

The Pineapple as Ornamental Motif in American Decorative Arts

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“The romance of pineapples blossomed from a passion for a fruit with character...”

-Gary Okihiro

What is a symbol? Does an object's symbolic meaning change over time or is it a set message that remains static through time regardless of changes in society? Over time, the pineapple has been used as a symbol with distinct meanings to not only people from differing financial status, but also differing countries. This fruit, which was once a status symbol available only to royalty or the very wealthy, is now available to nearly everyone around the world. Has this changed what the pineapple means? By using a symbolist approach for analyzing material culture, a scholar can examine what the pineapple has meant over time, what it means today, and how that meaning has changed over time. In this way, the use of the pineapple in the decorative arts is an example of how changes in society can alter the meaning of symbols used on material culture within that society.

This paper will discuss how the pineapple came to be a decorative motif and how the meaning behind the symbol changed over time. The use of the pineapple as a symbol changed from one of wealth to one of welcome, particularly in the United States. How people viewed the pineapple since its discovery sheds light on how the pineapple is currently recognized as a symbol. This paper will also address the historical nature of symbols and whether or not the definition of a symbol can be dynamic, therefore retaining meaning within a society.

Limited research has been done on the subject of the pineapple, particularly as a decorative motif. Two distinct groups divide current scholarship over the research of the pineapple as a crop or decorative plant and research on the pineapple as a symbol. Publications relating to pineapples as a produce crop or decorative plant are useful for discussing the pineapple as symbol due to the research done on the pineapple's past. The discussion of the pineapple's distribution around the world can help to pinpoint when the pineapple came to be known and popular in a particular society. By first examining the horticultural history of the pineapple, researchers can trace its social history and use as a symbol as well.

The scholarship available regarding the pineapple as a decorative motif exists mostly in few printed materials and information on the internet. The bulk of information available on the Internet is usually referencing a single source, an article written by Hoag Levins. Most books dealing with the pineapple as motif are décor and home style books. In these publications, pineapples are given a fairly brief mention. Usually these are anecdotes on the history of the pineapple and its symbolic meaning, which relates to why it is depicted on the object. These books are based on the collective remembrance of what the pineapple means concerning material culture. These are often idealized and romanticized notions that change over time and distance, but they beg the same question asked in the opening lines of this paper: Are those meanings wrong just for being romanticized?¹

Currently very few books examine the pineapple from a more scholarly approach. One is *Pineapple Culture: A History of the Tropical and Temperate Zones* by Gary Y. Okihiro. This book uses the pineapple as an avenue on which to explore the history of tropical regions, in particular Hawaii. Using Hawaii as a case study of the tropics, Okihiro explores the way the pineapple is used as a symbol in which to promote the tropics. In regards to the pineapple's use as a symbol of hospitality, he concludes that it is because of the fruit's use in decorative arts that it became a symbol of hospitality, even though it may not have originated as such. A second book studying the pineapple from a scholarly approach is by Fran Beauman entitled, *The Pineapple: The King of Fruits*, which draws a similar conclusion. She argues that the pineapple originally conveyed status and that many current representations of the pineapple are actually pinecones, an influence from the Romans.²

To discuss the use of the pineapple as an American symbol, the fruit's past must be explored in order for the modern interpreter to be able to see the pineapple as people did in the past. In this way one can see how the pineapple gained the widespread prestige required to become a widely recognized symbol that has remained so recognizable and popular over time.

Christopher Columbus discovered the pineapple on his second voyage to the Americas. Columbus landed on the island of Santa Maria de Guadeloupe de Extremadura, which is today's Guadeloupe, on November 4, 1493 and was given a pineapple by the Arawak people. This was the first

¹ Levins, Hoag. “Symbolism of the Pineapple: Being the Brief and Colorful History of a Truly American Fruit.” <http://www.levins.com/pineapple.html> (accessed Sept. 15, 2009).

² Gary Y. Okihiro, *Pineapple Culture: A History of the Tropical and Temperate Zones* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 172.

Fran Beauman, *The Pineapple: The King of Fruits* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2005), 1.

mention of the fruit and subsequent voyages continued to praise the wonderful fruit of the Americas. Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdes on his voyages to America in 1513 called the pineapple “one of the most beautiful fruits I have seen wherever I have been in the whole world...(having a) beauty of appearance, delicate fragrance, (and) excellent flavour.” Along with this description, Oviedo also sent to King Ferdinand the first drawing of a pineapple, immediately catching the interest of botanists. Many botanists during this period were nobility or from a wealthy background. They actively sought out new plant species and the distinctiveness of the pineapple impressed them. This led to not only rapid importation of the fruit, but also prestige associated with owning the pineapple among the upper class.³

The pineapple quickly spread to other tropical regions where the fruit could be grown. Sailors noticed that the consumption of the pineapple was a way to avoid scurvy. The plant was also slow to rot, taking several weeks to ripen and staying edible for an extended period. This discovery helped to spread the pineapple to ports around the world. In 1548 the pineapple was well established in Madagascar, and by 1590 the pineapple was being commercially grown in India. The quick spread of the pineapple around the world shows that the plant was not only easy to grow and export, but that it was also a popular and welcome addition to a region’s agricultural potential. Okihiro states that, “The pineapple, as a food and object of social and economic value, circulated the globe on the currents of European commerce and globalization.” The European commerce in Okihiro’s statement refers largely to the efforts of the English in spreading the fruit to the many corners of its large empire, which were the first tropical areas to grow the pineapple.⁴

The cultivation of the pineapple centered in Western Europe. In these places, the pineapple grew in hothouses at enormous expense. Many members of the nobility in England and France kept thousands of the plants in constant production. The Duc de Bouillon in France kept 6,000 plants. Not to be outdone, the Duke of Portland in England had a hothouse large enough to contain 10,000 plants in 1779. Keeping this number of plants at a constant warm temperature year-round in England was no little expense. This contributed to the pineapple quickly becoming a symbol of wealth as these growers made their success in raising such a rare and difficult produce quite public. Most commoners, with the exception of sailors, would have never seen a pineapple, perhaps only in illustrations. It would not be until improvements in ship technology, which allowed for

³ Okihiro, *Pineapple Culture*, 81.
Claudia Hyles, *And The Answer Is a Pineapple: The King of Fruit in Folklore, Fabric, and Food* (New Delhi: Swankit, 2001), 22.

⁴ Ibid.; Okihiro, *Pineapple Culture*, 82, 90.

faster transportation of produce, would pineapples be physically available to the middle class.⁵

In the early 1800s, pineapples began to appear in London’s street fruit stands due to the advances in steamship technology. Even though pineapples were now available to the general public, they were by no means cheap. In 1820, a pineapple sold for ½ to one crown each. Adjusted to 2009 United States currency that is the equivalent of \$35 for a single pineapple. For a very special occasion, a hostess could acquire a pineapple, but they were not the usual middle class table fare. To the wealthy, however, the pineapple began to lose some of its prestige. The hothouse production of pineapples by the wealthy plummeted, as pineapples were now commonly available. This changed the pineapple’s position in society, as they became available both physically and symbolically to the middle class. With the wider availability of the fruit, the pineapple motif became much more common in commercially available household goods, but less so in the decorative tastes of the wealthy.⁶

The early days of the pineapple in America are not well documented. Presumably, pineapples were much more common in the United States than they were in Europe due to the close proximity of the United States to where pineapples were grown. Even so, the pineapple retained the symbolic status it had gained and lost earlier in Europe. Wealthy Americans used the pineapple in the same manner as the wealthy previously had in England, namely for a symbol of what they wanted to convey about themselves. They wanted to be associated with the graciousness of the nobility. Okihiro makes the statement in his book *Pineapple Culture* that the pineapple “conveyed ostentation, wealth, power, and the worldliness of its proprietor with ties not only to mother England but to her daughter colonies like the West Indies.”⁷

How England and colonists from England perceived the pineapple carried over from the Atlantic to America. Due to the popularity of the pineapple in England, many imports from the motherland featured the pineapple motif, especially after the motif’s popularity declined. In fact, the pineapple was one of the most prevalent decorative motifs in the mid 1700s. In colonial America various household wares, especially food consumption related objects that featured pineapple decorations, were widely available. Period advertising listed such objects as a specialty of the shop advertised. In June 1766, a shop in New Jersey advertised its various pineapple wares, which included; teapots, dishes, bowls, and other place settings as pieces in a distinct decorative motif. Many other luxury goods from England

⁵ George W. Johnson, *The Gardener’s Monthly Volume, The Pine Apple; Its Culture, Uses, and History* (London: R. Baldwin, 1847), 10.
Hyles, *And The Answer Is a Pineapple*, 24.

⁶ Johnson, *The Gardener’s Monthly Volume*, 10; Hyles, *And The Answer Is a Pineapple*, 32; Okihiro, *Pineapple Culture*, 87.

⁷ Ibid., 165.

featured the pineapple, including textiles, furniture, silver, and cutlery. These goods brought across the ocean from England “carried with (them) a subtle implication of an elite social standing, because (the pineapple) had long been the exclusive prerogative of wealthy and educated people. The pineapple as a symbol of ostentation migrated from Europe to the United States as decoration on silver and ceramic dinnerware, appearing on American tables by the eighteenth century.”⁸

The sauceboat in Figure 1 is an example of an early use of the pineapple motif on exported goods to the American colonies. This ceramic table piece (ca.1765) has a pineapple fruit appearing in the center of green foliage, possibly representing the pineapple plant itself. The plates featured in Figure 2 also depict examples of the pineapple motif used in ceramic dinnerware. Here the pineapple is placed along the edges of the plate in a very prominent position and size. These two examples of formal dinner pieces, one an accessory and the other a fine formal plate, show that as a symbol the pineapple was often portrayed prominently and clearly on items in dinner services used when entertaining.

Pineapple themed ceramics were popular for a short time in England during the 1760s. The popularity of the pineapple motif however, quickly faded. By 1770 Josiah Wedgwood expressed his relief that all of the remaining ceramics featuring the pineapple had been sent to the American colonies as a way of liquidating them as they were no longer selling in England. Like many decorative elements in America, it seems that the colonies were not only a few years behind what was popular in English decoration, but also dependant on Europe for what would be in current fashion. This may be the case with the pineapple motif, but in America, the symbolic meaning of the pineapple continued to change and maintained popularity in the home.⁹

In colonial America the homes of wealthy and influential people became the centers of social happenings. One dramatic way to make an impression was with a pineapple. Not only was the pineapple a recognized symbol of prosperity, it was also a visually striking fruit with unique color, large size, and a crown of foliage. When served, the presentation of such a notable fruit honored and flattered guests. This could be the basis of the pineapple as a symbol of hospitality as it was served as a sign of respect to the visitor. Because of the appearance and meaning behind the fruit, banquet table centerpieces featured pineapples as the focal point for large and impressive displays. This is even true today in fine settings such as upscale restaurants, weddings, and even cruise ships. (Figure 3) Many authors have noted that in the American colonial period it was common for the pineapple to be rented out by fruit sellers for an evening centerpiece setting. A single fruit could be rented several times over until being sold to

⁸ Beauman, *The Pineapple*, 128; Okihiro, *Pineapple Culture*, 89, 164.

⁹ Colonial Williamsburg website, www.history.org.

the end user who then made the fruit part of the actual feast, greatly impressing the guests.¹⁰

Early American’s experiences and associations with the fruit formed the pineapple as a symbol of hospitality. As we have seen, the pineapple was widely used as a decorative centerpiece and dessert finale. The pineapple was also used as a unique and fun motif on nearly everything as a decorative feature. This was true in nearly every aspect of the home, but especially the kitchen and dining room. From the pineapple motif’s introduction in the mid 1700s, it has been featured in many whimsical uses such as butter molds (Figure 4), glassware, and plates, such as in Figure 5. Decorative ceramics were also created in the shape or color of a pineapple, such as jugs and pitchers as seen in Figure 6.

For an object or motif to be universally recognized as a status symbol by members of society it begins to appear in the upper levels of society. This is true even today when one considers that brand name clothing and higher end luxury items must first create a foothold within the upper class. The name recognition and what it symbolizes trickles down through lower economic groups losing the original meaning, such as representing the clothing or luxury items themselves. The meaning changes from identifying a product into identifying a concept; in this case, the pineapple becomes a symbol of wealth and prosperity. For this to occur, there needs to be not only acceptance and belief in what the symbol represents, but also the desire to associate with that created identity to improve one’s own societal standing.¹¹

The upper crust of society as well as all other levels appropriated the pineapple motif. Fine china, silver, and glassware survive today, but there were many other interpretations of the pineapple used in everyday life’s more ordinary forms. The door screens seen in Figure 7 show the use of the pineapple motif. These are panels inserted into the frame of a door, possibly for a kitchen cabinet for the storage of dishes or food. The woodworker could have used any manner of venting the cabinet; holes or slits were popular. Here he chose to arrange the openings in a design that resembles the pineapple; two fruit on each panel in a mirror image separated by the central diamond shaped vent. The body of the fruit is stylized and not immediately recognizable as a pineapple. The leaves that protrude from the top of the fruit however, are depicted here as radiating out and up. This is an interesting example, as usually the pattern of the pineapple’s distinctive body is the dominant motif. Here it is the leaves that indicate representation of a pineapple. This particular example is also interesting as it shows the use of the pineapple in a rural built, country craftsman piece, not in a high style or formal use more commonly seen.

¹⁰ Levins, “Symbolism of the Pineapple”; Okihiro, *Pineapple Culture*, 89.

¹¹ Twitchell, James B., *Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College, Inc., and Museumworld* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 257.

Another use of the motif was for personal accessorizing. Usually the pineapple existed in the home as a presentational decorative element to visitors. The perfume flask in Figure 8 is a more personal object than the public objects in the home. Here the pineapple is seen in a literal form, it is clearly a pineapple. Many other representations of the pineapple employ a certain amount of ambiguity in how the pineapple is portrayed. Sometimes the stylistic impression is what was desired, but then sometimes people simply wanted to see the pineapple as itself. This could be because it either pleased them due to what it meant to the owner, provided a whimsical decoration, or was simply a pleasing image, with or without a symbolic meaning. Sometimes a pineapple is simply a pineapple.

There are many examples of the pineapple as a decorative element in home goods. The root of the symbol lies in the history and the usage of the pineapple. From the pineapple's discovery, it was associated with wealth, power, and ostentation in England. The meaning did not seem to change much over time in England; it stayed a symbol for wealth and enjoyed a relatively short popularity span. In America however, the symbol changed from its original meaning to one of hospitality and style. In early American history, the pineapple was used as a symbol to associate the owner to the graciousness, distinction, and affluence of the European nobility. These meanings changed due to the medium on which the image was portrayed. In Okihiro's book he quotes a writer from 1945 as saying, "Because the fruit played such an important part in the social life of the time and appeared as a decorative motif on so many objects which had to do with the welcoming, sheltering, entertainment, and refreshment of guests the idea of hospitality became attached to it and is now fairly widespread."¹²

This statement leads to a fascinating new way to view the pineapple in decorative arts. Items of material culture used for certain purposes can lead to new meanings for the symbols used upon them based on the emotions felt when the items are in use. For example, any of the entertaining objects found in the Figures section of this paper were used to welcome and entertain guests. The emotions of hospitality generated during the event encouraged people to remember the event as a wonderful time. Any items used at the time could be associated with these fond memories; sometimes a single object can bring back powerful emotions. The decorative element included on an object would make the object more noticeable, memorable, and therefore more likely to have an emotion attached to it. In the case of the pineapple, guests noticed the pineapple on an object and from that point forward associated that symbol as a symbol of hospitality.

Would this be an example of fictionalizing and romanticizing the experience of colonial America? Okihiro argues in his book, *Pineapple Culture*, that the association with hospitality is a manufactured meaning

used by historic houses and museums in the early 1900s as a way to explain the use of the pineapple and to diminish viewing the pineapple as a symbol of empire and conquest. Beauman also states her belief that twentieth century Americans have confused not only the image, but also the meaning of the pineapple with that of the pinecone, used even earlier than the pineapple. So does that mean that the viewer or presenter of the pineapple as symbol is only perpetuating mistaken history? Perhaps, but not necessarily. The use of the pineapple as a symbol of hospitality is alive and well today, probably even more so in the Southeastern United States. Here the pineapple has come to mean, "Welcome to our city/establishment/home. Please feel at home." The symbol is everywhere, shops, homes, and even public art, such as the water fountain in Figure 9. So does it matter that the meaning behind the symbol has changed? Not at all! The meaning of a symbol is the meaning the viewer associates with it regardless of past associations. The question posed at the beginning of this paper was, "What is a symbol?" Using the pineapple, this paper demonstrates that a symbol can be anything used to convey a meaning, and as this paper has also shown, a symbol's meaning can be dynamic over time, distance, and culture.

Illustrations



Figure 1: Cockpit Hill (Derbyshire) molded creamware sauce boat, ca. 1765. Note pineapple depicted in center.
Photo Credit: Cowan's Auctions Inc.

¹² Okihiro, *Pineapple Culture*, 172.



Figure 2: Crackleware plates, raised pineapple design, date unknown.
Photo Credit: Rago Arts and Auction Center



Figure 3: John F. Kennedy wedding, 1953. Note the pineapple used as a distinctive feature in the fruit course.
Photo Credit: Lisa Larsen



Figure 4: Wooden butter mold with central pineapple decoration, date unknown.
Photo Credit: GoAntiques.com



Figure 5: Pineapple themed plate. Note that the plate is not flat in the bottom, the center is raised making this plate an entertaining piece, not a place setting. Date unknown.
Photo Credit: GoAntiques.com



Figure 6: Majolica pitcher with body shaped and textured like a pineapple, ca.1880s.
Photo Credit: deceevoice



Figure 7: Pineapple motif vents on cabinet door panels, ca. 1840. Note the representation of the leaves protruding from the top of a pineapple.
Photo Credit: Worthpoint.com



Figure 8: Small silver perfume flask with high relief pineapple decoration, date unknown.
Photo Credit: Worthpoint.com



Figure 9: Pineapple motif water fountain, 2008, Waterfront Park, Charleston, South Carolina. The pineapple today means "Southern Hospitality", and is actively marketed as such.
Photo Credit: Loran Berg