'The inspiration of an artist': William Moorcroft and Florian Ware

A paper by Jonathan Mallinson presented on 18 January 2025

When, in 1898, the Burslem firm of James Macintyre & Co. Ltd. launched the first designs of William Moorcroft, their newly appointed Manager of Ornamental Ware, the demand for art pottery was at its height. 'Every reception room aspiring to be artistic must contain some specimens of the potter's skill' noted the *Cabinet Maker* in 1883,[1] and by 1897 the number of manufacturers making it was, in the words of one journal, 'legion',[2] from established potteries like Wedgwood, Mintons or Doulton, via smaller, independent enterprises such as the Della Robbia Pottery or C. H. Brannam, to individual makers like Edmund Elton or William de Morgan. But in this crowded field, Florian attracted attention in both the trade and the art press. Just a month after its launch, the *Pottery Gazette* noted its 'entirely different styles of ornamentation',[3] different from anything Macintyre's and, by implication, many other potteries had produced hitherto. And a critic in the *Magazine of Art* went further, suggesting that the very term 'art pottery' was not appropriate for this new work:

> There has been of late years such a large production of so-called 'art pottery' that has almost become a term of reproach, whether regarded from the point of view of design or decoration, that we are glad to welcome one of the most recent developments of ceramic art introduced from the Burslem potteries.[4]

By the time Florian was discontinued in 1904, its originality was celebrated the world over; it was not just different, it was special, in the words of one critic, 'the inspiration of an artist'.[5] But what made this pottery stand out? Why did it have such a remarkable impact? What did it mean to describe it as ceramic art? I would like to approach these questions by looking at a few specific examples, setting them in their cultural context, and exploring how they create their effect. From here, I hope to get closer to understanding why Florian caused such a stir.

Iris (1898)

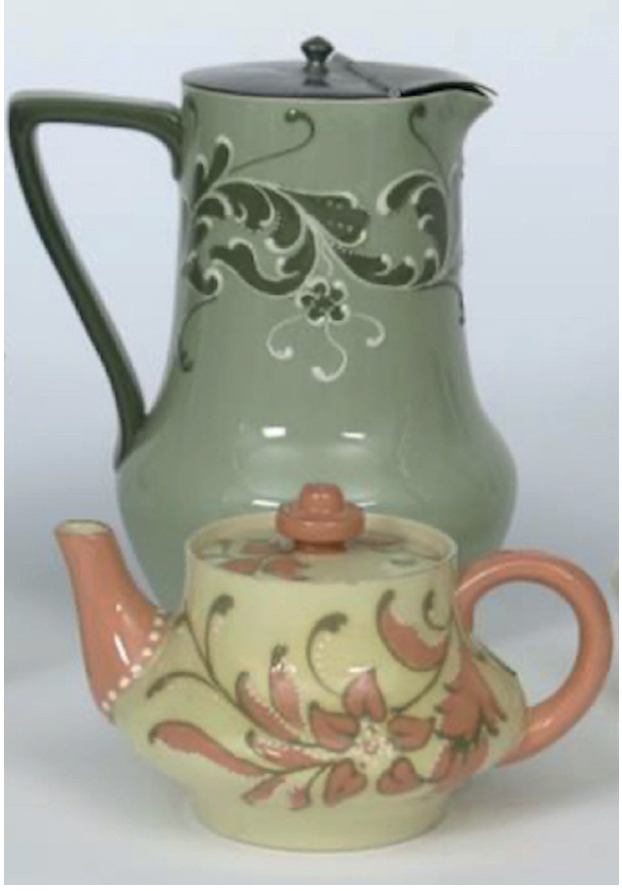
Early examples of Florian were clearly noticed because of their decorative technique. The use of piped slip was not in itself without precedent or parallel. It was a feature of the pre-industrial pottery of Thomas Toft, where trails of liquid clay were used to embellish the edges of applied designs. In more recent times, it was a method of decoration used for some pottery made at Doulton's in Lambeth (**1**); and Harry Barnard, Moorcroft's predecessor at Macintyre's, had used coloured slips in a similar way, both in Gesso Faience and, subsequently, in some of his designs at Wedgwood (**2**).

Moorcroft's application of the technique, though, was quite different, as we can see in this early example of an iris design (**3**). Slip is not used simply to create additional decorative flourishes, as it does in the examples of Tinworth or Barnard, it is the defining characteristic of this vase, the means of rendering a tall iris flower extending the length of this 40 cm vessel. A series of vertical lines capture the observer's attention in the lower third of the vase, gradually opening out as stem, leaves and buds take shape, the outer leaves creating a frame to contain and highlight the flower head. The flower head itself is an eye-catching display of intricate slip-trailing, which renders the flower's undulating outline and exquisite veining. The same qualities are evident too in the subsidiary flower, rising up between adjacent pods.

Notable, too, is the way the iris is depicted, a design determined as much by the form of the vessel as it is by botanical exactness. The flower's outer petals echo the lines of the surrounding leaves, just as the leaves follow the line of the vase from shoulder to narrowing neck. This vase by the Martin brothers, which adopts the same floral motif and dates to a very similar period, suggests a much more natural rendering of the flower (**4**). In Moorcroft's vessel, however, ornament combines with form to convey the energy of organic growth, a tall pot rising up as strongly and as elegantly as the flower which adorns it. It is a celebration of nature captured in a bold demonstration of the decorator's art.

But what is also striking about this vase is that it works with variants of just a single colour. This restraint was significant at a time when colour was a dominant element in much art pottery; it was a direct consequence of Moorcroft's technique of colouring the clay. He did not apply pigment to a once-fired body, or, as many industrial producers were doing, paint with bright

1. George Tinworth for Doulton Lambeth, vase with slip decoration, 1876, 24 cm; Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M.2001.97.1), Wikimedia Commons



2. Harry Barnard for J. Macintyre & Co. Ltd., teapot and water jug in Gesso Faience, *c.*1896; image courtesy of Woolley & Wallis

enamels over the glaze; instead, he stained the body with metal oxides before it had been fired even once. Few commercially available colours could withstand the much higher temperatures of a first firing, and in the course of his career, Moorcroft would develop his own distinctive range. In the earliest years of Florian, however, he was largely restricted to variants of the two most stable ceramic colours, blue and green. But this very simplicity focused attention on the delicacy of line and the harmony of ornament and form.

3. William Moorcroft, vase with iris motifs in shades of blue, 1898, 30 cm

4. Edwin & Walter Martin, vase with iris, wild flowers and mayflies, dated April 1899, 22.5 cm; image courtesy of Woolley & Wallis

Narcissus (1901)

If this vessel is all about line, colour is the focal point in the next example, an urn decorated with narcissus motifs, dating to 1901 (**5**). This different emphasis is evident in the use of slip. Whereas, in the Iris vase, trails of slip created the decoration, here they define compartments to be filled with colour, a technique known as tube-lining. It is not slip itself which captures the attention, but the interaction of colours: a pale blue wash inside a swirling border is juxtaposed with a dark cobalt ground outside it, a leafy frame of green sets off the bright yellow of the narcissus heads. And we are not dealing with single flat pigments; the leaves are rendered in two or more shades of green, and in the flowerheads, at least three different tones of yellow can be seen.

5. William Moorcroft, urn with narcissus motifs in shades of yellow, blue and green, 1901, 21 cm

But this piece is not just about colour. Urns ornamented with floral motifs were a recurrent feature of 19th-century English decorative art; this Crown Derby example is quite characteristic, a classical shape with decoration painted in bright colours in a gilded reserve (**6**). Moorcroft's urn, though, is quite different. It references the Victorian taste for illusionistic ornament, but changes the focus of attention. It does not offer a

6. Désiré Leroy for Royal Crown Derby, urn with floral decoration, 1901, 20 cm; Wikimedia Commons

mimetic depiction of flowers, applied to the surface of the vessel in enamels; the decoration is two-dimensional, created in slip, stained in the body. The flowers are not presented on their own terms in a self-contained panel, they are a part of the object itself, both in their substance and their design, ornament following the lines of the vessel, just as it did in the iris vase. There is a difference of technique here, but one of aesthetic too. The object invites us to admire not the art of a china painter, but the art of a potter, whose technical skill is highlighted in one of the most fragile of all ceramic colours, yellow, and whose aesthetic sense is embodied in the harmony of an object made entirely of clay.

7. William Moorcroft, vase with lilac motifs in shades of blue, yellow and mauve, 1902, 26 cm

Lilac (1902)

Florian was distinctive in its technique, but it stood out too in its design, not least in the way it explored the relationship of form and ornament. We see this clearly in a vase with lilac motifs, dating to 1902 (**7**). Unlike the Iris vessel, which focused on a strong vertical movement within a single leafy frame, clusters of blossom are represented here in a more free-flowing, unhindered manner, at the end of stems which extend in no immediately discernible pattern, and with multiple focal points: one rises vertically halfway up the vessel; another moves to the outer edge of the pot, and continues out of sight; another enters from the left, then arcs back on itself. The top two-thirds of the vase are characterised by space as much as ornament, the clusters of blossom standing out against an expanse of pale blue.

This use of line and space recalls the decorative arts of Japan (**8**), but Moorcroft's design is distinctively his own. For all its apparent spontaneity, it does not have the asymmetry of Japanese art, but nor does it have the regularity of a purely repetitive design; the same combination of motifs returns across the surface, but each recurrence has its own small variations of detail. What Moorcroft creates here is a sense of movement. Both the Iris vase and the Narcissus urn allowed the observer to see one iteration of a pattern from a single, static vantage point, to appreciate the harmony of ornament and form. Not so here. No angle of vision allows an unbroken view; there is always some part of the design awaiting completion just out of sight, inviting the observer to take up the vessel and rotate it, to follow the stems as they extend beyond the contours of the pot.

8. Sakai Hoitsu, folding screen with cherry and maple trees, *c.*1820, 175 x 358 cm; Metropolitan Museum of Art (2018.55.1), Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0

And this dynamic effect is complemented by the way colour is used. Unlike the urn, which worked with contrasts of colour, evident from a distance, this vessel draws us in by its blended shades of blue, yellow and mauve. If the lilac flower attracts by its scent, Moorcroft translates subtlety of fragrance into delicacy of colour. And just as the air carries traces of scent away from its source, the undecorated space at the neck of the vessel takes on the blend of colours which characterise the blossoms beneath (**9**). It is an exercise in synaesthesia, but it is an appeal too to the imagination. As in the Grecian urn celebrated by Keats, this object inspires in the observer an experience more compelling than the reality it depicts: 'heard melodies are sweet, those unheard are sweeter'. When Eliza Simmance created a design using the lilac motif for Doulton, she worked with much starker and static contrasts of colour (**10**); in comparison, the sensitivity of Moorcroft's vision stands out clearly.

9. William Moorcroft, vase with lilac motifs (detail of (**7**))

This vessel shows how Moorcroft uses line and colour to create in clay an experience of natural beauty. But it gives an insight, too, into his approach to the decorative style of a different culture. Florian was pottery rich in allusions to other traditions, but far from seeking to revive a technique or a look, as some of his contemporaries were doing, Moorcroft used them to express his own individuality.

10. Eliza Simmance for Doulton Lambeth, vase with lilac design, *c.*1900, 38 cm; image courtesy of Woolley & Wallis

Violets and Butterflies (1899)

We see this creative response particularly well in our next example (**11**). Decorated with motifs of violets and butterflies, this design clearly references the tradition of representing flowers with birds or insects, known in China as *huaniaohua* and found on painted scrolls and woodcuts from the 10th century to the 19th, in both China and Japan. Applied, too, to ceramics, it was a motif adopted in English art pottery, as the fashion for Japanese decorative art permeated Europe; this example of the Martin brothers dates to 1885 (**12**). The form, too, alludes to Asian culture; the double gourd was a classic Chinese shape, and copied in Europe from the 17th century. This is a vessel, then, steeped in Oriental references; what is significant, though, is what Moorcroft makes of them.

What characterises many versions of the motif is the suggestion of hovering insects and flora set side by side, frozen in time; what characterises Moorcroft's version is a sense of movement. Flowers and butterflies are given a shared delicacy (**13**): the violets bloom at the end of slender stems, traced by the finest lines of slip; the butterflies are rendered no less exquisitely, their antennae barely perceptible. They do not hover, they seem to emerge from the flowerheads, the silhouettes of their wings echoing the upper outlines of the violets; as if released from floral roots, they are allowed to fly free. And this freedom extends even to their distribution on the neck of the vase. The violets are depicted in a loosely recurring pattern around the body of the vase, the butterflies are not; their place is not predictable, pre-ordained, it suggests a more natural spontaneity.

11. William Moorcroft, vase with violet and butterfly motifs in shades of blue, 1899, 22 cm

12. Edwin & Walter Martin, bottle vase with flowers and butterfly, dated October 1885, 23.5 cm; image courtesy of Woolley & Wallis

13. William Moorcroft, vase with violet and butterfly motifs (another view of (**11**))

This effect of fluidity is enhanced, too, by Moorcroft's use of the double gourd form. Whereas the two halves of this vessel shape were often treated as separate, either with a clear marker at the junction of the two sections, or an absence of decorative connection between the two (**14**), Moorcroft suggests its integrity as a form, the continuity of its undulating line. The vessel enacts a seamless process of transformation, of evaporation even, taking the observer from full body to narrowing neck, from flower to insect, from earth to air.

Harmony of form and ornament is one of the most striking characteristics of Florian. Moorcroft's decorative technique created an inseparable physical bond between decoration and body, but it defined too his design spirit. In a handwritten noted dated 4 May 1900, he observed: 'No piece of pottery can be called good, unless it have a perfect balance of parts'.[6] That 'perfect balance of parts' is clearly evident in this vessel.

Cornflower (1899)

These last two pieces illustrate Moorcroft's ability both to capture and to re-imagine the refinement of an Asian aesthetic, his own distinctive visions characterised by their craft and their art: delicacy of trailed slip, harmonies of colour, integrity of form and ornament. This next example suggests a quite different response to decorative tradition, a bold affirmation of his own individuality via the pottery of Iznik (**15**).

In the second half of the 19th century, there was a revival of interest in 16th-century Turkish decorative art, with its flowing lines, stylized floral motifs, and its bright palette of turquoise and blue, red and white (**16**). Individual potters across Europe sought to reproduce its distinctive style and colours, not least Deck, de Morgan and Cantagalli, and pottery in the Iznik manner was produced by larger UK manufacturers such as Mintons or Burmantofts (**17**). Moorcroft's vessel clearly alludes to this fashion. The form recalls

14. Double gourd vase with vegetal scrolls, Qing dynasty, *c.*1720, 20 cm; Metropolitan Museum of Art (79.2.158), Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0

15. William Moorcroft, bottle vase with prunus, saz leaf and cornflower motifs in shades of blue and celadon, 1899, 28.5 cm

16. Iznik jug with swirling floral decoration, *c.*1600, 34 cm; British Museum (1878.1230.468), Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY 2.5

17. Mintons, bottle vase with 'Persian' motifs, *c.*1890; image courtesy of Woolley & Wallis

18. Iznik bottle vase with tulips and roses, *c.*1575, 38 cm; Victoria and Albert Museum (973.1875), Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0

that of the *surahi*, or water bottle, with its swollen belly, and knopped, narrow neck (**18**); the design structure is characteristic of decoration on such objects, the vessel divided into three segments, each decorated on its own terms; and the central section explicitly references recurrent elements in Iznik decoration: the trailing saz leaf and five-petalled prunus.

But if there is Iznik at its centre, Moorcroft's design is framed by a quite different motif. A trio of flowers in the lower section offers a striking contrast in style; and at the top of the vase, the same motif recurs, reaching up and over the band around the neck. Two things are of note. First is the choice of flower. The design vocabulary of Iznik art is dominated by tulips, hyacinths, roses, carnations and prunus; Moorcroft, however, has chosen to depict on this very Turkish vessel a cornflower, a plant native to Europe. But what is also notable about this motif is the manner of its drawing. Moorcroft's flower has none of the trailing stems or arabesque patterns which characterise

Iznik design; nor does it have the simplified, almost geometric stylization which distinguished many of its floral motifs. It is characterised by its compressed flurry of petals and flower heads, capturing the vigour of the plant's composite nature. No other artist represented the cornflower quite like this; it was a very personal floral signature, a celebration of the designer's individuality and of the decorator's skill.

This pot is a bold, individual response to Iznik tradition. Moorcroft adapts the tripartite division of many bottle vases to bring together two very different decorative worlds, Iznik and his own, holding them in a suggestive balance: his ragged cornflower finds a place on a Turkish form, while traditional Iznik motifs are recreated with his distinctive technique of trailed slip. And each works in harmony with the vessel, the curved lines of its body echoed by the radiating petals of the cornflower, its gently narrowing neck accentuated by the delicately trailing saz leaf. This balance is suggested, too, in the palette. The design, first produced in a blue-on-blue version, is created here in blue and celadon; this may imply an oblique reference to cobalt and turquoise, two of the four recurrent colours in Iznik design, but at the same time, this tonality is a distinctive feature of many pieces made by Moorcroft in these early years, another mark of his individuality. It is a design which sets out to be noticed; and it was. Such was its impact that it was one of the pieces illustrated in the first review of Florian ware published in the *Magazine of Art* (**19**).[7]

Peacock Feather (1899)

What one may call cross-cultural energy is a characteristic of many Florian designs. Another example is this vessel (**20**). The peacock feather, a motif introduced to Florian in 1899, featured widely in decorative art during the final decades of the 19th century, achieving celebrity in England in 1877 via

FLORIAN WARE.

VASES, &c., DESIGNED BY W. MOORCROFT.

THERE has been of late years such a large production of so-called "art-pottery" that has almost become a term of reproach, whether regarded from the point the Burslem potteries. We have recently had the opportunity of examining many specimens of Florian ware—as it has been named—and, with but one or two trifling

19. 'Florian Ware', *The Magazine of Art* (March 1899), reprinted by J. Macintyre & Co. Ltd (detail)

20. William Moorcroft, vase with peacock feather motifs in shades of blue, 1899, 22.5 cm

21. Auguste Delaherche, vase with peacock feather motif, 1889, 48 cm; Metropolitan Museum of Art (2013.483), Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0

22. English wrythen ale glass, *c.*1780, 12.5 cm; Wikimedia Commons, A1989C2, CC-BY-SA 4.0

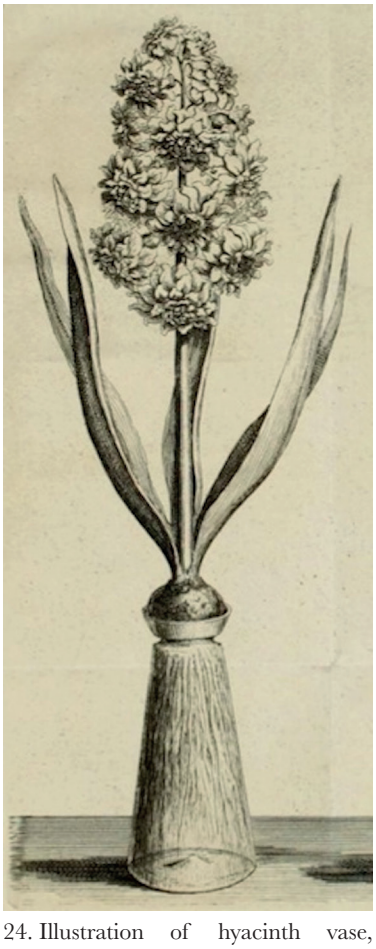
Whistler's notorious Peacock Room in the house of Frederick Leyland. It became an emblem of *art nouveau* in the 1890s, its potential for rich, shimmering colour exploited by leading designers across different media, from Arthur Silver's *Hera* of 1887, one of Liberty's most successful textile designs, to Tiffany in glass and Delaherche in pottery, whose Peacock Feather vase was acclaimed at the Exposition Universelle of 1889 in Paris (**21**). Moorcroft did not have the technical resources at the end of the century to achieve the range of colours or iridescent effects associated with the motif; that he adopted it nevertheless was a(nother) bold affirmation of his individuality.

In comparison with the luminosity achieved by Delaherche or Tiffany, this example is sober. What draws our attention, though, is the object's vitality, the flaring movement of the form (emphasised by the knop at its narrowest point) matched by the swirling rotations of the peacock motif. The feather enters our line of vision at an angle, its origin out of sight, just as the next iteration of the pattern begins at the base, but disappears from view, to be completed a third of a turn away. Moorcroft suggests energy here, but lightness too. The vessel stands on a foot, obscured by the body, thus creating the impression that it is hovering. And this effect is complemented by the flowing lines of the peacock feathers which curl round the body and up the neck, as if caught in its motion, their airiness suggested by a pale colouring at times barely distinguishable from the background blue. This delicacy continues to the top, where wispy feathers soften the outline of the rim. But at the widest point of the vessel, at the centre of this diaphanous movement, the peacock eye itself holds our attention. Its variations on an inverted tear

drop echo the unfurled form of the vessel, compressing its energy into this single focal point, a moment of stillness suggested not through colour but line.

In this object, ornament (once more) gives life to form, and vice versa. But this relationship is more than just structural. Because the form, ornamented by one of the emblems of modern decorative art on both sides of the Atlantic, is not just any form. Its distinctive outline suggests a Georgian ale glass, a quintessentially English object from another age (**22**). If other designers use the peacock motif to evoke a world of lustrous colour, Moorcroft creates an object of quite different expressiveness, one which brings together the English and the cosmopolitan, the past and the present, the useful and the ornamental. At one level, it suggests a domestication of the exotic peacock device, defined and brought to life by a form (ale glass) and technique (tube lining) steeped in national tradition. And at the same time, it finds a place for an 18th-century form in the vibrant modernity of a new century, so often inclined to turn its back on the past. But, most significant of all, it turns the functional into the decorative. For all its origins as a form, this is not a drinking vessel, nor would it serve very effectively as a vase; it is an object of art, rich (challenging, even) in its collision of cultural references, a striking mix of simplicity and sophistication, to be looked at, not used.

23. William Moorcroft, hyacinth vase with honesty seed pod motifs in shades of blue, 1903, 22.5 cm



24. Illustration of hyacinth vase, George Voorhelm, *Traité sur la Jacinte* (Harlem: N. Beets, 1773), p. 138 (detail); Internet Archive

25. Mark V. Marshall for Doulton Lambeth, vase with honesty motifs, *c.*1900, 46 cm; image courtesy of Woolley & Wallis

Honesty seed pods (1903)

The dynamic, eloquent interaction of form and ornament which we see here characterises many Florian designs. Some later pieces, made in the early years of the 20th century, explore this relationship in strikingly creative ways. One example is this object, decorated with a motif of honesty seed pods (**23**).

Immediately arresting is the form. It recalls another 18th-century vessel, a vase shape developed as the hyacinth, introduced from the Ottoman Empire, replaced the tulip as the fashionable flower of the elite, and the practice of forcing bulbs on glass with water swept Europe (**24**). Variants proliferated in England from the 18th century; Josiah Wedgwood took advantage of the craze, producing a range of ceramic examples. The fashion endured in England throughout the Victorian period.

This object could conceivably function as a hyacinth vase, but this is not self-evident. There is an aperture at the base of the bowl to connect it to the stem, and yet the bowl itself is noticeably narrower at the top than at the base, unlike the (more traditional) example illustrated. This implicit tension between form and functionality is suggested too by Moorcroft's choice of ornamental motif. It might seem perverse to take a shape so obviously associated with the exotic hyacinth, and to decorate it with motifs of honesty, a flower whose look, habit and origins could hardly be more different. So, what do such disjunctions suggest?

As he did in the 'Peacock Feather' vessel, Moorcroft has taken a functional form, and creates an object whose function is, above all, simply to be itself. Without its expected complement – a fragrant, colourful hyacinth rising above the bowl – the object draws our attention to its form, the strong upward trajectory, the dominant conical stem and diminutive, rounded body suggesting a stylised embodiment of growth. In its stark simplicity, it presents as a form for the new century, quite different from the elaborate shapes which had characterised much Victorian ceramic design.

This suggestion of modernity in a form dating back to the 18th century is implied, too, in Moorcroft's choice of ornament. The honesty seed head was a motif seen in many examples of contemporary decorative art, from the glass of Daum to the pottery of Doulton (**25**), but its treatment here is quite particular. If designers often focused on the lightness or translucence of the seed heads, Moorcroft makes them strikingly opaque, focusing instead on their outline, abstract in form, immediate in impact. This quality is evident in the object as a whole. A bold dark-blue edge encircles the foot, its colour and curving line echoed in the clusters of seed heads around the base. A narrowing stem, decorated by a single line of slip and by token seed heads, takes the eye upwards to the bowl, its rounded surface occupied by disks. It is a repeating pattern, but there is no obvious front or back, no subsidiary decoration. From whichever angle it is viewed, the vessel has a compelling directness and coherence, an unsophisticated motif creating its own visual commentary on the lines and circles which define the form itself.

This distinctive austerity is reflected too in the palette, shrunk to a single contrast of dark and pale blue, with no intermediate tones; it is an object reduced to its basic elements, to its seed one might say. But what is notable, too, is the texture, the pot's surface stippled from top to bottom, using the same technique as was used to create match strikers. It has a bold visual impact, but a tactile one, too; it is an object made to engage the senses.

In many respects, this object has little in common with the Florian designs which preceded it; its form, its ornamentation, its technique, all are different. Dating to 1903, it has nevertheless the same sensitivity to line and space which characterised the Lilac vase, but it is taken now to the limits of the representational. Flowers are become form, shades are turned to contrasts, giving the piece an elemental, timeless impact.

Tree (1902)

One final example of the innovative quality which characterises many later Florian pieces is the tree design introduced in the spring of 1902 (**26**). Designs in this series were created both in shades of blue, and in green on white; the particular palette of this example, however, in tones of blue, green and yellow, was closely

26. William Moorcroft, vase with tree motifs in bespoke shades of blue, celadon and yellow, marketed as *Hazledene* by Liberty's of Regent Street, 1902, 25 cm

associated with Liberty's, and did not carry the Florian mark. It was illustrated in an *Art Journal* article of 1905.[8]

At one level, the similarities with other Florian designs are clear. Tree has replaced flower, but there is the same vertical energy, the same harmony of form and decoration. Nevertheless, the substitution of flower with tree gives to this design structure a quite different impact. This is seen particularly in the use of secondary ornament. In the 'Iris' pot, for instance, the subsidiary motif complements the energy of the primary; overlapping the narrowing lines of the adjacent pods, its detail stands out sharply against a dark cobalt ground (**27**). This tree design is quite different (**28**). The gap between the primary motifs is not filled with complementary energy; quite the reverse, it is characterised by an impression of expanding space and diminished decoration. Faint, horizonal streaks of colour seem to extend the distance between the trees, their trunks barely visible at the edges of the vessel. The eye is drawn towards a wash of yellow, a warmer tonal palette but which represents nothing. And this sense of openness is emphasised by the subsidiary tree, diminutive in size, and less sharply traced, with a minimum of tube-lining, the colour of crown and trunk beginning to merge with their own background. This is not a realistic effect of perspective, such as one finds on the art glass of Gallé or Daum (**29**); the repeating pattern of ornament is not dictated by observation.

27. William Moorcroft, vase with iris motifs (detail of (**3**))

28. William Moorcroft, *Hazledene* (detail of (**26**))

29. Daum frères, *Messidor*, *c.*1905; Maryhill Museum of Art, Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY-SA 3.0

We might picture a landscape extending into the distance, but the pot suggests, too, a different kind of journey, to the very border of what we see and what we imagine, where ornament seems to emerge from the surface of the pot, or to recede into its depths.

Conclusions

When we look back at these pots, all made between 1898 and 1903, what is particularly striking is their variety. Such is the diversity of Florian ware that one cannot easily date designs by style or colour alone. The 'Violets and Butterflies' vase, for instance, notable for its freedom and delicacy is of a similar date to the more structured Iznik cornflower; both pre-date the much more formal, three-coloured Narcissus urn. And the 'Honesty' and 'Tree' designs, radically different from each other as they are, were created within the space of just one year. For all that Moorcroft was constantly developing new colours and decorative techniques, Florian did not evolve into a single, distinctive look; it was a living series, fuelled and unified by a spirit of experiment.

At one level, it was very much of its time, and echoed the principles of modern design increasingly widespread in European decorative art of the 1890s and beyond: its focus on nature, its sensitivity to line, its antipathy to stylistic revivalism. Hardly surprising, then, that it was enthusiastically promoted by Liberty's of London, the flagship of *art nouveau* in England. And not just Liberty's. It was stocked by some of the most fashionable outlets of the age, on both sides of the Atlantic, from Tiffany's of New York to the gallery of Clain & Perrier in Paris. And yet Florian was quite distinct from the various styles associated with European *art nouveau*, having little of its dramatic stylisations, its sensuality, or its more contemplative mimesis. Nor did it echo the sparer, more angular world of Wadsworth's Secessionist designs for Mintons, or those of Eliza Simmance for Doulton Lambeth. It was different, too, in its relationship with ceramic tradition. If *art nouveau* designers consciously distanced themselves from the past in their search for a new means of expression, Florian often referenced other decorative traditions, Asian, Iznik, Greek or European; but when it did so, as we have seen, it was not to replicate, but to reimagine.

The modernity of Florian was different, more a creative principle than a look, more a spirit than a style. As the new century dawned, decorated pottery took many different forms, but it tended to focus on ornament above all; the vessel itself was implicitly considered to be (no more than) a canvas, by designers and by critics too. In a review of Solon's *pâte-sur-pâte*, in 1890, for example, Cosmo Monkhouse analysed the artist's low-relief modelling on its own terms, even going so far as to note that his decorations 'would be beautiful and complete by themselves' (**30**).[9] The same was not (and could not have been) said of Florian. Reviews, in both the trade and the art press, drew attention to the fact that Moorcroft, quite unusually for the time, was responsible for all aspects of design. The *Pottery Gazette* underlined 'the perfect harmony of ornamentation with form', and explicitly saw this as 'the result of shape and decoration emanating from the same artist'.[10] And a review in the *Art Journal* noted particularly the designer's sensitivity to form as well as ornament: '[…] the decoration does not assert itself too much and so destroy the contour of the pot.'[11] Moorcroft was bringing to pottery

30. M. L. E. Solon for Mintons, vase and lid with *pâte-sur-pâte* decoration, 1898, 34 cm; Victoria and Albert Museum (C.948&A-1935), Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0

not simply the eye of a decorator or fine artist, but the three-dimensional vision of an artist-potter; to look at Florian was not simply to look at ornament, it was to look at an object.

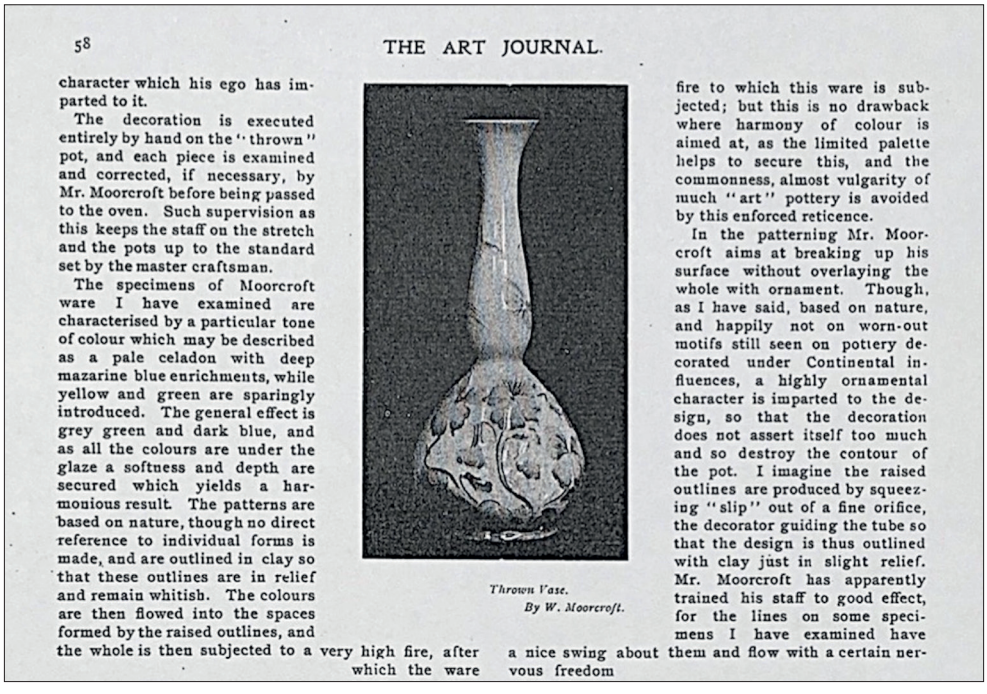
But this synthesis of form and ornament was not the only reason why Florian caught the attention of critics. Within months of its launch, an article in the *Magazine of Art* described Florian as 'thoughtful art', sensing in it a quality more difficult to define, but clearly perceptible.[12] And William Jervis, writing in the US art journal *Keramic Studio*, took a similar line: 'Florian is the inspiration of an artist who has succeeded in giving expression with much humanity to some beautiful thoughts in an imperishable material'.[13] He recognised in Florian 'a distinct advance in ceramics'; it was not simply decorative, it had something to say.

This response was echoed and developed in the *Art Journal*. Like Jervis, Miller picked up the idea of inspiration, describing Florian in terms taken from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 'fine frenzy' given a 'local habitation', thoughts given form:

> […] the reproductions of a few examples of "Moorcroft" ware accompanying these notes will enable the reader to gain some slight idea of what this "fine phrenzy" becomes when it has "a local habitation and a name".[14]

The implicit analogy with poetry was eloquent. Poetry is a creative collaboration of language, form and sound; Florian was a synthesis of ornament, form and colour. Miller saw in it a physical expression of the designer's ideas, pottery to be read; his article was illustrated with a number of examples, one of which being the 'Butterflies and Violets' design (**31**). He did not seek to interpret Moorcroft's 'fine phrenzy'; as he well understood, one cannot simply translate an object into words, any more than one can re-express poetry in prose. And he realised, too, that a few 'reproductions', photos in black and white, could give only a 'slight idea' of the impact achieved by objects of three dimensions, with shades of colour. The effect of Florian could not be conveyed by proxy.[15]

But for all that it was seen to be resistant to analysis, it is clear that Florian compelled attention, that it was pottery to be pondered – and from the moment it hit the market. The trade reviewer for the *Pottery Gazette* was immediately, and intuitively, captivated, *engrossed*; this was not just another novelty of decorative art, easily summarised: 'We found



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character which his ego has imparted to it.

The decoration is executed entirely by hand on the "thrown" pot, and each piece is examined and corrected, if necessary, by Mr. Moorcroft before being passed to the oven. Such supervision as this keeps the staff on the stretch and the pots up to the standard set by the master craftsman.

The specimens of Moorcroft ware I have examined are characterised by a particular tone of colour which may be described as a pale celadon with deep mazarine blue enrichments, while yellow and green are sparingly introduced. The general effect is grey green and dark blue, and as all the colours are under the glaze a softness and depth are secured which yields a harmonious result. The patterns are based on nature, though no direct reference to individual forms is made, and are outlined in clay so that these outlines are in relief and remain whitish. The colours are then flowed into the spaces formed by the raised outlines, and the whole is then subjected to a very high fire, after which the ware

Thrown Vase.
By W. Moorcroft.

fire to which this ware is subjected; but this is no drawback where harmony of colour is aimed at, as the limited palette helps to secure this, and the commonness, almost vulgarity of much "art" pottery is avoided by this enforced reticence.

In the patterning Mr. Moorcroft aims at breaking up his surface without overlaying the whole with ornament. Though, as I have said, based on nature, and happily not on worn-out motifs still seen on pottery decorated under Continental influences, a highly ornamental character is imparted to the design, so that the decoration does not assert itself too much and so destroy the contour of the pot. I imagine the raised outlines are produced by squeezing "slip" out of a fine orifice, the decorator guiding the tube so that the design is thus outlined with clay just in slight relief. Mr. Moorcroft has apparently trained his staff to good effect, for the lines on some specimens I have examined have a nice swing about them and flow with a certain nervous freedom

31. F. Miller, 'The Art Pottery of Mr W. Moorcroft', *The Art Journal* 65 (1903), p. 58 (detail)

many samples that were new since we last called at the London rooms, but the special display we had been asked to inspect engrossed nearly the whole of our time'.[16] The critic was not describing a look, he was reporting an effect. The *China, Glass and Pottery Review* went further still, characterising Florian as 'one of the most original and charming art potteries in the market, daring in its boldness'.[17] Critics felt a compulsion to look, or perhaps to listen. Each in their own individual way, no doubt, but to respond nevertheless.

From the outset of his career, Moorcroft was exploring his originality as a potter in relation to the work of others, past and present. Like Walter Crane, he conceived design as 'a species of language capable of very varied expression'[18] and his first Florian output was a powerful manifestation of that conception. Some gave voice to the designer's sensitivity to nature, some was provocative in its use of cultural references, boldly affirming his own individuality; none tried to imitate or to be other than itself, little was matter of fact, all bore his personal mark.[19] As he noted in his 1902 diary, 'the most perfect art is that which expresses the greatest thoughts by the simplest means.'[20] This was the quality implied, consciously or not, by the *Magazine of Art*. If 'so-called "art pottery"' was little more than 'a term of reproach', Florian had to be considered 'ceramic art';[21] it was not art on pottery, it was expression in clay.

At the start of his article, Jervis implied that the name 'Florian' was no more than a marketing convenience, an 'arbitrary name' which did little to convey the significance of this original ware.[22] It embodied a different conception of what pottery might be as an artistic medium, but what made it special was not its name, nor its technique, nor its look, it was the art of William Moorcroft himself:

> For over one hundred and fifty years no added precious secret in ceramics has been discovered. Florian ware suggests the question to our thoughts as to whether the man and the time have arrived.[23]

The name 'Florian' was discontinued after about 1904, for many reasons,[24] but its spirit would continue throughout Moorcroft's career: constant experimentation, not least with colour, sensitivity to nature and its translation into art, creative responsiveness to the changing and increasingly turbulent times, and, perhaps above all, the ability to make an object speak.

NOTES

[1] Quoted by Bergesen (1991), p. 12.
[2] *Pottery Gazette* (1897), p. 315.
[3] *Pottery Gazette* (1898), p. 1248.
[4] *Magazine of Art* (1899), p. 232.
[5] Jervis (1902), p. 261.
[6] Moorcroft (SD1837).
[7] *Magazine of Art* (1899), p. 232.
[8] Rix (1905), p. 116.
[9] Monkhouse (1890), p. 174.
[10] *Pottery Gazette* (1903), p. 1220.
[11] Miller (1903), p. 58.
[12] *Magazine of Art* (1899), p. 234.
[13] Jervis (1902), p. 261.
[14] Miller (1903), p. 57.
[15] Thirty years later, critics were still responding in very similar ways to Moorcroft's pottery, but used different metaphors to convey its compelling impact. See Mallinson (2022).
[16] *Pottery Gazette* (1898), p. 1248.
[17] Rose (1903), n.p.
[18] Crane (1893), p.7.
[19] This personal quality is suggested, too, in Moorcroft's practice of signing his pieces by hand. See Mallinson (2017).
[20] Moorcroft (SD1837).
[21] *Magazine of Art* (1899), p. 232.
[22] Jervis (1902), p. 260.
[23] Jervis (1902), p. 261.
[24] For a discussion of the growing tensions between Moorcroft and the General Manager of J. Macintyre & Co. Ltd., see Mallinson (2023), ch.3.

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