# Food & Material Culture

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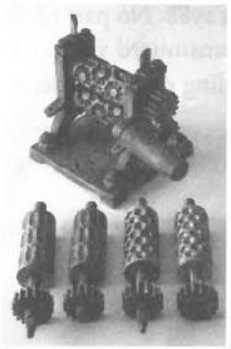

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# Contents

# Autarchic by Design: Aesthetics and Politics of Kitchenware

*Diana Garvin*

In October 1935, Italian Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini heralded the invasion of Ethiopia, and with it, the establishment of Italian East Africa. One month later, the League of Nations countered with a raft of economic sanctions. By choking off Italy's foreign supply of wheat and other basic materials, the League of Nations hoped to crush the regime's imperialist ambitions. With this bout of international fist-shaking, domestic policy crashed headlong into the domestic sphere. Autarchy emerged.

Broadly speaking, autarchy meant producing and consuming Italian products, privileging domestic goods over foreign ones. On the national level, the regime promoted this policy by introducing a raft of plans to rationalize and modernize Italian industry. Popular magazines and books translated these policies into recommended practices for everyday life. Italian economic self-sufficiency meant that domestic labour such as shopping, gardening and cooking took on a heightened political charge. When autarchy entered the home, it headed straight for the hearth. In the private sphere, politics spoke through the idiom of design.



## A new approach to the material culture of Fascist Italy

Cultural historians of the Italian Fascism have tended to focus on regime-sponsored initiatives rendered on a grand, public scale. Art historians have emphasized the diffusion of style via commercial and graphic design. Taking these conversations into the domestic realm demonstrates how political and commercial aims mutually reinforce and ultimately coalesce in the aesthetics of cooking utensils, dishware and appliances. In short, culinary paraphernalia promoted autarchy to Italian women through design.

If economic policy takes material form in kitchenware, then this incarnation demonstrates that the regime infiltrates the domestic sphere and modifies its aesthetics for national ends. So it stands to reason that Italian citizens experienced Fascist policies of autarchy not only at political rallies in the public piazza, but also in the home through the objects they handled every day. This line of logic further suggests that the kitchen stands as a synecdoche for the national larder. Ultimately, these objects exemplify the collusion of design and politics in the hearth of the home.

Of course, designers may or may not have explicitly allied themselves with the regime and its promotion of autarchy. But living and working in Fascist Italy meant that designers were subject to the political and artistic trends of the day. These tendencies inevitably influenced the conditions of manufacturing and sale. All these objects are

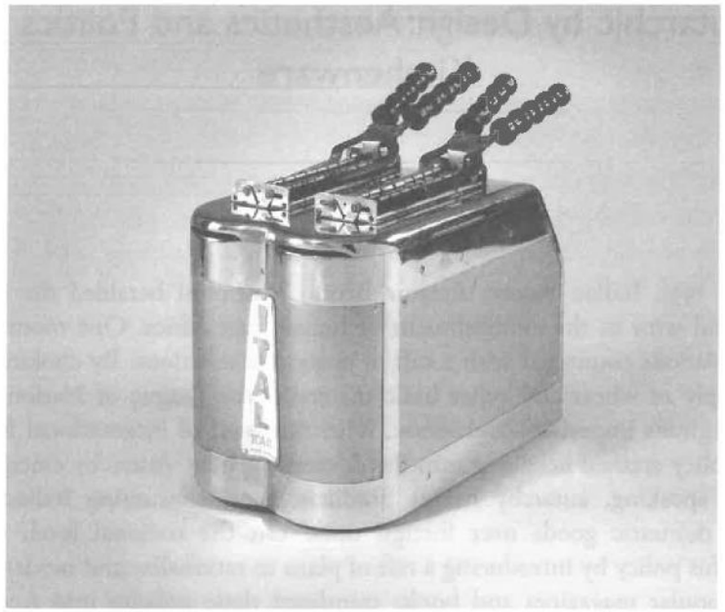


*Figure 1. Toaster, Milan, manufactured by ItalToast, chrome (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, xx1990.393; photo. Lynton Gardiner).*



imbued with concerns for autarchy because they were produced in a time marked by such concerns. Ultimately, the significance of these objects in the context of the private home tells us more about the history of daily life than does the intentionality of the designer and his professed political stance. This essay focuses on the observable, physical properties of the plates, toasters, sugar bowls, and what these aesthetics meant in the context of Italy's Fascist period. These objects represent the material connection between the regime, industry and consumers – the physical point at which politics touch the individual through design.

## From autarchy to aesthetics: the modern and the traditional

Autarchy, an abstract economic policy, takes concrete form in the aesthetics of the kitchen objects that Italian women used every day. Two broad categories emerge: modern and traditional. Each style evokes a specific set of culinary practices to encourage autarchical eating. Innovative designs, bright colours and shine characterize the modern objects. This group dazzles the viewer with its futuristic aesthetic of streamlined curves and knife-sharp angles. Forms evoke speed and efficiency. Functional objects associated with energy (electric appliances) and stimulants (tea and coffee sets) predominate.

In contrast to the modern objects, the traditional pieces comfort rather than thrill. Simple forms and muted colour palettes of sepia and sage prevail. Larger and heavier than the modern objects, these pieces provided decoration for bare walls and cupboards.



Bucolic motifs like wheat heads and home-made loaves of bread repeat in the same dish, suggesting the abundance and the fertility of the countryside.

## Modern, functional objects

These objects construct and promote a set of culinary practices that bring politics into the kitchen by translating autarchy into two aesthetic categories. Turning to the first group, what design elements make these objects feel modern, and how does that modernity work to encourage autarchic cooking and eating? Approaching the question of modernity iteratively rather than attempting to define it from the start demonstrates the meaning of modernity in the specific context of culinary implements and cooking methods. First, metalwork, particularly in silver hues, gives this impression. Domestically produced aluminium and chrome evoke the idea that using autarchic materials imbue the cook with a modern sensibility. Along similar lines, writers and artists of the day such as F.T. Marinetti and Mario Sironi conflated the physical properties of metal with idea of modernity. Metalwork signals a shift from old cooking methods, such as heating food over an open hearth, to new ones, such as toasting bread with electricity in a chrome-plated appliance. The material composition of these objects casts the daily practice of autarchy as chic. This aura of style is a particularly important move for autarchy, because foreign products previously reigned as the height of fashion. A visually dazzling Italian teacup represented a cultural shift – it signalled the beginning of the end of France and England's monopoly over style in Italian homes.



In addition to being composed of autarchic materials, metal-based electric appliances such as the ItalToast Toaster decrease cooking time and effort. Designed in Milan, this electric chrome toaster features two sets of adjustable heat level controls. The construction allows the cook to minutely control multiple facets of the cooking process by turning dials and pushing buttons. A flashing red alert light the need for attention previously required of the cook. By automating these elements, the toaster abstracts the cooking process from the original combination of fire, pan and bread into a Taylorist succession of manual, rather than full-body, operations. So this object sends a message of modernity in its physical aesthetics, in that it is metal with streamlined curves and shine, but also in its function. Cooking faster and with less effort means cooking in a modern way. Speed marks the object in its design and in its use. This toaster suggests that increasing the speed of cooking while diminishing the effort involved was a positive practice that marked the cook as fashionably modern. By accelerating production in the kitchen, this object translates the abstract concept of autarchy into a daily practice for the domestic sphere.

Aesthetics of smooth flow also emerge in Friuli-Venezia-based designer Galvani's ceramic tea set, produced in Pordenone *circa* 1935. This piece exemplifies how design provides a concrete means for creative negotiation of the politicized questions of autarchy. This tea set evokes modernity two of the same elements as the ItalToast toaster: gleam and novel form. Although ceramic, the tea set's black glaze and smooth

*Figure 2. Galvani, Tea Set, Pordenone,* c. *mid-1930s, ceramic (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, 84.7.27.9; photo. Lynton Gardiner).*



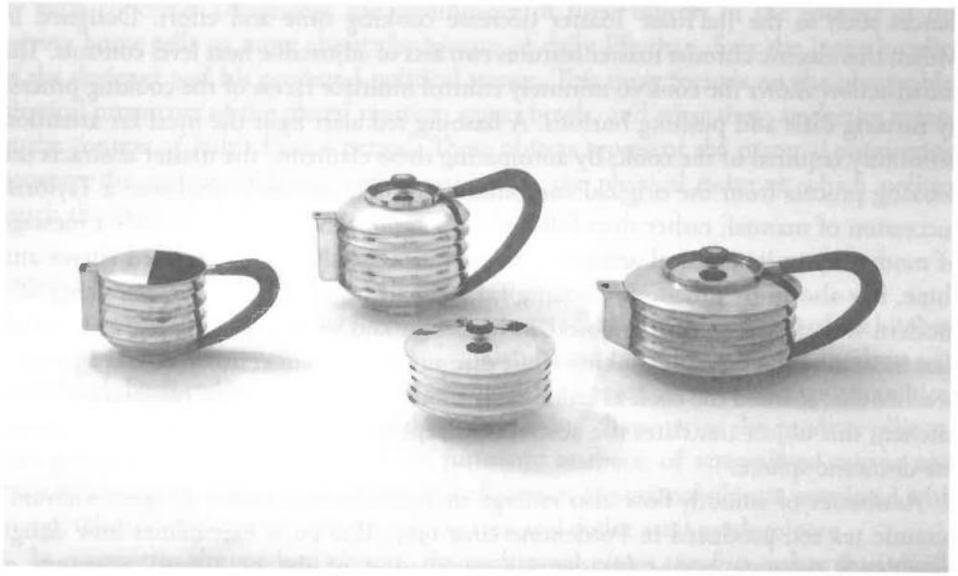

*Figure 3. Arrigo Finzi, Tea and Coffee Set,* c. *1935, manufactured by Le Argenterie d'Italia, metal and wood (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, 83.9.11.2; photo. Silvia Ros).*



texture throw off light. Sharp colour contrast of matte orange on the oval-shaped handles and knob finials energizes the visual composition. Brightness draws attention to the rendering of the cup handles: while traditional in that the oval form allows for a modified handgrip of the cup, the ovoid form departs from the formerly diffuse English teacup handle style, a dainty ear-shaped curve. Form (novel), material (clay) and aesthetics (modern) mark this tea set as conceived and manufactured in Italy, making it an autarchic product.

What would this object have meant in physical context? The teapot, creamer and sugar bowl would have been filled in the kitchen then moved to a salon or living room for service. The kitchen constitutes a private space, whereas the salon provides a semi-public area for receiving guests. Traditions of tea drinking in Italy tended to be bourgeois and gendered female, and further invoked an association with Great Britain that could be highly problematic for sanction-bound Italy. It is the class-based and foreign tradition of tea service, rather than the product itself, that becomes problematic under the sanctions. For this reason, design provides a powerful intermediary to redefine this meal pattern as Italian.

Not only is afternoon tea a foreign ritual, but tea itself is also a foreign product. How then to rebrand tea, as well as coffee, sugar and chocolate, as Italian, and thus autarchic? Advertisements often conflated colonial people with dark-coloured products, suggesting that both manpower and food were raw materials to be seized in order to fuel Italian bodies and industry. Similarly, these foods provide energy as stimulants but have little nutritional value. This last fact provides for an interesting connection to the aesthetics of modernity, in that stimulants provide a means to meet the call for ever-increasing speed. Aesthetics of streamlining further support this acceleration.



Being both decorative and functional, this tea set beautifies the table and contains products prior to consumption. In contrast to the ItalToast toaster, these objects do not change cooking method. Rather, these objects serve a translational need by rebranding a foreign ritual and product as autarchic. By serving tea to guests in with this explicitly Italian service, the lady of the house could mark herself as patriotic, even chic, with her up-to-the-moment awareness of the Fascist political climate.

Similar tropes emerge in a tea and coffee set designed by Arrigo Finzi, produced by Le Argenterie d'Italia in Milan. Also dating from *circa* 1935, this set evokes modernist aesthetics in its materials, design, use and associated foods. We see this in the novel octagonal base and fluted concentric bands encircling the central container, and the sharply sculpted rectangular spouts, all topped by the star-shaped knobs.

Autarchic materials and streamlined form both evoke modernity. The decision to depart from previous coffee and tea set forms, rather than to update them, can be read as a bid to mark these objects as the material bearers of new ideas in Italian design. Ultimately, we see that modern kitchen objects offer chicness and worldliness to promote autarchic practices. But in doing so, they also evoke the problematic associations of modernity with hyper-acceleration, colonialism and imperialism.


*Figure 4. Lino Berzoini, 'Non Sciupate il Pane' [Don't Waste Bread], Albisola (Savona), c. 1933, bread plate, manufactured by Casa Giuseppe Mazzotti, ceramic, 8 inches diameter (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, 84.7.1.4; photo. Silvia Ros).*




*Figure 5: Virgilio Retrosi, 'Amate il Pane' [Love Bread], Rome, 1927, bread plate, manufactured for Fabbrica Ceramiche d'Arte [Ceramic Arts Factory], ceramic, 14 inches diameter (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, 84.7.30; photo. Bruce White).*



## Decorative traditional objects

Some kitchen objects overtly trumpet political messages with text and graphics rather reflect or incarnate the political climate with elements of design. This brings us to the second category of objects. How do the aesthetics of these objects evoke simplicity and a sense of the rural? And how do these traditions promote autarchy? Decorative bread plates offered the ample, flat surface area necessary for detailed pictorial odes to autarchy. Bread consumption (how much, how often, by whom) sent charged political messages whether or not the consumer wished to do so because of widespread grain scarcity and a national push for conservation. Being placed in the kitchen or dining room and thus highly visible around mealtimes, these objects were meant to display and communicate the importance of bread conservation when such messages could have the greatest effect on rationing behaviours.

Designer Lino Berzoini heralded bread conservation in a rustic plate produced by Casa Giuseppe Mazzotti and Motta *circa* 1933 bearing the message, '*Non sciupate il pane*', 'Don't waste bread', in pale yellow letters. This plate's raised design suggests display rather than service. The messages of this plate would be read in the same context as other wall hangings of the mid-1930s, such as the ubiquitous images of the Duce. The plate, like the Duce, watches over the dining process. In this way, this ceramic plate attempts to diminish bread consumption in the individual's home as one part of a larger push for autarchic eating on a national scale.

But how do the plate's aesthetics promote autarchic eating? Rusticity and domesticity converge in the plate's kitchen scene, simply composed of an open hearth and a woman working at a long farmhouse table. A countrified aesthetic marks Berzoini's colour choices. The plate's muted earth tones range from sienna to sage, sparked by the buttery shade of the wording, the bread, and the blonde-haired baker. Yellow unites the composition by highlighting the connection between the baker and her family's bread. The tranquil kitchen space depicted here provides an effective advertisement for autarchic practices by evoking the peace and plenty of a socially conservative imaginary national past.

Production, rather than consumption, of bread inspires the decoration. With fourteen rolls completed on the bench, and another in her hands, she happily engages in this time-consuming labour. Daily practices of autarchy, such as managing bread consumption, belong to the realm of women's labour. The high number of rolls, along with ample sacks of flour and a large container of flour at the woman's feet, suggest plenty even as the words below her feet warn against waste. With no speaker apparent, these words assume the quality of a Biblical commandment. This plate would have been mounted on the wall and commands from on high, 'Thou shalt not waste bread'. Whether the plate's owner took this edict so seriously we cannot say. But the plate's celebration of baking is clear. Because the imagery focuses on food production even as the use of a serving plate implies its consumption, this image imbues the simple choice of whether or not to reach for another piece of bread as a matter of national importance.

In the next example, the voice of the State calls out to the diner in poetic rather than religious terms. This ostentatiously rustic bread plate bears the opening phrases of Mussolini's propagandistic poem, '*Amate il pane*' [Love bread]. Sienna wheat chaffs and midnight-blue cornflowers at the wide lip of the plate wreathe the injunction, 'Amate il pane, cuore della casa, profumo della mensa, gioia del focolare' [Love bread, heart of the home, perfume of the table, joy of the hearth]. The authoritative capitalized words evoke the dictatorial language of the '*Non sciupate il pane*' plate.

The centre of the plate shows the open fireplace of a country kitchen, flanked by stylized wheat chaffs drawn in a relatively larger scale than the kitchen. By using the open hearth as a backdrop for Mussolini's verse, Retrosi casts the country kitchen as the symbolic space for daily autarchic practices such as conserving bread. Both plate and poem define the kitchen through the slippery fusions and elisions of consumer and consumed. While the phrasing and title ('*Amate il pane*') suggests that bread is the '*cuore della casa*', the heart of the home more typically refers to the kitchen or fireside. Positive emotive terms such as '*amate*', '*cuore*' and '*gioia*' elevate bread eating from a rote act of filling the belly to pious ritual of quasi-religious significance, as with the consumption of the host. Bread, the product, rather than the kitchen, the space, defines the emotional centre of the home. Being so precious, only the State has the authority to oversee the daily rite of bread consumption. In sum, we see that rural aesthetics and tradition promote autarchy by evoking a sense of peace to be gained through productivity and obeisance to regime calls for autarchy.



## The political power of common things

Industrial design colludes with politics not only because it possesses the capacity to travel from the public sphere to the private, but because it is a form of intervention in daily life that passes largely undetected by the object's user. Message reception need not depend on text: meaning can be read in extent and type of decoration, intended and actual use, materials, size and heft of objects. Put more broadly, objects need not be created with the goal of controlling population in order to possess a controlling function; they may act as political interventions by dint of their creation in a time and place infused with such reins.

To broaden the frame from object to kitchen, and from kitchen to the national larder, one might ask: Was the ideal kitchen aesthetic of the 1930s modern or traditional? These two categories have been useful in helping us to identify the specific culinary practices that these objects promoted. But ultimately, this categorization presents a false dichotomy. Elements of an old-fashioned kitchen do not capture the difficult working conditions of actual kitchens so much as they provide a re-writing of productive, Italian, socially-conservative past to promote contemporary calls for autarchy. Indeed, nothing could be more modern. Further, every kitchen would have featured a mix of these objects – both modern toasters and traditional bread plates.



Modernity and tradition come together under the aegis of autarchy and point to what is at stake in the aesthetics of kitchen objects. With the onset of the League of Nations' economic sanctions against Italy and the regime's responding call for autarchy to neutralize this threat, questions of domestic production and consumption assumed a heightened importance. Promotion of autarchy crossed spheres, encompassing the public via linguistic translations and pushes for increased productivity in factories, farms and mines, and the private via calls to the home cook to get more out of less. She was to Taylorize her movements, as if in a factory to get more work out of less physical energy, and to make judicious decisions with food products, providing the family with more nutritional energy out of less food.

The regime generally did not concern itself with making these dictates explicit. Rather, major kitchenware firms and designers translated the regime's broad calls for autarchy into specific practices for their core consumers. Economic prudence and trendiness also played significant roles in shaping popular aesthetics. Within the general frame of obeisance to the regime via promotion of autarchy, designers took variant approaches with regards to how such consent manifests in prescribed actions.

When speaking of food and the kitchen in this political context, the significance of the connection between the body and the national body assumes heightened importance. In a time and place that held repetitive, daily practices to be productive of particular types of bodies and minds, the kitchen offered a potent material governmental dimension. National economics enter the private sphere through mass-produced texts and objects, that is, through narrative and also through design. This shift contributed to the development of a definition of autarchy that is specific to women and defined as a set of daily, primarily culinary, practices. But more broadly, it also supported governmental efforts to institutionalize the kitchen, to control this productive space through the form and function of the most mundane of objects. These familiar kitchen tools show that regulatory controls are not always as big as prison or hospital. Sometimes they are as small as a sugar bowl.