

# THE EARLY GEORGIAN TEA TABLE

BY JOHN ELTON

THE habit of drinking tea has a history of nearly three centuries in England, dating from its beginnings in Charles II's reign. It remained a precious and expensive luxury until the reign of George I, but in 1715 we are told that tea drinking had become generally customary among "well-regulated families." Though the cost of tea dropped during the course of the century, it still remained a luxury, and tea was kept in caddies under lock and key. A writer in 1753 records that in the country, people used tea, but they seldom opened the tea chest but to the best company and that less than a pound lasted them for a twelvemonth. A few years later, Hanway writes of the "wild infatuation" of poor people who clubbed together for the appliances for the "fantastic amusement" of tea drinking. The reduction in the price coincides with the creation of special types of tables for the service of tea. XVIIIth century tea equipages are well recorded in conversation pieces (which have been defined as "groups of family portraits, connected by some common interest or occupation") and the informal grouping of the family, and the still life renderings of porcelain, silver, and furniture are very attractive. Such pictures show that tea was at first served unaccompanied by eatables. In an unidentified picture once known as the Walpole family painted with attention to details about 1729, the service is set out on a table, while a maid-servant has just lifted a silver kettle from a low tripod stand, on which a lamp stands. The mistress of the house is pouring tea from a canister into its cap; and beside her is a caddy with two compartments. To the right of the picture, a servant in livery is carrying a silver coffee pot. A small milk ewer is on the table; but these do not appear to have been made to match the tea service until the middle of the XVIIIth century. The conversation piece by R. Collins (below) shows the oriental cups without handles, the canister, and the kettle on its silver stand. The customary tea equipage can also be reconstructed from English and American inventories. Tea tables and "tea boards" appear in American and English inventories of the early and middle years of the century. In the inventory of the goods belonging to an American, Peter Cunningham, in 1740, are listed china cups and saucers, fine handle cups, a slop basin with a plate beneath, a milk pot, teapot with its plate and a boat for spoons. The tea was kept in a shagreen tea chest. In the early part of the century japanned tea tables are frequently listed

in inventories, but when their perishable surface decoration became shabby these disappeared from well-to-do interiors.

Tea and other tripod tables were often finely finished. A visitor to America while George Washington was President, states that tea parties were invented by avarice, in "order to see company cheap," but adds that the greatest expense was in the furniture, which was of mahogany. The serviceable tripod (or "pillar and claw") table which was used both as a tea table and for "occasional" purposes, appears frequently in conversation pieces. Their tops ranged from a flat, un moulded surface to patterns with a moulded edge or fretted rim. The top is usually hinged to a square bed, above a "bird-cage" support, consisting of dwarf balusters, which enables the top to tilt when not in use. A small spring catch fixed underneath the top engages it into a socket when the top is in its horizontal position. This bird-cage device is clearly seen in the table (Fig. I). The moulded rim (described as "scolloped" in accounts) was often superseded in George III's reign by a gallery of small turned spindles, as being less expensive in labour. The pillar, or shaft, is sometimes of columnar, sometimes of baluster form, having a bulbous enlargement spirally fluted or carved with acanthus leaves. In the table (Fig. I) the square top is surrounded by a spindle gallery, and the legs are lightly carved with low relief detail and foliage. In the table with an octagonal top, the gallery is pierced in the Chinese taste (and including among its frets the swastika) and the cabriole legs are also perforated to accord with the gallery, while the upper face of the legs is carved in low relief with decorated cabochons and foliage (Fig. II). In the third example (Fig. III) the cluster-column shaft is triangular in section, and clasped by a decorated band, while the tripod finishes in the French (volute) foot. The tripod loses much of its bulk during the middle Georgian period, and the usual termination of the foot is the "French." In Chippendale's *Director* (1754) two lightly-built galleried tables are figured, one having cabriole the other tapered legs, and they are described as serving as tea tables or for holding a set of china. The rectangular table with its larger top allowed more space for the tea equipage, and also appears in several conversation pieces dating from the second part of the XVIIIth century. The flat-topped Pembroke table was in favour as a tea table in the late Georgian period. Accompanying the tea table was a small tripod stand (to support the tea kettle) such as the example (Fig. IV) where the fretted gallery is splayed, and the enlargement and the upper face of the tripod are carved in low relief. The late XVIIIth century stands, with splayed and tapered legs, which were made in a variety of woods besides mahogany, are figured in the *Guide* (1788).



A FAMILY TAKING TEA  
about 1725, by Richard Collins  
Victoria and Albert Museum

## BOOKS RECEIVED

- EUGENE DELACROIX DRAWINGS. (Bruno Cassirer. 9/6.)  
FRENCH DRAWINGS AT WINDSOR CASTLE. (Phaidon. 25/-.)  
RODIN. By RAINER MARIA RILKE. (Grey Walls Press Ltd. 7/6.)  
THE ENGLISHMAN BUILDS. By RALPH TUBBS. (Penguin Book. 3/6.)  
GAUDIER-BRZESKA DRAWINGS. By HORACE BRODZKY. (Faber. 30/-.)