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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13. 1936–39: Pottery for a Troubled World

1. Functional Pottery

By the mid-1930s, Moorcroft's tableware had become a model of modern design. On 6 December 1937, he was invited by Frank Pick to donate to the Victoria and Albert Museum [V&A] examples of his Sunray teaware which would 'further the general improvement of industrial design'.[1] Of particular prominence, though, was Powder Blue. In April 1936, it was singled out in an article by Nikolaus Pevsner in the inaugural issue of *Trend in Design*, published by the Design and Industries Association [DIA]. Using terms which would acquire almost iconic status, Pevsner drew attention to its forms which anticipated by some twenty years the modern taste for elegant functionality. This was Moorcroft's art in a nutshell; transcending fashion, it appealed in equal measure to two quite different worlds, at either end of the king's reign:

> [...] changes of shape occur less frequently than changes of pattern. [...] One of the best contemporary sets, W. Moorcroft's famous Plain Blue, was designed in 1913 and is, in spite of that, as 'modern' as anything created now, and as 'modern' as Josiah Wedgwood's sets, i.e. undatedly perfect.[2]

For Pevsner, modern design was not (just) a matter of style, but of conception, and Powder Blue exemplified this. An illustration of selected pieces shared a page with an illustration of Bauhaus wares by Otto Lindig. This pairing was significant. In his article, Pevsner explicitly distinguished pottery of the Bauhaus from that of Josiah Wedgwood; for all the technical accomplishment of the latter, it remained a product of its age:

> The Bauhaus pots and cups may be less perfect than some of Josiah Wedgwood's, but they express one quality which Wedgwood of necessity could not bestow upon his object—the spirit of the twentieth century.[3]

1 All unpublished documents referred to in this chapter are located in William Moorcroft: Personal and Commercial Papers, SD1837, Stoke-on-Trent City Archives [WM Archive].
2 N. Pevsner, 'Pottery: Design, Manufacture, Marketing', *Trend in Design* (Spring 1936), 9–19 (p.19).
3 Ibid.

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No such qualification was necessary for Powder Blue, which could stand without difficulty beside the work of Lindig. Pevsner's endorsement was particularly significant in an article highly critical of much contemporary pottery production. Moorcroft's forms clearly stood out from the many (unattributed) 'new shapes' which had characterised commercial tableware for the last decade, almost all 'thoughtless in design' and 'hardly meant to be of lasting value'.[4] And his unequivocal praise of its undecorated simplicity contrasted with his more tempered evaluation of the 'floral patterns of a pleasant rustic type', designed by students of Gordon Forsyth in the Staffordshire Schools of Art.[5]

Further evidence of Powder Blue's status among advocates of modern design was its inclusion in *The Flat Book*, a guide to home furnishing co-written by the architects Sadie Speight and Leslie Martin.[6] Writing to Moorcroft on 5 August 1937, Speight noted that the book would contain illustrations of 'only goods of the best design', the criteria of which were based on the timeless values of 'convenience' and 'cleanliness'. The section on 'Minor Equipment' brought out the modern relevance of Moorcroft's potting principles; the understated simplicity of Powder Blue continued to appeal, even as the popularity of Clarice Cliff and her imitators had begun to decline:

> Perhaps more than in any other field of design, the craze for novelty, tawdriness and unsuitable decoration has found an outlet in these smaller items of house equipment. [...] Earthenware is very suitable for most purposes. It should have a good strong glaze, and if coloured, the colour is most practical if it is in the body of the material, and not just in the glaze alone. [...] Effective pouring from the teapot should be tried out before purchasing; handles should be comfortable to hold [...].[7]

The section included examples of wares by some of the most prominent designers of the modern age: vases and bowls by Keith Murray; beer mugs by Carter, Stabler & Adams; tableware by Susie Cooper; and two illustrations of 'Dark speckled blue porcelain by William Moorcroft', showing tea pot, coffee pot, hot water jug, morning set, breakfast set and tea set.

Powder Blue had the functionality, quality and style which appealed to design critics of the new generation; like Pevsner (born in 1902), both Speight (born in 1906) and Martin (born in 1909) were children of the twentieth century and advocates of a modern, international style. But the ware was displayed, too, in Muriel Rose's Little Gallery, Chelsea, an important outlet for studio pottery, where Bernard Leach, Shoji Hamada, Nora Braden, Katharine Pleydell-Bouverie and Michael Cardew had all exhibited. An icon of industrial design, it had prestige, too, in the world of craft. And its longevity of appeal was widely celebrated when Queen Mary visited the

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., p.14.
6 J.L. Martin & S. Speight, *The Flat Book* (London: Heinemann, 1939).
7 Ibid., p.166.

(L) Fig. 104 Powder Blue illustrated in *Trend in Design* (Spring 1936). 'Personal and Commercial Papers of William Moorcroft', Stoke-on-Trent City Archives, SD 1837. CC BY-NC

(R) Fig. 105 Queen Mary, Moorcroft and Powder Blue at the 1939 British Industries Fair. 'Personal and Commercial Papers of William Moorcroft', Stoke-on-Trent City Archives, SD 1837. CC BY-NC

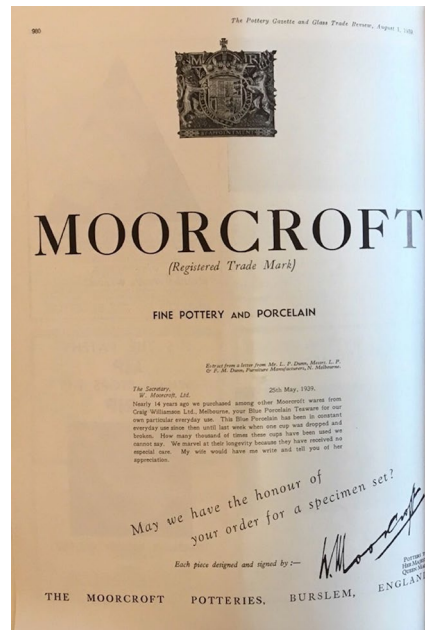

Fig. 106 Moorcroft's advertisement in the *Pottery Gazette* (August 1939). 'Personal and Commercial Papers of William Moorcroft', Stoke-on-Trent City Archives, SD 1837. CC BY-NC

1939 British Industries Fair [BIF] and bought 'A morning set in blue porcelain'.[8] A photograph showing Moorcroft, the Queen and the set was published in the London evening newspaper, *The Star*, 21 February 1939, and in the *Staffordshire Sentinel*, 22 February 1939. The image was subsequently used to open the full BIF report in the *Pottery Gazette*.[9] It was the perfect advertisement for modern industrial art, bringing together affordable, functional ware, high-profile designer and distinguished patron. Dating back twenty-five years, the Queen's continued advocacy enacted now, coincidentally or not, Pevsner's observation in his *Enquiry* that there were 'great possibilities of support for the Modern Movement in connection with the royal family'.[10]

This public endorsement was mirrored in private correspondence. A letter from Horace Jones, 19 October 1937, confirmed in no uncertain terms that Moorcroft's tableware was fit for purpose:

> Mrs Jones was delighted with the tea service, and it certainly looked most distinctive and in tune with the room when set out on the table. She considers the tea pot excellent because it pours well, and the handle does not become too hot. She considers the 'feel' of the pieces beautiful. She is planning now to add more pieces.

Its well-designed functionality was a selling point as significant as its visual appeal. In August 1939, Moorcroft introduced an imaginative variant on his regular monthly advertisement, replacing Pevsner's timeless accolade, regularly used since 1936, with a much more informal expression of approval from an Australian retailer, L.P. and F.M. Dunn, Furniture Manufacturers, N. Melbourne:

> Nearly 14 years ago we purchased among other Moorcroft wares [...] your Blue Porcelain Teaware for our own particular everyday use. This Blue Porcelain has been in constant everyday use since then until last week when one cup was dropped and broken. How many thousands of times these cups have been used we cannot say. We marvel at their longevity because they have received no especial care. My wife would have me write and tell you of her appreciation.[11]

Moorcroft understood the impact of the unconventional, and this bold departure from the orthodox advertising technique of a memorable catchphrase arrested the eye; the carefully wrought phrase of a design specialist was replaced by the spontaneous appreciation of a user. The text still emphasised the timelessness of the ware, but in terms of its practicality rather than its look; it embodied the qualities of modern design heralded in the Editorial of *Trend in Design*: 'The movement for better design in

8 *Pottery Gazette and Glass Trade Review* [*PG*] (March 1939), p.392.
9 *PG* (April 1939), p.523.
10 N. Pevsner, *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1937), p.229.
11 *PG* (August 1939), p.980.

everyday things is really moving at last. It is a move from inefficient things, pretentious, counterfeit and ugly things, towards things that work'.[12]

Moorcroft had clearly designed Powder Blue without reference to a European aesthetic of functionalism, but in keeping with his often-expressed principles of natural simplicity in design; the two overlapped, without being identical. His position was explored in a letter to *The Times* following the launch on 1 September 1936 of the first (and only) postage stamps featuring King Edward VIII. An Editorial of 27 August 1936 welcomed its 'clear-cut directness', a design 'true to the spirit of the age', but its stark simplicity aroused animated debate.[13] Moorcroft's intervention followed an exchange of letters by Frank Pick (on 16 September) and Eric Gill (on 22 September). Pick saw 'vacuity', not simplicity, in the design, the sign of a 'modern fear of decoration' evident too in the 'witlessness of modern architecture'.[14] In response, Gill welcomed its 'plainness', which respected the 'conditions of industrialism' and offered a release from 'the banalities of imitation hand-engraving and stupid ornamentation'.[15] Published on 24 September 1936, Moorcroft's letter used the stamp as the pretext for a much more general statement. Unlike either Pick or Gill, he did not see the design as characteristic of modernist functionalism (for worse or better); on the contrary, he praised its difference from that aesthetic. His point of comparison was not the ornamented stamp designs of earlier reigns, but the angularity of modern art:

> When seeing the stamp for the first time, I was greatly impressed by the charming balance of colour and sense of English design. It came as a happy relief following the strained harsh lines as seen in much so-called modern art. [...] this simple design of the new postage stamp will instinctively appeal, owing to its spring-like freshness.[16]

Moorcroft's modernity was conceived in terms of the natural cycle, not of industrial (re) production; it was a matter of renewal, not repetition. Colour mattered to Moorcroft as much as form, and what he admired in the stamp, he identified too in his own pottery:

> I only venture to express this opinion after having spent almost the whole of my life in seeking the best possible balance in colour and form as applied to pottery.[17]

This was the aesthetic of Powder Blue, and of Sunray. But for all its high reputation and commercial potential, Moorcroft's teaware did not represent the whole of his output. And for all that it was giving him a place at the forefront of modern design, he continued to be appreciated, too, as an artist potter whose wares, in quite different ways, were speaking to the times.

12 *Trend in Design* (Spring 1936), p.5.
13 'The New Postage Stamps', *The Times* (27 August 1936), p.13.
14 F. Pick, 'Modern Fear of Decoration', *The Times* (16 September 1936), p.8.
15 E. Gill, 'New Postage Stamps', *The Times* (22 September 1936), p.15.
16 W. Moorcroft, 'The New Stamps', *The Times* (24 September 1936), p.8.
17 Ibid.

2. Experiments in Ceramic Art

As Powder Blue and Sunray were winning the praise of design critics, Moorcroft did not stop trials of new decorative ideas. The autumn of 1936 was characterised by extensive experiment, inspiring in the *Pottery Gazette* excited expectation of 'bigger changes in this year's samples of 'Moorcroft' pottery than have been witnessed at any previous [British Industries] Fair.[18] Some new designs gave greater prominence to line than to colour, gesturing back to his early use of slip as the principal medium of ornament. This sparer style was clearly undertaken in part for economic reasons, but it was characteristic, too, of Moorcroft's creative approach that he should experiment with a more modern, graphic style of design, translated into the world of slip decoration.

The *Pottery Gazette* illustrated an example of Windswept Corn, the caption describing it as 'an excellent example of art, craftsmanship and technique in happy relationship.'[19] The motif, based on an idea by his daughter, Beatrice, was introduced in 1934, often in strongly coloured or flambé treatments. Reworked now with slender, arching lines and discreet colours, on a vase with an unturned, lightly ribbed texture, it was an expression of natural simplicity. Applied, too, to other designs, this reduced decorative approach attracted serious attention at the 1937 BIF, and not just by those in search of less expensive ware; it was also 'much admired by connoisseurs and critics', as reported in the *Pottery Gazette*.[20] One such wrote on 10 July 1937 about a vessel with a fish motif, similarly restrained in its conception:

> I am prompted to write and tell you how much personal pleasure I have already derived from a piece of your pottery that my husband gave me only three days ago. It is a globular shaped vase, white. On one side swims an angel fish in bluish shading, and on the other side of vase are twin fish. I have placed this in front of a mirror where the twin fish are seen in reflection, and the effect is beautiful. [...] As an artist, I thought you might be interested to hear that some of your good pieces find homes where beautiful things are appreciated.

The writer was Dora J Owen, whose book *We Built a Home* (1936) offered a quite different conception of the home from *The Flat Book*; its purpose was not simply 'efficient' living, but the provision of a 'retreat', a place offering 'sustenance for refreshment of both body and soul'.[21] Moorcroft's work clearly spoke to that environment. He may have been simplifying his designs, but the artistic quality remained, and it continued to be appreciated.

But Moorcroft's output in these years was not confined to these more economical designs. He continued experiments with colour, and by 1937 was returning to floral motifs, for the first time in some years. Some were produced for export to the growing

18 *PG* (February 1937), p.252.
19 Ibid., p.223.
20 *PG* (April 1937), p.554.
21 D.J. Owen, *We Built a Home* (Oxford: Alden Press, 1936), p.9.

Fig. 107 William Moorcroft, Experiments in line and colour: Windswept Corn (c.1936), 32cm; Willow Tree (c.1936), 22.5cm; Toadstool (c.1936), 10cm. CC BY-NC

Fig. 108 William Moorcroft, Floral designs for an export market: Protea (c.1937), 20cm; Orchid (c.1937), 7.5cm; African Lily (c.1937), 18cm. CC BY-NC

(L) Fig. 109 William Moorcroft, Variations on the Freesia/African Lily design: on celadon ground (c.1937), 24cm; under flambé glaze (c.1937), 19cm. CC BY-NC

(R) Fig. 110 William Moorcroft, Design and glaze experiments of the late 1930s: Peacock Eye under drip glaze (c.1937), 9cm; Stylized Leaf under a partial flambé glaze (c.1937), 21cm; Fish under matt smear glaze (c.1937), 10cm. CC BY-NC

market in South Africa, including Protea and African Lily, both set against a rich ochre background.

Moorcroft introduced other designs, too, featuring Spring Flowers, Anemone, and the Orchid, a project eagerly anticipated in a letter from a retailer, dated 19 October 1937:

> I am looking forward with the greatest interest and enthusiasm to your treatment of the medium to create the orchid in 'nature's colours'. [...] I am sure that accomplishment will be the wonder and marvel of the potters' world and art.

These pieces required the sensitivity of his finest decorators, and they were immediately noticed at the 1938 BIF; Moorcroft's skills as a potter had produced, once more, 'specimens of colour such as have not been seen before', and the decorations were 'so well conceived that they merged into the material like the colour in a flower, forming a charming, homogeneous whole'.[22]

Some of his most remarked upon pottery, though, created its impact with its glazes. The *Pottery Gazette*, reporting on his exhibit at the 1936 BIF, noted pieces in a new celadon glaze which 'vied with the more imposing flambé treatments for the notice of the discerning buyers on the look-out for pottery of an individualistic kind'.[23] Moorcroft's experiments with oriental glazes dated back nearly twenty years, but they attracted particular attention in the context of the International Exhibition of Chinese Art, held at the Royal Academy over the winter of 1935–36. Following by just eight months the end of the British Art in Industry exhibition, it illustrated a quite different approach to ceramics. Pieces displayed by Moorcroft at the 1936 BIF were explicitly likened to the finest works of the Chinese, still on view at the Royal Academy:

> But there was a glamour of its own in the Flambé pieces, caught in the flash of triumphant technique, difficult to describe in detail, but consummate like Chun Chou Sung types seen at Burlington House, and the result of their producer's own built-up technique.[24]

The technical accomplishment and artistic appeal of these pots was captured in a widely publicised anecdote about the visit of Chinese officials to Moorcroft's stand. Once again, he was admired for work comparable in quality to that of the Chinese; it was the ultimate accolade for a potter, reported thus in the *Pottery and Glass Record*:

> The Chinese Acknowledge a Masterpiece. Among the many interesting incidents occurring at the British Industries Fair, the story is told of how Chinese experts visiting the Moorcroft stand noticed an unusually fine piece closely resembling ancient Chinese art. It is said that the Chinese visitors took it for an example of old Chinese of unusual quality, and bowed before it, acknowledging its importance. That certainly should be a tribute to the skill of Moorcroft design and decoration.[25]

22 *PG* (April 1938), p.553.
23 *PG* (March 1936), p.542.
24 *Pottery and Glass Record* [*PGR*] (March 1936), p.60.
25 *PGR* (March 1936), p.72.

The story was reported, too, in the *Pottery Gazette* and the *Overseas Daily Mail*. Moorcroft was recognised as a potter of real distinction, his mastery of glazes winning the appreciation of connoisseurs of ceramic art, across nations, across epochs. If critical evaluation of modern pottery was often made with reference to models from the Song dynasty, these accolades were particularly significant; it was not just studio pottery which stood comparison with the finest oriental wares.

What characterised Moorcroft's output in these years was its creative energy. For all the commercial pressures, he did not stop experimenting with both design and glaze, some of his most innovative pieces being made in only very small quantities. He continued to support the British Industries Fair, but he was also submitting pieces to exhibitions of art works. His ware was displayed at selected events at the Royal Institution, as it had been for many years, and he began to exhibit, too, at the Autumn Exhibition of the Liverpool Walker Art Gallery, an annual event dating back to 1871 which displayed contemporary painting and sculpture. The *Liverpool Daily Post*, 15 October 1937, published a photograph of selected exhibitors at the opening of the Preview that year; Moorcroft was to be seen in a group of fine artists and members of the Royal Academy.

Fig. 111 Preview of the Autumn Exhibition at the Liverpool Art Gallery; Moorcroft is second on the left in the main group: *Liverpool Daily Post* (15 October 1937). 'Personal and Commercial Papers of William Moorcroft', Stoke-on-Trent City Archives, SD 1837. CC BY-NC

He exhibited again in 1939, the *Pottery Gazette* illustrating four of his pots, described as 'pottery of real character and distinctiveness'.[26] Particularly striking was the varied nature of these pieces: two floral designs on contrasting grounds, a ribbed vase decorated with a running glaze, and an imposing vessel with red flambé glaze,

26 *PG* (February 1939), p.241.

its depth of colour intensified by pewter mounts. These works epitomised the very different strands of his decorative output at the end of this decade, highlighting the eye of the designer, the craft of the decorator, and the expertise of the glaze chemist.

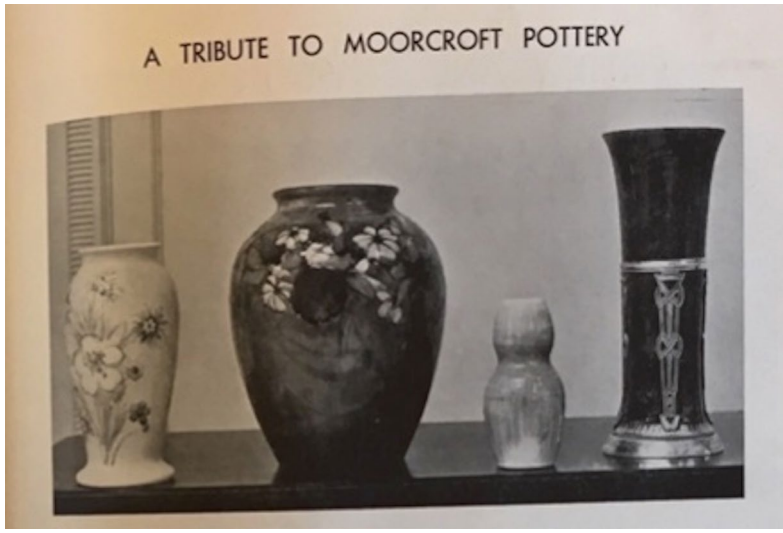

Fig. 112 Pottery exhibited by Moorcroft at the Walker Art Gallery (*Pottery Gazette*, February 1939). 'Personal and Commercial Papers of William Moorcroft', Stoke-on-Trent City Archives, SD 1837. CC BY-NC

Moorcroft's decorative ware was also attracting the attention of the French press. C. de Cordis, Editor of *La Revue Moderne Illustrée des Arts et de la Vie*,[27] wrote and published an article on his pottery in early 1937. The review carried photographs of four pieces covering over ten years of production: an unornamented vase in Powder Blue, a design with Leaf and Berries under a flambé glaze, a Moonlit Blue with silver mounts, and a vase in the Windswept Corn design. The designs were (again) strikingly varied, from the unadorned simplicity of Powder Blue to the fluent movement of Windswept Corn, from the quiet serenity of the mounted Moonlit Blue to the deep and varied tones of the flambé. William Moorcroft was represented as an artist potter, the pride of his country:

> *L'Angleterre qui s'est toujours prévalu de la facture hautement artistique des céramiques réalisés par ses anciens maîtres,* [...] *peut à juste titre s'enorgueillir actuellement des travaux d'art exécutés par W. Moorcroft en matière de poterie.*

27 This journal took pride in an independent critical position, set out in its inaugural volume, 15 January 1920: *'nous reparlerons de l'Art qui embellit la Vie, du Bien que l'on peut faire, du mal que l'on devrait* éviter. *Pas plus qu'hier, nous ne connaîtrons pas de chapelle, de coterie, d'école, de parti, pas même de frontière, le Bien et le Beau n'en doivent point avoir.'* [we shall return to the subject of Art which beautifies Life, of the Good we can do, of the evil we should avoid. No more than in the past shall we align ourselves with any particular sect, clique, school, party, nor even recognise boundaries, the Good and the Beautiful should have none]. [Translation mine] (quoted in Yves Chevrefils Desbiolles, *Les Revues d'art à Paris 1905–1940* (Paris: Ent'revues, 1993), p.211).

> [England, which has always prided itself on the highly artistic workmanship of the pottery made by its master craftsmen […] can be justifiably proud today of the art works executed in clay by W. Moorcroft.][28]

De Cordis stressed the cosmopolitanism of Moorcroft's education, and the international reputation of his pottery, reminding the reader of his successes at World's Fairs from St Louis (1904) to Milan (1933). But he underlined, too, its enduring appeal. If Pevsner praised his 'undatedly perfect' Powder Blue, de Cordis situated his work in the quite different, ageless tradition of the artist potter. Although clearly not a child of the twentieth century, he was represented, explicitly, as one whose art continued to speak to the modern age:

> *William Moorcroft qui va allègrement vers ses soixante-cinq ans a conservé toute la verdeur de la jeunesse, et ses œuvres en témoignent.*[29]
>
> [William Moorcroft, who is cheerfully approaching his sixty-fifth birthday, has retained all the verve of youth, and his works bear witness to this].

The critic attributed this enduring quality to the integrity of Moorcroft's designs, but also (and perhaps above all) to his handling of colour:

> *Puis il y a la couleur, cette couleur merveilleuse, variée, diverse, toujours éclatante et précieuse. Et si l'on songe qu'il faut pour l'obtenir atteindre des températures de 2000 à 3000 degrés Fahrenheit, qu'il suffit d'un rien, d'un abaissement ou d'une élévation quasi-insensible de la température pour compromettre irrémédiablement l'effet recherché, on est bien obligé de conclure à la maîtrise de l'artiste qui a créé tant de chefs-d'œuvre.*[30]
>
> [Then there is the colour, that marvellous colour, rich, distinctive, always arresting and lovely. And if we consider that to obtain it, one has to reach temperatures of 2000 to 3000 degrees Fahrenheit, that it would take next to nothing, a barely noticeable reduction or rise in temperature, to compromise irreversibly the desired effect, we have to conclude that the artist who has created so many treasures is indeed a master].

De Cordis echoed observations by Paul Valéry, whose 1930 essay 'De l'éminente dignité des arts du feu', written for an exhibition at the Galerie Rouard, reflected on the unique qualities of art forms subject(ed) to the capricious will of fire. Moorcroft was presented as one who could control the fire, a true master potter whose art was the expression of his skill, not the result of chance. The review ended, significantly, with a reference to the Japanese ambassador's appreciation of his art in 1923, an accolade which had lost none of its currency since it was first reported, and which had been corroborated more than once in subsequent years. Moorcroft's accomplishments as a ceramic artist were undisputed:

28 C. de Cordis, 'La Poterie', *La Revue moderne* (28 February 1937), 24–25 (p.24). [All translations mine]
29 Ibid., p.25.
30 Ibid.

Moorcroft est l'égal des plus grands artistes potiers de la vieille Chine.[31]

[Moorcroft is the equal of the greatest artist potters of ancient China].

This ringing endorsement of Moorcroft's reputation in France was the perfect prelude for the World's Fair to be held in Paris later that year. His path to this event, though, would not be quite so smooth.

3. Paris, 1937

The Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne brought out tensions between the pottery industry and the Council for Art and Industry [CAI], the body responsible for selection of the British exhibits; but it highlighted differences, too, between how Moorcroft was seen and how he saw himself. Members of the Selection Committee visited his exhibit at the 1936 BIF, inviting him to submit examples of Sunray tableware. On 19 March 1936, however, Moorcroft wrote to the CAI, declining the invitation; he disputed that the members of the committee had the necessary experience to appreciate, or the correct criteria to select, his best work:

> You will understand, after working practically the whole of my life learning through constant work something of physics, the chemistry and the design of my pottery, that I scarcely feel happy in submitting my pottery for judgement to men who could not have had a long experience. The experience required for decorating pottery superficially or of buying it for the trade is almost useless when considering the complete homogeneous action of the clay, the glaze, the colour and the high temperature say of 2000 to 3000 degrees F.

Given its growing reputation at the forefront of modern design, it is no surprise that Moorcroft's tableware attracted the Committee's attention. For Moorcroft, though, this selection overlooked work which demonstrated a much more sophisticated engagement with the art and craft of pottery; it diminished his achievements as a potter, which were widely appreciated elsewhere. The presence on the Committee of manufacturers (Josiah Wedgwood V, Cyril Carter, Ronald Copeland), and of a designer/retailer (Harry Trethowan), implied an approach which evaluated (and valued) sales potential before ceramic qualities. It was not that he did not rate his tableware, nor that he dissociated artistic merit and commercial success, but he did not regard this functional ware as his most original, or significant, or expressive, work. Notwithstanding Moorcroft's reluctance to participate, members of the Selection Committee returned the following year to his exhibit at the 1937 BIF, again requesting the submission of Sunray ware. They commissioned one other piece, a vase in the Windswept Corn design, to be made specially for the exhibit. This was not enough to satisfy Moorcroft, however, and in the spring of 1937 he made an additional, and independent, submission of pottery for exhibition in the International Pavilion. Edith

31 Ibid.

Harcourt Smith applauded his initiative, in a letter of 17 June 1937: 'Glad you have sent pottery to Paris. Shows you stand alone and ignore the distinguished men who select. What a position for men like you.'

The opening of the British Pavilion caused furious controversy. On 7 July 1937, *The Times* published a letter from Alfred Bossom, MP for Maidstone, who decried the poor standard of the British articles selected. Moorcroft responded the same day, in the same spirit, his letter recounting how his own wares had been chosen. He told a tale of misguided values and dogged insensitivity, no less pronounced in 1937 when the Committee visited his BIF exhibit a second time:

> A year later, Mr Pick, Chairman for the Council for Art in [sic] Industry, with his selection committee visited a show of my pottery, and once more selected a few small pieces which were entirely unrepresentative. However, Mr Pick did select one large piece, but not without saying that he would like me to alter the foot. And these pieces were sent to Paris.[32]

The reference to Pick's request for a modified example of the Windswept Corn vase added a further touch of irony; caricatured for its lack of judgement, the Committee was presented as interventionist, authoritarian, and deluded:

> It appears to me unusual, after spending fifty years of my life, first as an art worker and later as chemist and physicist, researching for the best means to make good pottery, to then be visited by the Council for Art in [sic] Industry who not only made an inadequate selection of pottery for Paris, but tried to advise me before sending it, how to make it. After long experience, I feel that unless there are found men with sound understanding of their work and less influenced by the fashions which are now known as ultra-modern, there will be little hope for better things.[33]

The uncompromising tone of Moorcroft's letter struck a chord with others. Ellis Smith, M.P. for Stoke, alluded to the 'letter in *The Times* from a well-known potter' in his questions to the Secretary of the Department of Overseas Trade [DOT] on 26 July 1937, recorded in Hansard.[34] And on 27 September 1937 Moorcroft was invited by J.F. Price to address members of the North Staffordshire branch of the Society of Industrial Artists who were planning to visit the exhibition: '[…] as they wish to see what they ought to see, and not to waste energy, your views would be extremely valuable. […] If you would do us this service, we should be honoured'.

Moorcroft may have been thought to speak for the generality of the pottery industry in his assessment of the Committee, but the reasons for his dissatisfaction were fundamentally, and tellingly, different. Criticism of the British exhibit in the trade press was essentially commercial. The industry regarded the Exhibition as a trade fair, and resented what they saw to be a predominance of (uninspiring) studio pottery. The *Pottery Gazette* review was categorical:

32 'Paris Exhibition. The British Pavilion', *The Times* (9 July 1937).
33 Ibid.
34 House of Commons, *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates* (26 July 1937), vol. 326, cols. 2648–649.

> The ordinary low-priced commercial china and earthenware is not represented in anything like the proportion of its selling capacity. It is difficult to see what influenced the selectors in their choice and their display, but the result is not happy. As to choice, the colours are mostly drab and brown, with a little dull green.[35]

Moorcroft outlined his own position in a letter to the *Pottery Gazette*, responding to their review. He echoed the reporter's dismay at the poor selection and display of exhibits, but his criticism was that the CAI's choice gave prominence to mass-produced wares at the expense of true exhibition pieces. Characteristically forthright, he decried the display of his Windswept Corn vase, the very piece Pick had commissioned:

> To my disappointment I found that the large vase I made specially, 20 inches high, was placed on the floor away from the pottery groups, and was being used to assist the display of some fabrics. The vase was filled with dust-spattered artificial flowers, which, together with the fabrics, covered the greater part of it. On the other hand, the same Council displayed mass-produced articles in the front line, on special stands. These were of a type which one would not expect to take up valuable space in the British Pavilion.[36]

His letter ended, provocatively, with the suggestion that responsibility for this inadequate exhibit could be traced back to the industry itself:

> Mr Trethowan […] tells us, in his letter to you, that six out of nine men on the Paris 1937 committee were directly connected with the pottery industry. So it may be seen that the existing committee, which is responsible for the present show, has, in fact, a two-thirds majority of members engaged in the industry.[37]

If the view of industry was that commercial wares had been inadequately represented, Moorcroft's view was that the committee had given too much consideration to sales potential, and not enough to true artistic quality.

Moorcroft's decision to submit exhibits of his own selection to the International Pavilion was no trivial undertaking, inevitably incurring additional and substantial expense of both money and time; that he did so, suggests just how important it was to him to exhibit wares which reflected the true extent of his activity as a potter. His action may have called to mind the double exhibitions of Leach in 1927 and 1928, but Moorcroft's motives were quite different. He was not distinguishing functional and decorative wares (a distinction he would not recognise), but he sought to correct the narrow official view of what mattered in (his) pottery. For him, the art of the potter was not simply to design useful wares suitable for large-scale production, it was to create objects of beauty which displayed the potter's skill and brought pleasure to the owner. The International Pavilion opened on 27 July, and Moorcroft's exhibit was soon attracting attention. Writing from Paris on 30 July 1937, the journalist John Thomas congratulated him on 'such a magnificent, royal Moorcroft display', noting that it was

35 *PG* (September 1937), p.1213.
36 *PG* (October 1937), p.1382.
37 Ibid.

'much admired and commented upon by all at the International Pavilion'. And on 13 August 1937, less than three weeks after its opening, the *Revue Moderne* sent Moorcroft proofs of an article devoted to this exhibit; it appeared two months later.

The article, written by R. Serlanges, carried an engraved portrait on the first page, and a heading which focussed on Moorcroft the ceramic artist:

> *Les Céramiques d'art. William Moorcroft. Potier de sa Majesté la Reine*.[38]
>
> [Art pottery. William Moorcroft. Potter to Her Majesty the Queen]

Included were photographs of selected items in the exhibit: the evocative, and still very popular, Moonlit Blue; his latest floral designs; examples of his much sparer decorative world, represented by Windswept Corn and Angel Fish on a plain cream ground; a series of marred pots, one with a fish design and others undecorated. Serlange's focus was made clear from the start; it was Moorcroft's independent exhibit which did justice to the remarkable range of his output:

> *C'est au Pavillon International du Champ de Mars que le plus célèbre artiste céramiste d'Angleterre a dû rechercher un cadre vaste pour y présenter un ensemble d'œuvres qui fût digne de son magnifique talent*.[39]
>
> [It was in the International Pavilion on the Champ de Mars that England's most famous artist potter sought out a suitably spacious setting to display a body of work worthy of his magnificent talent.]

The critic noted the purity of line and depth of colour which had impressed de Cordis in his article of March 1937, but he soon turned his attention to Moorcroft's ornamented ware, characterised by its unassuming subject matter, and its harmony of form, decoration and colour. He was not assessing the commercial potential or the functionality of this pottery, he was paying attention to its detail:

> *Quant à l'ornementation, elle est inspirée des éléments de la flore choisis souvent à dessein parmi les plus modestes, beaux épis d'or, lourdes grappes élégantes, feuilles aux découpures harmonieuses ou humbles fleurs des champs; parfois aussi des poissons aux silhouettes originales*.[40]
>
> [As for the decoration, it is inspired by flowers often deliberately chosen from among the most unassuming, beautiful golden ears of corn, elegant clusters of buds, leaves with the most delicate shapes, or humble meadow flowers; fish too, sometimes, striking in their outline.]

It was these qualities of design which were seen to underlie the broad appeal of Moorcroft's work, and its ability to engage critics of all aesthetic persuasions:

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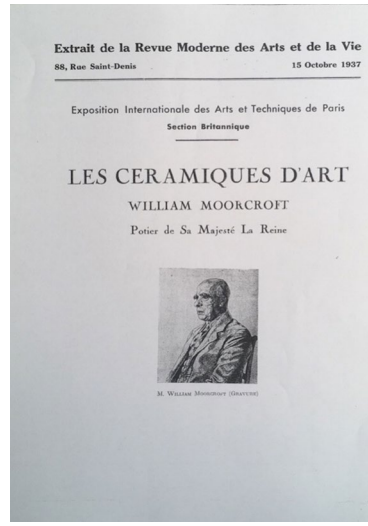
38 R. Serlanges, 'Les Céramiques d'art. William Moorcroft, Potier de Sa Majesté la Reine', *La Revue moderne* (15 October 1937), 2–4. [All translations mine]

39 Ibid., p.2.

40 Ibid., p.3.

> *Les plus illustres collectionneurs du monde entier, les critiques formés par toutes les cultures ont rendu hommage à la valeur exceptionnelle de ses créations*.[41]
>
> [The most distinguished collectors in the world and critics of all cultural backgrounds have paid tribute to the exceptional value of his creations.]

Moorcroft was represented as a potter for the times, appreciated the world over. It was an image of modernity, reflected, too, in the etched portrait which featured on the opening page of the article and for which Moorcroft had sat on 21 July 1937, less than a week before the opening of the International Pavilion. The portraitist was Edgar Holloway, a rising star in the art world whose work had been displayed in the V&A, the British Museum and the fashionable XXI Gallery, and who counted among his sitters some of the leading figures in the world of modern art and letters: Herbert Read, Stephen Spender and T.S. Eliot.


Extrait de la Revue Moderne des Arts et de la Vie
88, Rue Saint-Denis 15 Octobre 1937

Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques de Paris
Section Britannique

LES CERAMIQUES D'ART

WILLIAM MOORCROFT

Potier de Sa Majesté La Reine

Fig. 113 Portrait of Moorcroft by Edgar Holloway, *Revue Moderne* (15 October 1937). CC BY-NC

Moorcroft sent offprints of the article to many people, including Frank Pick, who replied on 1 December 1937:

> It must indeed be pleasing to you to find that the French show a just appreciation of your pottery, as there are so many good French potters with whom you may be regarded as in competition.

Pick's response revealed his priorities. To see Moorcroft's work 'in competition' with French pottery was to adopt the perspective of commerce, where success might be measured in trading figures and compared with those of a rival; from the viewpoint of an artist, such a perception would have seemed misplaced, even incomprehensible. The *Pottery Gazette* published extracts of this review, and a photograph of his display

41 Ibid., pp.3–4.

which included two marred pots, and two fish pots.[42] It was this same issue of the *Pottery Gazette* which carried Moorcroft's letter describing his impressions of the British pavilion; the juxtaposition brought out even more clearly the difference between an art critic's assessment of Moorcroft's work and that of a government committee.

Moorcroft's reaction to the selection of his wares by the CAI was arguably more than just personal, or aesthetic; it was also political. As totalitarian states began to politicise their culture, Moorcroft questioned the authority of a committee to dictate what represented Britain at its best. He may well have imagined in its interventions the early signs of a cultural authoritarianism already far advanced in Germany and Russia, and whose two imposing pavilions confronted each other so ominously at one end of the Pont d'Iéna, within sight of Britain's controversial pavilion at the other. Moorcroft's aesthetic position was not that of a nationalist; his ceramic politics were more sensitive, and more far-reaching, in their scope.

Fig. 114 View of the Pont d'Iéna facing south. The British pavilion is the low rectangular building on the far side of the river. Séeberger frères, La Tour Eiffel et Fontaine du Trocadéro [1937] [*detail*], Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/a/a6/Exposition_Internationale_des_Arts_et_Techniques_dans_la_Vie_Moderne_15.jpg/2560px-Exposition_Internationale_des_Arts_et_Techniques_dans_la_Vie_Moderne_15.jpg, Licence Ouverte 1.0

4. Politics and Pottery

1936 saw a rapidly changing and increasingly unstable political landscape in Europe and beyond: the outbreak of Civil War in Spain, Hitler's occupation of the Rhineland, Mussolini's annexation of Ethiopia, and the start of Stalin's purges in Russia all contributed to the worsening economic depression. In Britain, the year had begun

42 *PG* (October 1937), p.1361.

with the death of the much-loved George V, but the stability of its monarchy was not questioned. Confidence in the new king was absolute; it was given expression in the *Pottery Gazette* just weeks, ironically, before the abdication crisis:

> While Spain is in the grip of a civil war, and Dictators dictate, we in Britain, fortunately, maintain a calm which is characteristic of our race. [...] The British race loves simplicity, and abhors ostentation—it worships its King.[43]

The abdication had potentially serious consequences for firms which had already begun the manufacture of Coronation wares, but for Moorcroft the events of late 1936 inspired different considerations; his commemorative pottery had a still relevant message to convey. He wrote to Queen Mary on the day following Edward VIII's broadcast to the nation; the Queen's Private Secretary responded on 14 December 1936:

> I have had the honour to submit to Queen Mary your letter of December 12th, together with the two souvenirs of your ware of the reign of King Edward VIII. In reply [...] I am to assure you that Queen Mary very much appreciates the kind message of sympathy conveyed to Her Majesty at this time of sorrow and anxiety for Herself and the whole Nation.

Moorcroft's gesture was eloquent. To send the Queen examples of his (now obsolete) Coronation ware was to commemorate the promise of the king's reign, and to imply the national grief at its untimely end; it was a sensitive expression of support at a time when the stability of the royal family had been so dramatically shaken.

Moorcroft's Coronation ware for the new king George VI attracted press attention. Some pieces were exhibited at the 1937 BIF, others were reviewed in the *Pottery Gazette*. Moorcroft took this opportunity to describe the distinctive qualities of his pottery; like the monarch and his subjects, ornament and body were inseparably, and harmoniously, bound together:

> Mr Moorcroft [...] prides himself upon the fact that the whole of the elements which go to compose his finished pottery are absolutely homogeneous [...] the decorations are not merely applied to the ware [...] but part and parcel of the pottery itself [...]. This point cannot be overstressed, and it will be appreciated to the full by lovers of pottery of the truest type.[44]

To associate qualities of authenticity with royal ware was to make a political point. In a world increasingly shaped by ideology and dictatorship, the humanity of a royal family was most appropriately celebrated in pottery characterized by its individuality, integrity and personal touch; this was not the soulless product of a machine. And it captured the mood of the nation. It featured prominently in a television programme on 17 April 1937, entitled 'Coronation Ware', presented by John Thomas. His wife, A. Longton Thomas, wrote to Moorcroft on 19 April 1937, giving an account of the broadcast; his ware had not just been discussed in the programme, it was given

43 *PG* (October 1936), p.1345.
44 *PG* (June 1937), 795–96 (p.795).

prominence in the opening credits, setting the tone for what was to follow: 'Your pottery 'televised' very well indeed, and at night, instead of showing the Television hostess on the screen, the Moorcroft Bowl was used to introduce the Talk in a most effective manner.'

But for Moorcroft, pottery and politics did not simply intersect at the level of national pride. He demonstrated this in his response to the interest of the Deutsches Museum in his work, first expressed at the 1934 BIF. This was no ordinary museum. An article in *The Times* noted its apolitical approach to acquisitions, all the more striking as Hitler's power in Germany increased, and nationalist propaganda was becoming more widespread:

> The name Deutsches Museum is in a way a misnomer, as it might suggest that the institution is devoted to the achievements of the German nation only. This is not the case, since the technical and scientific progress of all periods and races is represented [...].[45]

The Museum had written on 6 July 1934, informing him that they no longer had the funds to buy the items selected from his exhibit. Moorcroft undertook to donate examples of his work, as he explained on 19 March 1936 in a letter to the CAI, responding to their invitation to lend pieces to the V&A. For a museum collection, he argued, only the very best was good enough; this was particularly true of a German museum in such troubled times, and of this museum above all:

> [...] I have so far delayed sending these pieces as I am very anxious that this Museum should have only the very best I can make. In these days there is such a deluge of make-belief, that one is more than ever restrained and anxious to make something worthwhile.

For Moorcroft, the arts spoke eloquently across national boundaries, offering an example of harmonious and creative exchange which politicians were struggling to replicate. It was a familiar sentiment. On 17 March 1937, *The Times* reported in detail 'Germany's Gift to London': 2,600 books from the German government to the Institute of Historical Research, University of London. The gift, presented by the newly appointed German Ambassador, Joachim von Ribbentrop, was clearly nationalistic in substance—it included the *Monumenta Germaniae Historia*, and a copy of *Mein Kampf*—and political in intention, reflecting Germany's desire at this time to broker an alliance with Britain. But it was accepted by Lord Macmillan, perhaps disingenuously, as the gift of 'an even more important country, the republic of letters, a country which had no frontiers to dispute, and no economic problems to solve', and whose ambition was 'to foster the spirit of international good will.'[46] Shortly afterwards, von Ribbentrop visited Moorcroft's stand at the 1937 BIF. In a letter of 27 March 1937 to Ralph Cory, Librarian at the Royal Institution, Moorcroft gave a brief account of the meeting, where he had clearly spoken of the inspirational value of cultural exchange, be it German music or, it was implied, his own pottery:

45 'A Storehouse of Science. The Museum in Munich', *The Times* (1 June 1935), p.15.
46 'Germany's Gift to London', *The Times* (17 March 1937), p.18.

> Recently I met Herr von Ribbentrop, the German Ambassador, and he much admired my work, and I told him that the wonderful music of Germany so soothed one that it enabled one to visualise colour and form.

Moorcroft sent his gift to Munich, with a covering letter dated 26 June 1937; his pieces reflected the trans-political spirit evoked by Lord Macmillan. In their diversity of design, decoration and glaze effect, they all embodied the natural art of the potter: a ribbed vase decorated with *sang de boeuf* glaze, and another in Peach Bloom, a straight-sided vessel in a Windswept Corn design, and a shallow bowl with Leaf motifs, its colours enriched by a flambé glaze. This work, and the gesture of giving it, was all the more eloquent, though, in the context of two major exhibitions which opened in Munich little more than three weeks after its dispatch: the Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung in the recently opened Haus der deutschen Kunst, celebrated German art for a new era; and the exhibition of Entartete Kunst at the Institute of Archaeology assembled examples of decadent art to be swept away by the new age. *The Times* was clearly wary of these growing signs of a cultural purge:

> It is held that by destroying individualism and Liberal, Bolshevist, Jewish and Marxist influences, and by applying the principles of 'authoritarianism' and extreme nationalism, German art and culture which, according to Herr Hitler, were in a pitiful state of degeneracy and corruption a few years ago, have been redeemed.[47]

For Moorcroft, though, art had a quite different function, and a quite different message to convey. His covering letter focussed on pottery as an expression of nature, a source of inspiration common to all and controlled by none:

> The objects are all made without moulds and sculptured out of the material, and the colour is obtained by a purely natural process through the fusion of the earths and metals directly in the material. [...] I feel it is a great privilege to be able to offer some of my work to your famous Museum.

The Museum wrote to Moorcroft on 29 September 1937, acknowledging receipt of his pieces. Their welcome of the gift, and their pledge to display his wares in a place of honour, in a museum just one mile away from these two heavily politicised exhibitions, clearly reflected their more open political position, and their appreciation of Moorcroft's art without borders. Keen to publicise this response, Moorcroft sent the text of the Museum's letter to *The Times*; it was published a week later:

> W. Moorcroft, Potter to Her Majesty the Queen, Burslem. It is with the greatest pleasure that we acknowledge the arrival of the four pieces of pottery which you so very kindly presented to us, and which have arrived in perfect condition. We thank you very warmly for giving these outstandingly beautiful pieces; they will be put in the middle case of our room of ceramics, and they will form a centrepiece of our ceramic exhibits. A card will be put with the pieces with the name of the donor. With our deepest respect.[48]

47 'House of German Art. Opening by Herr Hitler', *The Times* (19 July 1937), p.13.
48 W. Moorcroft, 'German Tribute to British Pottery', *The Times* (6 November 1937), p.8.

The letter was noticed. Bruce Watson, Rector of Upham, wrote the same day as Moorcroft's letter was published:

> I congratulate you on the very delightful letter you have received from the Deutsches Museum [...]. Such kindness will do more to make the Germans friends and friendly than many acts of Parliament.

And it was reported too in the *Pottery Gazette* which pointedly commented on the 'high appreciation' of Moorcroft's ware in both Germany and France.[49] Just a few months later, similarly high appreciation was again associated with figures in the political limelight. A review of the 1938 BIF reported a visit to his stand by the Emperor of Ethiopia, who 'expressed his intense admiration for the Moorcroft pottery', and later sent 'a special message of thanks'.[50] Haile Selasse had been in exile in England since the annexation of Ethiopia by Mussolini in 1936, an act which the British government had not opposed. Moorcroft's art, neither ideological nor nationalistic, but seeking above all to embody the harmonious beauty of nature, must have seemed all the more relevant and precious in these unsettled times.

Significantly, as political tensions increased in Europe, the *Revue Moderne* published a third review of Moorcroft's work. It carried illustrations of pieces exhibited at the Walker Art Gallery in the autumn of 1938: two versions of a Spring Flowers design, a vase with Orchid motifs, and another decorated with a running glaze. Its opening underlined the international reach of Moorcroft's reputation as the *maître incontesté de la céramique anglaise'* [undisputed master of English ceramics], and the French reader was reminded of his two triumphant exhibits in Paris.[51] Serlanges identified an essential selflessness in Moorcroft's work, manifested both in his choice of subject matter, and in the manner of its representation; it was a quality which gave this ware not just its universal appeal but also a moral value:

> *La nature seule est à la base de ses compositions décoratives ; tout son savoir, toute son expérience lui ont servi à acquérir une grande humilité et à ne pas prétendre concurrencer les créations naturelles par la recherche de la beauté. Cette nature, il la sert plus qu'il ne se sert d'elle, en proposant ses exemples à l'admiration de tous. C'est là l'indice éclatant d'une valeur morale qui apparait manifestement dans tous ses travaux*.[52]
>
> [Nature alone is the basis of his decorative designs; all his knowledge, all his experience have inspired in him a great humility which does not set out to compete with nature's creations in its search for beauty. He serves nature, he does not make use of it, holding up examples of its loveliness to be admired by all. This is striking proof of the moral value clearly evident in all his work].

What is striking about this review is its clear engagement with Moorcroft's work. Serlanges did not describe the pottery, he did not even describe its effect; he sought

49 *PG* (January 1938), p.63.
50 *PG* (April 1938), p.553.
51 Serlanges, R., 'La Céramique', *La Revue moderne* (15 March 1939), 19–20 (p.19). [All translations mine]
52 Ibid., p.20.

instead to understand its meaning, and its value. Significantly, he referred to the letter sent by the Deutsches Museum; as tension in Europe increased, the importance of Moorcroft's work was appreciated with ever greater intensity, and urgency. At a time of nationalist politics and politicised aesthetics which threatened centuries of culture in Germany, Russia, China and elsewhere, Serlanges recognised in Moorcroft an artist whose work had an integrity which spoke across national frontiers. It was a powerful statement at this time of turmoil:

> *Ceux-ci acquièrent, de ce fait, une force éducatrice, car ils relèvent l'esprit des masses; en même temps ils échappent à l'influence de toute doctrine d'école, ou des fantaisies d'une mode passagère, et c'est pourquoi ils s'imposent dans le présent à l'estime générale des hommes de toute culture, comme ils s'imposeront par la suite à l'admiration des générations à venir; ils portent, en effet, la marque de l'art véritable: celui qui est universel et éternel.*[53]
>
> [His creations take on, in this way, an inspirational force, because they lift the spirits of ordinary people; moreover, they are not influenced by aesthetic doctrines, nor by the whims of transient fashion, which is why they enjoy widespread appreciation today, across all cultural boundaries, and why they will be admired too by future generations; they are stamped with the hallmark of true art, that which is universal and lasts forever.]

Moorcroft's art was seen to replace restlessness with tranquillity, assertion with contemplation, ideology with a quiet, humble morality; it was an eloquent gesture of calm in a world increasingly characterised by a strident rhetoric of regeneration, purification and strength. The most expressive pieces of all in this context were perhaps the marred pots, some decorated some not, exhibited in Paris, and later at the Walker Art Gallery. They were very much of the moment, focussing on colour and form, but on a form which was collapsing, an imperishable embodiment of man's limitations and nature's power, an unwitting nod to Valéry.

Fig. 115 William Moorcroft, Marred pot with Fish design (1937), 18cm. CC BY-NC

53 Ibid.

These qualities of Moorcroft's art, recognised in France, were appreciated, too, at home. It was the tranquillity of his ware which was anticipated by the *Pottery Gazette* in advance of the 1938 BIF:

> When the visitor has toured the Section [...], he can pause awhile at the Moorcroft stand and experience there something of a spirit of restfulness. After all, there is nothing in the Section quite like the 'Moorcroft' pottery. [...] The buyer who appreciates real truth in pottery, soulful expression shall we say?, knows that he can get it here.[54]

And what was true of published reviews was reflected also in private letters. A letter from Margaret Macintyre of 12 September 1938 acknowledged the uplifting effect of a recently acquired flower bowl: 'Believe me I shall always treasure it [...]. Such beautiful colourings will brighten the dull days of winter'. And the same appreciation was expressed in a letter from Edith Harcourt Smith, dated 30 October 1938, as she told him of her pleasure to see his vases filled with flowers around her house: 'First, let me say you are specially in our conversation these days, for your beautiful vases decorate the rooms, being full of yellow and dark chrysanthemums [...], and they look too lovely in the vases.' As the Munich Agreement seemed increasingly frail, and the threat of war in Europe continued to loom, the pots and the tranquillity they embodied put such crisis in perspective; they could not quench the anxiety, but they brought some measure of comfort: 'Your views on life are so exalted and fine, just what we all should be contemplating. Peace in mind and life is really the only thing to find, more and more does one realise the uselessness of anything else.'

5. The Potter's Art

On 3 December 1937, less than a month after the publication of his letter from the Deutsches Museum, Moorcroft was approached by Cecil Hunt, the newly appointed London editor of Blackie & Son, inviting him to write a book:

> For many years I have been an admirer of your art, and determined, if ever I returned to publishing, [...] to ask you to consider the possibilities of your writing a book. In these sadly mechanised days, a book under some such title as 'The Potter's Art' would be not only interesting but a service to the community, and of infinite value to the craft you serve.

Moorcroft accepted the idea, and Hunt wrote again on 14 December 1937. His proposal was for a book with high production values, and ample illustrations of Moorcroft's work:

> My own feeling is that it should be a book fairly heavily illustrated, and if possible with some coloured plates. This, of course, puts it in the 12s.6d to 15s [twelve shillings and 6 pence to fifteen shillings] range, but to my mind these would be an essential part of the book [...].

54 *PG* (February 1938), p.250.

Hunt clearly envisaged a volume significantly more luxurious than recently published books by two of the most experienced teachers of the time: Gordon Forsyth's *20th Century Ceramics* (1936), and Dora Billington's *The Art of the Potter* (1937). And significantly different, too. Both these books had explored in different ways the relationship of the studio potter and the manufacturer, both associating studio pottery with individual pieces of decorative art, and industrial pottery with mass-produced functional wares. Forsyth noted a 'wholly artificial gulf' between the two, but his was clearly a view from the Potteries; studio potters were placed in inverted commas, a telling sign of their marginality, both geographical and conceptual:

> In Great Britain, Staffordshire remains the unchallenged pottery metropolis. [...] There are, of course, many other factories in the North, in Scotland, and scattered in the South-West. These are mostly small, and a considerable number of 'studio potters' work in the South of England.[55]

He saw the future of studio pottery 'within mass production concerns',[56] but the 'reconciliation between artist and manufacturer' which he noted already in the Potteries was clearly identified not with potters, but with a new generation of Art School trained designers, some of whom had exhibited at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1935. Billington wrote from the opposite perspective. Her vision was of the studio potter working alongside (rather than within) industry, but, like Leach and Cardew, she underlined the importance of their making functional wares, albeit on a studio scale. It was not a matter of competition with the factory, but of recognising the potter's social role:

> The studio potter cannot, and should not, attempt to compete with mass production on its own lines, but there is no reason why he should be too reserved and precious to take his place in the life of the community both through his own productions and the help he can give to trade production. Only thus will his art become really vital and valuable.[57]

She implied that there might be some beneficial influence of such work on industrial design, but her vision was hypothetical, and doubtless idealistic; Cardew's collaboration with Copeland's in 1938 was short-lived and unsuccessful:

> If beautiful pots were available for everyone who could appreciate them, what a vitalizing influence this would have on the mass-produced article!—and studio potters can only justify the making of pottery for the sake of its beauty if thereby they can bring beauty into the whole industry.[58]

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55 G. Forsyth, *Forsyth, G., 20th Century Ceramics: An International Survey of the Best Work Produced by Modern Craftsmen, Artists and Manufacturers* (London: The Studio Ltd., 1936), p.28.

56 Forsyth facilitated the appointment of Anne Potts as Manager of a newly opened Pottery Studio at Buller's in 1934, and he would help Grete Marks find work at Minton in 1937.

57 D.M. Billington, *The Art of the Potter* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1937), p.112.

58 Ibid. In his autobiography, Cardew recalled Staite Murray's 'emphatic and memorable' dismissal of this plan: 'You can't make love by proxy'. (*Michael Cardew: A Pioneer Potter* (London: Collins, 1988), p.98).

It was telling, but inevitable, that Moorcroft was not discussed by either Forsyth or Billington, for both of whom a clear line separated the studio potter and the manufacturer; he fell into neither of those polarised camps. It was evidently clear to Hunt, however, that Moorcroft, celebrated both for his functional wares and for his decorative pottery, would be able to offer a broader (and doubtless more outspoken) vision than theirs of the art of pottery in the modern world. A list of Chapter Headings, sent for his consideration in a letter of 20 March 1939, gives a clear idea of the range he wished to cover, a mixture of technical explanation, ceramic history and personal reflection, an assessment of the art and craft of pottery, past, present and future:

> The Potter's Wheel throughout the Centuries
> The Development of the Potter's Art
> The Main Influences and Schools of Thought
> Personalities of Pottery
> The Potter's Philosophy
> The Potter in the Machine Age
> The Technical Processes of Pottery, from the Conception in the Artist's mind to the Appearance of the Finished Piece.
> Personal Reminiscences of Occasions and Personalities, Changed and Contrasting Conditions etc.
> Famous Contemporaries.
> Notable Successes and Influences Governing their Design.
> A Survey of the Future Trend, and the Possible Return to Crafts and Simplicity.

A number of undated notes and jottings have survived which relate almost certainly to this project. As Moorcroft responded to ever more challenging commercial, political and aesthetic pressures, he wrote above all as a potter. One fragment sketched out his sense of vocation. That Hunt should have wished to include a section on 'The Potter's Philosophy' was in itself significant; for William Moorcroft, pottery was far more than a business, and Hunt had recognised that:

> There is no more human, more fascinating nor appealing work than that of the Potter. The Potter has for his use the foundation of the earth itself, with all its clays and metals formed during millions of years. The Potter is happy in finding himself with this boundless, infinite, thrilling, vivacious, joyous gift from God. [...] With such a sacred trust there can be only one aim, that is the utmost for the Highest.

The lines echoed the opening of his 1905 article in the *American Pottery Gazette*, but the spiritual dimension was now developed. He saw the creation of pottery as a deeply personal collaboration with the very materials of creation, an act of joy and veneration; to do so through mechanical means would have been a travesty. But he stressed, too, his sense of moral responsibility not just to his public, nor to himself as artist, but to 'the Highest'. The phrase echoed the motto often attributed to the Victorian artist G.F. Watts, quoted most recently in the Obituary of his widow, Mary Seton Watts, published in *The Times*:

> During some 30 years she drew strength from the past and kept alive a great tradition. 'The utmost for the highest' had always been his aim. She fought with vigour against any attack on the beauty of Nature [...].[59]

For Moorcroft as for Watts, the integrity of art was what mattered above all. And he represented the potter's creative journey in almost allegorical terms, a quest to produce work worthy of its precious material, while resisting the lure of fashion:

> This can only be achieved by sacrifice, by conscientious work, and by leaving entirely alone the miserable temptation to listen to the charlatan, the uninformed man who is always ready to talk without an understanding of the deeper values of the craft.

Unlike Forsyth or Billington, Moorcroft did not divide potters into the categories of studio and industrial, he distinguished between those who had a sense of vocation and those who thought no further than profit, and produced superficial ware as a result. To describe the potter driven by commercial motives as a 'charlatan' was both revealing and damning; the charlatan was a deceiver, his products fraudulent, and his success based on his salesman's 'prattle' (*ciarla*), not on the quality of his wares. The fragment ended with Moorcroft's own version of the struggle between conflicting aesthetic and moral values in the interwar years:

> During the debased art as seen in many things during the last 20 years, we were working without true guidance. The men who could do things were driven out by the more commercially minded men. And the true men were alone, pining in their caves, as it were, waiting for the dawn of a new era. May we all pray for deliverance from an ugly phase.

Not politicised, as it was in Europe, Moorcroft's account opposed the integrity of art and the emptiness of wares made simply to sell. He did not foresee imminent progress, but he could visualise its qualities: in the 'new era', 'true' art would be freed of its commercial straitjacket. And it would be, above all, an expression of the self. Any form of imitation, be it industrial plagiarism or anglo-orientalism, fell short of this:

> [...] we must seek through the wonderful material we use as potters truth and beauty. [...] Plagiarism is so common, and life so short. In our short life, we cannot wisely spend our time following Greek or Roman models, or French, or Chinese. We should not forget [...] to be true to ourselves and to our work. This alone will justify our existence.

Moorcroft's book was never completed, and no extended drafts have survived; they were probably never written. In the years of increasing commercial and economic pressures, when Moorcroft's ware was as diverse and expressive as it had ever been, writing cannot have been his priority. On another scrap of paper he made the telling observation that he had time only to create pottery, not to reflect on it: 'I fear that I am not much known, as I have never had time to spare to attend meetings, or to talk about my pottery. My motto has been, and almost without choice, *Facta non verba*.' But it was not just a matter of time, it was a matter, too, of principle (and temperament).

59 'Mrs G.F. Watts, An Appreciation', *The Times* (10 September 1938), p.12.

Moorcroft was not by nature a man of (written) words, and for all that he felt the need to promote and explain his art, he was doubtless much more effective doing so informally as he showed visitors around his works than he was in documents which required more careful drafting. Leach spent much time in the late 1930s writing *A Potter's Book*; Moorcroft spent these years making pots. It was a clear sign of his status and celebrity that he should have been approached by Blackie to commit to paper his own potter's outlook, but in a sense, the book was not necessary. For all Moorcroft's anxiety about not being understood, the uniqueness, quality and value of his pottery were there for all to see. And many did, from heads of state to members of the public, from East to West.

6. New York, 1939

The New York World's Fair of 1939 promised to be a less contentious occasion for Moorcroft to exhibit his wares than the Paris exhibition of two years earlier. Memories of that controversy were implied in a letter of 7 April 1938 from Sir Edward Crowe, who had retired as Comptroller-General of the DOT in 1937:

> To me, the word Moorcroft has become synonymous with beautiful pottery, and I hope and trust that you will have health and strength [...] to give to the world these masterpieces for many years to come; and I hope particularly that at New York you will have an opportunity of displaying your goods.

The same implied criticism of the CAI was expressed publicly in a letter to *The Times* by Cecil Harcourt Smith, responding to a notice on Moorcroft ware: 'If British pottery of today is to have due recognition at the New York World's Fair, I trust that, for the credit of our handicraft, Moorcroft pottery may be given the position it deserves.'[60] The British Commissioner General to the Fair, Sir Louis Beale, met Moorcroft in February 1938, inviting him to participate. A letter from Moorcroft dated 26 July 1938 implied that he had been left free to select his own wares, and he clearly relished this opportunity to exhibit the very best of his work:

> I believe it will be possible with your help to make a display that will be original, yet breathing with life, something at once appealing, something undateable, something that will be a pleasant oasis in this often restless age.

He was describing an ambition to produce works of ceramic art, but echoing too Pevsner's assessment of Powder Blue; as ever, the same quality characterised all he made, functional or decorative. Using a metaphor already familiar in reviews of his work, he evoked works of timeless beauty, distinct and distinguished, vital and yet restful, works to transcend the troubles of the age.

And yet, in the course of the autumn, Moorcroft made enquiries about the possibility of exhibiting in his own right (just as he had two years earlier in Paris). On

60 'Moorcroft Pottery', *The Times* (8 March 1939), p.12.

14 November 1938 he wrote again to Beale, repeating his desire to display his finest art; Beale, it was now implied, had different priorities:

> In my case, you will understand that the pieces are purely exhibition pieces, and not commercial. The impression I formed when we first met, when you asked me to give you something exceptional and outstanding, was not to think how much I could make out of it, but how much I might be able to contribute to the exhibition in the form of the finest possible of pottery and porcelain.

As in Paris, he was making a very clear distinction between wares which were designed for replication in quantity, and those which exemplified the very best of his designs and the skills of his staff. He conceived his display, then, not as a trade catalogue, but as an artist's exhibit; it was in this spirit that he had participated at Wembley fifteen years earlier:

> My desire at that exhibition was to contribute something that would be worthy of English pottery, but I believe I was alone in my decision not to sell things there, but to show something that would add to the prestige of English pottery in the Great Empire Exhibition. [...] My feeling towards your British Government Pavilion remains the same [...].

It is almost certain that Moorcroft did not, in the end, exhibit separately; economic pressure was doubtless too strong. But there is evidence that, once again, he was unhappy with the final selection made of his exhibition pieces. With an art which was so personal, Moorcroft was uncomfortable leaving selection to others. An undated draft to Beale, clearly written after the opening of the Fair, broached this subject. He was proud of the pieces he had originally submitted, and certain of their appeal; for all the commercial pressures, he had not lost faith in his work:

> I did over a year's special work in producing specimens as requested by you, [...] but Captain Baynes was only able to select a few of these pieces, as he said owing to lack of space. I feel sure these objects would interest thousands of people in the United States, if they could be seen.

He pointedly enclosed a copy of the third review of his work by the *Revue Moderne*; the value of his pottery was eloquently appreciated in France, if not by the British Commissioner General.

The outcome of this request is not known, but Moorcroft's exhibit caught the attention of the British press. On 7 June 1939, *The Times* published a series of photos of the Fair, including views of the Maritime Hall, of the main entrance, and of the Hall of Metals which displayed in the foreground one of the supreme examples of British automotive engineering: the 7-ton Thunderbolt in which Captain Eyston had broken the World Land Speed record the previous year. The only item with a picture of its own, however, was an Orchid vase by Moorcroft, with the caption: 'The centre picture shows one of the notable pottery exhibits, the work of Mr W. Moorcroft of Trentham, Staffordshire.'[61]

61 'The British Pavilion at the New York World's Fair', *The Times* (7 June 1939), p.20.


20 THE TIMES WEDNESDAY JUNE 7 1939

THE BRITISH PAVILION AT THE NEW YORK WORLD'S FAIR

THE MARITIME HALL at the British Pavilion, showing a large map of the world, on the ocean surfaces of which are 9,000 models of ships representing the extent of British mercantile interest.

BRITAIN AT THE FAIR.—In a few days' time the King and Queen will pay a visit to the World's Fair in New York, and they will most probably see many of the exhibits in the British Pavilion illustrated on this page. Above are (left) a corner of the Maritime Hall, with exhibits representing British transatlantic shipping, and (right) the main entrance showing the dedication panel, and heraldic lions.

THE HALL OF METALS is shown on the left. Captain Eyston's Thunderbolt is in the foreground. The centre picture shows one of the notable pottery exhibits, the work of Mr. W. Moorcroft, of Tunstall, Staffordshire; and the right-hand picture shows the Court of Honour with its impressive heraldic display planned by Portcullis Pursuivant. It consists of 14 large panels and 128 escutcheons.

Fig. 116 *The Times* (7 June 1939). 'Personal and Commercial Papers of William Moorcroft', Stoke-on-Trent City Archives, SD 1837. CC BY-NC

The individualised focus on Moorcroft's ware among these more general views of the Fair is striking in itself; his was an exhibit seen to be of world-class significance. Perhaps more striking, however, is the fact that he was presented as an individual, located by his place of residence; for the reader of *The Times*, William Moorcroft was first and foremost an artist, not a firm. That same month, the *Pottery Gazette* published a report on 'China at the World's Fair in New York'; it ended with a Stop Press:

> As we go to press, we also learn that there are on view at the World's Fair several magnificent specimens of 'Moorcroft Ware'. Of two of these specimens, noble-sized vases, showing 'Moorcroft' craftsmanship at its best, we have pleasure in reproducing photographs.[62]

The photos were of an undecorated vessel with a running glaze, and of a vase with an Orchid design. Thirty-five years after Moorcroft's success at St Louis, he was exhibiting again in the US, and to equal acclaim.

7. Trade

At the end of the 1930s, Moorcroft's reputation was at its peak, both as a designer of tableware fit for the modern home and as a ceramic artist of international significance. But reputation alone did not guarantee commercial success. 1935–36 saw sales fall by 5.3%, against a rise of 8.4% in workers' wages, and of 27% for other costs; this left a gross profit lower by 32% on the previous year, and a net loss of £808 after working expenses had been factored in. Moorcroft wrote to Alwyn Lasenby on 1 September

62 'Some Moorcroft Triumphs', *PG* (June 1939), p.789.

1936, disappointed by the outcome; he hoped, though, that his son's arrival at the works would give him more time to increase sales: 'It is not easy to obtain the right type of salesmen, but with Walter to help me, I look forward after many years to giving more personal attention to this side of things.'

In the following year, he cleared some stock in a bulk sale to Beard Watson & Co. Ltd., a fashionable Sydney retailer who posted a large advertisement in *The Sydney Herald* of 24 November 1936 headed 'Pottery by W. Moorcroft. Special London Purchase'. Its wording, significantly, promoted both the functional and decorative qualities of this pottery, simultaneously 'the quest of collectors' and a solution to 'every home need':

> Moorcroft pottery—by reason of its unusual and practical design—will be the quest of collectors of future generations. It is the perfect expression of the potter's art. [...] There are shapes and sizes for every home need [...].

Moorcroft also exploited his popularity in Canada, exhibiting again at the Canadian National Exhibition, 1936; his participation was welcomed in Toronto's leading newspaper, *The Globe*.[63] His exceptional reputation in Canada was confirmed in a letter of December 1936 from Herbert C. Merry, a pottery buyer for Eaton's: 'The people here love your work, and now that things are coming back to normal in a financial way, there should be a grand market for 'Moorcroft' again.' But conditions remained difficult, particularly in the home market. A letter from a traveller in the Liverpool area, dated 22 April 1937, tellingly captured the deepening Depression:

> Since collecting my samples, I have been out each day, working intensively, to make a success of Moorcroft sales. To date I have opened 4 new a/cs, travelled about 350 miles, and the net result is—that I have not earned the expenses of the car.

By the end of 1936–37, sales had increased by a modest 3%. The balance sheet still left a loss, but it was just £101; it was not spectacular progress, but it was progress.

The year 1937–38 was no easier. Writing on 22 October 1937, shortly after Moorcroft's return from the Paris Exhibition, Mr Harris, who had succeeded Pasco as his book-keeper at Liberty's, expressed confidence that commercial benefit would follow his artistic success there, but by the spring of 1938, following Hitler's annexation of Austria on 12 March, political uncertainty was taking its toll. The *Pottery Gazette* painted the bleakest of pictures from the 1938 BIF; this was trade truly in the doldrums:

> On quite a number of days, the corridors of the Pottery and Glass Section were almost empty, except for groups of the manufacturers' representatives, many of whom [...] were bitterly complaining that they might have been doing better on their own particular territories.[64]

At a personal level, too, Moorcroft was under intense financial pressure. He drafted a letter to the Canadian Pacific Railway Company on 7 January 1938, giving an account

63 *The Globe* (6 August 1936), p.9.
64 *PG* (April 1938), p.543.

of his ill-fated investment in the Company; in its stark account of relentless economic decline, it offers a telling insight into the art of the potter and the resilience of the man:

> My work in life is mainly personal, and my success depends largely upon my own health. […] Now I have nothing left but 1,464 shares in your company for which I paid some £16,000, which today are worth about £2,196.

The tranquil beauty of pots which had won such significant acclaim in France and Germany just weeks earlier was not the expression of an artist untouched by the political and economic turmoil; on the contrary, it was an act of will, an act of faith.

By the end of the year 1937–38, sales had fallen again, by 6.5%. The AGM, the Company's 25th, was held on 7 September 1938; the Directors' fee was foregone once more. Political tensions continued to make trade very difficult, and even the Munich Agreement brought no discernible improvement in confidence. As the year-end approached, there looked to be no end to the uncertainty. In the *Pottery Gazette*, W.J. Kent, president of the North Staffordshire Chamber of Commerce, was uncompromising in his assessment: 'There can be no definite improvement in trade so long as this menace of world war threatens'.[65] And as political tensions increased, so too did the economic pressure. A report from the British Pottery Manufacturers' Federation of 20 May 1939 discussed 'A.R.P. [Air Raid Precautions] on Factories. Prevention of Glare from Pottery Ovens'. All factories were required as a matter of urgency to make provision for ensuring a total and immediate blackout on their sites:

> Since it is probable that this country may get little or no warning of the outbreak of war—in fact, the first notification might take the form of an actual air raid—the Committee feel that manufacturers should definitely take steps to screen their ovens immediately.

For all this increasing pressure, though, Moorcroft's sales in 1938–39 rose by 15.8%, leaving a gross profit of £3,200. A net loss remained, but it was just £48; it was his best outcome for four years.

These figures tell the story of a constant struggle against challenging conditions, each financial year ending in a net loss. And yet, over this period, the extent of that loss was reducing steadily, from just over £800 in 1935–36 to just under £48 in 1938–39. This modest success was all the more notable given an increase in production costs of 17% over these four years. It was due in part to a reduction in the wages bill, lower by 10.5% in this period, a sign of a shrinking workforce and the increasing proportion of undecorated wares being produced; but it was due also, and significantly, to an increase in sales, which stood in 1938–39 11.6% higher than in 1935–36. For all the constraints in the economy, Moorcroft ware was still finding a market, and increasingly so. In manuscript notes for his report to directors at the AGM, he expressed confidence that the tide was turning:

65 *PG* (May 1939), p.686.

> The year's work. Its uncertain outlook, its development regardless of this. A demand for better things. A gradual reaction from useless values. Good production is accepted as the best investment. [...] Our sales are nearly 15% higher than a year ago. While the demand in London is less than a year ago, the demand from U.S.A. is higher. The advantages of the New York World's Fair, without any charge for space.

The AGM took place on 28 August 1939. Six days later, on 3 September 1939, Britain was once again at war.

8. Conclusions

As economic conditions continued to deteriorate amid growing political tension, Moorcroft's commitment to his production methods was increasingly exceptional. At a meeting of the Design and Industries Association [DIA] and the Society of Industrial Artists, the Pountney designer J.F. Price acknowledged that underglaze decoration produced the most authentic ceramic effects, but affirmed that it was simply unviable in a challenging economic climate; the modern manufacturer had to be pragmatic: 'If the ware must be decorated at all, he would like it to be decorated on the glaze, where any mistakes could be wiped out and the work done over again'.[66] Decorated pottery of any kind was clearly seen to be a gamble in the current conditions, and Price noted that 'most potters have arrived at a common-sense view of industrial art.'[67] Not so William Moorcroft. For him, art was irreducible to common sense, and his introduction of new, finely decorated floral designs, so successful in Paris and New York, was another clear sign of his bold individuality. He was not one to compromise his values, a position which led to more tension with the BPMF. A Minute from the Federation's General Purposes Committee dated 27 February 1936, recorded a proposal to introduce greater uniformity of stand design at the 1937 BIF, to which 'practically the whole of the exhibitors in the four central blocks of the Pottery Section' had agreed. Moorcroft, however, contacted Sir Edward Crowe at the DOT on 19 October 1936, clearly contrasting his own individual practice with that of a manufacturer. He resisted uniformity at all costs, and his letter, temperate, courteous, deferential even, nevertheless communicated strongly held views:

> Would not it be possible for me to be something of an oasis in the desert? Even a flower in a green field is a relief to the eye, and could not my stand with its carefully thought-out lighting prove to be a happy relief to the uniform stream line as suggested?

Moorcroft's was not the individuality of a competitor, intent on survival at the expense of others; it was that of a potter defending his right to be himself. He would not be dictated to by a committee, as he reminded Crowe:

66 *PG* (July 1936), p.938.
67 Ibid.

> […] the Chairman of the Council for Art and Industry might be well qualified to control the underground railway, but I hope always to remain in a position to determine how to display my pottery without the intervention of any other council.

In 1937, Moorcroft resigned from the Federation.

This resignation appeared to confirm the view that Moorcroft was not a 'pottery manufacturer', but on 27 January 1939 he wrote to Sidney Dodd, secretary of the Federation, in response to a comment made to a visiting importer from Czechoslovakia:

> […] after your Federation recommended certain firms, Mr Hohenberg asked you a question, 'What about Moorcroft', and it would appear that you amused him by telling him that I was not a merchant, but an artist […].

Moorcroft's very public repudiation of the designation 'artist' in his letter to *The Times* of 7 April 1934 had clearly had no effect on the attitudes of the BPMF. Dodd's comment was all the more inappropriate, and provocative, given Moorcroft's unbroken record of attendance at the British Industries Fair, the industry's main trade fair; indeed, such support was by no means common among Staffordshire manufacturers, who increasingly regarded it as uneconomic. Moorcroft's objection was doubtless inspired by concern at the potential loss of business, but it reflected, too, his continued dislike of being categorised as an 'artist'. He recalled his exchange with the Chairman of the BPMF in a letter of 11 April 1938 to the Secretary of the Royal Society of Arts, K.W. Luckhurst, on the subject of the RSA's creation of the title, Designer for Industry, for which, Moorcroft contended, the qualifying criteria implicitly valued commercial success above aesthetic quality. He added a reminiscence omitted (or perhaps cut) from his letter to *The Times*:

> I thanked them for this reference, and explained that I felt no special compliment was paid to me; and I reminded the meeting of one Sunday evening when leaving my hotel in Paris, of some charming creature quite unexpectedly taking my arm, telling me she was an artist; and I left her as quickly almost as she had addressed me, telling her I was not.

Moorcroft's anecdote, characteristically witty, carried a telling irony. The 'artistic' qualities displayed by the 'charming creature' in Paris, and which Moorcroft so categorically disclaimed, were those he identified with much modern industrial design: the art of providing whatever the public might be thought to desire. Design created simply for commercial motives was not part of Moorcroft's conception of his art, nor of his practice.

By the end of the 1930s, in a world increasingly preoccupied by commerce and competition, Moorcroft stood out, and appeared to stand alone. Writing to the Royal Institution on 27 March 1937, in response to an invitation to exhibit, he expressed the fear that his work was not fully appreciated for what it was. The first of the *Revue Moderne* articles had been published less than a month earlier, but his experience with the CAI over the Paris Exhibition was still very fresh in his mind: 'My means of working are little known, but in some future era I am hopeful that the result of a life's

work will be better understood.' But his uniqueness was appreciated, if not by the BPMF. Blackie's book commission reflected interest in a potter whose practice could not be reduced to a single generic term, and Moorcroft's individuality was recognised, too, in the *Pottery Gazette*; truth to his principles was all the more noteworthy when economic pressures to compromise might have seemed irresistible:

> Mr Moorcroft was good enough to show us [...] a number of new decorations and colourings which he will be exhibiting at Olympia this year for the first time. They are, it is almost needless to add, pottery of the truest type; for, assuredly, nothing less than this would satisfy Mr Moorcroft. It is certainly greatly to the advantage of the pottery trade that there are still a few individuals here and there who hold indomitably to their principles [...].[68]

This same exhibit (at the 1939 BIF) caught the attention, too, of Marriott, who published a notice in *The Times*.[69] It was, at one level, a recognition of Moorcroft's reputation that his pottery should attract the attention of a critic who, for over ten years, had been reviewing the work of leading studio potters. Marriott clearly recognised that Moorcroft could not be classified in either of the customary categories; his work differed from both studio and commercial pottery, both in its design and manufacture:

> In kind, this pottery which Mr William Moorcroft has been making at Burslem for the last 40 years, is distinct. It differs from the work of our leading 'studio' potters in being practically without Oriental reference, and from ordinary factory production in that all the pieces are 'thrown' on the wheel and not moulded.[70]

The observation that Moorcroft's pottery was 'practically without Oriental reference' took no account of the flambé wares which had been admired for nearly twenty years, but it revealed Marriott's critical standpoint. Unlike Serlanges, who read Moorcroft's pottery on its own terms, Marriott viewed it through the lens of contemporary studio pottery. But for all the obvious differences between the two aesthetics, and for all Marriott's undisguised preferences, he still recognised in this work the art of a skilled potter:

> The large ornamental vases in flambé and turquoise, richly decorated with flowers naturalistically drawn, are not to our taste, but they serve very well to illustrate technical methods and the intensity of colour that can be produced by purely potting means.[71]

Like Pick and Pevsner, however, he was entirely convinced by the tableware, judged, significantly, in terms not of its functionality, but of its artistic qualities, form and colour:

> Wholehearted praise can be given to the tea, coffee, dinner and cider sets in jade white and porcelain blue—of the stippled 'powder' variety [...]. The forms are well considered,

68 *PG* (February 1939), p.252.
69 *The Times* (4 March 1939), p.10.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.

> with all the curves flowing together, and the semi-matt surface of the jade white is particularly pleasing.[72]

It was this appreciation of Moorcroft's industrial design that led Marriott to liken his aesthetic to that of Josiah Wedgwood:

> Speaking generally, the work of Mr Moorcroft inclines to the classical tradition of the original Wedgwood, with symmetry and purity of form as the aim, rather than the balance and fluency which charm us in pre-Wedgwood English pottery and in the modern revival.[73]

Marriott had recognised the individuality of Moorcroft's practice, but he did not explore how he brought together studio and factory, art and industry; he resorted instead to the familiar, if rudimentary, categories of pre-industrial and industrial ware. His conclusions may have been questionable (and were questioned), but the fact that he considered the issue at all was a mark of Moorcroft's reputation as a potter at the end of this troubled decade; it was all the more significant for the fact that Marriott had not reviewed any pottery in *The Times* for more than two years.

The notice prompted an immediate response from Cecil Harcourt Smith. In a letter to *The Times*, published under the revealing heading 'Commerce and Art', he picked up the polarised categories within which both the BPMF and Marriott had attempted to classify Moorcroft. He clearly implied that a notice by Marriott confirmed Moorcroft's status as an artist potter, and not simply as a manufacturer, and he began to explore ways in which the potter's practice collapsed this distinction:

> We are today realising more and more that commerce and art are to their mutual advantage allies, and it is encouraging to find that you, Sir, are prepared to give this outstanding British production the distinction of a special notice.[74]

He saw evidence of this fusion in the broad range of people who appreciated Moorcroft's work, the ordinary observer and the connoisseur, at home and abroad:

> Moorcroft pottery has for some years been recognised abroad as standing in a class by itself among the modern products of ceramic art. [...] It is not without reason that every important specimen issuing from his works bears his signature, for his individuality asserts itself in every piece; but one can almost always rest assured that the handling of the material, form and decoration will give pleasure, not only to the amateur, but to the expert and the scientist who know the problems which confront any potter who is not merely a commercial provider.[75]

Significantly, neither the word 'artist' nor 'manufacturer' was used to describe Moorcroft, categories which (alone) could not contain the particularity of his work.

72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 *The Times* (8 March 1939), p.12.
75 Ibid.

But the term 'individuality' was applied, occurring again in his response to Marriott's comparison of Moorcroft and Wedgwood:

> Both styles, it is true, aim at symmetry and purity of form, but whereas Wedgwood was obsessed with his interpretation of the then new range of classical models, with the consequent limitations involved, Moorcroft has drawn upon an infinitely wider field of inspiration, which imparts to his work movement and naturalness that are human and individual.[76]

Harcourt Smith understood very well the unique diversity of Moorcroft's production. His inspiration was not to be found in pattern books, or decorative traditions; he did not copy a look, or a style, he expressed through form, colour and design his personal response to nature. This was the work of an individual, of one unafraid to be himself, and whose practice brought together in his own distinctive way the poles of commerce and art.

Just four months earlier, Pevsner had been revisiting a similar polarity on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society. Writing in *The Studio*, he situated the origins of industrial modernism in the Arts and Crafts movement, for all that this legacy was claimed, too, by those committed to handcraft.[77] Pevsner saw the Arts and Crafts spirit in terms of design principles rather than means of production, a spirit which accepted the artist's social responsibility to improve the quality of life:

> A designer, like an architect, is not a free artist. Both must believe in the moral value of serving, serving clearly defined purposes in their individual works, and serving the community in the whole of their activity.[78]

Different in its aesthetic and its practice, Moorcroft's fusion of art and industry was nevertheless conceived in like spirit. Writing to his daughter, Beatrice, on 14 February 1930, as he prepared for the British Industries Fair, he had made this profession of faith:

> If only the people in the world would concentrate upon making all things beautiful, and if all people concentrated on developing the arts of Peace, what a world it might be, that is, would not the common things of life made beautiful be more in keeping with the great gift of God to man, the beautiful Earth itself. We have a sacred trust when we have the opportunity to live, yet how many of us fail in our trust.

At the end of the decade, his commitment to these values had not diminished; the world, however, was set on a different course.

76 Ibid.
77 N. Pevsner, 'Fifty Years of Arts & Crafts', *The Studio* (November 1938), 225–231.
78 N. Pevsner, *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1937), p.199.