GEMRISHA ANANTHAM

WOULD YOU LIKE A CUP OF TEA?

Teapots have evolved materially and mechanically since tea was first introduced to the Western world. However, the physical form of the standard teapot remains largely unchanged: short and stout with a handle and spout. It has become a recognisable object invoking ritual, holding warmth, and retaining flavour. Be it in an office kitchenette or hotel room, regardless of geographic location, one is bound to encounter a kettle loyally inhabiting the back of a counter, often accompanied by an assortment of tea bags.While the teapot primarily infused flavour into warm water, the modern kettle can grant one the ability to boil the water too. Between the two, they effortlessly assimilate into various contexts, from polished marble countertops to dwindling fires in construction sites. Transcending class, culture, and time, tea fills cups in sitting rooms across the New World, just as in Japanese tea houses; its steam rises from royal courts and Indian street corners alike.

As an object that facilitates conversation, ceremony, and celebration, the fierce rivalries, exploitative practices, and extractive systems that secured its ubiquity are often overlooked. The empire's foothold on the trade began when the first Camellia sinensis plants outside of the Sinosphere were discovered in the Indian Subcontinent (Sarkar 1984). The physical implications of unethical land grabs and abusive labour conditions upon which this empire was built are still visibly evident in the vast swathes of tea plantations that now monopolise hilly terrain in Northeastern and Southern India, where native forests and indigenous cultivation practices were once prevalent (Guha 1977: 13-18). The tea trade has also drastically shaped culture and consumption practices, with former cultivation colonies like India and Sri Lanka now being some of the largest consumers of tea (Voora et al. 2019). Thus, when prodded, the benign household object of the teapot unlocks a neglected contact zone that continues to carry residues of colonial logistics, distilling vast histories into a singular domestic manifestation —tea.

Originally, tea was consumed by traders and the European elite. To facilitate the preparation of the hot beverage, teapots began to enter the Western market. Teapots such as those from the Yixing region of China

are known to have been in circulation since the 1620s (Mueller 2005). Made out of Zi Sha (purple clay), the Yixing teapots were unmatched in the quality of tea they brewed, allowing the beverage to breathe through the pot's porous unglazed surface. Over time, teapots became locally replicated to supply a more diverse tea-drinking demographic in England. A red-brown clay found along Stoke-on-Trent became the material of choice, rendering more affordable, albeit denser teapots with a non-porous magnesium glaze that contained warmth for longer durations. The most popular mass-produced teapot which came out of the English replicas is the Brown Betty, which remains in circulation (McIntyre 2023). It even garnered a mention from Hugh Pearman in his Design Classics series for the Times, hailing it as the 'masterpiece of design' given to us by the industrial revolution (Pearman 2002).

The meticulous design, elaborate purpose, and dynamic atmosphere of teapots establish their multidimensional roots, independent of relationships to their immediate surroundings. As autonomous objects, their thermal, formal, and physical properties embody architecture's concerns with lived space, historic paradigms, and material consciousness. As a ruin of colonial encounter, the teapot cannot remain a neutral occupant of space. Teapots become sites of theoretical enquiry, urging the observer to probe beyond their surface to realise their robust imperial aftertaste.

Whether clay or steel, under tropical sunshine or temperate rain, the teapot brews a mesmerising tale: activated by temperature, absorbing flavour, and circulating vapour to fill the spatial realm we inhabit. This substance is capable of steeping into life as we know it, becoming more than an extended gesture of welcome, as comfort on a cloudy morning, as a metaphor for gossip, or as an accompaniment to conversation. Objects like the teapot cannot remain neutral occupants of space. Thus, even in its smallest forms, architecture must take a position as it engages with discomforts that can be disguised as seemingly mundane occurrences.

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