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William Moorcroft Flamminian 1905

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Individuality unbound: William Moorcroft's relationship with Liberty & Co, 1898-1912

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The launch of William Moorcroft's Florian ware in September 1898 at the London showroom of J Macintyre & Co clearly caught the eye of Liberty's. In a note written the following month, Moorcroft recorded a scheduled meeting with Alwyn Lasenby, cousin of Arthur Liberty, founder of the firm; he had been invited to send samples of his work '1 doz. Vases, other decorations. Mr Lasenby.' [1]

Liberty's had been at the leading edge of design in the decorative arts for more than two decades, and their commissions for fabrics, wallpapers, furniture and silver from designers such as Dresser, Voysey, Crane and Knox were helping to define a New Art, soon known in Italy as the *stile Liberty*[2]. The store retailed the work of several small potteries, established to a lesser or greater extent in the spirit of Morris, and often patronised by royalty: C.H. Brannam, Aller Vale, Bretby, Della Robbia. Little surprise, then, that they should have noticed Moorcroft's Florian ware, the work of a young designer who, although working at the heart of industrial Staffordshire, was attracting the attention of both commercial and art press for his 'abundance of originality' [3] and 'thoughtful art'[4].

1. Iris in Liberty palette 1901

As he did for other fashionable retailers, Moorcroft created for Liberty's bespoke variants on Florian designs, their individuality deriving from a distinctive palette of celadon and blue, to which yellow would later be added, tones very much in keeping with the store's acclaimed fabrics (**1**). Within months, though, Liberty's were not simply ordering Florian vessels in their own bespoke palette, they were inviting Moorcroft to submit new design suggestions. In a letter of 24 May 1899, one of the earliest surviving communications, we see this relationship in practice 'Mr Lasenby is attracted by the rough sketches you forwarded for him to see, and is of opinion that if you produce a few examples on the lines of those he has marked with a red cross (X), he can then better judge their merits, and would be pleased to discuss same with you.'

2. Crocus 1902

These discussions were clearly very productive, and led to some of Moorcroft's most innovative pieces. Fred Miller's *Art Journal* review of Florian was evidently based on Liberty examples; he drew attention to the 'particular tone of ... pale celadon with deep mazarine blue enrichments', and noted in particular their 'harmonious result'[5]. One of the vessels illustrated was this Crocus vase (**2**). The quality perceived by Miller derives in part from decorative technique, what Moorcroft had called in a notebook entry under the heading 'Liberty notes' 'a softer bleeding of colour'. But that is not the only source of this 'harmonious result'. The vessel displays above all a fundamental integrity of line, ornament and colour: its striking verticality offers the merest suggestion of curve, just as the crocus itself is rendered between bud and flower, and the colours, still blended, are yet to crystallise into clearly defined lines. This is not just a vase, it is a vision of imminence, the embodiment of energy yet to be released.

Moorcroft would express this creative principle in an article later commissioned by the *American Pottery Gazette* 'In adding ornament to a form, we should always support construction, and add a note in the same key as is struck in the shape itself, and never more than that which accentuates the form.'[6]

From the start of the new century, Moorcroft's designs were characterised by their experimentation with non-floral motifs. Having introduced variations on the peacock feather in 1899, he moved to a completely different decorative subject: Tree. The earliest surviving examples are in Liberty's distinctive palette, and it is possible that the motif was first developed for them, to be marketed under the name Hazledene. An order dated 15 April 1902 included this request 'In addition to above order, please forward of the new ware with trees a variety of forms to value of £50'. These two early examples (**3**) show the extent to which Moorcroft varied his treatment of a single motif. Trees of different profile are imagined according to the chosen form, creating a differential balance between tree and landscape. In the taller vessel, he uses colour too to enrich the effect, taking us through a continuum of blended tones to an area of warm yellow; it is situated at a critical point in the object, where form begins to open out and décor offers a glimpse of receding depths. This was a striking series, at the border of the representational and the stylised, neither fine art nor 'mere' ornament[7]; it retained the largely symmetrical structure of Florian design, but with a much looser treatment of space. One can imagine it was an example of this new design that Moorcroft presented to Arthur Liberty in 1902, doubtless for his birthday (13 August); he understood the value of the store's interest in his work, and Liberty, writing on 28 August 1902, was clearly appreciative of Moorcroft's art 'I beg you to accept my cordial thanks for the charming surprise you have so kindly prepared for me. I shall prize your gift immensely'.

3. Two early examples of Hazledene 1902

The design was soon noticed and, inevitably, pirated. Lasenby wrote to Moorcroft on 13 February 1903 'The fact of the vase which the City House has, having been issued without being stamped is no excuse, as they perfectly well knew the source of the origin whether it was stamped or not, and I think you would have very little difficulty in proving this to the satisfaction of any Judge ....'

His comment tells us much about the success of the design, but also about the relationship of the designer and the store. Such was the distinctiveness of Moorcroft's ware for Liberty's, even the absence of the retailer's stamp would not raise doubts about its identity.

Another of Moorcroft's designs for Liberty's dates from just this time; it was sold by the store under the name Claremont, and would remain in production throughout the decade and beyond. Moorcroft noted its origins in a diary entry on 28 January 1903: 'Mr Lasenby suggests the use of a toadstool in decoration'. Further entries recorded his development of the idea until finally, on 21 November 1903, he noted 'Sent first package Toadstool decoration, L & Co'. Lasenby may have suggested a motif, but Moorcroft's resultant designs were a combination of quite radical innovations in colour, form and decorative structure. Immediately striking in this early example

(**4**) is the object's form, its compressed body on the verge of collapse. And just as the vessel seems to implode, the regular structure of decorative design is also dissolving; there are traces of alternating primary and secondary motifs, but quite without symmetry, each toadstool having its own distinctive character. But for all the implied disintegration, the vessel exudes great energy. The ochre engobe, barely visible beneath a wash of inky blue, seeps in different concentrations into the toadstools themselves, which surface in sundry shapes, colours and aspects across the rippled contours of the vessel. Their dominant tones of ochre and russet are striking variants on some of the most unstable ceramic colours, emerging boldly and unrestrained from all sides. This was a quite distinctive conception of modern ceramic art, a far cry from the more abstract Secessionist ware of Léon Solon and John Wadsworth, created for Minton's at just this time. More Expressionist than Art nouveau, it expresses the vigour of nature, but celebrates too the potter's skilful manipulation of colour and clay, and the artist's integration of ornament and form.

4. Claremont 1903

Moorcroft's experiments for Liberty's continued throughout the decade. The following year, he created two new series which, like Florian, stood apart from contemporary styles. One, known as Tudor Rose, clearly referenced popular, rose-inspired designs in neo-Georgian style, but re-figured them completely. In this particularly radical example (**5**), a simplified, almost geometric representation of the traditional rose motif occupies a completely original shape, an eccentric

5. Tudor Rose 1904 with an example of Eighteenth Century 1905

fusion of the *meiping* and the double gourd. If the ornament in Moorcroft's more traditional Eighteenth Century series suggests neo-classical control, nature tamed and made decorative, this vessel, with its capricious form and vivid jade tone, draws the eye not to the harmony of trailing stems but to the tracks of colour descending unscripted from the opening flower heads, reaffirming the authority of nature.

6. Flamminian 1905

No less progressive was a series of vessels first registered in the same year, and sold under the name Flamminian. In this early example (**6**), the form has a distinctive simplicity of line, its sloping shoulders decorated with a roundel of abstracted flower motifs, from which streams of colour flow in random patterns down the body; caught between movement and stasis, it suggests a moment of molten energy frozen in time, recorded in clay. It is an object designed to be contemplated, its characterful trails stimulating the imagination, their effect varying with every angle of vision. It is an embodiment, too, of individuality; it can have no template, each example will be different, depending on the circumstances of its decoration, the particular conditions of its firing.

With its minimal ornament, this was, in some ways, quite atypical of Moorcroft's work. In its stark simplicity, it was close to the aesthetic of Tudric pewter, launched by Liberty's in 1903, and whose restrained decoration Arthur Liberty had explicitly distinguished from the 'fantastic *motif* which it pleases our Continental friends to worship as *l'art nouveau*'[8]. In its spirit, though, Flamminian embodied many of the qualities of Moorcroft's ceramic art: individuality, integrity, expressiveness, a celebration of potter and nature. In 1905, he drafted a commentary on this series, the basis of an article by Arthur Veel Rose, Head of Ceramics and Glass at Tiffany's; it was a telling profession of faith. 'Simplicity, the Alpha and Omega of all great effort, is the main characteristic of this ware.... In this pottery, the forms in all cases are expressive of the material, there being no evidence of producing forms that are wanting in fitness. The beautiful iridescent colour is in the body of the ware, the whole elements being in perfect fusion.... The fire plays its notes upon the pottery, and leaves its expression in thousands of different forms, as varied and infinite as nature herself. At one moment one sees results echoing the beauty of crystals .... At another moment is depicted the spirit of the sea shore, as seen in the beautiful lines left by the waves on the sand'[9].

He sent a copy to Henry Woodall, one of the Macintyre directors; his reply, dated 25 September 1905, gives an idea of its impact 'When in Cornwall last week, I gave some consideration to the character of sea sands, and found there was more variety in the forms they take than I had looked for.'

With its rich colour and simplicity of ornament, Flamminian was an extremely versatile conception. It was highly popular with Liberty's, whose many surviving orders for 'New Red Ware' included both vases and a wide range of functional objects, from coffee cups to trinket trays, clock frames to ring stands. Such was its success that it remained in production throughout this decade and well into the next.

It is quite characteristic of Moorcroft's diversity that, alongside these minimalist objects, he was also creating more exclusive, traditional designs with lustre glazes, many of which were adopted by Liberty's (**7**). Aesthetically, these vessels are poles apart from Flamminian: forms are more conventional and ornament more graphic, the delicacy of natural motifs enhanced by the lustrous glaze. These were very special objects, to be admired, but from a distance; the glaze was

7. Two vases with lustre glaze 1906–08

soft, and would wear with regular touching. Like the natural world they evoked, their life was fragile, to be treasured.

At the end of the decade, Moorcroft produced for Liberty's one of his most celebrated series, returning to a Pomegranate motif he had first used nearly a decade earlier in another creation for the store. In this *kantharos* of 1902 (**8**), the fruit was embedded in a formal, almost abstract frieze, encircling the classic Greek form. Here, though, it led to a range of vessels which were the embodiment of opulence. Immediately striking in this example (**9**) is the richness of colour. In the same year as Bakst's first vibrant designs for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, Moorcroft and Lasenby had clearly been discussing the development of new, bolder palettes. In a letter of 22 December 1909, the potter announced his project 'I am delighted with the colour impressions you gave me yesterday during our conversation. Yes! We will put into our

8. *Kantharos* with early Pomegranate motif 1902

9. Pomegranate 1910

Western pots some of the luxuriance of the East. You have fanned into flame a keen desire to obtain luxurious colour'.

Moorcroft was not working with Bakst's 'barbaric hues' [10] of jade, crimson and orange, nor yet the standard blue, turquoise and red of Iznik ware; this was a palette of more seasoned tones, harmonised rather than starkly contrasted. An ochre engobe is evident behind all the motifs, merging with the shaded reds of the pomegranate, the autumnal glow of the leaves, the tonal variety of the berries. And the pomegranate itself is the perfect focus for this 'luxuriance', a fruit whose cultural associations of fertility, prosperity and rebirth were themselves abundantly dispersed, from Greek mythology to Islamic legend, from Biblical narrative to Chinese art.

Moorcroft, significantly, set the motif in a vision of mellow fruitfulness, emerging from a range of forms characterised by their soft curves. Colour and ornament combine to create a beguiling effect, exotic but not remote, luxurious but not extravagant, a vision of harmony and plenty for the start of a new decade. Moorcroft noted its success in a diary entry '30 June 10: Met Mr Lasenby and Mr Knight. Order, Liberty & Co., £400. Express general satisfaction of new Pomegranate ware'.

This was a series he wished to promote at every opportunity. He included it in a display of his latest pottery at the Royal Institution (26 May 1911), where Gilbert Murray was giving a lecture on 'The Greek chorus as an art form'. And, as a letter of 24 May 1911 makes plain, he turned to Liberty's not just as a retail outlet, but as an exhibition venue for his newest creations 'We have sent today about fourteen pieces of your pottery, principally Pomegranate design, all as good as possible, to the Royal Institution of Gt Britain .... May one presume to ask you to accept the same for your collection in Regent St? '

To examine the pots made for Liberty's is to witness Moorcroft's creative energy in the first decade of the new century. His experiments in form, ornament and colour were taking ceramic art in new directions, quite different from the glaze-focussed creations of Burton, Howson Taylor or Moore, the organic, sculpted forms of Edwin Martin, or the stylised fantasies of de Morgan. This is not to say that his most innovative work was reserved for this store. Many designs initially made for Liberty's were adapted for other high-end outlets, not least in the US. Claremont, Flamminian and Pomegranate were taken up by Shreve of San Francisco; Tudor Rose teaware, bowls and vases, by Wright, Tyndale and van Roden of Philadelphia; Hazledene and lustres by Tiffany's of New York. Conversely, other new creations were not produced for Liberty's, from designs with stippled textures developed in 1903 to two highly sophisticated series featuring wisteria and pansy motifs, launched the year after Pomegranate and characterised by their delicate, pastel tones.

Stylistically, his work for this store made little reference to the kind of simplified floral motifs which characterised the work of F.H. Rhead (for Wardle's) or Simmance (for Doulton Lambeth), both of whom were retailed by Liberty's. Nor did they echo the clean lines and pared-down forms of the *stile Liberty*, be it the stylizations of Voysey or the radical conceptions of Knox. But his pieces for this store do include some of his most striking experiments in colour, from the delicate tonal harmonies of celadon and blue in their bespoke Florian palette to the haunting yellow highlights of Hazledene, from the characterful glazes of Flamminian to the luxuriance of Pomegranate. The reputation of Liberty's fabrics was based as much on their original, organic colours as on their designs; and from the start of his career, Moorcroft's underglaze colours, created with his own mixtures of metal oxides, attracted the attention of critics for their richness and depth.

But what Liberty's appreciated in Moorcroft's pottery perhaps above all was its individuality and expressiveness. As contemporary reviews regularly pointed out, no two examples were identical. And for all the apparent stability of a design name, these objects were constantly evolving, as Moorcroft used different palettes or forms, structures or decorative effects to explore the possibilities of an initial idea. An example of Claremont made in 1903, for instance, bears little resemblance to one dating a decade later; indeed, Moorcroft did not really produce designs at all, he created individual art objects (**10**). And yet each had its own integrity, a harmony of ornament, form and colour; they were the conceptions of an artist potter following his personal inspiration, in three dimensions. In his assessment of Flamminian he noted, tellingly 'The whole is conceived and controlled by one mind, which results in a perfect cohesion in all parts'.

What was true of Flamminian was true of all his vessels; his aim was not to create a style, it was to be himself.

And Liberty's understood this. If their fabrics, jewellery or silver were rarely credited to a named designer, but simply marked Liberty & Co, the implied originator and guarantor of quality,

it was not so with Moorcroft's pottery; this was stamped 'Made for Liberty & Co.', but it was signed too, in full, by Moorcroft himself. These objects were not presented as the expression of a store, but as the creation of an individual, signed as a fine artist would identify his work (**11**). And many of their surviving orders reflect this recognition of his individuality; they stipulated few specific requirements, making only occasional references to particular shapes, and just general indications of motif or palette:

10. Contrasting examples of Claremont 1903 and 1911

£100 Tudor Rose design in Vases, Pots and Bowls
£25 in Florian design, shapes as suggested
250 pieces Red Flamminian
150 pieces Claremont (cheerful colours)

11. The distinctive base of vessels 'Made for Liberty & Co.' signed by the potter

Liberty's clearly valued this relationship. Moorcroft's diaries record the date of many meetings to discuss his latest work, sometimes involving Arthur Liberty himself, or John Llewellyn, who commissioned many designs for fabrics, silver and pewter ware. And the store constantly encouraged his innovation. On 11 April 1901, Moorcroft noted 'Received enquiry from Liberty for new shapes (photograph)'; a letter of 15 September 1904 expressed eagerness to see examples of his latest work: 'We have not yet received the designs of the new potteries promised by you. We should be glad to have these as early as possible'; and an order dated 9 January 1906 ended with this open invitation: 'We shall be pleased to see you with any new samples you may have produced'.

And yet, paradoxically, this highly creative association contributed almost certainly to the well-documented tension of Moorcroft's relationship with Henry Watkin, General Manager at Macintyre's, which would eventually lead to the closure of his department[11]. The problem was not that Moorcroft's designs were not making money, they were, Watkin clearly felt, however, that the full benefit of this creativity was not being felt by Macintyre's. Liberty's, one of the factory's biggest customers, clearly enjoyed special concessions, and on 27 November 1907, a resolution by the Directors explicitly targeted the store. 'It was decided to advise Messrs Liberty's that owing to the advance in price of raw material, it was necessary to increase prices 10 per cent.'

In his 1909 diary, Moorcroft recorded a further sign of growing pressures ' [HW] referred to work done in dept. (complainingly) for Liberty, to my selling to Liberty at ordinary prices. This was his sense of gratitude.'

And the same issue informed a Minute dated 2 May 1912, recording a decision to make a surcharge on art wares sold to retailers without the factory's identifying mark. The Directors

clearly understood the commercial appeal of Moorcroft's pottery, and sought to take advantage; but they stopped short, significantly, of applying this levy to Liberty's.

Trademarks were considered, and it was decided in the event of anyone wishing for Macintyre ware without the Macintyre stamp, except Liberty's, an extra charge of twenty per cent be levied.

Whether Watkin himself supported this exemption is not recorded. But what is clear is that Moorcroft's relationship with Liberty's had become the focus for a more deep-seated difference between the General Manager's commercial ambitions, and the artistic instincts of his Head of Ornamental Wares.

On 22 April 1911, Moorcroft summarised a conversation with Watkin 'H.W. refers to Liberty orders being only £500. When he requests one to design a small badge for the Delhi Durbar which he imagines will produce £1000. Imagines. He suggests cynically that this is a piece of greater value than all my other work in the year. The usual cynicism regarding L & Co. Had to remind him that our orders for the same pottery were £1500 at least'.

To suggest that a 'small badge' commemorating the new monarch's attendance at a magnificent pageant in his honour would be of 'greater value' than Moorcroft's art wares, was disputable from an aesthetic, and perhaps even from a commercial standpoint. But it illustrates clearly the tension between manufacturer and artist, the one seeking to confine the activities of the other. Watkin's observation implied a desire to focus on designs suited to large-scale production; he showed little interest in the more individual, expressive work which characterised much of Moorcroft's work for Liberty's. It was, at one level, a sign of the (industrial) times. Walter Crane had characterised the modern designer 'chained to some enterprising firm' in 1892[12]; Bertrand Rhead's metaphor, nearly twenty years later, was no less stark, 'The British potter works in a groove of a very straight and rigid sort'[13].

Watkin may have wished, increasingly, to place Moorcroft in a 'groove', but Liberty's were a means of escape, providing an outlet for some of his most creative work. They had recognised his originality, the commercial value of his output and the aesthetic significance of his works. Their support and encouragement were crucial in allowing him to realise the ambition he had first voiced to Arthur Veel Rose, author of the first US review of his pottery, 'I have always been charmed with the sense of freedom and individuality that characterises their [Asian potters'] work. It was after long dreaming of what was possible in this direction that in 1898 I was first able to express my own feeling in clay'.

It is little surprise that they would invest in his new works, when Moorcroft finally left Macintyre's in 1913.

Endnotes

1. All unpublished materials referred to in the course of this article are contained in the 'Personal and Commercial Papers of William Moorcroft' SD1837 Stoke-on-Trent City Archives
2. For a detailed exploration of this subject, see Levy M *Liberty Style: The Classic Years, 1898–1910* London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson 1986 and Morris B *Liberty Design 1874-1914* London: Octopus Books 1989
3. *Pottery Gazette* October 1898 p1248
4. 'Florian Ware' *Magazine of Art* March 1899 232–4 p234
5. Miller F 'The Art Pottery of Mr W. Moorcroft' *Art Journal* 1903 57–8 p58
6. Moorcroft W 'The Potter and his Art' *American Pottery Gazette* May 1905 np
7. An expression coined by Day LF 'Mere Ornament' *Art Journal* 1901 18–22
8. Liberty A 'Pewter and the revival of its use' *Journal of the Society of Arts* 52:2690 10 June 1904 625-46 p638
9. Veel Rose A 'Flamminian Ware' *American Pottery Gazette* 2:6 February 1906 p37
10. Lancaster O *Homes, Sweet Homes* London: Murray J 1939 p58
11. For a full discussion of this relationship, its causes and consequences, see Mallinson J *William Moorcroft, Potter: Individuality by Design* Cambridge: Open Book Publishers 2023 freely available on Open Access at https://www.openbookpublishers.com/books/10.11647/obp.0349
12. Crane W 'The importance of the applied arts and their relation to common life' *The Claims of Decorative Art* London: Lawrence & Bullen 1892 106-22 p115
13. Rhead B 'International Competition in Artistic Pottery' Pottery Gazette April 1910 455-7 p455