William Moorcroft, Potter

Individuality by Design

Jonathan Mallinson

I feel there is a need for interesting, individual things. Not extreme, not fashionable, but things that will be the outcome of careful thought, things built with the spirit of love in every part of them.

William Moorcroft

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9. 1924–25: Recognition of the Artist Potter

1. The British Empire Exhibition 1924

As economic conditions continued to deteriorate, many pottery manufacturers remained resistant to calls for design reform. At the conference following the Exhibition 'Industrial Art Today', organised by the British Institute of Industrial Art [BIIA], H.J.Plant (of R.H. & S.L. Plant) distinguished categorically between the potter and the artist; one truly understood the secret of commercial success, the other did not:

> [...] there was a good deal of difference between a potter and an artist. An artist very often had ideals which were not commercial; but a potter was a man who had to make his living out of the making and selling of pots [...].[1]

It was such sentiments which doubtless contributed to the lack of interest among manufacturers for the British Empire Exhibition.' A Minute of the General Purposes Committee of the British Pottery Manufacturers' Federation of 13 June 1923 recorded the 'exceedingly small number' of firms intending to exhibit.[2] Moorcroft, however, was committed to the project from the start. The Director of UK Exhibits was Sir Lawrence Weaver, advocate of contemporary architecture and founder of the Ashtead Pottery, set up to provide work and training for disabled war veterans, and an exemplar of collaboration between potters and modern designers (such as Phoebe Stabler and Charles Herrick). Weaver welcomed Moorcroft's support, inviting him on 6 June 1923 to join the organising committee. He saw in him 'one of the few people with vision' among British potters, and promised him in the Palace of Industry 'a most prominent position commensurate to the beauty of your work'.

Moorcroft's stand, a model of modern exhibition design by Edward Maufe, provided the ideal backdrop for his pottery. In a letter to Weaver of 3 April 1924, he expressed great confidence in his exhibit, sure to 'surpass in quality anything we have hitherto shown'. Moorcroft's conception of his display was reflected in the wording of

1 'British Institute of Industrial Art. Conference on Pottery', *Pottery Gazette and Glass Trade Review* [*PG*] (December 1923), 1976–78 (p.1976).

2 All unpublished documents referred to in this chapter are located in William Moorcroft: Personal and Commercial Papers, SD1837, Stoke-on-Trent City Archives [WM Archive].

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the advertisement for an assistant he placed in *The Times*; this was pottery raised to the level of art:

> Lady (refined), reasonably accomplished linguist, required to receive British, Colonial and Foreign visitors at important art exhibit (pottery of world-wide repute) at and during the Wembley Exhibition.[3]

And so it proved. The stand, with its length of fifty feet (15.25 m) and four oval alcoves housing wares of exhibition proportions, was illustrated in the *Pottery Gazette*. Nothing in the review suggested a manufacturer's stall; this was a total work of art:

> W.Moorcroft, Ltd., Cobridge, have a spacious and dignified stand, which provides a perfect setting for the wares displayed. It is not a comprehensive collection of everything which is produced at the Moorcroft pottery which is to be found here, but a restrained selection of pieces displayed in such a way that each individual piece has a chance to convey its own message and exert its own appeal.[4]

Moorcroft appointed two assistants to supervise his exhibit: D.C. Honey, a war veteran and Liberty's employee, and Hilda Brownrigg, a former army nurse, who had responded to the *Times* advertisement. Their regular reports paint a vivid picture of daily life at the Exhibition, and capture the esteem in which Moorcroft's ware was held. At a time when the public mood was low, his pottery was seen to have a uniquely engaging effect, even from a distance, even on those who had not encountered it before. In a report dated 7 July 1924, Brownrigg noted the reaction of visitors: 'A tremendous number of people come and say that this is the only really beautiful exhibit at Wembley, and as passers-by stop and look this way, one can see their lips forming the word 'beautiful'.' And for many others, it was clearly the stuff of collections, even in these straitened times:

> People from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa have come in and said that they collect your pottery. Lady McGregor of Camberley was here on Wednesday with a party of friends, and is coming again to get some of the pottery.

The display attracted the attention of prominent public figures who wished to include pieces in personal collections. Charles Pellew, the 7th Viscount Exmouth, was President of the New York Society of Craftsmen, and in a report dated 21 July, Brownrigg recorded the admiration of Lord and Lady Exmouth for Moorcroft's distinctive effects of colour:

> Lady Exmouth spent about half an hour looking at the flambé vases, and went off to fetch Lord Exmouth, who came and spent another half hour admiring the vases in the front three cases, and finally ordered two. One of them Lady Exmouth especially fell in love with, a beautiful mottled one with some beautiful moss green tints in with the red. [...] Lord Exmouth is intensely interested in the things, and wants to take the two pieces to New York to show them there how lovely the best English pottery is.

3 *The Times* (16 February 1924).
4 *PG* (July 1924), 1196–98 (p.1196).

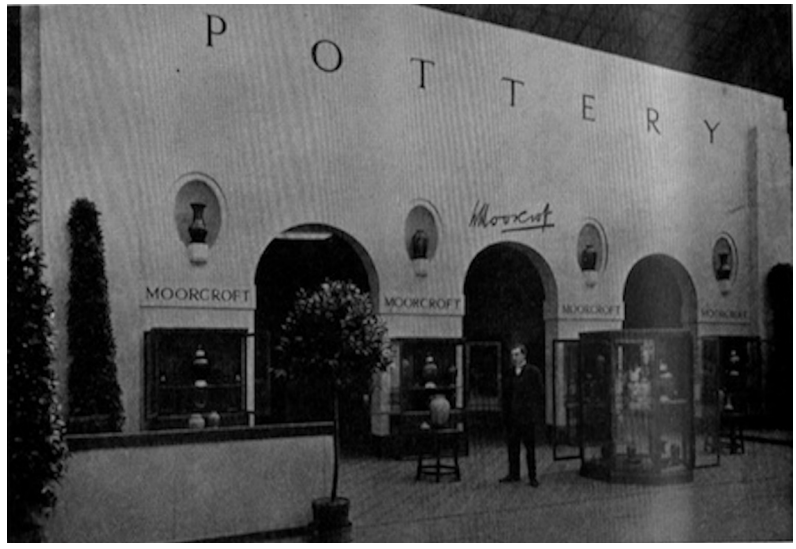

Fig. 74 Moorcroft's stand at Wembley, illustrated in the *Pottery Gazette* (July 1924). 'Personal and Commercial Papers of William Moorcroft', Stoke-on-Trent City Archives, SD 1837. CC BY-NC

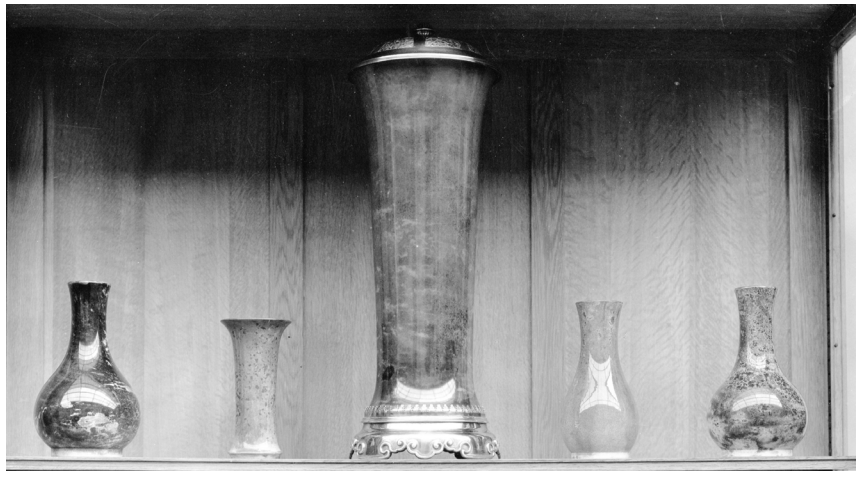

Fig. 75 Contemporary photograph of flambé vases included in Moorcroft's exhibit at the 1924 British Empire Exhibition. 'Personal and Commercial Papers of William Moorcroft', Stoke-on-Trent City Archives, SD 1837. CC BY-NC

And on 4 June, Honey recorded a visit from Sir John Sulman, leading Australian architect and President of the National Art Gallery of New South Wales. Moorcroft's ware was to be found in museums the world over:

> I learned from Sir John that previous to him coming to Mr Moorcroft's stand he had visited the Palace of Arts and seen Mr Moorcroft's pottery. [...] Sir John also stated he had told Major Longden what amount of money he was prepared to spend on pieces of pottery, including Mr Moorcroft. Sir John stated to me that he very much admired the pottery and would like several pieces.

Moorcroft's Wembley display clearly inspired interest worthy of the 'art exhibit' he had envisaged in his advertisement. It is significant, therefore, that he should have decided to participate, simultaneously, at the British Industries Fair [BIF] that year. Normally planned for February, the Fair was re-scheduled to begin a week after the opening of the Empire Exhibition, a change of timetable designed to enable those exhibiting at the BIF to benefit from the influx of visitors to Wembley; the assumption was that no individual enterprise would choose to exhibit at both. And for good reason: a display at Wembley entailed considerable expense for a period of several months; to exhibit also at the BIF would incur yet more cost, as well as creating the need for a second display. The leading (larger) factories confined their efforts to just one exhibit, at Wembley; there was no mention of Minton, Doulton, Wedgwood, A.J. Wilkinson, Cauldon, Copeland, George Jones or Pilkington at the 1924 BIF. But Moorcroft exhibited there, one of just five potteries to feature in *Pottery Gazette* reports on both fairs, the other four being Gray & Co., Pountney, Upchurch, and Carter, Stabler & Adams. That he attended both says much about his ambitions, and about how he saw himself in relation to other firms. The Wembley exhibition gave him a high-profile stage for his finest exhibition pieces, but he would not neglect the main trade fair of the year; his aspirations as an artist potter were not met at the expense of his commitment to a broader public. And this was noticed in the press. *The Overseas Daily Mail* referred to both exhibits, confirming Moorcroft's excellence in the seemingly distinct fields of art and commerce:

> A number of superb pieces are shown, distinguished by perfect potting, the best of shapes, which come from throwing on the wheel, and seductive colour and glaze effects. Specially fine are the ranges of flambé and sang-de-boeuf glazes, and there are some wonderful deep, translucent blues. […] There is an equally fine show, more comprehensive in range, of Moorcroft ware at the British Industries Fair, and these two magnificent exhibits enhance the already high reputation of Mr Moorcroft as artist and potter.[5]

If H.J. Plant had starkly distinguished 'artist' and 'potter', Moorcroft was seen to unite them.

2. Paris 1925

Concern about the competitiveness of British industry was sharpened further the following year, on the occasion of the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris. Explicitly excluding work which reproduced historical styles (still very popular in Britain), it aimed to celebrate the new materials, techniques and design motifs of a modern industrial age, the sinewy lines of nature and *art nouveau* giving way to a more angular and abstract world of the machine. The BIIA took responsibility for the selection of British exhibits, but interest among

5 *The Overseas Daily Mail* (22 August 1924).

pottery manufacturers was limited. For many, the more conservative Empire markets offered greater prospects of commercial success than Europe, where design taste was more progressive and unfavourable trade tariffs made it more difficult to compete. Moorcroft's attitude to the Exhibition was ambivalent. His work sold well in Europe, but in the spring of 1925 he withdrew his agreement to take part; it was not because of a disinclination to participate, but because he was unwilling to have his exhibits selected by the BIIA. On 11 May 1925, the Department of Overseas Trade attempted to reassure him of the Selection Committee's support; their letter was a clear sign of Moorcroft's reputation at this time:

> […] your absence from the pottery exhibit at Paris will be nothing less than misfortune, and I very much hope that in the interests of our national reputation for producing pottery of the very highest character, you will see your way to reconsider your previous decision […].

The Exhibition displayed some of the most radical ceramic design of the age, including many examples of collaborations between artist designers and industry in both Scandinavia and Europe: Wilhelm Kåge for Gustavsberg, Jais Nielsen for Royal Copenhagen, Jean Gauguin and Axel Salto for Bing & Grøndahl, Gio Ponti for Richard-Ginori, René Buthaud for the Atelier Primavera, and Jean Luce for Haviland. The event revived trade rivalries with France, but it also highlighted disagreements among British manufacturers, artists and retailers about the aesthetic and commercial value of modern design. For some, it was no more than a passing fashion, and unlikely to win a solid market, least of all in Britain and the Empire. A report in the *Pottery Gazette* of July 1925 was clearly wary of the innovative exhibit of Gray & Co. (which included the first designs of the recently appointed Susie Cooper):

> […] we doubt very much whether, from a business-getting point of view, their efforts to conform to the original instructions issued by the exhibition authorities will recoup them to the same degree as if they had come forward with some of the types of patterns which they have shown at previous exhibitions.[6]

Gordon Forsyth, conversely, thought the British exhibits to be too conservative. In a lecture to the Art Section of the Ceramic Society, he deplored the absence of innovative energy, a criticism too, by implication, of the BIIA: 'The British ceramic section was badly set out, dull and uninteresting, and one would have liked to see more enterprise and artistic attack on the material.'[7] In October 1925, *The Times* published a letter from Sir Lawrence Weaver. He recognised how the trading strength of both European and Scandinavian countries had been increased by their modernisation of industrial design, and his letter began with a provocative criticism of British manufacturers, characterised as unimaginative, out-of-touch, and, in consequence, increasingly uncompetitive:

6 *PG* (July 1925), p.1092.
7 'Modern Development in Pottery Design', *PG* (December 1925), p.1863.

> Can British industry afford, without grave results, to ignore the pulse of modernity which is throbbing throughout those European industries, and they are many which rely for their success on the Arts?[8]

Weaver's argument was economic, and founded on a valid perception: that designs modelled on historical styles had a limited and diminishing market in the Empire. The road to commercial success lay in a more creative and global view of both design and trade, not a nostalgic and narrowly imperial one:

> Is it not the fact that the very few British manufacturers and distributors who see not Bolshevism, but a fresh and logical outlook in the modern manner, are prospering? Yet they have dared to turn from a sole devotion to reproductions, and to develop as though 1925 were really 1925, and not 1825, or 1725, or 1625.[9]

The letter encapsulated the modern view of industrial design, as befitted a future President of the Design and Industries Association [DIA], and it inspired a number of supportive responses. But it provoked, too, a reaction from Moorcroft whose attitude diverged significantly both from Weaver's and from the manufacturers whose attitude his letter had criticised.

Moorcroft drafted his response on 5 October 1925; his letter, abridged, was published on 7 October. He clearly shared Weaver's belief in the importance of design originality, but he could not reconcile this with Weaver's promotion of 'the modern manner':

> But, to go with the idea of becoming obsessed with the 'pulse of modernity' as stated in Sir Lawrence's letter, would be somewhat unfortunate. If we are to succeed in the markets of the world, it will be mainly by being ourselves, and to ever remember that England is England.[10]

The notion of a national tradition had been explored the previous year by Bernard Rackham and Herbert Read in their landmark study, *English Pottery*; the authors, both employed in the Ceramics Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum, traced the demise of an expressive, native pottery in the wake of a fashion for neo-classicism popularised by Josiah Wedgwood. They argued that an external culture cannot be grafted successfully onto an indigenous one, while recognising that such influences may sometimes be irresistible:

> Wedgwood must be excused; the circumstances were too much for him. In the same way in these days of new revelation of the Far East and Negro Africa circumstances are apt to be too much for those with no strong traditional instincts.[11]

8 'Modern Art in Industry. Lessons of Paris Exhibition', *The Times* (3 October 1925), p.6.
9 Ibid.
10 'Modern Art in Industry', *The Times* (7 October 1925), p.10.
11 B. Rackham & H. Read, *English Pottery, its Development from Early Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), p.124.

Moorcroft saw the same tension at work, now as then, between native and European aesthetics; to adopt the tropes of a modern European style would be no less stifling of individual creativity, he implied, than it had been to follow the neo-classical trend. His letter was a provocative declaration of intent. By re-stating the importance of being oneself, Moorcroft re-configured Weaver's polarised opposites: the aesthetic choice facing designers was not between modern and traditional, but between stylistic imitation and creative independence:

> To copy or to follow modern notions as expressed in France or in any other country, would be in some degree injurious to our success in industry. If on the Continent as stated in Sir Lawrence's letter, they put aside traditional tendencies, will it not be to our advantage to have a sane regard for tradition? And, so let its silent influence govern in some degree our expression in colour and form.[12]

Moorcroft implicitly situated his own output in an indigenous, pre-industrial tradition, not because of any similarity of style, but because he associated native English pottery with work of individual character rather than with a more uniform, industrialised look. He was determined to defend this principle, no less creative or vital than the 'pulse of modernity' celebrated by Weaver. And if Weaver's argument was conducted largely on commercial grounds, Moorcroft's response re-affirmed his long-held belief that good design was determined above all by aesthetic criteria. His own works did not reproduce a 'look', modern, historical or otherwise, but they invariably caught the eye; and it was this quality of individuality which underlay their success, both artistic and commercial.

The second page of Moorcroft's draft response was omitted from *The Times*. It developed the idea of national tradition as the basis of good (and therefore competitive) design; it was not a matter of style, but of self-expression:

> If the workshops of England are to be kept fully employed, will it not be mainly by expressing ourselves as workers of England should, in a purely English form, bearing in mind the importance of tradition. If we are to allow the work as seen on the Continent to interfere with our indigenous art, it will increase competition and make things much the worse for us.

Moorcroft's intervention highlighted a tension between two aesthetics, but even more was at stake. The Paris exhibition had celebrated the close collaboration of designers and manufacturers in the production of industrial art; the work of the emerging studio potters in Britain was coming to represent quite different conceptions of ceramic art and of its relationship with industry. Terms such as 'workshops' and 'expressing ourselves' were not in the vocabulary of a manufacturer engaged in mass production; Moorcroft spoke as an artist potter, defending his own distinctive principles and practice.

12 *The Times* (7 October 1925), p.10.

3. Revisiting the Relationship of Art and Industry

A distinction between 'Art' and 'Industry' was enshrined in both the Wembley and the Paris exhibitions, both of which divided exhibits into these two categories. For the *Pottery Gazette*, the nature of work in the Palace of Arts was clear, and clearly different from that in the Palace of Industry: 'if one is interested in pottery and glass from the aesthetic point of view, as distinct from the commercial aspect, there is a good deal to see, and much to interest one.'[13] The journalist distinguished pottery designed for reproduction and sale in quantity, and pottery made as individual items, each piece to be appreciated on its own terms. But there was more. From the industrial perspective of the *Pottery Gazette*, there was a distinction, too, at the level of technical quality; studio pottery might be more expressive, but it lacked finish, an inevitable consequence of its being made by hand:

> In the same gallery we also came across numerous specimens of work by well-known studio potters, but in many cases we should regard these as being more artistically attractive than they are good technically—which, however, is perhaps as it should be in a Palace of Art.[14]

For others, though, technical perfection was not in itself a virtue. Rackham and Read contrasted the vitality of thrown ware with the coldness of the mass-produced:

> Forms capable of being multiplied without variation from a single original model cannot but have a much smaller interest than those in which each individual piece is the direct expression of the potter's instinct.[15]

As debate continued about the need to make pottery more competitive, the distance between studio and factory increased. If the Paris exhibition had celebrated the results of modern industrial design, Paul Konody, reviewing the work of William Staite Murray and Reginald Wells in *The Observer*, implied a fundamental difference between work made for trade and work made to express the artist:

> [...] modern English potters are at the present moment exhibiting the products of their taste and skill, and demonstrating the aesthetic possibilities of china-clay, earthenware and stoneware when the manipulation of these materials is left to the initiative of individual artists, instead of being ruled by commercial concerns [...].[16]

Studio pottery was seen to have an authenticity of conception absent from industrial wares, designed to meet 'commercial concerns'. Written just weeks after Moorcroft's letter to *The Times*, Konody's review also celebrated the freedom of the potter to use his own initiative, to be himself.

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13 *PG* (August 1924), p.1353.
14 Ibid., p.1354.
15 Rackham & Read, *English Pottery*, p.129.
16 P.G. Konody, 'Modern English Ceramics', *The Observer* (22 November 1925), p.17.

Moorcroft was as committed to craft as the studio potters around him. In a tradition extending back to Ruskin and Morris, he defended the individuality of true manufacture against the uniformity of the machine. Just a month before his letter to *The Times*, he was in correspondence with the Canadian retailer Ryrie Birks who, on 10 September 1925, had requested a refund for a batch of pots which, they claimed, were imperfect. In a terse conclusion, they suggested that Moorcroft may have given more attention to the selection of his exhibition pieces for Paris than he had to his retail wares, implying that he cared more for his reputation as an artist than he did for the satisfaction of his customers. The allegation was provocative, and it provoked a response. Moorcroft's reply, dated 2 October 1925, is one of very few of his business letters to have survived; it is an invaluable statement of his principles as a potter. After a strenuous denial that he would allow the despatch of imperfect ware, he set out what distinguished his pottery from industrial production. Categories of first and second quality were doubtless appropriate for wares which reproduced a template design, and from which deviations might be construed as imperfections. With ware made entirely by hand, however, the notion of quality was to be understood differently:

> The pottery we send at a special rate, which we do not admit as 'seconds', has some feature in it that we consider reduces the value of the piece, from our point of view. As you know, each object we make is created on the wheel, and entirely handmade. We have no actual duplicates. And in making pottery that is so entirely human in nature, it is impossible to get all pieces, or even any pieces to suggest a mechanical standard.[17]

His criterion of quality was not simply technical, as it was for industrial ware, it was also aesthetic; each piece was individual, and was judged on its own terms. His letter finished with a flourish. Moorcroft knew the value of his pottery, and he distinguished between the perfection of the machine-made pot and the enduring appeal of the handmade; one was impersonal, the other was alive:

> If you were to examine the pottery in any famous collection, you would find that some of the most treasured pieces have the faults that you now complain of in a much more serious form. The real value is found in the difference between an entirely human production and a machine made product. The created article is always one possible to live with, while the mechanical product always becomes wearisome to live with. Moorcroft Pottery is entirely creative. There are no mechanical means used in making it.

This was the voice of a potter venturing where it was thought a craft potter simply could not survive, in competition with industrially manufactured wares. The challenge was not just economic, that of producing hand-produced ware in sufficient quantity to be cost-effective, it was a question too of perception. Moorcroft's experience with Ryrie exemplified what could happen when the criteria of industrial production were

17 Brownrigg clearly understood this principle, reporting from Wembley on 10 September 1924: 'People often come and ask me for 'seconds' to take away as souvenirs, but I say that there are no such things in Moorcroft Pottery. That is right, isn't it?'

used to evaluate works made by hand; his response was to defend it with the criteria of an artist.

4. Pottery as Art

For all that the work of British studio potters was included in the Wembley and Paris exhibitions, many also held exhibitions of their pottery in galleries, prompting reflection on the nature of ceramic art. Rackham and Read contributed much to the identification of pottery as a vehicle for artistic expression; while recognising its origins in function, the authors stressed above all its sculptural qualities:

> Sculpture, whether glyptic or plastic, had from the first an imitative intention, and is to that extent less free for the expression of the aesthetic sense than pottery, which may be regarded as plastic art in its most abstract form.[18]

Read's essay, 'English Pottery: an Aesthetic Survey', took this further. He gave to studio pottery an identity quite separate from that of industrial wares, distinguishing clearly between 'Formal values' associated with both medieval and contemporary craft ware, and the 'Utilitarian and commercial values' of nineteenth-century industrial production; expressiveness was associated with studio pottery, and functionality with industry.[19] Staite Murray who, significantly, exhibited alongside artists and sculptors Paul Nash, Winifred Nicholson and Jacob Epstein at the Lefevre Galleries shortly before the opening of the Paris Exhibition, noted the revival of pottery as a vehicle for self-expression in an article of 1925,[20] and Rackham observed the same quality in the work of Wells; this was the mark of an artist:

> Several artists have begun to find in clay as a material and the kiln as an auxiliary agent a sympathetic means of self-expression. Among these artist-potters is Mr Reginald F. Wells [...].[21]

Significantly, the expressiveness of ceramic art was not directly associated with ornament. On the contrary. Rackham and Read were critical of figurative ornament, implicitly distancing themselves from the classical aesthetic of the Grecian Urn, and of its industrial revival by Wedgwood:

> [...] a 'leaf-fringed legend' about its shape is likely to detract attention from the essential properties of that shape. [...] Pottery is, at its best, an abstract art, and its decoration should be in harmony with its abstract nature.[22]

18 Rackham & Read, *English Pottery*, p.4.
19 H. Read, 'English Pottery: an Aesthetic Survey', *Apollo* (December 1925), 318–23.
20 W. Staite Murray, 'Pottery from the Artist's Point of View', *Artwork* (May-August 1925), 201–05 (p.201): 'Pottery as a means of expression in Art has in the last few years been re-established'.
21 B. Rackham, 'The Pottery of Mr Reginald F. Wells', *The Studio* (December 1925), 359–63 (p.359).
22 Rackham & Read, *English Pottery*, p.7.

And if industrial design tended to focus on ornament rather than form as the key to commercial success (or failure), Read, writing later, had no doubt that it undermined an object's artistic quality:

> In short, any decoration can only be justified in so far as it serves to accentuate or enhance the form of the pot. As a matter of fact, we shall find that in general, especially in England, the decorative elements have been allowed almost complete sway in the historical development of the craft; but this has always been to the detriment of real aesthetic values.[23]

From this perspective, it followed that the best pottery was the creation of a craftsman; it was not a matter of creating a design for others to realise in clay, it required a potter's sensitivity to form and to the particular qualities of his materials. For Staite Murray, practical skill (rather than an aptitude for graphic design) was the essential prerequisite of ceramic art:

> Of all the arts pottery demands the highest technical knowledge, and however great the urge, the artist cannot express himself through pottery until he has acquired by very hard work a knowledge of his materials and their chemical reactions.[24]

Hence the value attached to control of glaze, for example. In his article on Wells, Rackham underlined again the predominant importance of form, but clearly saw colour as another vehicle of artistic expression:

> But strength and beauty of form are not the only values that can be realised in pottery. Only second in importance is colour, especially the colour obtainable in the process of glazing. In this sphere the Chinese have been the great masters [...].[25]

If industrial design tended to favour novelty of decoration over appropriateness, it was attention to the relationship of form, ornament and colour which was seen to characterise ceramic art. Marriott's review of Staite Murray's second exhibition at the Paterson Gallery, singled out the 'consistency' of its constituent elements:

> The glazes, in a sober range of grey, blue, and brown, with variations which could only be described by 'fancy' names, are technically perfect, and all decoration is by way of comment on shape or surface. Above all, there is the consistency between shape, colour and texture—and implied weight—which makes a piece of pottery a work of art.[26]

Such qualities had often been identified in the work of Moorcroft, and his status as a ceramic artist was affirmed in an article published in the *Daily Graphic* by the paper's editor J. Fraser, writing at the height of the British Empire Exhibition. Fraser implicitly situated Moorcroft's pottery in a medieval English tradition, describing his skill as a

23 Read, 'English Pottery: an Aesthetic Survey', p.318.
24 Staite Murray, 'Pottery from an Artist's Point of View', p.201. Not coincidentally, Murray's appointment to the RCA in 1925 would lead to his training of artist potters rather than of industrial designers.
25 Rackham, 'The Pottery of Mr Reginald F. Wells', p.359.
26 C. Marriott, 'The Work of the Potter', *The Times* (13 November 1925), p.10.

potter in pre-industrial guild terms, and his work as that of a master craftsman. This was pottery for collectors, certain to survive into posterity. McCance had described Hamada's pottery as 'tradition in the making';[27] Fraser saw in Moorcroft 'the old master of tomorrow':

> Such a master potter is William Moorcroft, an artist of the most distinguished gifts, whose work may be seen in the Palaces of Industry and of Art at the British Empire Exhibition. His technical equipment is superb. The master of today is the old master of tomorrow, and the discerning connoisseur does not lose sight of this fact. Moorcroft Pottery will be the quest of collectors of future generations, for it is the perfect expression of the potter's art, of that inherent beauty which 'is a joy for ever', whose 'loveliness increases.'[28]

Just as Rackham would do in his review of Wells, Fraser drew attention to Moorcroft's skill in his control of glazes and his sensitivity to colour. His technical accomplishments were equated with those of the finest oriental potters, Fraser pointedly recalling Ambassador Hayashi's reaction to his ware:

> In design, harmony, delicacy and richness of colouring this stands unique among ceramic ware of today. Baron Hayashi, the Japanese Ambassador, in purchasing two Flambé vases last year, said the Moorcroft vases were in every way the equal of early Chinese work—a very great compliment indeed.[29]

But Fraser stressed, too, the expressive quality of this pottery. Each piece was considered on its own terms, as an individual work of art; whether ornamented or not, each was seen to engage the attention of the onlooker, the creation not just of a potter but of an artist:

> Stall 464 M in the Palace of Industry provides a real feast of beauty. Take, for example, the vase with oxydised silver lid and base, entitled 'Moonlit Tree', a nocturne in blue and old gold, with foliage of blue-grey and pale gold against deep dark blue, and misty blue hills encircling the base. It is a masterpiece. Or the magnificent Rouge Flambé vase, richly mottled in translucent reds, purples, greys and greens, subtly toning into shades of black; or the tall vase, 'Autumn Tree' on a black carved ebony stand, with its splendid sunset effect behind the trees, its valley and winding paths. Only a great artist, a great colourist, could produce these. There is, too, a delightful beaker, mounted in oxydised silver, of a rich opal, flecked with golden, feathery cloudlets, and melting into purple and russet towards the base. It is the work of a poet.[30]

This was a significant article, published in a newspaper of national circulation. Moorcroft's ware was situated far from the world of industrial production, for all that the pots described were exhibited in the Palace of Industry. Fraser made no mention of functionality, nor of fashion; his focus lay entirely on the impact of his wares. The article

27 W. McCance, 'The Pottery of Mr Shoji Hamada', *The Spectator* (26 May 1923), p.886.
28 J. Fraser, 'A Potter of Genius', *Daily Graphic* (28 June 1924).
29 Fraser, 'A Potter of Genius'.
30 Ibid.

was noticed, and prompted Weaver to write on 9 July 1924: 'Mr Fraser's appreciation of your work makes very pleasant reading, and must be to you a real reward for the splendid work you have done in your craft.' And it was quoted in full in the *Pottery and Glass Record* of July 1924 under the heading 'Justifiable Praise'. This perception of Moorcroft's pottery as work of enduring beauty was appreciated even in the trade press; he was recognised as a potter quite like no other.

Fig. 76 William Moorcroft, Tobacco jar in the 'Autumn Tree' design (c.1924), 14cm. CC BY-NC

If Moorcroft's work was silently distinguished from commercial wares, Fraser made no reference either to studio pottery. Moorcroft's aesthetic principles were clearly different, but in both approaches to the art of pottery an equivalent expressiveness was sensed; Rackham and Read analysed pottery in terms of its sculptural qualities, Fraser likened Moorcroft's work to poetry. Their comparable eloquence is perhaps most strikingly suggested in evidence of a much less public nature. Marriott's review of Staite Murray's exhibition at the Paterson Gallery in 1924 described not just the objects but the effect they produced:

> To say that the stoneware pottery by Mr W.S. Murray [...] is a delight to the eye is to understate its appeal, because it conduces to a satisfaction—a sort of peace that passes understanding—in which several senses are engaged [...]. His pieces—bowls, dishes, vases, bottles, and jars—have a consistency in form, colour, surface, substance, and weight, for which 'holiness' in the original meaning, is hardly too strong a word.[31]

In this published review, Marriott explored how a perception of unity and balance in Staite Murray's pottery induced in the onlooker an experience of stillness. In a private

31 C. Marriott, 'Stoneware Pottery', *The Times* (19 November 1924), p.7.

letter to Moorcroft dated 6 July 1924, the journalist Lillian Joy described (via Mary Baker Eddy) a response to his pottery of equal intensity:

> I must tell you in conclusion that the things came at a moment when I had been having a very difficult and trying time, and it was simply wonderful the sense of happiness they seem to bring with their beauty. It made me realise what a great thing people who are making really beautiful things are doing for the world. My favourite writer says 'beauty typifies holiness'. Well, thank you ever so much.

Writing in quite different circumstances, and about quite different styles of pottery, both journalists nevertheless found in the same term a means of conveying an experience of harmony both physical and spiritual in its force.

5. Art and Manufacture

If the Paris exhibition celebrated the collaboration of designers and manufacturers, studio potters in Britain operated in a more splendid isolation. In a review of Leach's exhibition at the Paterson Gallery in 1925, Marriott acknowledged the 'problem' of creating affordable, well-designed and well-made functional pottery; he surmised a role for craft pottery in its solution, but he had no clear vision of how it might be effected:

> The Leach Pottery does not touch directly the problem of an inexpensive artistic pottery for domestic use, but, indirectly, it is bound to have a good influence upon manufacture by setting a high standard of design and execution.[32]

And although in his article on Wells, Rackham suggested that studio ware was already influencing industrial design, he offered little evidence of it:

> We can only be glad of the progress that has been made in this country since the war in appreciation of such wares as those of Mr Wells. They are valuable not only for their own sake, but also for the wholesome stimulus they give towards the improvement of pottery made for useful purposes on purely commercial lines.[33]

Studio potters and manufacturers may have shared the same exhibiting spaces, but there was little practical collaboration; even the more progressive manufacturers still looked to artists rather than potters for their designs.

For all that the difference between studio and industrial ware seemed categorical, Rackham and Read sought nevertheless to elaborate criteria for judging pottery irrespective of its means or period of manufacture. Blending art history and design theory, their *English Pottery* covered both sides of pottery production, craft wares and the mass-produced output of Josiah Wedgwood and beyond; it sketched out the

32 C. Marriott, 'Chinese Art and English Pottery', *The Times* (9 June 1925), p.9.
33 Rackham, 'The Pottery of Mr Reginald F. Wells', p.360.

parameters of a beneficial influence of pre-industrial pottery on modern industrial design:

> Our chief purpose in writing this book has been to treat the subject from a critical point of view, and to introduce standards which may be helpful, not only to collectors […], but also to designers and craftsmen whose aim it is to develop the English tradition in the future.[34]

The Introduction was as prescriptive as it was historical, clearly echoing the spirit of the DIA as it linked good functionality to pleasing form:

> The form of an earthenware vessel should in the first place be strictly appropriate to its use. It may be unfailingly demonstrated that all departures from utilitarian form, when the intention is utilitarian, weaken the aesthetic appeal.[35]

It praised the value of 'symmetry or some more subtle balance', and drew again on the notion of vitality, a quality as evident in a pot's design as in its execution:

> In addition to symmetry or balance, a good vessel possesses vitality, a quality due to the instinct of the potter. […] The eye registers and the mind experiences in the contemplation of energetic lines and masses a sense of movement, rhythm, or harmony which may indeed be the prime cause of all aesthetic pleasure.[36]

The book made a case for judging all pottery from the same aesthetic perspective, without reference to fashion or commercial considerations. The implication was that good work would sell; it was the view of Moorcroft from the beginning:

> […] a manufactured article must be judged by aesthetic standards which are entirely independent of ethical and economic considerations; an object is appropriate and beautiful on the evidence of its obvious qualities, and all other questions are irrelevant to our enquiry.[37]

No distinction was made between pottery made by hand or by machine, but Read, in his later article, saw a greater sensitivity to form in the work of some studio potters than in the products of modern designers:

> Only in modern times, particularly in the hands of Mr W.S. Murray and Mr Bernard Leach, has there been a revival of that sense of formal values which we must persist in regarding as the essential quality of the potter's art.[38]

If all pottery was best judged by the same criteria, then industrial design failed to meet them. Against the background of the Paris Exhibition, this was a telling conclusion.

34 Rackham & Read, *English Pottery*, p.vii.
35 Ibid., p.6.
36 Ibid., p.7.
37 Ibid., p.8.
38 Read, 'English Pottery: an Aesthetic Survey', p.320.

It was this gap between studio and factory wares, though, that Moorcroft was seen to be bridging. Fraser implicitly recognised this when he situated Moorcroft in the Burslem tradition of pottery production which, significantly, included both individual potters and industrialists, both Toft and Wedgwood. But it was more than this. What was repeatedly noted was that all his wares, whatever their cost or status, had the same quality, and the same effect on the customer. This was exemplified at an exhibition of his ware at Jenner's, the exclusive Edinburgh retailer, in the weeks following the British Empire Exhibition; Hilda Brownrigg once again supervised the exhibit and wrote regular reports to Moorcroft. Expensive exhibition pieces and more affordable wares clearly inspired the same delight; this was ware whose quality was not simply appreciated by connoisseurs (or Japanese Ambassadors), but by a general public eager to own even a small example of the potter's art. Brownrigg's report of 19 December 1924 captured this effect:

> Your pottery has been most tremendously admired here, and has sold very well [...] The big beautiful flambé vases have caused a great sensation. Unfortunately there are no people wealthy enough to buy them. The two lovely little flambé bowls that you sent last, sold immediately, and also the flambé tobacco jar and fruit dish. [...] The decorated is selling well all the time. The small flambé bowls at about 25s [shillings] or 30s would sell over and over again.

The exhibition attracted a review in the *Edinburgh Evening News*. The appeal of Moorcroft's work was clearly recognised, but it was implicitly distinguished from the attraction of a fashionable object; it was deeper and more lasting in its effect:

> Mr William Moorcroft, who is responsible for the majority of these lovely objects, is more than an artistic potter—he is a potter who is a great artist. He has stabilised a type in British pottery, and has spared no time and effort to make these ornaments in every minute detail a 'joy for ever'.[39]

What was stressed (again) were the qualities of beauty, permanence, individuality; he was creating fresh and original effects, some using ornament, others not, but all engaging the attention of the observer:

> The 'Autumn Tree' conjures up all the golden joy of such harvest days as we would like to see, but seldom do; while the haunting fascination of a summer's night is embodied in the subtle allure of one he calls 'Moonlit Tree'. I am told that many artists have expressed great admiration for this beautiful fantasy in clay; I do not wonder. It is almost impossible to describe the newest of Mr Moorcroft's achievements—the Rouge Flambé pottery; it is so utterly different from anything already created in that line. It is almost like iridescent marble, so brilliant, yet with so much depth and warmth of colour.[40]

39 J. Januck, 'The Potter's Art: Some Lovely Things from Wembley', *Edinburgh Evening News* (2 December 1924), p.3.

40 Ibid.

Januck identified in Moorcroft's work the same qualities appreciated by Fraser in his *Daily Graphic* article. But if Fraser had presented to his national readership a collector's potter above all, Januck offered her more local readers the promise of a more affordable art. Whether decorative or functional, exclusive or more moderately priced, the special quality of Moorcroft's pieces was not compromised:

> Silver being a particularly fitting accompaniment to such beauty, several of the larger jars have base and charged caps of this princely metal. The largest of these (it costs £135) was much coveted at Wembley by certain German connoisseurs, who were very anxious to take it to a collection of fine arts in Dresden. Very naturally we are not looking for anything just about that price in our Christmas list, but I dare say the fact that articles in Moorcroft ware may be had from 3s 3d [three shillings and three pence] will prove a useful little bit of information if you elect to give china on the 25th.[41]

The difference between art works fit for museum collections and smaller domestic pieces was not quality of design or of execution, it was a matter of elaboration (and consequent cost); one was not an industrialised version of the other, neither made by machine to look handmade, nor designed to a new machine aesthetic. If manufacture was moving slowly towards standardisation of design and production, Moorcroft's ware offered individuality as standard.

Even his tableware inspired a similar delight, and not just in the rhetoric of journalists or retailers; it was the spontaneous response of the owners themselves. The *Pottery Gazette* had warned starkly of the consequences of post-war depression:

> Food and drink, the prime necessities of life, are just as palatable and nourishing when served in plain blue and white or W. & G. earthenware as in the finest china; vases and ornaments come to be regarded only as 'something more to dust' in a household that is short of domestic labour.[42]

But Moorcroft's ware continued to appeal, not to fashion, whether retrospective or contemporary, but to instincts, emotions and needs more deep-seated, more enduring. For Edith Harcourt Smith, writing on 6 December 1923, its effect was transformative: 'You have been so kind in making the pottery which we all enjoy <u>all the time</u>. One's food tastes quite different, believe me.' [Emphasis original] And in her letter to Moorcroft of 6 July 1924, Lillian Joy expressed the perspective of a much less affluent market. Even a humble tea set could inspire the kind of appreciation normally reserved for a decorative object; useful ware was not just used, it was treasured:

> Journalist as I am, I do not find it easy to find just the language which shall convey to you the enormous amount of pleasure that your gift of lovely Moorcroft pottery has given me. [...] A cup and saucer I actually bought once, and then thought that it had been rather extravagant as I <u>could</u> have done without it, and gave it, with much reluctance, to my sister as a Christmas present ! [...] I love the shape of the sugar basin too, and do not

41 Ibid.
42 'The Trend of Public Taste in Pottery, *PG* (September 1924), p.1499.

> think I have ever seen it before, though I always seize an opportunity of looking at the pottery whenever I see a display of it. And I think the way that little edge of white shows in all the things is so charming. [Emphasis original]

Moorcroft's special appeal both to collectors and to domestic households, with both decorative and functional wares, was being noticed. In a continuation of its report on the Paris exhibition, the *Pottery Gazette* distinguished the two categories of 'industry' and 'art' in the starkest terms, seeing in the first 'what is produced as an article of commerce under industrial conditions' and in the second 'what is produced merely as a studio creation'.[43] It was the difference between mass-produced and individually made wares, those made as a trading commodity and those made as a means of expression, the predominantly functional and the predominantly decorative. The distinction was clear, and yet, for all that, the critic recognised that neither of these two categories adequately covered the work of some potters:

> We realise, of course, that at times it is extremely difficult to know just where to draw the line between the two types of productions, particularly as a number of our best-known firms of potters are largely actuated by the studio spirit, and are rather inclined to foster the studio atmosphere on their works, or, at least, in certain sections, if not throughout the entire factory. We have in mind at the moment three or four concerns of repute, such as W. Moorcroft, Ltd., Carter, Stabler & Adams, Ltd., and Mr W. Howson Taylor, all of whom are rightly placed in the commercial section. In these particular instances, however, pottery is produced on an industrial scale, although art may be said to be the dominating factor.[44]

The three firms mentioned were all much smaller in size than the leading manufacturers, but they were also very different from each other. Howson Taylor continued to attract attention for his glaze effects, and Carter, Stabler & Adams for their collaborations with modern decorative designers, both Truda Carter and commissioned artists. Moorcroft's work, however, inspired a different kind of analysis; the report on his exhibit focussed neither on technique nor on design, but on the integrity and expressiveness of his wares:

> Of all the exhibits presented in the ceramic section of the Grand Palais none could be regarded as being more stimulating than that of W. Moorcroft, Ltd., of Cobridge, whose displays always powerfully exemplify, to our way of thinking, how art in relation to pottery production can become a cogent and articulate thing. There is nothing vapid or imitative about the creations of Mr Moorcroft; the art that is in them is evolved from within, and is part of the actual creation, as distinct from a mere added element. It is this which, during the last twenty years, has brought Mr Moorcroft right to the forefront of English ceramic art potters.[45]

43 'Pottery and Glass at the Paris Exhibition of Decorative Arts', *PG* (September 1925), p.1397.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid., pp.1397–98.

It is significant that his work was analysed as much in terms of what it was not, as of what it was; if much contemporary pottery might have seemed 'vapid' or 'imitative', Moorcroft's had its own distinctive voice. And its defining quality of integrity, wholeness, was seen to extend back to the potter's first international triumph at St Louis, in those very different days of 1904; the decorative idiom had clearly changed, but the underlying coherence of design remained a constant. This was a quality which critics identified in studio pottery, but here, crucially, it was seen to characterise the whole of William Moorcroft's output, both his collector's pieces and his more modest functional objects:

> His creations are always sound and substantial; whilst they are essentially works of art, they are intensely practical, and they seem to combine all that is true and best in a concentrated form. [...] Included amongst the pieces shown are many choice specimens which will doubtless find their way ultimately into museums and private collections. We have heard that, at Wembley last year, a hundred pounds was offered for a single piece of Moorcroft ware, but, although this may be very interesting as indicating how highly some of Mr Moorcroft's creations are appraised by connoisseurs, we are just as much comforted by the thought that even a simple and tolerably inexpensive piece of Moorcroft ware is regarded by thousands of people as a priceless possession.[46]

The anecdote of the German connoisseur and the expensive flambé vase was particularly significant. The journalist reviewing the Wembley exhibits of studio pottery in the *Pottery Gazette* had commented wryly on the high price asked of some pieces, evidence, it was implied, of a discrepancy between the potter's view of their value and that of the market:

> Many of the pieces exhibited by the studio potters have a certain value put upon them in the catalogue—and, if we may say so, not a small value at that. [...] However, art is always a trifle difficult to evaluate in terms of hard cash. [...] the value of any given article is probably largely determined by the keenness of the desire that there is to become possessed of it, and we are not all equally keen.[47]

The elevated sum associated with the Moorcroft vase was offered, not requested; it was the market's valuation of his ware, not the artist's own. But the journalist made clear, too, that the value of Moorcroft's work was not simply a function of its price. If integrity of design and individuality of execution were the hallmarks of art ware, Moorcroft invested the same qualities in all his pieces, whatever their size or function or cost; even his most down-to-earth tableware had qualities which enriched people's lives. For this critic, Moorcroft had achieved something quite exceptional, the alliance not only of the artist and the potter, but of artistic integrity and commercial success:

> Our own view with regard to 'Moorcroft Ware' can be summed up very briefly. It represents that coordination between art and handicraft which is the ideal of every potter,

46 Ibid., p.1398.
47 'Pottery and Glass at the British Empire Exhibition', *PG* (August 1924), p.1354.

> but which is accomplished with exceptional rarity, and then very often only by men whose temperament is unsuited to commerce. In Mr Moorcroft the present generation has an artist and a potter, who is practising successfully in commerce. The combination is remarkable, for it is one that is seldom met with.[48]

6. Conclusions

At the end of 1925, Moorcroft was at one of the summits of his career. For all the demanding economic conditions, he reported profits of £6,210 in 1923–24, and of £5,823 in 1924–25. But his achievement was not to be measured simply by the figures in his account books. More significant was his unique fusion of two roles which were, in theory and in practice, moving further apart: the artist-potter and the manufacturer. His method of production had changed little since his years at Macintyre's, but as the relationship between studio and factory, art and commerce, came under increasing scrutiny, Moorcroft's practice became particularly significant. He had established a craft workshop, creating art works for more than an elite few without compromising either quality or financial viability. The quality of his work was recognised by critics, and affirmed in private correspondence; commercial success was not its primary aim, but it was its inevitable consequence.

What is striking is that this success came with designs which made little reference to fashionable motifs. Moorcroft would not turn his back on nature in an age when abstraction was coming more into prominence, and he continued to explore the expressive power of ornament, colour and form. His designs often harked back to the past, but it was a past viewed through the present. 'Moonlit Blue' revisited his blue landscape designs of 1903, softening the outlines, simplifying the details, adding new touches of colour to create an atmosphere of subdued calm; 'Autumn Tree' (later known as 'Eventide') was an expression of hope and renewal, the palette of his wartime poppy designs applied now to a landscape at peace. By contrast, his return to Wisteria and Pansy introduced brighter colours, illustrated in a review of his work in *The Country House and Estate* of late 1925. But in these troubled times, where the aftermath of war was still keenly felt, his sombre-toned Pomegranate design still had something to say, as Brownrigg noted in her Wembley report of 1 October:

> Of the decorated pottery, artists always prefer the 'Moonlit Tree', and their second choice is the 'Autumn Tree', or the Wistaria [sic]. The general public nearly always go straight to the pomegranate, and say that they much prefer it to all the rest.

Moorcroft's work was praised for its integrity of design. His ornament was expressive, significant, working in complete harmony with form and colour. If Rackham presented Staite Murray's work as the result, and even the embodiment, of a struggle with the properties of clay and fire, Moorcroft was for many the potter poet, master of his art,

48 *PG* (September 1925), p.1398.

engaging the viewer's imagination with the power of his own. In a post-war world exploring ways out of economic depression, the effect of his ware was little short of inspirational; writing on 29 December 1925, Edith Harcourt-Smith put this into words:

> I must add you are the kindest of friends for you ever give me great pleasure in having near me your interesting and delicious pottery which soothes one with its beauty and form. No one in your profession achieves as you do. A thousand grateful thanks.

And this was a style which, however varied, was irreducibly personal. On 14 October 1925, he was approached by Cicely H. Burton (daughter-in-law of Joseph Burton), who as Cicely H. Jackson had worked for Bernard Moore. Moorcroft clearly stood out as an artist potter, unlike her current employer (not identified):

> I am writing to put my name before you, should a vacancy occur as an artist on your works. I have been accustomed to high class work—as for several years I was with Bernard Moore of Stoke, designing and painting in glazes and lustres. I am at present engaged in designing for fancies at a well-known firm in the Potteries, but often feel I would like to get back to the really artistic pottery.

Her name does not appear in Moorcroft's wage books, and she subsequently won recognition for her freelance designs in the modern style. Moorcroft had no need (nor wish) to employ a designer; the individuality of his work was his, and his alone.[49]

By making a clear distinction between the studio potter and the industrial designer, Read's article underlined the ambivalent position Moorcroft occupied. Like the craftsman-designer, he created models as the basis for serial production, but he did not set out to produce exact copies of a template, as he explained in his letter to Ryrie Birks. He exemplified neither modern industrial production methods, nor a modern design style, and yet he was seen to represent all that was best in English pottery manufacture of the time, his participation encouraged and facilitated at two of the most important Exhibitions of the decade. And at the same time, he was celebrated as a ceramic artist as well as a manufacturer, his work admired by critics, collectors and the general public alike for qualities which were being praised, too, in studio ware. He was an artist potter competing successfully in an industrial world.

As the worlds of craft and industry moved further apart, Moorcroft's individuality became his defining quality, while making it impossible to situate him in existing categories. His work showed little trace of the ongoing debate between manufacturers and designers about the importance of design reform, a debate conducted largely on commercial grounds. And he remained distant, too, from the sharpening opposition of craft pottery and industrial production. It was this self-belief that doubtless impelled him to respond to Weaver's plea for a modern style in the aftermath of the Paris Exhibition. What mattered for Moorcroft was not style but expression, integrity of

49 Moorcroft was approached on 11 May 1925 by the Coda Werkstätte, a design studio in Frankfurt, offering him a range of contemporary designs. No copy of Moorcroft's reply (if he sent one) has survived, but one can imagine its content.

design and individuality of production; such qualities accounted for the impact of his work, and its success with the public. It was by being himself that he communicated with others through his art; and it was this quality, too, which underlay the expressiveness of the English pottery tradition which critics were even now beginning to rediscover.