. In the 1700s, European inventors developed a formula for soft-paste and hard-paste porcelain and began manufacturing their own services in the Chinese manner. To underscore the origins of these exotic commodities (both the tea and the porcelain), eighteenth-century artists sometimes painted stylized, imaginary scenes of China, known as *chinoiserie*, on their teapots, cups, and saucers (fig. 5). The designers rarely had first-hand knowledge of China and understood it only through export wares, second-hand accounts, or sometimes by meeting Chinese officials who visited European courts on diplomatic missions.

*Now hear it then, my Rennie dear, nor hear it with a frown  
You cannot make the tea so fast as I can gulp it down.  
I therefore pray thee, Rennie dear, that thou wilt give to me  
With cream and sugar softened well, another dish of tea.*

— Samuel Johnson

Spain's conquest of Mesoamerica in the sixteenth century made them dominant traders of **cocoa**. Most often, the beans were ground or shaved from a compressed block and whisked into hot water provided in covered jugs (fig. 6) with sugar and spices to make a drink. Because of the whisking process, hot chocolate was normally prepared in metal vessels with a molinet (or stirring stick) at the top, and sometimes served in tall cups with handles.



### *Chocolat à la Capucine* (served at Versailles)

4 oz. chocolate  
6 oz. sugar  
3 eggs beaten well  
½ litre of Madeira

**FIGURE 6:**

*Hot Water Jug and Cover*, ca. 1730–35, Meissen Porcelain Manufactory (Meissen, Germany), hard-paste porcelain, 7 inches high. Museum purchase in honor of Stephen B. Spiro, 2001.056.a-b.

Covered jugs were used for hot water or milk.

At home, coffee, tea, and hot chocolate were taken in the drawing room on low “coffee” tables in the middle of the afternoon and served with sweet or savory treats (fig. 7) to hold one over until dinner was served at about 7 or 8 p.m. In the early 1700s, Queen Anne drank tea instead of the traditional ale at breakfast with bread and perhaps cheese and butter. Specialty shops serving coffee, tea, and hot chocolate in public became popular among men where discussions about politics prevailed. In England, women were prohibited from entering coffee houses. The burgeoning domestic and commercial demand created a market for large services of chocolate, coffee, and teapots, sugar bowls, covered pitchers for warm milk or hot water, cups and saucers, and small plates and platters for serving snacks giving rise to a lucrative porcelain and silver industry.

Slave labor on plantations was the engine that drove the economy, costing millions of African lives in pursuit of profitability. Governments collected significant taxes on these commodities, filling their coffers with revenues that could in turn be spent on the military or grand building projects. It was the Tea Act, for example, imposed on the American colonies by the British parliament that led to the Boston Tea Party in 1773, setting the stage for the American Revolution.

The wares on display here—elegant, refined, precious—help trace Europe’s commercial ambitions in the 1700s and the changes in worldviews that resulted from them.





**FIGURE 7:**  
*Portrait of a Venetian Family with a Manservant Serving Coffee*, ca. 1752, Pietro Longhi (Italian, 1701-1785), oil on canvas, 23.7 x 19 inches. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-A-4980.

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For an overview of slavery in the New World, see [www.digitalhistory.uh.edu](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu) (Digital History ID 449)

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