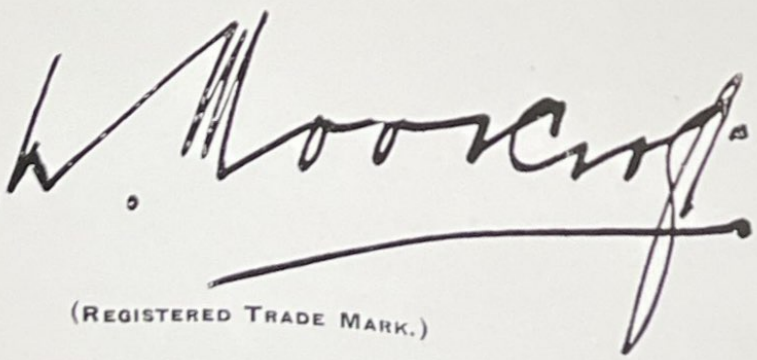
MOORCROFT

(REGISTERED TRADE MARK.)

POTTERY.

EACH PIECE SIGNED 

(REGISTERED TRADE MARK.)

Signed by Design:
the making of William Moorcroft

by Jonathan Mallinson*

William Moorcroft signed his pots, or at least most of them. It was one of the characteristics of his pottery to which journalists, retailers and customers drew attention from the early years of his career at the factory of James Macintyre & Co. That they did so suggests that this was quite a distinctive practice among potters at the turn of the twentieth century; to trace its development is to trace the making of a name.

It would be wrong to suggest that in 1898, when Moorcroft took over direction of the art pottery department at Macintyre's factory, no ceramic ware carried the imprint of (some of) those associated with its creation. Far from it. Factories had begun to mark their products with institutional stamps from the early nineteenth century, and as art pottery began to emerge as a distinctive form of decorative ware in the 1870s, pots increasingly carried the sign or signature of the decorator or maker[1]. In some cases, to sign ceramic ware was equivalent to signing a painting; Marc-Louis Solon, Emile Lessore and Thomas Allen, for instance, all trained artists, signed some (if not all) of their work for Minton and Wedgwood, in full, and in full view. They were putting their name not so much to a decorative object in its entirety, but to a work of art applied to a ceramic canvas;[2] their mark enhanced the value of the work, and, by implication, the prestige of the factory.

For decorators and designers more generally, though, such recognition had not been commonplace. Walter Crane, describing the beginnings of the Art Workers Guild (founded in 1884), evoked a situation where artists were rarely identified:[3]

> Up to about 1880, artists working independently in decoration were few and far between, mostly isolated units, and their work often absorbed by various manufacturing firms [...]

From this date, though, some firms allowed, even encouraged, decorators to identify themselves. Many artists working at Doulton Lambeth, for instance, inscribed their initials, either on the side or the base of the pots they had decorated; Della Robbia pottery, established by Harold Rathbone in 1894, carried the marks of its decorators, and the same was true of Royal Barum ware, and of Burmantofts faience, which, from the 1880s, together with the regular incised mark of the factory, frequently included the decorator's initials,[4] often formed as monograms, one further artistic sign of the decorator.[5]

---

* Jonathan Mallinson is Professor of Early Modern French Literature at the University of Oxford, and a Fellow of Trinity College. He has a long-standing interest in British art pottery, in particular the work of William Moorcroft.

[1] See G.Clark, *The Potter's Art: a complete history of pottery in Britain* (London: Phaidon, 2004), p.107

[2] R.L. Hobson, giving the Solon Memorial Lecture, reported in the *Pottery Gazette* of February 1915, suggested that plaques, rather than vases, were a more appropriate medium for Solon's art:
There was no doubt that his work was seen to best advantage on the plaques. In vases, the perspective of rounded contours was apt to distort the figures and to conceal from the immediate gaze parts of the composition without which the subject was incomplete. Moreover, the vase forms themselves competed with the ornament, and withdrew attention from the design – a thing which had its disadvantages even when the vase itself was beautiful. On the flat surface of the plaque, on the other hand, the design was complete and unchallenged. It was, in fact, a picture on porcelain [...]

[3] V.Bergesen, *Encyclopedia of British Art Pottery 1870-1920* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1991), p.24

[4] See J.A.Bartlett, *British Ceramic Art 1870-1940* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer, 1993), p.32. As for Burmantofts, the factory stamp is often accompanied by 'various painted or incised initials or monograms by artists'; see Bergesen, p.52.

[5] See Bartlett, p.27. It was not always the case, however. Bretby ware usually carries the factory mark, the impressed initials of Henry Tooth, the founder, but very rarely an artist's mark; the same is true of Ault pottery.

In cases such as these, the decorator was also the designer. Where this was not the case, and the artist was following the design of another, this same co-existence of decorator's and factory marks might also be found. On de Morgan ware, for instance, which carried the monograms of some of the principal decorators, the factory mark represented de Morgan's identity as designer. In the case of independent designers, though, identification was not always explicit. The ceramic designs of Lewis Day, Crane or Voysey, for instance, for such firms as Maw & Co.,or (later) Pilkington's, are by no means always attributed. As for Christopher Dresser, some of his designs for Wedgwood 'bear his signature in the decoration'[6], and in an article on Linthorpe Pottery (where Dresser was Art Director from 1879 to 1882) in the *Pottery Gazette* of August 1915 (p.849-53), it was noted:

> In the first stages of Linthorpe Ware, the pieces are stamped with the word 'Linthorpe' above 'Chr. Dresser', facsimile signature. (p.853)

It is striking, though, that Dresser remained a designer with no role in manufacture; the article in the *Pottery Gazette* makes this clear:

> Dr Dresser never had anything to do with the manufacture of the ware, and had no knowledge of the glazes and colours. These glazes and colours, so far as they were original, were the invention of Mr Tooth.

For Dresser, design was paramount, and its realisation, it is implied, was perfectly and infinitely replicable by either human or mechanical means. Pots bearing Dresser's mark are certainly uncommon, and one might assume that the mark, usually impressed or stamped, was not applied by Dresser himself; where it does occur, it implies as much the desire of the factory to claim association with the designer, as it reflects the designer wishing to mark his association with the pot.

To identify oneself as the designer of a pot in its totality, and to do so with a mark applied by hand, was, in 1898, an unusual occurrence indeed. And yet this is just what William Moorcroft did. The earliest designs thought to be those of Moorcroft, decorated by transfer-printing and marketed under the name 'Aurelian', did not bear his signature. Whether this is because they were produced during Harry Barnard's period as Director, or because Moorcroft did not in fact design them[7], or for some other reason, cannot be known. The first pieces which were signed, or initialled, were those with tube-lined decoration, some, but not all, bearing the stamp of the range with which he would rapidly become associated: Florian ware.

Moorcroft's situation was quite unlike that of Dresser, Crane or de Morgan; he was not an independent designer or the owner of his own factory, but an employee. Nor was he an artist decorator, like Hannah Barlow, but the originator of designs realised by a team of decorators under his close direction. What then did this act imply, initiated by Moorcroft from his earliest days as a designer ? At one level, it suggests a desire to present himself as the originator of the pot. To leave a defining mark on the ware identified it not just as the product of an anonymous department in a larger factory, designated by the Macintyre backstamp, but also, crucially, as the creation of an individual designer to whom a name should be given. In this way, he echoed an approach implied by Gimson with regard to the furniture to be produced by Kenton and Co, in a prospectus dating from around 1891:

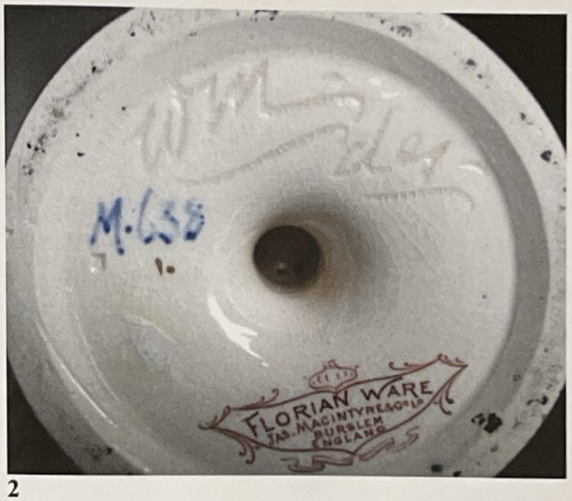
---

[6] See R.Reilly, *Wedgwood: the New Illustrated Dictionary* (Antique Collectors' Club, 1999), p.141

[7] A Macintyre catalogue from 1902 attributes the designs for Dura ware to Moorcroft, but not Aurelian.

> Each piece of furniture will be signed by the designer, and it is hoped that in this way, and by the observance of a high standard of excellence both in design and workmanship, something of the recognition already allowed to works of sculpture and painting may be extended to individual pieces of furniture.[8]

1



2

Indeed, some of Moorcroft's earliest signatures resemble more closely the writing of his name, carefully inscribed [1]. The name was followed invariably by the abbreviation des.; to do so was to indicate his status in the firm which employed him, but it was also to underline his role in the creation of the pot. The designer was responsible for its conception, and he implicitly claimed as much recognition as the factory in which that conception had been realised. Significantly, in this space, beneath the pot, where the marks of factory and designer co-exist, the relationship between the two can be seen to evolve. At first, the sign of the designer, either full name or initials, was secondary, sometimes incised quite discreetly, barely visible, if visible at all [2]; alternatively, it occupied the inner foot rim, leaving intact the space reserved for the factory stamp [3]. But this was not always to be, and before long the designer's signature was to be found occupying the centre of the base, with or without the factory stamp, with or without the Florian mark [4] Moorcroft's sense of the value and significance of design was becoming more and more pronounced.

3

4

---

[8] Quoted in M.Greensted, *An Anthology of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Writings by Ashbee, Lethaby, Gimson and their Contemporaries* (Lund Humphries, 2005), p.32

What is also different, though, about Moorcroft's mark as designer and that of Dresser or de Morgan, is that Moorcroft's was applied by hand, by him. As such, it implied a function and a meaning much broader than his self-identification as the mind behind the design; it suggested something, too, about the relationship of design and manufacture, and of the status of the object produced. It associated the designer not just with the design in its generality, but also, and just as crucially, with each individual object which bore this mark, which, at a given moment, he had held in his hand and put his name to; to sign a pot was, quite literally, to authorise it. But it was also to approve it. The fact that the signature was handwritten was proof of the designer's presence, bearing witness to the object signed. Early reviews drew attention to this last stage of inspection, undertaken before the final (glost) firing. In the very first article devoted to Moorcroft's work at the Macintyre factory[9], published just over a year after he succeeded Harry Barnard as Art Director, the author may (or may not) allude already to this signature, but he certainly pointed out Moorcroft's close oversight of production:

> But to us one of the most interesting features of this ware is that it bears indelibly the mark of the artist and the skilful craftsman. All the designs are the work of Mr. W.R. Moorcroft; every piece is examined by him at each stage, and is revised and corrected as much as is necessary before being passed into the oven. (p.233)

Moorcroft was not just signing, he was signing off. Fired on the pot in the glost kiln, the signature was not just a detached mark of authorisation, it was as integral and as permanent as the decoration itself.

From a very early stage, the name Moorcroft, so often clearly indicated on the base of the pots, attracted the attention of commentators and collectors; it was the designer, and not the factory, which was being noticed. Already in *The Magazine of Art* article of 1899, the author left mention of Macintyre to the end, p.234:

> Messrs. Macintyre, who are the manufacturers, are to be congratulated on their success in placing before the public a ware that really exhibits evidences of thoughtful art and skilful craftsmanship.

And, after less than five years as Head of the department, Moorcroft's work was included in the *Dictionary of Ceramics* of W.P. Jervis, published in 1902, alongside articles on the more established names of Minton, Doulton and Wedgwood. Significantly, the article was listed under Moorcroft, not Macintyre; in a very literal sense, Moorcroft was making a name for himself. It was in 1904, however, the year of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, held in St Louis, that Moorcroft's signature was first explicitly referred to in critical reviews of his work. An article from the *Pottery Gazette*, of October 1904, 'A Short Visit to the Potteries', pp.1114-15, led with a feature on Macintyre. Moorcroft's prestige was already clear; he was a known name, destined for posterity. Having alluded to the 'electrical and other specialities' of Messrs James Macintyre & Co. Ltd., the article continued:

> But the company have another very important department devoted to the production of artistic ceramics. This branch is under the personal superintendence of Mr. William Moorcroft, an artist who has already made a name for himself, which, whatever now happens, will in the future be classed with the most famous art potters of the country.

---

[9] 'Florian Ware', *Magazine of Art*, January 1899, pp.232-4,

Later in the article, the author made a specific reference to the signature, and drew particular attention to Moorcroft's close association with his work, as much with the decoration and production of each piece, as with design:

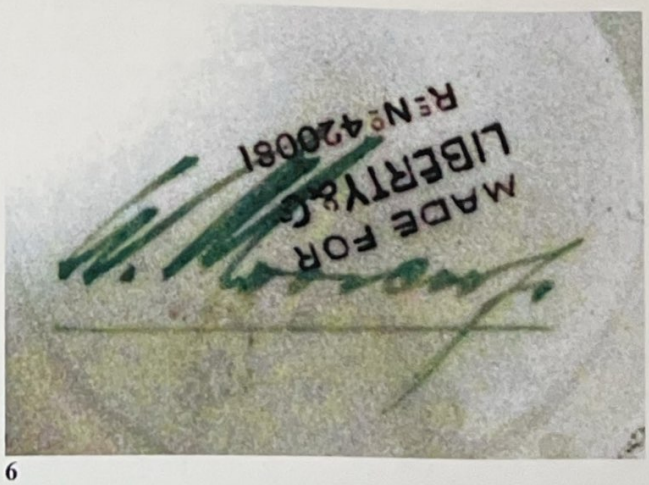
> Every piece of Florian ware bears Mr. Moorcroft's signature, and if it did not, each piece carries with it the impress of his skill. Each design is absolutely the work of his own hand, while the decorative detail is carried out by trained artists under his personal supervision. He examines the work in its various stages, and passes each finally before it is fired[10].

For this observer, the significance of Moorcroft's signature was clear: it was a sign of the unique and enduring quality which distinguished this ware from pottery of the day, and indeed of the future:

> A hundred years hence connoisseurs of pottery will have reason to be proud of the possession of a signed piece of Moorcroft faience. By that time other, and perhaps finer, art pottery will be available, but there can then be no replica of Florian ware.

It was at this time, too, around 1904-5, and almost certainly in the wake of his success at St Louis, where he was awarded a Gold Medal, that Moorcroft dropped the abbreviation *des*. after his signature or initials. This award was notable, not just on its own terms, but for the fact that it was given to Moorcroft rather than to Macintyre's[11]; in the list of award holders published in the *Pottery Gazette*, he figures as 'Wm Moorcroft (designer for McIntyre & Co., Burslem), as distinct from Doulton and Mintons, whose designers were not singled out by name. It was a success which further underlined the fact that Moorcroft was recognised in his own right; what was becoming explicit in reviews, had been confirmed on the international stage. And it was enacted now on the base of his pots. Moorcroft no longer sought through his signature to define his place or function: he signed now not as a designer employed by a larger firm, but in his own name [5].

5



6

---

[10] Moorcroft's practice recalls here that of the architect John Sedding, who in 1888 argued for the closer involvement of the architect-designer in the process of production (quoted in Reilly, p.229):
The designer should be part of the working staff of the factory, see his design take shape, and be consulted as required.

[11] In the official report on the St Louis exhibition, it is Moorcroft's role and significance as designer which takes precedence; Macintyre's role is simply that of exhibitor:
Fifty-seven pieces of pottery, designed by and executed under the direction of Mr. W.Moorcroft, were exhibited by Messrs. James Macintyre & Co.

It was at about this time, too, that the name of some of Moorcroft's most significant retail clients was added to the base of pots; in so doing, the retailer openly associated itself with the designer. One of the first, and most significant, examples is that of Liberty, known to have been in use some years before the St Louis Exhibition [6]. It was not Liberty's custom to identify the designers or manufacturers of the wares they retailed, and in their Yule-Tide Gifts and other catalogues, Moorcroft's name is never mentioned on the pages displaying his wares, presented as 'Burslem Ware' or 'Florian Ware'. Indeed, they were more likely to take ownership of the anonymised object themselves, its quality being assured by the presence of their own name on the base, not that of the designer or creator. In the case of Moorcroft, however, and from the very outset of their relationship (which dated back to the late 1890s), the designer's signature was to be seen. Even at this early stage, the name of Moorcroft was a guarantee of quality, a sign of good design.

As the new century evolved, Moorcroft's signature assumed a further function and importance: to sign his wares now was not simply to identify himself as the designer of a pot, it served also to associate a pot with an increasingly celebrated name. The growing autonomy of the Moorcroft name was regularly reflected (and enhanced) in articles reviewing his work. In the *Art Journal*, April 1905, Wilton P.Rix's article, 'Modern Decorative Wares', pp.113-18, made no mention at all of Macintyre's:

> The productions of several other decorative potters deserves notice. Among these may be named the very skilful treatment of *fungoid* growths in raised outline by Mr. Moorcroft [...] (p.118)[12]

and in an article by John A.Service, in the *Art Journal*, May 1908, 'British Pottery – II', pp.129-37, the designer and the manufacturer were clearly distinguished:

> For many years now the firm of James Macintyre and Co., Ltd., of Burslem, whose principal business is the prosaic one of manufacturing ordinary pottery for electrical purposes, have sought outlets for their enterprise, through the skill of Mr. W.Moorcroft, an art potter, in the making of decorative pottery of graceful form and with simple and appropriate colour ornament. (p.132)

In its report on the Brussels exhibition of 1910, the *Pottery Gazette* of August 1910 focussed on Moorcroft's responsibility for the ware:

> The pottery is that designed by and executed under the personal direction of Mr William Moorcroft, and its beauties are well known to our readers. The decoration is effected entirely by hand direct on the pottery in the clay state, and coloured by metallic oxides before being fired. It is subsequently glazed and fired again, rendering all the decoration absolutely imperishable. Each piece before being fired is signed by the artist. (p.891)

and in 'Some Modern Pottery', published in the *Art Journal*, April 1911, pp.119-26, H.M.Pemberton evoked a number of firms at the forefront of artistic production. He named William Burton, Gordon Forsyth, Richard Joyce and William Mycock in the context of comments on Pilkington's, a firm then at the peak of its success; in the case of Moorcroft, however, it was the designer alone who was mentioned, with no reference at all to James Macintyre & Co. Ltd.:

> Mr Moorcroft has a great command over his craft and a style which he is making quite his own [...] (p.125)

---

[12] It is notable that this very sentence continues with a reference to the long-established and celebrated potter, Frederick Alfred Rhead, who is explicitly associated with the firm who employs him as Art Director, 'Mr F.W.[sic] Rhead of the Foley Potteries'.

Indeed, for some years before his departure from Macintyre's, the public had begun to think of this pottery as 'Moorcroft' ware, and this the world over. An advertisement from Tiffany & Co, in the *New York Times*, 5 December 1907, which refers to Doulton, Minton, Lancastrian and Ruskin, evokes simply *Moorcroft Luster pottery*, and an advertisement from Rouard's Paris shop *A la Paix* refers to 'les Faiences anglaises de Moorcroft'[13]. References to the signed work, and to the distinctive quality of the name, were often associated with the individuality of the ware; these were hand-crafted works, with a vigour and particularity which set them apart from machine-produced goods, and which was completed by one final and equally unique hand-crafted gesture, a signature. This is clear in the article from the *Pottery Gazette* of 1904:

> The individuality discernible in this is, of course, that of Mr W. Moorcroft, the director of the art section of Messrs. Macintyre's works. [...] Not only is his own contribution all free-hand work, but some latitude is of necessity given to the assisting artists. Mr. Moorcroft encourages slight individual deviations so long as they do not interfere with the original scheme. This is how it happens that no two pieces of Florian ware can ever be exactly alike.

And in Service's article in the *The Art Journal*, May 1908, the same emphasis on handwork and individuality is to be found:

> The applied ornament is drawn in slip directly upon the thrown vase [...] No mechanical means are resorted to in its production, each detail being the handwork of the artist; consequently it retains that individuality and expression which distinguishes handwork from mechanical processes. (p.132)

By this time, Moorcroft's signature did more than just signify his identity as an individual; it was seen to represent a ware whose qualities were known, admired and enduring, which celebrated the values of craft and artistry, each piece individually wrought, personal, unique. Moorcroft was more than just a name; he was becoming a brand.

In the years following St Louis, the production of, and the market for, hand-decorated ware was clearly growing, and the marks of designers and/or decorators were increasingly added to ceramic wares. A.E.Gray set up a studio in 1906 to cater for this demand, and permitted decorators to design and to initial their own work; decorator/designers such as John Adams or Dora Billington left their monograms on wares produced in the factory of Bernard Moore, established in 1905, alongside the factory mark; and Alfred and Louise Powell, who began to work for Wedgwood around 1906, re-introduced hand-painted ware to the factory, marking some (if not all) of their work with their painted monograms. And Pilkington, particularly after the appointment of Gordon Forsyth as Art Director in 1905, encouraged its growing team of designers and artists to initial their own work, a practice welcomed by retailers in the US[14]. A notice in the *Pottery Gazette*, October 1907 drew attention to their marking system:

> Every piece is authenticated by the stamp of the factory impressed in the clay, and by the monogram or cipher of the artist responsible for the design or its execution.

---

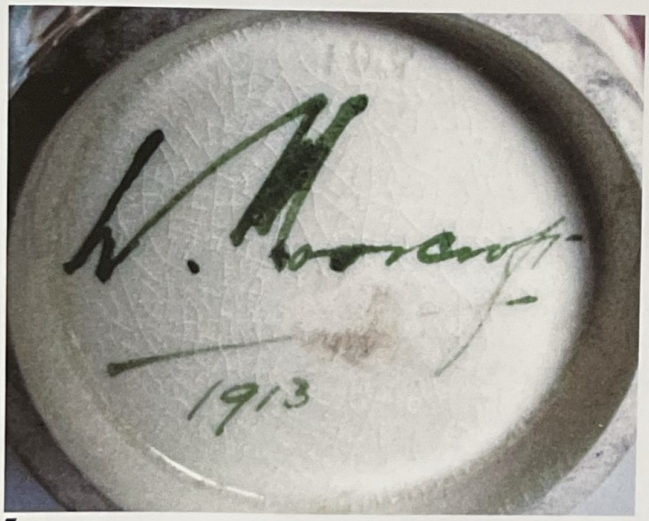
[13] Although this is not the case for John Service's article, 'British Pottery' in the *Art Journal*, February 1908, which refers to: [...] newer potters, like Bernard Moore, Pilkington's, Macintyres, the Brothers Martin or the Taylors of Smethwick. (p.54)

[14] See A.Casey, *20th Century Ceramic Designers in Britain* (Antique Collectors' Club, 2001), p.73

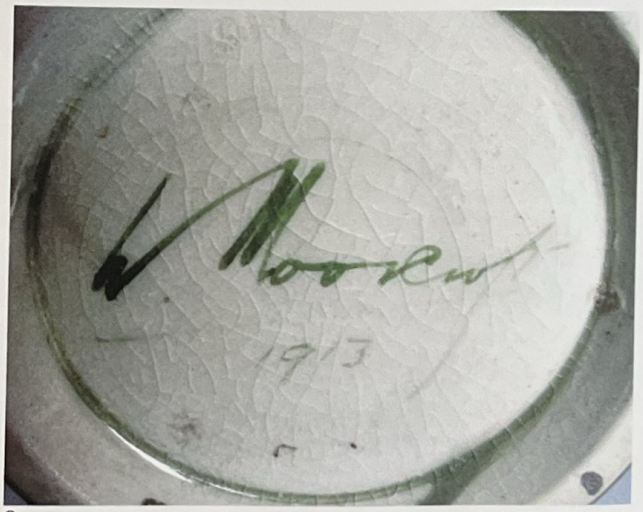
Full signatures, though, were still not common practice, far from it. In 1913, Wood and Sons issued a catalogue for pâte-sur-pâte ware – *Pâte-sur-Pâte: A Notable Revival* – which, in terms which echoed reviews of Moorcroft's work, proudly stated that the decoration was:

> [...] executed entirely by hand by a staff of trained artists under the direction of Mr Rhead. Every piece is signed by Mr Rhead, a guarantee of perfect execution and careful and artistic production generally [...]

The publicity may implicitly (even consciously) recall Moorcroft, but the reality was quite different; the Rhead signature was not handwritten, it was a facsimile, stamped onto the pot.[15] The same would be true of the George Cartlidge signature to be found on the base of his Morris Ware designs for Sampson Hancock, first launched around 1918[16]. The difference is absolute between hand and stamp; Moorcroft's unique practice had not been replicated, but it may well have inspired a look.[17]



7



8

By the time Moorcroft set up his own factory in August 1913, his name was made, and his signature could stand alone, immediately recognisable. In some pieces which clearly moved from the Washington Works to Sandbach Road, the very autonomy of the signature was enshrined in the pot, the Macintyre stamp having been scratched out, leaving the signature in splendid isolation [7]. Other pots of this period bore no factory marks, either from the Washington Works, or from the new factory, but simply the signature, and quite often a date, these being the only, and perhaps the only necessary, indicators of what the pot was and who had produced it [8]. Established at his own factory, Moorcroft's name, designating the new firm, W. Moorcroft Ltd., was impressed on the base of all pots.[18] What is significant, though, is that the factory mark did not replace the signature; the two had quite different functions. The unchanging, upper-case regularity of the factory mark did not subsume his individuality as designer; Moorcroft may have become a company, but he had not stopped being a potter. To sign in the same space as the impressed mark of the firm which bore his name was to

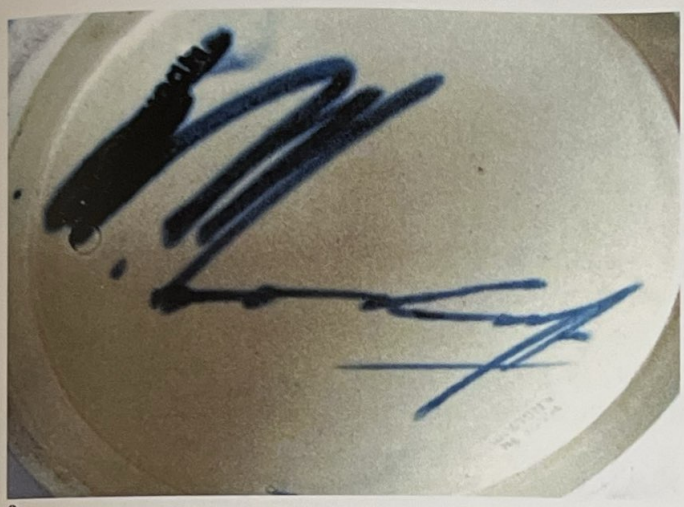
---

[15] See B.Bumpus, *Collecting Rhead Pottery* (Francis Joseph, 1999), p.24. Rhead also introduced a tube-lined range at the same time, Elers Ware, which also incorporated a printed facsimile signature in the backstamp.

[16] See Tony Johnson, *The Morris Ware, Tiles and Art of George Cartlidge* (MakingSpace, 2004), p.86

[17] The *Pottery Gazette* of December 1914 announced the launch of Doulton's 'Titanian' range, 'every piece of which bears a signed, hand-painted subject by one of a staff of first-rate artists.' As was the case, though, with the work of Solon or Lessore, these signatures applied to the painted design, rather than to the completed pot, over which the artist had no control or input.

[18] The name was followed by 'Burslem'; from 1916, as required by law, 'England' was added, and then, from 1918, 'Burslem England' was replaced by 'Made in England'.



9

reaffirm the individuality of each pot, and the personal association of the Director with each piece. At a time of increasingly mechanised mass-production, this was a very telling statement [9].

In journal reports from this period, references to the signature would become a familiar motif. A report on the Ghent World Fair in *The British Architect* (12 September 1913, pp.183-97), Moorcroft's first international outing even before production had started at the new factory, noted:

> Refinement of drawing, following very suitably the shapes of the pieces, and softness and richness of colour, characterise the distinctive pottery produced under the personal direction of Mr. William Moorcroft. […] Each object is signed by the originator. (p.195)

The fact that it continued to attract attention confirms that it was still (and not surprisingly) a unique practice; and it continued to inspire comments on its significance. In a review of the first British Industries Fair, published in the *Pottery Gazette*, June 1915, the writer commented on the 'class of goods […] being shown unlike any other ware that the Fair embraced' (p.658), referring in conclusion to the signature, and the quality of the handmade decoration:

> There was a new floral decoration with an egg-shell blue background, and cobalt blue sprays and white panels, all carried out by hand, as Moorcroft ware invariably is. There were numerous examples of the usual run of designs produced under Mr Moorcroft's personal supervision at his new factory in Cobridge, every piece of which bore his personal signature as a guarantee of its genuineness. (p.658)

For some commentators, clearly, the signature signified, above all, the authenticity of the pot; it was not a Moorcroft pot if it was not signed.[19] At a time when both forgery and illicit imitation were of widespread concern in the industry, this was not a trivial factor[20]. The following year's BIF report (*Pottery Gazette*, April 1916) contained another reference to the signature, which associated it now with quality:

> There was a gentle, quiet, graceful harmony pervading the whole of the pieces shown that is quite noticeable only in the work of the born artist. Every individual piece offered by this firm bears the 'W.Moorcroft' signature, itself a guarantee of artistic excellence. (p.390)

---

[19] This perception was echoed by D.C.Honey, Moorcroft's assistant at the British Empire Exhibition of 1924, who reported a visit to the stand by a representative of the retailers, Graham & Sands, Farnham:
[…] this gentleman stated he has not been able to sell two pieces of Pottery because they are not signed by Mr Moorcroft and intending purchasers will not buy them. (Ms report, dated 17 June 1924)

[20] An editorial in the *Pottery Gazette* of August 1913, openly condemned the practice of facile imitation:
The only reproduction which we consider to be quite unjustifiable is the copying of wares of another manufacturer as soon as he, perhaps by long and costly experimental work, has hit upon something which suits the public taste. The pioneer is all too often discouraged and deprived of his profit by the simian imitativeness of unscrupulous competitors. This art of brain-picking seems to us at least as reprehensible as pocket-picking and merits the most severe condemnation. (p.889)

The same point would be made three months later in the *Pottery Gazette*, July 1916:

> Wm. Moorcroft, Ltd., are now making quite a large variety of articles, some of them strictly ornamental, others both useful as well as decorative, but in every case the embodiment of refinement, and every piece, it should be remembered, certified by the signature of Mr Wm. Moorcroft himself. (p.720)

The signature was seen as an additional quality of the ware, a reassurance of its authenticity, a sign of something special; the pots themselves were distinctive, and so, clearly, even in 1916, was the fact that each one was signed by the originator. This feature was singled out, too, in international advertisements. In the *Evening Ledger – Philadelphia*, 6 December 1915, a notice for the retailer, Wright, Tyndale & van Roden, Inc. Sole Agents in Philadelphia, included the words:

> Moorcroft Pottery [...] An English production of great artistic merit. Hand painted in wonderful colors and designs. Each piece signed. Moderate in price.

It was at this time, precisely, in 1916, that Moorcroft registered his name as a trademark. The effect of this was the growing currency of the phrase 'Moorcroft ware' in press and other reports. Although the pots were not marketed under this name, it provided a convenient, and eloquent means of identifying their origin. The name was attached to the work, literally and figuratively, and it embodied all that the designer stood for. Even though each piece was different, and commentators frequently noted the great variety of Moorcroft's designs (as well as the individuality of each piece), it was the coherence of each piece which enabled the observer to generalise about the ware, to see in it a genre: to say 'Moorcroft', was to say individuality, integrity of form and design, distinctive quality:

> The main feature that strikes one in inspecting a piece of 'Moorcroft Ware' is that in no case does the decoration create the impression that it has been merely applied, but that, on the other hand, it is an integral part of the piece itself, a stage in the creation of the piece instead of a mere afterthought.

This was seen again in the BIF report, published in the *Pottery Gazette*, April 1917:

> He has the real artistic spirit, as is fully evidenced by the consistent characteristics of his ware, every piece of which is hand-thrown to his own designs and marked with his own name, which is a guarantee of its perfect finish. (p.370)

During the First World War, practices began to evolve. A rectangular paper label was introduced, bearing Moorcroft's printed signature and the caption HAND MADE POTTERY; in many cases the pots were also signed by hand, but by no means all [10]. This is hardly surprising at a period when, throughout the industry, supply was outstripped by demand and time was at a premium. By 1919, the signature had become a marketing tool, one of the distinctive selling points of Moorcroft ware; it became the defining sign not only of the man, but of the firm, and of the product itself. It was more than just the designer's name, it attested to the authenticity, quality, and individuality of each piece. An

10

advertisement in the *Pottery Gazette*, dating from September 1919, exemplified the impact of the name. In a full-page display, the words MOORCROFT POTTERY are followed simply by the statement *Each piece signed* and the Moorcroft signature. No pictures, no references to awards won, no other text fills the blank spaces; but what there is, is enough. An advertisement of such minimalism only works when the advertiser is confident that the name is already known, and that it alone will convey its message to the observer. It does not inform, it reminds, reassures; the nature and quality of the ware is enshrined in the name, and guaranteed by the signature. Behind the firm is the man. This advertisement was used, in slightly modified form, throughout 1920, with just W.Moorcroft Ltd. Potters Burslem added as a footer.[21] A focus on the signature characterised other advertisements, too. In *The English Review [Advertiser]*, June 1923, under a heading Moorcroft Pottery, the text reads (simply):

Each Piece of Moorcroft Pottery bears the signature of [...]

followed by the signature, and the advertisement published in The Times on the wedding day of the Duke of York (the future George VI) and Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, 26 April 1923, and placed strategically on the very page in which the Official Programme of events is to be found, the simple statement EACH PIECE SIGNED is again followed by the signature itself.

The same distinguishing feature was alluded to in advertisements for Moorcroft's stall at the 1924 British Empire Exhibition in *The Times* of 29 July 1924; and again in an advertisement in *The Daily Mirror*, of 6 June 1925. The formula remained the same, but, crucially, the displayed signature itself did not; not fixed in a rigid form, but clearly submitted afresh with each new advertisement, it was not a symbolic, formulaic guarantee of quality, but the authentic product of the designer's hand, living, individual, reliable, like the pots themselves.

References to Moorcroft's signature often accompanied references to the artistic quality of his ware. It was not the manufacturer who was singled out now, it was the creator of unique, distinctive wares, the artist; and, like an artist, Moorcroft signed each work individually, and by hand. The report on the BIF of 1919, published in the *Pottery Gazette*, April 1919, p.357, noted:

> The hand-made and hand-decorated pottery offered by this house, every individual piece of which bears at the bottom the autograph of Mr Wm. Moorcroft, was to be seen in many charming combinations of colour, and in every single instance the pieces exhibited that sense of refinement such as artists of the type of Mr Moorcroft cannot fail to depict in their wares.

So integral, so familiar, so particular a feature of Moorcroft ware was the designer's signature that in the *Pottery Gazette* report of the BIF in 1922, it had assumed an adjectival force; to describe the ware in terms of its signed quality was to identify its particularity at a stroke:

> [...] we assume that the general reader of The Pottery Gazette and Glass Trade Review knows something of the high merits of the 'Moorcroft' signature pottery, and therefore that it is not necessary for us to do more than to merely state the facts. From the point of view of the art potter – and for once we hope we use the term in its truest sense – the display must have occasioned Mr Moorcroft complete satisfaction [...] (p.564)

---

[21] Such stark advertisements were not unprecedented. Burgess and Leigh displayed an advertisement in the *Pottery Gazette* of July 1913, which consisted of nothing but the words BURLEIGH WARE presented obliquely across the space, and the name of the factory in small print at the bottom corner of the page.

So defining was this mark, of the man and of his ware, that the signature was displayed prominently on the front of his BIF stalls, for the first time in 1921, and, most memorably, on the elaborate stand designed for him by Sir Edward Maufe for the British Empire Exhibition in 1924.

The final stage in the evolution of the signature came in 1928, when Moorcroft was appointed Potter to H.M. the Queen. This was no trivial accolade, Queen Mary being seen as the embodiment of good taste, and whose collections of artworks had been the subject of articles in the *Connoisseur*; in the report on Harrod's exhibition of Stoke pottery in the *Pottery Gazette* of June 1913, the interest of Queen Mary was expressly alluded to (p.681):

> It is well known, of course, that Her Majesty is an enthusiastic connoisseur, and that she should [...] have paid a somewhat lengthy visit to the exhibition at Harrods', shows at least that her interest did not subside with the conclusion of her recent tour which embraced the Potteries.

Moorcroft marked the award of the warrant with a special stamp, consisting of two elements: a facsimile signature and the designation *Potter to H.M. Queen*, the one complementing and validating the other, the quality of the potter and the taste of the Queen. This very complementarity had been suggested over a decade earlier in the report on the BIF of 1917 (*Pottery Gazette*, April 1917), following one of the first signs of the Queen's interest in Moorcroft's ware:

> [...] their display was of a most attractive character, fully justifying the flattering interest of Her Majesty the Queen, who gave proof of her excellent taste in ceramics by becoming the purchaser of two decorative objects on the occasion of her first visit, and calling again, later on, accompanied by King George and Princess Mary. (p.370)

The fact that Moorcroft had a stamp made at all reflects the significance of the award, and, more particularly, its significance for Moorcroft. Other firms with Royal Warrants did not do this, although several had added the qualifier 'Royal' to their official designation before the privileges of warrant holders had become more carefully and strictly regulated. The fact that this stamp incorporated his signature suggests that for him, and for the public at large, this mark represented all the qualities for which the warrant had been awarded: individuality, quality of design and production, the personal touch. The signature, fixed and impressed on all subsequent pots, was, precisely, his signature of 1928, capturing the potter at this particular time, at the pinnacle of his success even as he was having to adapt to exceptional economic and domestic challenges. The impressed mark Made in England remained on the base of the pots, as it was obliged by law to do; but the new stamp now replaced the impressed trademark name MOORCROFT. It was the ultimate sign of their quality, recognised and approved. Signature and Royal Warrant and Made in England; all was there.

11

And yet all was not there. Because the impressed signature did not henceforth replace the real signature which was added, much more often than not, to the new marks; an impressed signature may symbolise the designer's personal

touch, but it was not in itself personal [11]. By 1928, the signature had become the mark of the factory, its distinguishing feature – it was even, briefly, registered as a trademark -, but it did not indicate the particularity of any single object; for Moorcroft, individuality could not be mass-produced, nor quality control mechanised, with the impress of a stamp. What mattered was not the signature itself; it was the fact that it was signed.

This act was all the more remarkable at a time when other firms were beginning to see the marketing value of a designer's signature, not least with respect to wares which were hand-decorated. This was particularly the case with three designers who, in their different ways, were coming to prominence in the mid- to late-1920s: Charlotte Rhead, Clarice Cliff and Susie Cooper. In each case, though, this sign of the designer's personal involvement was more symbolic than real. The printed backstamp for 'Lottie Rhead Ware', Charlotte Rhead's tube-lined designs for the Ellgreave Pottery (1923-26) included a facsimile signature; her hand-decorated ware for Burgess and Leigh (1926-31) carried a tube-lined 'signature', which may well have been applied by Rhead herself on the earliest or most elaborate pieces, but not on the later, mass-produced wares[22]; and Crown Ducal Ware, which Rhead designed for A.G. Richardson from 1931-1943 also bore a hand-painted 'signature', C.Rhead, but this, too, was almost certainly added by the decorators, and by no means all the designs were so marked.[23] A facsimile signature was applied to some Susie Cooper ware, even while she was working at the factory of A.E. Gray; and a hand-painted or incised signature, but applied by the decorators, might be found on examples of her Studio ware.[24] A.J. Wilkinson used a printed on-glaze facsimile signature of Clarice Cliff from the late 1920s; it would not have been feasible for the designer to sign each piece, nor was it claimed that she did. Nevertheless, an advertisement in the *Pottery Gazette* of 1931 (p.1171) contains the statement:

Your customers want the best, so look for the original signature[25].

The association of signature (facsimile or not) and individual, hand-painted ware, however remote the signature might be from the hand of the designer, was clearly well enough established for this marketing strategy to be effective.

Similar techniques were adopted by Wedgwood for ware designed by external artists such as John Skeaping or Keith Murray. The facsimile signature of J. Skeaping , together with the usual Wedgwood backstamp, was impressed into the side of the figures put into production in 1927.[26] On Keith Murray's designs, first produced in 1933, his name appeared as a printed signature, or a monogram, alongside the usual factory mark; like his pots, moulded, not thrown, the facsimile gave the appearance of the handmade. Such marks were stark, promotional, indistinguishable in form or application from the factory mark. The signature was there to enhance the factory's prestige, it did not record or express the presence of the designer at the moment of production. What was figurative in these cases, was literal in the case of Moorcroft. His ware did not simply look individual, personally signed by the designer; it was.

---

[22] See Bumpus, p.83
[23] See Bumpus, p.92
[24] A facsimile signature, Molly Hancock des, was added to Cremorne, a range of Cremona Ware produced by S.Hancock.
[25] See Casey, p.81.
[26] See Reilly, p.392

In later years, and increasingly from the late 1930s, Moorcroft's manuscript signature became less invariably present alongside the impressed Warrant stamp, or the round, paper label often applied to the base of pots, but which has not always survived across the years. The pots still bore the Moorcroft signature, but with the pressures of time, that signature was often just a metaphor, closer indeed to the practice of other firms. And yet, even at the end of a career lasting more than forty years, it was his signature which was often singled out as his distinctive mark, even at a time when a signature, albeit facsimile, had become much more commonplace on ceramic ware. In a letter written to *The Times*, 8 March 1939, Cecil Harcourt Smith, on the subject of 'Commerce and Art', made an explicit reference to Moorcroft:

> Moorcroft pottery has for some years been recognised abroad as standing in a class by itself among the modern products of ceramic art. Its author and producer is not only a skilled potter and painter, but a chemist of capacity unrivalled in his own line, who is daily by experiment adding to his knowledge. It is not without reason that every important specimen issuing from his works bears his signature, for his individuality asserts itself in every piece [...] (p.12)

And in his obituary, published in *The Times* 16 October 1945, the writer noted:

> All Moorcroft's work was individual in character, 'thrown' on the wheel by hand and not moulded or turned on the lathe. He signed all important pieces [...] (p.7)

Such comments implicitly acknowledged that it was not now, strictly speaking, 'Every pot' which was signed, by hand that is. And yet many still were. If the signature had now come to signify a mark of 'importance', many important pots were still produced during the troubled years of the war.

Moorcroft's handwritten signature, distinctive as it was, suggests much about Moorcroft's vocation as a manufacturer of ceramic art. At one level, it reflects the primacy for him of the hand-crafted. Each piece was not just the soulless realisation of a design, infinitely and perfectly replicable; each pot was individual and individually signed. And just as no two signatures could be exactly alike, each pot was correspondingly unique. In an age of increasingly mechanised, industrial production, promoted in terms of changing aesthetic principles as much as commercial necessity, it was an act of faith, at times even of defiance, to defend and celebrate human craft, to deal in individuality, not in mass-production, to revive what is embedded and yet so often ignored in the very word *manufacture*: the hand.

But the signature implied something also about Moorcroft's conception of pottery; it was more than just the creation of decorative or practical objects, it was a form of self-expression. In one of his earliest statements, recorded in an article on Florian Ware by Arthur Veal Rose, Tiffany's pottery expert, Moorcroft evoked his admiration for oriental pottery:

> I have always been charmed with the sense of freedom and individuality that characterizes their 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. Perhaps no other material is so responsive to the spirit of the worker as is the clay of the potter [...]

To sign was not simply to mark pots with his own name, an evident form of self-expression; it was also to say something about his conception of pottery and his role as designer. For Moorcroft, inspiration did not end with design, it was only truly realised in clay, in the integrity of form, colour and decorative design, of the visual and the tactile. And unlike many industrial designers whose work ended with the completion of their design, Moorcroft played an active role in the realisation of each one; his close involvement with the different stages of production was frequently attested to in critical reviews. An article from the *Pottery Gazette*, of October 1904, for instance, entitled 'A Short Visit to the Potteries', 1114-15, noted:

> The secret of the graceful and beautiful 'Florian ware' [...] is that the particular grace and beauty pertaining to these pieces were conceived by the artist-potter in the beginning, and have been steadily kept in view through every stage. There has been no chance work, no accidental addition to, or omission from, the original design.

In his oversight of production, Moorcroft translated design into its full and complete realisation, like a composer directing a performance of his own work. And, like a composer, Moorcroft's artistic self-expression was not compromised by the fact that it was produced by the craft of others, nor did his control imply that each enactment would be identical, still less, definitive. When he signed the pots, he was not simply claiming ownership of an original design, he was identifying himself above all with its realisation, each individual one, individually. He was there at the beginning, and he was there now at the end.