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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14. 1939–45: Adversity and Resolution

1. Negotiating the Restrictions of War

War brought restrictions and challenges of all kinds: escalating costs, fuel rationing, loss of labour to the armed forces or to munitions factories. The Limitation of Home Supplies (Miscellaneous) Order 1940 placed limits on sales to the home market of articles ‘commonly used but not essential’. The Concentration of Industry scheme, introduced in the early part of 1941, aimed to consolidate the production of wares for export or for government contracts in as few ‘nucleus’ factories as possible, each working at full capacity; smaller firms were to be absorbed into larger enterprises, their staff redeployed and their premises used for storage. For the *Pottery Gazette*, the inevitable consequences of this ‘drastic curtailment of production’ were plain to see: ‘manufacturers who are not fortunate enough to be transacting an appreciable amount of export business are literally staring ruin in the face’.[1]

Moorcroft’s factory was particularly vulnerable: it was too small to qualify for nucleus status, and the specialised nature of its production methods made it unsuitable for absorption by a larger firm. On 19 August 1941, the Board of Trade announced that his factory had been classified as a non-nucleus establishment, requiring him ‘to take immediate steps to transfer your production to a nucleus firm’.[2] If concentration of resources promised survival for the country as a whole, it spelled doom for Moorcroft, whose staff faced re-deployment and his works closure. His response was immediate, and quite unorthodox. On 22 August 1941, he applied for nucleus status, basing his case both on his substantial output for export and for government contract, and on the artistic quality of his work. Boldly re-appropriating the term ‘nucleus’, he argued that his works did conform to the new criteria, even though in its size and its activity it was the very antithesis of what the government was envisaging: ‘It is now 44 years ago since the nucleus of my pottery began. [...] We are not manufacturers in the ordinary sense, but much more nearly a school of research.’ The argument was disingenuous,

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[1] ‘Concentration of Industry’, *Pottery Gazette and Glass Trade Review* [*PG*] (May 1941), p.389.

[2] All unpublished documents referred to in this chapter are located in William Moorcroft: Personal and Commercial Papers, SD1837, Stoke-on-Trent City Archives [WM Archive].

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but Moorcroft was not prepared to lose sight of the real significance of his work. His export revenue was sizeable, but he linked this, crucially, to the uniqueness of his ware; his was not just any small-sized firm, and its economic value to the country was contingent on its independence:

> The works here have been specially built to make Moorcroft pottery, and it could not be produced in any other works. I wish to appeal to you to allow me to continue making my original pottery as we are doing, in conjunction with pottery we are making for the Ministry of Works. [...] The demand for my pottery, largely in the United States and Canada, forms 90% of our turnover.

Aesthetic arguments had little traction in times of war, and the application failed. Moorcroft appealed, and his case was referred to Sir Cecil Weir, the Business Member of the Industrial and Export Council, responsible for the concentration of the pottery industry. On 9 September 1941, Weir confirmed the Board of Trade's decision, but offered Moorcroft an alternative, if highly uncertain, option: to continue production in his own works, and to 'take your chance against the Ministry of Labour taking all your labour away or the Factory Control requisitioning your premises'. By now, seventy factories had been designated 'nucleus', sixty had been absorbed, and seventy-five more had been closed. Faced with closure or concentration, which, given the specialised and individual nature of Moorcroft's production, would have been closure in all but name, Weir's third option was Moorcroft's one chance of survival. He had won a stay of sentence, but only that; for the next four years, he would work under the constant pressure of a diminishing workforce, and the ever-present threat of losing his premises to government use.

Not for the first time in his career, commercial survival did not hinge on the quality of his work, but on his ability to negotiate economic conditions and political pressures; it was not enough to be a potter, he had to be strategist and campaigner as well. Draft letters to Weir reveal his constant efforts to keep his works afloat. In one, he pleaded for support to retain his specialist staff, underlining the economic value of what he produced; in another he argued for the aesthetic, even moral worth of the beauty he created, unquantifiable but beyond measure:

> Now there is too little left that gives perpetual joy, and we are told again and again that it is our privilege to give this service in life. We are non-competitive and a small band of workers, a real nucleus, as a heart beating towards real strength. I would not ask this privilege if I could see we were able to help the country in a better way than we are now doing.

And elsewhere he underlined the importance of the work he was doing for the Ministry of Works, another argument for protecting his enterprise:

> [...] we are constantly making articles for hospital use. [...] To prove that we make these things economically, may I quote one instance of a visit we received from a War Office accountant, who asked to see our costings of a certain article. He found our price was

> lower than that quoted by a large mass-producing firm, and at the same time the article we supplied was of a much higher standard of production.

Moorcroft's point was characteristically double-edged; he stressed his contribution to the war effort through the fulfilling of government contracts, but he implied, too, that for all its small size, his works could compete with larger enterprises protected by their nucleus status. But no arguments could withstand the government's insatiable need for labour. In a list of thirty-eight employees dated 10 November 1941, there were just six men under the age of fifty, and of the fifteen decorators listed, nearly half (six) were seventeen or younger. At the start of 1942, Moorcroft had lost more than a quarter of his already depleted workforce, and the pressure continued, and increased. By mid-1943, he had lost two of his three turners, and on 12 July 1943, he was pleading for a replacement: 'we are unable to produce more domestic ware owing to the lack of a turner, and the only turner we have left is now on the verge of a collapse.' The appeal was unsuccessful.

Moorcroft's most urgent, and ultimately forlorn, mission was to retain his son, Walter. On 7 December 1939, he wrote to the Ministry of Labour, making the most strategic of arguments; Walter was essential for the production of government orders: 'This man Walter Moorcroft is the only Manager and Foreman we employ, and he is responsible for the production of all orders for the Ministry of Supply.' This was enough to defer enlistment, but by the spring of 1941, the situation had deteriorated. The age of exemption for those in reserved occupations was raised to thirty; Walter, the only male under the age of thirty-seven at the works, was twenty-four. Moorcroft somehow managed to keep conscription at bay for two more years, but by early 1943 the battle was finally lost; Walter was called up in May 1943, and Moorcroft worked alone until the end of his life, two and a half years later. Even VE Day brought little respite as he continued to plead for his son's release from military service. He wrote to the Stoke M.P., Ellis Smith, on 25 August 1945, just seven weeks before his death. His account of his multiple roles in the works, once the proud explanation of what made his pottery so distinctive and personal, read now as a litany of increasingly unendurable burdens:

> I am working entirely upon original work for export, mainly for the U.S.A. and Canada, and I have an unusual demand for my production. [...] at present, with a much depleted staff, I produce about £10,000 (ten thousand pounds) worth of pottery per annum. [...] My present turnover is achieved without my having either a manager or a foreman. I am my own chemist, designer, I make each working drawing, I produce my own colours through my long experience as a physicist. I fire my special ovens. I have to train my own workers. My son was taken from me, and he is the only man qualified to carry on my work. It is only by the grace of God that I can do all my work in my 74th year. [...] If you could help me to obtain his release, this would be a practical way of helping the country, in at least a small way.

Moorcroft painted a bleak picture, but for a small enterprise to have survived independently during the war years was a quite remarkable achievement; by the end of the war, more than two thirds of potteries had either closed or been absorbed into the remaining larger nucleus firms.[3] Surviving letters from Olive Cotton, the works' secretary, give an insight into conditions in the last months of Moorcroft's life: a letter of 13 June 1945 depicted a small, exhausted but dedicated workforce, facing more orders than they had the capacity to satisfy:

> I am sorry I did not answer your letter by return. I have not been too well, but I am better now. [...] Jones hasn't [taken] the Blue Porcelain from around the oven, but I will have this attended to. Joan and Olwyn are working very well together. [...] We had an urgent cable from Birks, Ellis, Ryrie this afternoon, as follows: 'Badly need assortment Vases, all sizes, including a few larger sizes, teapots, sugars and creams, cigarette boxes, ashtrays, candy boxes, bowls etc'. [...] Shall I send the pottery from the oven this week to Birks Ellis Ryrie, or do you wish it packed for Hy Birks, Montreal?

Such was his shortage of staff that even when he was away from the office, Moorcroft was still directing affairs; he would do so to the end.

2. Design in Wartime

Wartime constraints created one further challenge to Moorcroft, both as manufacturer and designer: the proscription in 1942 of sales of decorated pottery both at home and (with the exception of North America) abroad, and the restriction of production for the home market to white, undecorated Utility ware in shapes approved by the Board of Trade. The aim was to focus industrial resources on essential needs, but the potential consequences of these curbs caused widespread concern among manufacturers. Speaking two years after the introduction of Utility ware, in a lecture reported in the *Pottery Gazette*, John Adams noted its stifling effect on creativity:

> Manufacturers and retailers are heartily tired of the bleak utility ware, and look forward to the time when they will be permitted to try to regain unique qualities of design and technique laboriously built up during generations of effort. [...] for those who produce work of a more individual and progressive character, the break with tradition has been disastrous.[4]

One might imagine that Moorcroft, for whom colour and ornament were essential elements in his designs, would have been seriously unsettled by this limitation. It was not so. On the contrary.

For many designers, the Utility scheme boded well for the future of modern industrial art. A debate about its benefits was prompted by a letter to *The Times* from J.P. Blake, Chairman of the London County Council, who celebrated this 'unparalleled opportunity to put good designs into nearly every home in England.'[5] James Hogan, Chief Designer at James Powell & Sons, responded in similar vein on 16 September 1942, welcoming the inevitable focus on form rather than 'mere decoration'.[6] It is no surprise that Moorcroft should have felt impelled to intervene. He wrote to *The Times* on the very day Blake's letter appeared; his comments were published on 18 September 1942:

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[3] *Industrial Reference Service*, vol.3, pt.8:2 (September 1945), p.1.

[4] J. Adams, 'The Potter's Art', *PG* (June 1944), p.322.

> The question raised by the Chairman of the London County Council on design in pottery and glass leaves me as a designer and maker of pottery, grateful for his directing attention to the great value of living with things as perfect in form as possible. But as a ten-thousandth part of an inch determines purity of line, it would be no easy task to reach this ideal. Form exquisitely balanced, pure in tone and texture, is as refreshing as early morning in the country, with the song of the bird. But the maker of pottery alone can eliminate the fault in shape that so easily destroys beauty and truth. If the order for simplicity which the Board of Trade has been compelled to enforce can lead to this high ideal, then a great advance will have been made through the influence of adversity.[7]

Moorcroft, like other correspondents, appreciated the virtues of simplicity in form, but in a quite different way. If for some it was a desirable prerequisite of design for machine production, for Moorcroft its virtues were more natural, even organic. His synaesthetic comparison of form with birdsong suggested its capacity for unmediated expression, but it allowed him, too, to affirm that man ceded nothing to the machine; just as a trained ear might pick up the slightest deviation from perfect harmony, so too the potter's eye could detect the merest divergence from a perfect line. Precision was not a quality unique to products of the machine. Nor could he resist the temptation to question (once more) the aesthetic sensitivity of a government committee; if 'the maker of pottery alone' could identify and correct imperfections in form, intervention by the Board of Trade would be superfluous at best, and at worst... Moorcroft did not elaborate.

The letter engaged with the machine aesthetic of modernism, implicitly affirming the value of human agency, even when the focus was on simplicity and precision. But it engaged, too, implicitly, with Leach's *A Potter's Book*, published in 1940, whose opening chapter 'Towards a Standard' had provocatively contrasted the qualities of pottery made by hand and by machine, and identified in Song ware the one universal standard of value, dismissing all other industrial or craft traditions. Moorcroft's Austerity Ware had none of the craft look of Leach Standard Ware, but it sought in its own way to bring together craft and design for serial production. Giving form to the principles outlined in his letter to *The Times*, he invested the starkest of pottery designs with a human spirit. If Leach reaffirmed the polarisation of industrial design and craft ware, Moorcroft sought a synthesis of reason and intuition.

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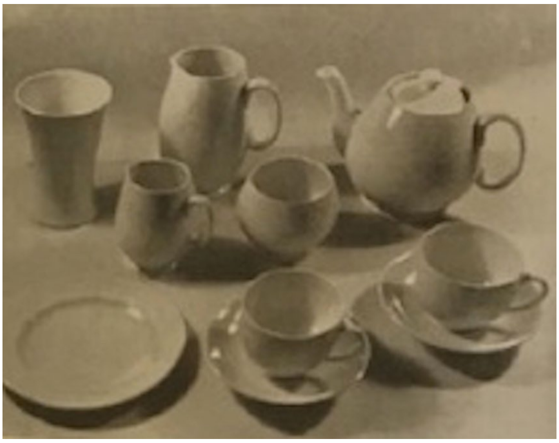
[5] J.P. Blake, 'Designs for Glass and Pottery', *The Times* (11 September 1942), p.5.

[6] J. Hogan, 'Design and the State', *The Times* (16 September 1942), p.5.

[7] W. Moorcroft, 'Design of Glass and Pottery', *The Times* (18 September 1942), p.5.



(L) Fig. 117 William Moorcroft, Vase in Austerity ware (1942), 12.5cm. CC BY-NC
(R) Fig. 118 Moorcroft's Austerity ware illustrated in Architectural Review (January 1943). 'Personal and Commercial Papers of William Moorcroft', Stoke-on-Trent City Archives, SD 1837. CC BY-NC

Moorcroft sent a sample to R.M. Barrington Ward, the newly appointed Editor for *The Times*; his reply, dated 17 September 1942, set it explicitly in the context of his letter:

> Your little set of china [...] is displayed on a table in my room. It bears out most admirably the doctrine represented in your letter. [...] I have good reason to welcome a correspondence which has [...] brought me a sample of the response to war necessities which is both delightful to the eye and full of encouragement.

On the same day as Moorcroft's letter, *The Times* published a short notice on his Austerity ware. It was seen to combine the qualities of efficient functionality and skilled craftsmanship, simplicity and grace; Moorcroft's theory and practice were given national endorsement:

> *The Times* has received [...] examples of a tea-service designed by Mr William Moorcroft to meet the Board of Trade's austerity requirements. The shapes have all been 'thrown on the wheel' and great care has been taken to make the balance and symmetry as perfect as possible. [...] They are just a shade warmer than white, glazed, and quite without ornament. The service seems very practical, each piece standing firmly, so as not easily to be upset. Yet it has a comely look, almost amounting to elegance, and shows how pleasing a well-planned simplicity can be.[8]

Moorcroft's letter attracted much attention. It was quoted extensively in the *Pottery Gazette*, October 1942, its author identified as one 'who certainly knows what beauty in pottery means',[9] and he received many responses both approving his views and also, crucially, placing an order for the tea set; Moorcroft's artistic principles, and his ware, were striking a chord. On 21 September 1942, he heard from Alfred Talbot Smith, book illustrator and *Punch* cartoonist: 'I am interested in your letter and the Austerity Crockery paragraph in *The Times* of 18 September 1942, because I am an artist and a member of the DIA.' And in a similar vein, Arthur L. Humphreys, bookseller and former proprietor of Hatchard's, wrote on 19 September 1942; he too recognised the aesthetic sensitivity of its content: 'That was a very good letter of yours in *The Times*, and only a real artist could have written it'. His Austerity ware also attracted widespread acclaim in official quarters. The Board of Trade wrote on 23 November 1942, clearly in response to a gift from Moorcroft; his ware was a powerful vindication of its policy: 'we shall treasure it as an example of how your firm adapted themselves to the Order necessitated by war-time needs'. The Ministry of Information saw its potential, too, Harry Trethowan noting in a letter of 24 March 1943 that they wished 'to purchase your utility wares to send on exhibition to the USA'. And Sylvia Pollack of the government-funded Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts, wrote on 6 April 1943, keen to include Moorcroft's ware in an 'Art for the People' exhibition, organised as part of the Ministry of Information's scheme of War-Time Support for the Arts: 'I agree entirely with the *Times* that these pieces are extremely elegant'.

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[8] 'Austerity Crockery. A Simple Tea-Service', *The Times* (18 September 1942), p.7.

[9] 'Design in Pottery and Glassware', *PG* (October 1942), 567–71 (p.567).

Throughout 1943, even as he faced Walter's imminent departure to military service, Austerity ware attracted widespread attention, not just as a solution to wartime restrictions, but as an example of modern design at its best. In an article, 'Utility or Austerity', published in the forward-looking *Architectural Review*, Nikolaus Pevsner expressed doubts about the first fruits of utility furniture, but he had nothing but praise for utility pottery, singling out Moorcroft as one of its leading designers. The article included a picture of 'Moorcroft's Ivory Porcelain, one of the best utility sets that have appeared', and commenting on the 'contrast between the grace and beauty of these articles of pottery and the uninspired though soundly designed and soundly constructed utility furniture'.[10]

An article in *Great Britain and the East* emphasised its perfect harmony of form and functionality:

> The teapot and milk jug are modern without being modernistic, and have a beauty of line to please the connoisseur. [...] Yet while approaching such perfection, the designer fits a practical lid to the teapot which will not fall off.[11]

And it featured, too, in an article on 'Utility Pottery' in *The Studio*, by Harry Trethowan, who argued that wartime restrictions released the designer from the insidious temptation to follow fashion, leaving him 'free from the clamour of the distributor, [...] free to work his will'.[12] The article illustrated twenty-two items of Austerity ware, of which sixteen were the products of just three firms: Wedgwood, Carter, Stabler,

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[10] N. Pevsner, 'Utility or Austerity', *Architectural Review* (January 1943), 3–4 (p.4).

[11] 'Britain's Pottery Industry', *Great Britain and the East* (30 January 1943), p.29.

[12] H. Trethowan, 'Utility Pottery', *The Studio* (January 1943), 48–49 (p.49).

& Adams, and Moorcroft, who had six examples illustrated. No less significant than Trethowan's comments was the journal which published them, as the writer was quick to point out:

> Through its long and famous history, *The Studio* has fostered and encouraged good design. [...] its pages are free only to the best; it gives praise to the pioneer [...] In this particular connection, by giving space to the Utility wares here illustrated, *The Studio* looks beyond the present, and sees in the present the future prospect.[13]

Moorcroft was clearly seen as one such 'pioneer'.

But its success was not just a matter of its design, it derived, too, from the fact that it was hand thrown. A feature in the *East Fife Observer*, commenting on a display of Moorcroft's pottery, recognised in this ware the skill of an artist-craftsman who understood the practical as well as the aesthetic requirements of good design:

> He is the last of the real potters, and these examples show how pleasing a well-planned simplicity can be. [...] All are original pieces and, having examined them, one is struck with the elegant shape of the jug, the beautiful balance of cup, and the extreme neatness in the finish of tea-pot, truly the work of a real artist.[14]

Its significance was noticed too by Herbert Read, to whom Moorcroft sent a set in the autumn of 1943; Read responded on 23 September 1943: 'The purity and simplicity of these wheel-thrown shapes is a perfect joy, and the paste and glaze are so clean and cool. Thank you very much. My appreciation will grow with constant use.' The combination of beauty and functionality was perfectly expressed in this response; this was ware to be used, and appreciated. But what Read appreciated, too, was its appeal as much to the senses as to the mind. Simplicity was a source of joy, its use both a visual and a tactile pleasure; the qualities of modern industrial design and craft production were in perfect harmony. Read's reaction was particularly significant, coming as it did in the year he, with Misha Black and Milner Gray, founded the Design Research Unit, a London-based consultancy whose manifesto clearly affirmed its place at the cutting edge of modern, machine-based design:

> The machine is accepted as the essentially modern vehicle of form. Our designs will therefore be essentially designs for mass production, but at the same time we hope to rescue mass production from the ugliness and aesthetic emptiness which has so far characterised the greater part of its output.[15]

In Moorcroft's Austerity Ware, Read clearly saw none of that 'ugliness and aesthetic emptiness'. On the contrary, he recognised in it that very fusion of reason and intuition which Moorcroft had sketched out in his letter to *The Times*, and which Read himself had pointed out in his review of Leach's *A Potter's Book* in the *New English Weekly*, 11 July 1940:

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[13] Ibid., p.48.

[14] *East Fife Observer* (11 February 1943).

[15] *Design Research Unit 1942–72*, ed. M. Cotton (Koenig Books, 2011).

> He sets up an opposition between intellect and sensibility, which does indeed exist. But art is not the exclusive product of any one faculty of the human mind. At its highest, it is a synthesis of all—of reason, intuition, feeling and sensation.[16]

What Read appreciated in Austerity ware, he identified, too, in Powder Blue; means of manufacture was as important as design. He wrote to Moorcroft on 2 June 1943 for permission to include a picture of the morning tea set in his new edition of *Art and Industry*. Like Pevsner, he admired its purity of line, but he discerned in it a unique quality attributable to its production by hand. Writing again on 12 June 1943, he put this appreciation into words:

> [...] I am very glad to have your description of the Blue Porcelain, and of the way it is made. It explains why, though your shapes are so perfectly functional, they retain a quality, or rather a 'personality' not found in wholly mechanical production.

Even without recourse to ornament, Moorcroft's individuality was clearly evident in his work.

Moorcroft's functional ware remained an object of critical appreciation in the final years of the war. When the illustration of Powder Blue appeared in the second edition of Read's *Art and Industry* in 1944, it replaced an image of industrially produced ware made by Sphinx Kristal, Maastricht, but the caption retained the same description of its qualities. Powder Blue was adopted as an example of forward-looking industrial design, and Moorcroft as its designer:

> Dark, speckled blue porcelain. A morning set designed by William Moorcroft and made by W. Moorcroft Ltd., Burslem. Modern pottery embodying the tradition of simplicity, precision and the appeal of pure form.[17]

The same was true of Austerity ware. In an article published in *Picture Post*, Misha Black stressed the need for good design and high production values in a competitive post-war world; he included an illustration of Austerity ware, above the caption:

> Good Design: Utility Tea Service in Traditional Style. It is designed in the eighteenth-century shapes which have proved their convenience. But subtle changes give it a modern character.[18]

Moorcroft clearly appreciated the reference, but he published a significant clarification the following month:

> In your very admirable journal of January 6, you kindly referred to my designs of domestic pottery as being examples of *good design*. [...] May I say that I designed these shapes about forty years ago, but seldom a day passes without my trying to find a finer

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[16] *New English Weekly* (11 July 1940), p.143 [quoted in J.F. Stair, 'Critical Writing on English Studio Pottery 1910–1940', unpublished PhD thesis, Royal College of Art, 2002 (p.428)].

[17] H. Read, *Art and Industry*, 2nd edition (London: Faber & Faber, 1944), p.71.

[18] M. Black, 'The Problem of Art in Industry: Design in Everyday Things', *Picture Post* (6 January 1945), 14–17 (p.15).

> purity of line as the pottery is being formed. This is possible as no moulds are used. The shapes are entirely designed by me, and remain Moorcroft of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and not the eighteenth century.[19]

Moorcroft was keen to clarify that the designs were his, and not simply a re-appropriation of eighteenth-century models, but the implications of his statement extended much further. His design may be described as having a modern 'character', but this was not the result of a search for a particular style to reflect a new age of industrial production; Moorcroft's search had been for a perfect form for his functional wares. And this, he pointed out, was a constantly evolving process, made possible precisely because it was undertaken in the studio of the craftsman, free of the constraints, both economic and practical, of production in moulds. It was a remarkable achievement that ware made by hand, to designs first elaborated more than thirty years earlier, should be seen to look forward to the future of design in the post-war world. It was a telling endorsement of his skill as a designer, and of his ability to bridge the gulf between craft and industrial production so starkly laid bare by Leach.

If Black implicitly associated Austerity ware with an aesthetic of modernity, others saw in it the fundamental characteristics of Moorcroft's pre-war pottery. For all its absence of colour and ornament, it nevertheless had the ability to enhance the pleasure of living. A feature written by the children's poet, Ffrida Wolfe in *The Lady* openly quoted the *Revue Moderne* in support of her assessment of this ware:

> The skill, knowledge and experience that have gone into the making is not so apparent to the casual observer; yet the reaction to good design on the table, day in day out, is bound to have its effect. As a Frenchman writing about the Moorcroft pottery says: 'These works uplift the mind and thus have an educative value [...].' In other words, the value of living with things that are perfect as possible fixes a standard; you can thus recognise the good thing when you see it, undazzled by mere novelty or a delightful pattern.[20]

Indeed, even as Moorcroft's production of decorated pottery was confined to a very limited export market, he continued to represent for many the future of a quite different aesthetic. At the same moment as Trethowan's review in *The Studio*, *The Spectator* published an article by Cecil Harcourt Smith; it began by deploring the recently introduced restrictions, and spoke out against pure functionality as an exclusive condition of good design: 'Usefulness need not always connote austerity. Even the simplest object can be decorated suitably at trifling cost'.[21] Writing from a distinctly nationalist perspective, he argued for the importance of decoration in the future of design. It was in this context that he evoked Moorcroft, whose ornamented ware was seen to display an integrity and originality which would always command a wide market: ‘In Moorcroft [...] we possess an artist-potter whose wares are upholding the supremacy of British production both at home and overseas’.[22]

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[19] W. Moorcroft, 'Good Design in Pottery', *Picture Post* (3 February 1945), p.3.

[20] F. Wolfe, 'The Shape of Things: Ceramics', *The Lady* (17 May 1945), p.301.

[21] C. Harcourt Smith, 'Post-War Design', *The Spectator* (15 January 1943), p.52.

An article published in *Empire News* focussed on just this aspect of Moorcroft’s work. While his Austerity ware was earning critical attention at home, his decorated ware, the very embodiment of his commitment to craft and individuality, had lost none of its appeal:

> Still turning out craft pieces for export is William Moorcroft, the royal potter, who has his works at Cobridge. Hating mass production, Mr Moorcroft works to no pattern book. ‘Each article I make’, he told a reporter, ‘is an original piece. I will not make the same thing by the thousand. I believe that the British potter can hold his own anywhere, and at any time, with creative work.’[23]

Such ware was appreciated, even in an age of austerity. And not just abroad. Announcing her appointment as Director of the Auxiliary Territorial Service on 4 December 1943, the front cover of *Illustrated* carried a photograph of Dame Leslie Whateley in her office. Behind her on the mantelpiece, filled with flowers, stood a Moorcroft vase with Fish decoration. The design itself was more than ten years old; its appeal, though, was evidently undimmed.

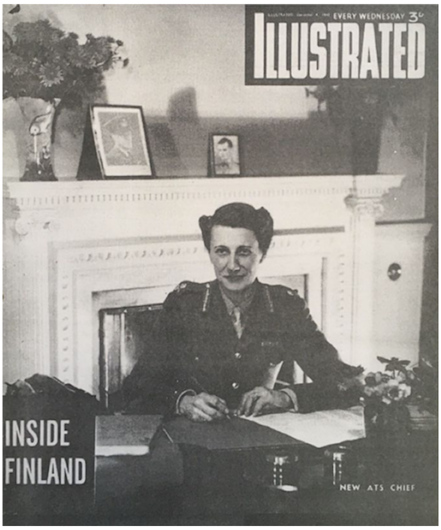

Fig. 119 Front cover of *Illustrated* (4 December 1943). ‘Personal and Commercial Papers of William Moorcroft’, Stoke-on-Trent City Archives, SD 1837. CC BY-NC

For Read, too, decorated ware clearly had its place. In a lecture delivered at the Burslem School of Art, he explored the differential aesthetics of machine-made and handcrafted wares, underlining the validity of both. It was a view he had expressed before, but it may well have implied on this occasion an acknowledgement of Moorcroft’s distinctively diverse output; he had been staying with Moorcroft during his visit, and he had doubtless heard his views on decorative pottery:

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[22] Ibid.

[23] ‘Potters keeping trade going for export’, *Empire News* (6 February 1944).

> The danger we ran, in a machine age, was that we sacrificed altogether one set of values, the personal, symbolic and decorative values, and confined art to an intellectual preoccupation with form and function. We might as well try to hop through life on one leg.[24]

3. Commercial Pressures

The conditions of war brought many pressures on both the production and sale of goods. To compensate for declining demand and rising costs, firms were steadily increasing their selling prices, but Moorcroft sought to resist this. He was prepared to take the long view, forgoing immediate benefit for the sake of retaining a solid commercial foundation; it was the strategy of a man with an eye to the future, a gamble, albeit calculated. He explained his reasoning to Alwyn Lasenby in a letter of 13 November 1939:

> During the last war, we remained firm and sacrificed immediate profit, and we found that this policy in the long run paid us, as our busiest time appeared after the war, for several years, and at a time when other manufacturers were without orders, or at most very little trade.

1939–40 was indeed a more difficult year than 1938–39 had been, not helped by the suspension of the British Industries Fair for the duration of the war. The early months of 'phoney' war were marked by widespread stagnation in home trade. Writing on 14 March 1940, Lasenby summarised its first effects; what was true for the retailer, was no less true for Moorcroft: 'This curious war has upset so many things and lives! It is difficult to see what the next moves are likely to be, and people feel so uncertain'. In this context, it is not surprising that the year-end figures showed a decline from the previous year. Sales revenue was down by just over 10%, while wages had increased by nearly 9% and purchases by 7%. Gross profit was reduced by more than 60%, and this produced a net loss of over £1,120, nearly £1,000 more than in the previous year.

At the start of 1940–41, pressure from the Bank was increasing. A letter of 22 August 1940 spelled out their position: they were not prepared to finance an overdraft of more than £2,500 without more substantial collateral, namely the deeds of the Company. They wrote again on 9 April 1941 with a stark message; the recent run of trading losses was seriously eroding the Company's capital. Viewed from a commercial perspective, Moorcroft was caught in a downward spiral, and however much his designs were appreciated, this was overridden by the economic reality of increasing costs, shrinking profit margins and a stagnating market. The Bank Manager juxtaposed the two perspectives, aesthetic and economic, but in the current climate, it was the balance sheet which prevailed:

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[24] 'Beauty and the Machine', *PG* (December 1943), 661–64 (p.663).

> I would like to say how much I admire your various productions [...], and I know my Directors are only too anxious to assist so long as the borrowing is placed on a proper basis. It would however be foolish for me to ignore the results appearing on paper, which are intended as an indication of the progress the Company is making.

The threatened collapse of the Company was chillingly reflected on the national scene, where the relentless bombardment of London and the provinces was taking its toll. Flinn & Co, jewellers and goldsmiths in Broadgate, Coventry, wrote on 27 November 1940, after the devastating raid which destroyed most of the city centre; they had lost their stock, and simply could not promise future orders. This was the vulnerability of Moorcroft's ware in this violent world: 'Our immediate problem is to get some temporary premises to carry on with. [...] One does not know whether it is safe to restock with Pottery at the moment.'

The 1940–41 figures did nevertheless show an improvement on 1939–40. Sales revenue rose by nearly 26%, but outgoings had also continued to increase: wages had risen by more than 17%, purchases by more than 35%, and insurance had soared by nearly 50%. Gross profit was higher by 33%, and although the net result was another loss, of just over £800, this was a reduction of nearly 30% on the previous year's outturn. In draft notes for his report to the AGM on 27 October 1941, Moorcroft reported on the new threat to the survival of the firm: the Concentration scheme. Under increasing pressure from both economic stagnation and government policy, he was nevertheless determined to carry on as an independent entity; he would brook no compromise:

> Your company, under the provisions of concentration, were given a month's notice to close their premises, as both their factory space and their workers would be required for munition work. We were offered accommodation by several well-known firms, but I had, as tactfully as possible, to accept their sympathy and to decline their offer.

The Company had been saved, but it was on a knife edge, subject to pressures largely outside Moorcroft's control. Continued production was contingent on the availability of labour and materials, and although he could work to increase his sales, profit might easily be eroded by escalating costs. Such factors had already diminished the benefit of improved sales in the financial year just ended, as the figures clearly bore out. In these circumstances, short-term commercial survival depended on the sale of existing stock; Moorcroft had neither the resources nor the staff to increase productivity. He forecast improved turnover in the coming year, but with the Blitz still a very present memory, nothing could be certain:

> From now on, we shall gain largely from our stocks, which will have a greatly increasing value. And providing we do not lose our premises through enemy action, we are establishing a stronger export trade which will grow to an extent that I hope will help us to again pay a dividend next year.

Moorcroft spoke here as a Company chairman, decisive and assured in his response to pressures. But he spoke also as an artist. It was design, ultimately, which would lead them out of trouble; his work was popular abroad, and his export market was growing:

> May I refer to a brighter side, that is our growing trade with the U.S.A. We are making many special things in which I am putting stronger constructive work than I have ever done, and for which there is a growing demand. Apart from fighting the provisions of concentration in industry, we are deeply concentrating in giving the world the best possible production.

Moorcroft's positive forecast for 1941–42 proved accurate, and the accounts showed his first profit for seven years. Outgoings had continued to increase: wages by another 10%, fuel by more than 64%, and repairs almost six-fold. But sales soared by over 45%, leaving a gross profit more than 84% higher than the previous year, and a net profit of £916. Harris wrote warmly on 18 September 1942, acknowledging 'what a trying time you have had' and recognising 'what a tremendous amount of work it must have entailed to obtain this result'. Much of the increased sales revenue came from stock. The prospect of an embargo on the sale of decorated and coloured ware from the summer of 1942 had prompted retailers to acquire as much as possible while they still could. A letter from Peter Jones, 15 April [1942] starkly juxtaposed a familiar, but receding, world and the impending new:

> Thank you so much for the marvellous lot of pottery you have sent to us. All the stores are delighted with it, and indeed the glowing colours make a lovely, alive spot in the departments. It will come as a great shock to you to learn that the government are stopping all manufacture of coloured bodies and decorated ware, and after, I believe, August 1st, nothing can be sold except plain white, at a fixed price. [...] If you have any more decorated ware that you can let me have, I would like another £200 worth sent to Peter Jones, and will send an order in hopes.

By the start of 1942–43, staff shortages were clearly acute, and conditions continued to deteriorate. But Moorcroft remained optimistic. In the early months of 1943, even as the prospect of losing Walter to military service seemed inevitable, references to his work in *The Studio* and *The Spectator* testified to its high reputation among critics of widely different aesthetic positions. Writing to Lasenby on 26 February 1943, he looked to the future with renewed confidence:

> If there should be another Fair, and I think it is probable, I should prefer an entirely different stand. Something as far removed from it as possible. [...] I am looking forward to a greater extended demand for our pottery all over the world. Unsolicited press publicity just now is an indication of our strength.

The 1942–43 AGM was held on 29 October 1943; it was the 30th meeting of the Company. The tide seemed to be turning in the war, and the same must have seemed true of the Company's economic fortunes. Moorcroft's report began on a high note:

> The figures before you, I do not think they call for a detailed explanation from me. Naturally, our difficulties have not grown less during the year, but in spite of these we have increased slightly our carry-forward.

The sales results were indeed positive, rising by 1% on the already impressive figure of 1941–42. But other expenses had increased significantly: wages by 11.7%, and working expenses by a huge 44.4%. Nevertheless, gross profits stood 16% higher, and a resultant net profit was recorded as £1,296, an increase of 41% on 1941–42.

This was the last of Moorcroft's high points, and the difficult times would get worse in 1943–44, not least following the departure of Walter. Moorcroft continued to market his ware at every opportunity, writing to the Chairman of the British Council, Sir Malcolm Robertson, on 3 November 1943. For all his success and celebrity as a designer of Austerity ware, he clearly regretted that the home market no longer saw his decorated pots:

> I should like to be allowed to send you a few pieces of my original pottery which are unlike any other made in this small world for inclusion in your overseas exhibits. I am told that I am better known in the U.S.A. and Canada than in Stoke-on-Trent.

The popularity of his ware in North America was undiminished, and he was managing to keep supplies going. A letter of 4 May 1944 from Stanley Rose at Birks, Montreal, eloquently expressed Moorcroft's reputation overseas, and the appreciation of his endeavours:

> You certainly give me a shock when you say you are nearly 73 years old, I think it is absolutely marvellous that you can carry on as you are doing. [...] We all thoroughly appreciate the wonderful efforts you have made to keep us supplied. We have your pottery in the most prominent part of the Department, and no one can help seeing it as they come up the steps. The only trouble just at present is that we have only about six pieces left!!!

He was also selling ware to American military personnel who had seen it in England. A letter from Capt. Mary Bramblett, U.S. Army nurse, dated 9 April [1944] responded to an evident invitation to look round his works, and reveals again the enduring appeal of his decorated ware:

> [...] another nurse and I will be so delighted to enjoy your pottery with you. [...] Please do make it possible for me to bring home a pre-war vase. They are so outstandingly beautiful; their colourings are exquisite. [Emphasis original]

Such ware was now effectively unobtainable on the home market, restricted to limited quantities of export rejects, available only under special licence. A letter from Vigurs Harris, of Harris & Sons, Plymouth, 22 April 1944, was characteristic of many others. In the absence of decorated pieces, he was more than happy to order Austerity ware; its aesthetic was different, its quality was not:

> I was afraid that you could get no licence to distribute your beautiful decorated ware. We shall be very glad to have the Ivory Porcelain; we appreciate its quality and beautiful glaze.

And yet, for all that, a trading loss was recorded for 1943–44. Sales had fallen by just over 14%, and outgoings had continued to rise: wages by 3.6%, purchases by 38%. The result was a drop of 55% in the gross profit, and a net loss of £1,494. For all the continued appreciation of his ware, conditions of war denied Moorcroft the commercial benefits of this popularity. In the last year of his life, it was all he could do to keep the business afloat. At the bottom of a letter from Harris, 21 February 1945, Moorcroft commented on the demand for his ware in the USA, which he was simply unable to satisfy under current conditions:

> We have in hand 20 times more than our limited staff can make. My pottery was never in greater demand, I believe because the U.S.A. are so eager to mass produce, they eagerly seek my pottery for a little rest and a quiet spiritual tonic.

His ware was as popular as it had ever been, but the economic pressures he faced were increasing by the year, as he suffered the consequences of a depleted staff. Artistic and commercial success were now completely uncoupled; this was the reality of war.

4. Tensions with Liberty's

The pressures of war put strain not only on Moorcroft's works, but also on his relationship with Liberty's. In a letter to Lasenby of 13 November 1939, he noted, pointedly, what he perceived to be dwindling support for his latest work:

> Some months ago I designed some new dinner ware which has been bought by some of the keenest buyers of dinner ware, both overseas and in this country, but I have not been fortunate in securing an order from yourselves.

More significantly, though, he suggested that Liberty's selling prices were impeding sales, alluding to one particular item in their latest catalogue; if he was resisting the pressure to raise his wholesale price, he expected Liberty's to do likewise on the shop floor:

> [...] if you could support us in our effort to keep prices firm, such action will enable us to remain firm for a longer period than would be otherwise possible. [...] We do not know if this is our bowl or not, we make a bowl identical to this which we have recently sold to you at 4/6d. I imagine that 12/6d must include the bowl with flowers, or otherwise the price would handicap the sale of the pottery.

It was a matter of commercial strategy: lower prices would keep at bay the risk of cheaper imitations. But it was also a question of equity; for Liberty's to buy at Moorcroft's uninflated wholesale price and to sell at the current inflated rate was effectively to add to their own profit the profit which Moorcroft was deliberately forgoing.

This tension was particularly evident in the spring of 1942. As retailers were buying stocks of decorated ware before the embargo came into force, the respective interests of Moorcroft and Liberty's sharply diverged. Liberty's were keen to secure his wares at the most competitive price they could, Moorcroft needed to maximise his sales income; collaboration drifted into conflict. On 30 April 1942, Liberty's cancelled orders for both 'seconds' and new stock whose dispatch had been delayed. Moorcroft wrote to William Dorrell in frustration; he clearly felt that Liberty's no longer understood, or were prepared to understand, the economic and production pressures he was facing:

> We sent a quantity of your order from stock, and we have used the best means possible to make the large remainder. We have lost for a time members of our staff that were necessary to the things you ordered, and we cannot avoid delay. The demand for domestic pottery is so large that whatever we do, we cannot meet the demand at present.

And as for the discount rate which Liberty's had been seeking on the 'seconds', this was no longer viable:

> Your order for seconds was placed by you at a rate of 25% of our 1921 prices. We could only send you pottery at this rate that would not be in keeping with the name of Liberty. Since your visit, we have sold no pottery at a less rate than 20% above pre-war prices, and establishment costs to the war, with a constant rising in the cost of material and wages, makes it impossible for us to do so.

Liberty's felt let down, but the feeling was mutual. Dorrell's unwillingness to pay the asking price for his wares increased Moorcroft's misgivings about Liberty's spirit of collaboration. A draft letter to Lasenby put these concerns into words:

> I have been conscious that for some years we have not had the support from Liberty in the selling of Moorcroft pottery that we might expect. We have offered you an entirely original pottery, and you have only sold a relatively small amount of it.

By this time, however, a more protracted and serious dispute had arisen about Liberty's role as the firm's book-keepers. After the serious trading loss of 1940–41, Moorcroft needed to increase his turnover, all the while facing the possibility of losing his labour, or his premises, to the needs of the war. Liberty's had acted as the firm's book-keepers since the foundation of the Company in 1913, a service which gave Moorcroft invaluable administrative backing; but as economic pressures increased, its financial implications were coming to the fore. When Liberty's proposed making a charge to the Company for this service, Moorcroft would not comply; it was not only a matter of cost, it was a matter of principle. If Liberty's were to be paid, it would radically change the basis on which they operated together; collaboration and shared commitment would become just another commercial deal. But as financial pressures and labour shortages affected Liberty's too, the dispute was not to be easily or swiftly resolved. A month later, on 8 December 1941, Blackmore spelled out the position of the store; they had no choice but to cut back:

> Voluntary reductions of staff in the first place in an endeavour to lessen the heavy loss at which we are working, and the present compulsory reductions, have brought the subject of your accounts before our Board, and have resulted in the decision to which they have come.

But what would have relieved the pressure on Liberty's staff would simultaneously have created an administrative and financial pressure for Moorcroft, just at a time when his own balance sheet was under strain. Moorcroft argued that his staff shortages were no less (and probably more) damaging to his business than those Blackmore had described. But he implied, too, in a letter of 5 December 1941, that Liberty's had some obligation to contribute to the Company, whatever their situation, not least on account of their financial entitlements set out in the Articles of Association of 1913:

> I cannot happily accept your extremely restricted share in the work of the Moorcroft Potteries, especially in view of the Articles of Association, the terms of which give you an important share. It only seems reasonable that if you withdraw almost entirely from giving any service to us, there should be some modification of the Articles of Association [...].

The question was arising as to what each was contributing to the firm, and how its value might be measured. Moorcroft did not put a price on his different roles in the Company—in design, production, marketing, distribution—they were all part of a single integrated vision of his identity and activity as a potter. And for the past thirty years, the relationship with Liberty's had worked along similar lines, their own uncosted collaboration focussed on the area in which their contribution was most valuable—the accounting side of his business. Now, though, wartime restrictions were forcing Liberty's to consider the financial cost of their contribution; and if they were to do this, Moorcroft felt justified to do likewise. The issue was all the more sensitive at a time (late 1941) of increasing political, as well as economic, pressures, when Moorcroft, faced with the threat of Concentration, was fighting for the survival of his firm.

Moorcroft's report to the AGM of 23 September 1942 referred to his correspondence with Blackmore over this period; the continued tension was clear, as he looked back to the foundation of the Company:

> I regret that since our last annual meeting, there has been prolonged correspondence between the legal representative of B shareholders and myself. [...] Actually, the sum of money your shareholders invested is negligible, and in the beginning you only took up 650 ordinary shares, while I put into the Company all I had, just twice as much. Your B shareholders advanced a further sum, but not in ordinary shares. You remained mortgagees until you found the business safe. And only when it was a safe concern did you venture to convert your mortgage into ordinary shares. But the same privilege was not offered to the owner of A shares, although the owner placed in the business all the real capital, that is his skill as a chemist, physicist, and potter.

It was erroneous to claim that Liberty's initial financial contribution was less than his in absolute terms, although it was undoubtedly true (and acknowledged by both

Moorcroft and Liberty's from the outset) that he had a larger investment in unsecured shares and was thus taking a greater risk. What he underlined now, though, was the essential value of his artistic contribution; it may not have been measurable in pounds, but it was 'all the real capital'. And Moorcroft's argument prevailed. At this same meeting, a resolution was passed that no more charges would be made to the Company in respect of book-keeping.

Of all the pressures of this period, the dispute with Liberty's was potentially the most destabilising. Moorcroft must have sensed, one way or another, that this thirty-year association had reached a crossroads. And it was not just to do with the pressures of war; by 1942, Moorcroft was seventy years old, and Lasenby seventy-four. It is clear that both hoped for a continuation of this collaboration beyond their own personal involvement. In August 1942, nearly fifteen years after the last serious review of the relationship, Moorcroft proposed to Lasenby that Walter should be appointed to the Board of Directors. On 14 August 1942, Lasenby replied in full support, but pointing out that the original balance of Directors should be maintained. He enclosed a draft revision of the Articles of Association which included a new Article 17A:

> 17A: The holders of the A shares issued by the Company and the holders of the B shares issued by the Company shall each at all times be entitled to be represented on the Board of the Company by two Directors. [...] The holders of the A shares issued by the Company shall also have the right to nominate the Chairman of the Board.

Writing to Moorcroft on 4 September 1942, Lasenby saw in this new Article a mechanism for continued collaboration, evoking discreetly a time beyond his and Moorcroft's involvement:

> The rights of the respective shareholders must [...] be incorporated into the Articles, as otherwise they would not be binding in the future, and if either I or you dropped out, it is essential that the balance on the Board should be maintained.

The change introduced some stability for the future, but it also heralded an inevitable, and irreversible change from the past. Moorcroft's relationship with Liberty's had succeeded above all because of his close collaboration with Lasenby; it was not a business relationship alone, but one based on personal friendship and shared artistic values. Its creativity was not due to the administrative balance of the Board, but to the personalities and priorities of the two Directors; to retain the structure for the next generation was not (necessarily) to replicate the relationship of its representatives.

Walter and Dorrell were appointed Directors on 18 January 1943, but the disputes did not end here. At the end of the 1942–43 financial year, P.N. Plaistowe, Chief Cashier at Liberty's who had audited Moorcroft's accounts since 1936–37, resigned from this role. Liberty's did not appoint a successor; they were understandably keen to shed a task which cost money, and which was much more difficult to fulfil in conditions of acute labour shortage. Moorcroft, equally understandably, was not keen to take on the extra expense of appointing an external auditor, and refused to do so. The apparent subject of the dispute had changed, but the underlying quarrel about the nature of their original undertaking, the moral obligations of the present, and, one may surmise, the vision of the future, remained the same. For Moorcroft, the matter was simple; Liberty's had taken it upon themselves to audit the Company accounts in 1913, and he saw this as an undertaking to do so from then on. He spelled this out in a letter to Harris on 23 December 1943:

> When you say that Mr Plaistowe resigned from the post of auditor, it seems only to infer that Liberty & Company decline to accept the work of auditing, which has been done by them since the inception of the Company. I maintain that there is an obligation on the part of Liberty & Company to perform this duty, as was originally arranged by them.

The dispute continued, unresolved, until Moorcroft's death two years later; in consequence the accounts for both 1943–44 and 1944–45 were left unaudited, and no AGM was held in either year.

It might appear that this dispute marked the inevitable divergence of the artist and the retailer, but this would be to simplify. Writing on 17 December 1941, as he looked back to the founding of the Company, Blackmore recalled the act of faith in Moorcroft which underlay Liberty's original decision to collaborate. They had recognised the value of his art, unquantifiable as it was, and despite the claims of Henry Watkin. Their involvement may have been financial, but it implied, too, an aesthetic judgement:

> I entirely agree that Liberty & Co's interest was, and was always intended to be, mainly financial, [...] but at the time that Liberty & Co. started to finance, the only record of results was the opinion of Macintyre's foreman that it was a source of loss to them, and there were no assets beyond your brains and ability, which are an intangible kind of asset that most banks do not take into consideration.

And Moorcroft's art had clearly profited as a result. High-profile promotion of his ware was not only the basis of substantial trade, but also a commercial endorsement of each new creation. It was a virtuous circle:

> Our sales of Moorcroft Pottery were, I imagine, a mutual benefit: you got a substantial and steady basis for production, and some considerable advertisement, and we got our ordinary retailer's profit.

But a relationship which for thirty years had seen a convergence of artistic and commercial interests on both sides was struggling now to withstand the pressures of their more immediate survival, and to negotiate the paradox of Moorcroft's widespread critical acclaim and his declining trade. Taken on their own terms, the exchanges with Liberty's suggest a narrative of non-communication, disintegration, and a rather jaundiced view of the achievements of the past. Beneath them, though, was another, more fundamental question: how was Moorcroft's work to be valued?

5. Pottery and Value

The war exacerbated the tensions between art and commerce which Moorcroft had sought to resolve throughout his career. He had never judged the worth of his ware in purely monetary terms, any more than his public had done. But now, as he faced increasing pressures from government departments, the Bank, and Liberty's, he found himself constantly having to make a case for the value of what he was doing. In a letter of 8 December 1941, at a particularly low point in the dispute with Liberty's, Blackmore ventured to suggest that the declining trade in Moorcroft's ware was attributable in part to a lack of new material:

> We pushed your pottery to the best of our ability, but changing conditions in home decoration and, I am told, the lack of fresh designs gradually militated against the popularity of your pottery, and our Regent Street account dropped substantially [...].

In his reply of 10 December 1941, Moorcroft explicitly rejected this judgement of his art by the criteria of the balance sheet. Referring indirectly to the favourable reviews which his work had received both at home and abroad in the late 1930s, he reaffirmed his refusal simply to follow fashion; to remain true to his artistic principles represented a more solid basis for commercial success. He might also have said, but he did not, that this originality was the very basis of Liberty's faith in him as a designer:

> But regardless of your unnecessarily expressed point of view on design, my designs secured, during the time you mention, world-wide recognition with the highest honours. I find at times that the commercial mind flings its arrows too often at the poor artist to whom he is very greatly indebted. Again, with regard to design, as a matter of principle I firmly resisted the temptation, and it was a great temptation, to be caught in the web of modern fashion. [...] I feel that it will interest you to know that today we find an increasing demand for our wares, for this simple reason that we retain our classic standards and were not misled.

Revealingly, on the back of a Liberty's envelope postmarked 9 December 1941 (which may well have contained Blackmore's letter), Moorcroft jotted down thoughts on the seventeenth-century potters, the Elers brothers, doubtless with his book for Blackie's still in his mind. His account of their achievements, and their destiny, implied a bleak allegory of his own:

> Two of the recent potters, the brothers Elers [...] gave to England a new standard. [...] They made their objects on the potter's wheel [...], turned their pottery with great skill and refinement. And before the clay was dry, they applied on the moist clay often charming ornamentation. A century later, Wedgwood and others began to make pottery on a large scale, and from that time the peaceful indigenous potter was to some degree overlooked. Art was industrialised, and so gradually human skill was controlled by commerce, and that unfortunate greed for money, the making of money, was responsible for the impoverishment of innate beauty.

Moorcroft's pottery, like that of the Elers, was 'peaceful', of 'innate beauty', the product of 'human skill', qualities which Moorcroft saw himself fighting to defend, as the pressures of war made commercial success the only criterion of value.

This fight characterised Moorcroft throughout these years. In a war-torn world where human life and its cultural treasures were treated as expendable commodities, he would not stop producing objects of beauty. And this spirit was recognised and appreciated the world over; William Moorcroft, both the man and his pots, represented for many a defiant expression of individuality, humanity and freedom in the face of totalitarianism. A letter from Lightolier, the pioneering American electric lighting company based in New York, eloquently expressed this perception. Max Daum wrote on 4 January 1940, acknowledging the safe arrival of a shipment:

> I was more than touched by your kind message of well wishes for the New Year. It arrived during our annual convention of our salesmen, and I felt privileged to be able to read your cablegram to the men, together with the announcement that the most recent shipment of Moorcroft vases had just been confirmed from Halifax, where the ship carrying the consignment was towed into port after being damaged by enemy action.

In the midst of these hostile conditions, Daum expressed his appreciation of Moorcroft's personal touch, a timely and reassuring reminder of the world as it once was, and, it was hoped, would be again:

> With all the disturbing and jarring news of destruction of which we read daily in our newspapers, your cablegram comes as a reminder that we once had normal conditions, when such niceties were thought of and cables were used for other purposes than terse official communications. Indeed, since your message did penetrate through all the disturbance, it is doubly appreciated.

As Moorcroft fought through the commercial challenges, he retained his determination, courtesy, humanity. This was the real value of the business he transacted, and it was appreciated:

> Please [...] permit me to add that we all have the keenest admiration for the manner in which you continue to produce articles of beauty in a world of ugly destruction and mounting handicaps.

At the end of that year, after the devastating fire-bombing of London on 29 December 1940, he wrote to Geoffrey Dawson, Editor of *The Times*. He enclosed, characteristically, a gift of his work, a lidded box whose beauty was immediately appreciated. Dawson replied on 11 January 1941:

> I am more grateful than I can say for your remembrance of us, and for the beautiful specimen of your handcraft. It was intended, no doubt, for cigarettes, but my wife, who is enchanted with it, already shows signs of annexing it for other purposes.

A few days earlier, on 31 December 1940, a photograph 'St Paul's Survives' by Herbert Mason was published on the front page of the *Daily Mail*. In its depiction of the cathedral, illuminated by fires and surrounded by the smoke of burning buildings, it would become an iconic image of the nation's determination to survive the onslaught. Dawson implied something of the same spirit in Moorcroft's continued production: 'It is comforting to know that you keep the arts alive in these unpropitious times. Thank you again, and good fortune to you.'

For the owners of Moorcroft's 'articles of beauty', such pieces had a value beyond price. A letter dated 12 November 1944 from Arthur Rowland Churchwell III, Technical Sergeant, Air Corps, exemplified the appreciation of many for the qualities of the man and the pots:

> This is to inform you that the pottery you crated for me arrived in California complete and in excellent condition. [...] Needless to say, I had an immediate market for the things when they arrived. I could have sold them for as much as eight times what I purchased them for. But I consider them, each and every one, works of Art, and shall keep them in the family. [...] Thank you for the wonderful service you have given me.

So widespread was this appreciation that it was expressed, too, in fictional form, in *The Undefeated*, a novel by Arnold Bennett's nephew, George Beardmore (aka Wolfenden). Written at a time when Britain's freedom was still in peril, a piece of Moorcroft ware was invested with almost talismanic value by the narrator's father:

> Also he carried with him a beautiful little Moorcroft vase that he liked to stroke sensuously with his thumb, for the appeal of its rich ruby-tinted texture. One day, it jumped from his fingers and a tiny chip was knocked out of its neck. Now he abominated anything chipped, [...] but he had a pretty filigree cap of silver fitted to the neck, and the vase remained in his pocket.[25]

6. Conclusions

On 15 August 1945, the day of Japan's surrender and just a few weeks before his death, Moorcroft wrote to Edith Harcourt-Smith. On the threshold of peace, his tone was weary rather than jubilant; he saw a world where the freedom to be oneself seemed more threatened than ever:

> There is much talk of freedom in these days, but I never remember a time when we had less freedom. There are controls everywhere. And we appear to be part of a machine. Naturally, I resist being a part, I realise that man's greatest gift is the power to choose. [...] To be true to ourselves means so much. [...] Not only are we like sheep that have gone astray, unfortunately there are too many like sheep that merely follow [...].

But for all that he may have felt that independence in whatever context was now part of the past, it was in the very creativity of potters such as Moorcroft that the future of post-war pottery design was widely seen to lie. If the revival of industrial production was conceived in terms of large, mechanised factories, modern designers argued that it was in the smaller enterprise, free from the constraints of mass production, that the most original ideas would again be found. Adams, writing in the *Pottery Gazette*, included Moorcroft in a select list of potters whose small-scale establishments had produced work of distinctive quality, and whose 'pioneering spirit' would be needed in the post-war world:

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[25] G. Wolfenden, *The Undefeated* (New York: Greenberg, 1941), p.112.

> William and Joseph Burton, and Forsyth, at Pilkingtons, Moorcroft, Susie Cooper, Gray, and Poole, have all helped considerably to advance the reputation of British craftsmanship and good taste at home and abroad. Yet at this difficult time, as never before, the small quality-producing units need a just consideration of their contributions to British pottery in the past, if they are to survive the war and play their part in the future. [...] we shall surely need the pioneering spirit of certain of the small units again after the war. Their first aim has always been fine, fresh work, not profits.[26]

Moira Forsyth took a very similar line in a report on 'Design in the Pottery Industry', summarised in the *Pottery Gazette*:

> With very few exceptions, even amongst the firms with great traditions, the pioneer and initiator is found amongst the small producers, and it is in the interests of the industry as a whole to maintain his existence. Mass production on a large scale leads inevitably to a narrowing and standardisation of production on 'safe' lines.[27]

Josiah Wedgwood V, the forward-looking Managing Director of the firm, had, over the last decade, overseen the creation of Wedgwood's new Barlaston factory, hailed as the model for enlightened, high-quality industrial production. Nevertheless, in a lecture at the Burslem School of Art, he underlined the value of a quite different model:

> There was certainly a definite room for the man who was an artist, a technical man, and a 'bit of a born genius', a man who, if he wished, could have a 1-man to a 50-man factory and do extremely well. We could all of us think of examples in the district of highly individual small firms which, if carried on in future in the way they had been before the war, should certainly survive.[28]

In its evocation of the small firm, built around an innovative designer of 'genius' and 'individuality', Wedgwood's comment almost certainly referred to William Moorcroft; it would be for his son, Walter, to show how prescient it was.

William Moorcroft died on 14 October 1945; he had suffered a stroke just over three weeks earlier.[29] His importance was recognised in the many tributes and obituary notices, published and private, but it was not easily summarised; the diversity of perspectives on his significance and legacy was a telling sign of his individuality. For some, it was Moorcroft's accomplishments as a potter which distinguished him. A notice in the *Overseas Daily Mail* set him in the long tradition of chemist potters, whose work brought together ceramic expertise and artistic sensitivity:

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[26] 'Future of the Pottery Industry. Importance of Design and Planning', *PG* (December 1942), 687–89 (p.687).

[27] 'Design in the Pottery Industry', *PG* (March 1944), 135–41 (p.137).

[28] 'Future of the Pottery Industry', *PG* (May 1943), 269–73 (p.271).

[29] Walter Moorcroft, *Memories of Life and Living* (Shepton Beauchamp: R. Dennis Publications, 1999), p.38.

> All down the history of potting there has been the enthusiastic work of the master-potters who have added to their craftsmanship in the handling of the clay, a wide knowledge of art and science, and have thereby been enabled to effect valuable improvements in practice and effect. The work of the late William Moorcroft will long remain an inspiration to succeeding workers [...].[30]

Moorcroft's mastery of colour and of firing techniques was equated with that of William Burton, Charles Noke, Bernard Moore or William Howson Taylor, all of whom were celebrated for their innovative work in the chemistry of glazes. The *Pottery Gazette* took a similar line. In so doing, it implicitly set him apart from the manufacturer; his prime object was to create works of ceramic beauty, not to make a commercial commodity:

> Moorcroft ware of this description stood out in any exhibition of pottery or in window or store display, by virtue of its quality of unusual richness in colour, colour which could only have been attained by a master potter, enthusiastic in his craft and fortified with a profound chemical knowledge of the artistic possibilities of the materials used.[31]

Charles Marriott's Obituary in *The Times* also recognised Moorcroft's accomplishments as 'an experienced chemist', but it was his achievement as a designer of functional ware which was seen to set him apart. For Marriott, this was the least well-known of Moorcroft's successes, but nevertheless the most significant:

> But his interest went beyond mere colour, as the artistry of his domestic ware, fashioned under the austerity ban on colour, emphasised in outstanding style. [...] It was in the less spectacular domestic wares—tea, coffee, cider and dinner services—which, being generally relegated to 'trade shows' escape critical attention, that Moorcroft pottery was to be seen at its best artistically. It was designed with strict attention to utility, but with purity of form and subtlety of curve, and the semi-matt glazes in jade white, ivory and porcelain blue were charming to both sight and touch. In fact there can be little doubt that if the light of exhibitions had been thrown on Moorcroft's useful rather than his ornamental pieces, his artistic reputation would have gained.[32]

Writing very much from a modernist perspective, he implied that to emphasise William Moorcroft's accomplishments as a potter was to undervalue his importance as a designer. The *Pottery & Glass Record* also focussed on his domestic wares; his name was inseparably associated with Powder Blue, and its significance in the history of design was seen as axiomatic:

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[30] *The Overseas Daily Mail* (29 December 1945).

[31] 'William Moorcroft. The Passing of a Great Potter', *PG* (November 1945), p.643.

[32] 'Mr W. Moorcroft. Potter to Queen Mary', *The Times* (16 October 1945), p.7.

> Many of Moorcroft's domestic wares are perfect examples of the ceramic art, exhibiting great purity and beauty of form and line, and revealing ideal properties in service. His 'porcelain blue' which won international fame and honours represents one of the highest attainments in the history of potting.[33]

What writers found more difficult to analyse was the decorated ware, for all that it was seen to be, for better or worse, the best known part of his output; in 1945, however, little had been available on the home market for more than three years. The *Pottery Gazette* notice looked back to Moorcroft's designs of the early 1930s, seen to exemplify his artistic vision and its immediate, inspiring effect:

> This characteristically 'Moorcroft' ware, inspired by the natural form and colouring of fruit, autumn leaves and flowers, and the delightful harmonies they suggest, had a wide popular appeal, and its decorative and enlivening qualities were quickly recognised.[34]

For Marriott, ornamental motifs were transient in their appeal, and his own implicit preference for the starker aesthetic of early Chinese wares clearly coloured his view of Moorcroft's decorative pottery:

> Ornamental objects are more subject to changes in taste than are objects of utility and, rightly or wrongly, since Moorcroft started potting, preference has gone to the more sober colours of the earlier Chinese wares. Like Bernard Moore, the Martin Brothers, and the other individual potters who were established by the end of the nineteenth century, Moorcroft inclined to the brighter glazes, such as flambé and turquoise, of eighteenth-century Chinese porcelains. His style of decoration, too, with flower and fruit motives, was rather too boldly naturalistic for modern tastes.[35]

His assessment of the success of Moorcroft's later decorated ware was not borne out by its critical reception at the time, but it is notable that Marriott described his motifs as 'boldly' naturalistic. Although clearly preferring the unornamented teaware, he acknowledged a distinctive independence in Moorcroft's decorative art. In this sense, too, he was appreciated as an 'individual potter', his work recognised as the expression of one man's sensitivity, not the impersonal output of a firm. Marriott's contrast of two styles of oriental pottery, the 'brighter glazes' of eighteenth-century wares and the 'more sober colours' of early Chinese pottery implied another distinction, however: that between Moorcroft and (unnamed) studio potters. To do so was to raise a question of classification which other notices, too, would consider.

Several writers situated Moorcroft's pottery outside the confines of commercial production, drawing attention to the status of his decorative work as an object of collection by both individuals and museums. The *Pottery Gazette* emphasised his contribution to the nation's cultural heritage; its quality was enduring and recognised worldwide:

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[33] 'William Moorcroft', *Pottery and Glass Record* [*PGR*] (October 1945), p.21.

[34] *PG* (November 1945), p.643.

[35] *The Times* (16 October 1945), p.7.

> In 1912 [1913], he was established in his factory at Cobridge, which he specially designed to suit the production of those well-known and fine ceramics, examples of which were to win a distinctive place in pottery history, and also to find an honourable place in public museums throughout the world and to become amongst the proud possessions of discerning connoisseurs.[36]

In this context, royal appreciation of Moorcroft's ware was recognised as the distinguished achievement it was; for all its publication in a trade journal, this obituary valued Moorcroft as an artist rather than as a commercial potter:

> Their Majesties Queen Alexandra, King George V and Queen Mary, and other members of the Royal Family, have all bought examples of Moorcroft ware, and in 1928 Moorcroft was appointed potter to Queen Mary, an honour of which he was justifiably very proud in view of Her Majesty's well-known and discriminating love of good pottery.[37]

But what was noted, too, was the broad appeal of this ware, not the least of Moorcroft's achievements. A notice in the *Staffordshire Sentinel* stressed his place in history, but it finished on this most significant of points; Moorcroft's was pottery which was appreciated by all, by celebrities and ceramic specialists but also by the writer (and, it was implied, by the readers) of this notice:

> Mr Moorcroft won a distinctive and distinguished place in the world of ceramics. [...] He made outstanding shows at the British Empire Exhibition and at every British Industries Fair, and his work was appreciated by Royalty and other famous personages. All this was honour; but the most important fact was that his work was original; and the best of it will endure. His shapes, the results of throwing on the wheel, were the best in modern pottery. His colour qualities, integral in the ceramic materials, were quite individual. His pottery is a happy thing to live with—which is the test.[38]

For all this exceptional diversity of output, some notices did try to identify a category into which he might be placed as a potter. The *Pottery Gazette* linked the qualities of the work to those of the man; his ware was special because it bore the stamp of an individual: 'Throughout his whole life he was associated with the pottery craft, and his work, individualistic in character, bears the impress of a personality whole-heartedly dedicated to the pottery craft.'[39] The same term occurred in *The Times* which stressed above all the distinctiveness of each piece, the result of its creation by hand:

> All Moorcroft's work was individual in character, thrown on the wheel by hand and not moulded or turned on the lathe. He signed all important pieces, but employed a small number of assistants, and spoke feelingly of keeping them going in the face of mass production.[40]

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[36] *PG* (November 1945), p.643.

[37] Ibid.

[38] *Staffordshire Sentinel* (20 October 1945).

[39] *PG* (November 1945), p.643.

[40] *The Times* (16 October 1945), p.7.

It is notable that Moorcroft's concern for his staff was picked up here. But particularly significant, not least in the context of the growing opposition of artist potter and industrial manufacturer, was the allusion to Moorcroft's rejection of mass production. A similar implication was embedded in the *Pottery Gazette* notice, which explicitly referred to Moorcroft's works as a 'studio pottery':

> Although, under the Concentration of Industry scheme, Mr Moorcroft was successful in retaining the entity of the Moorcroft factory at Cobridge, the difficulties of adapting such a specially constructed studio pottery to meet the requirements of wartime utility production caused a heavy burden to be placed upon him [...].[41]

The *Pottery & Glass Record* went furthest, though, into the question of categorisation. Recognising that the individuality of Moorcroft's work and of his working practice took him outside familiar categories, the writer located him between the studio and the factory, in the tradition of William Morris but succeeding, where Morris had not, to reach a larger and a wider public with his handcraft:

> He was essentially the studio potter, a man of rare sensibility who chose to exercise and display his creative talents through the medium of clay. He was a 'post-Morrisite', a disciple who excelled his master and forged an ideal link between the craft and the industry of potting.[42]

Nearly a year after Moorcroft's death, a second notice appeared in the *Pottery & Glass Record* which set out, once more, to assess his significance as a potter; it was written by Geoffrey Bemrose, curator of the Stoke-on-Trent Museum, Hanley. Moorcroft's career was seen to be characterised by its inexhaustible creativity; constantly evolving, it did not lend itself to simple summary:

> William Moorcroft (1872–1945) was a great Staffordshire potter. Although he achieved the psalmist's allotted span, those who knew him best could never convince themselves that he was anything but a young man, young in those qualities that inspire the envy of middle-age, in confidence, enthusiasm and a high idealism. Great as were his triumphs in those happy days before the first World War, they were but a prelude to the rich success of his period of maturity which came after 1920.[43]

Bemrose, like Marriott in *The Times*, stressed the boldness of William Moorcroft's designs, and his refusal to be distracted by the fashions of the time; he was a potter who followed his own vision. The result was an irreducibly personal art, characterised by its tireless experiments in style, colour, form:

> In the restless interwar years when almost every conceivable style was applied to the decoration of pottery, Moorcroft proceeded on his way, untroubled by the latest craze and indifferent to the newest aesthetic theories. [...] His career was a singular example

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[41] *PG* (November 1945), p.643.

[42] *PGR* (October 1945), p.21.

[43] J. Bemrose, 'William Moorcroft, A Critical Appreciation', *PGR* (June 1946), 29–33 (p.29).

> of evolutionary development. Never content to rest upon past achievements, he was constantly experimenting towards an ideal.[44]

As one might expect from a museum curator, and one writing with the benefit of a year's reflection, this was the most considered assessment of Moorcroft's significance. He did not seek to place Moorcroft in a category, but he had no doubt about the artistic status of his work:

> In these days when we have come to accept the potter as an artist in his own right, it is well to remember how much Moorcroft did to bring this about. Before his day, pottery was regarded as a mere commodity; it had little or no exhibition value. [...] Nothing approaching the West End Art Exhibition, so beloved of the Victorian aesthete, was attempted in pottery until Moorcroft and de Morgan began to show their work. Small but choice gatherings of recent work were a means that Moorcroft employed, not only in his own interest, but also to educate the public in what he felt to be a distinct art form.[45]

Bemrose did not compare Moorcroft with studio potters, nor comment on the status of their work as ceramic art. He noted instead Moorcroft's exhibits at the Royal Institution, his larger displays at international Fairs, and his presence in museums, another sign that the permanent value of his pottery had been recognised. If some earlier obituaries had identified Moorcroft's modern teaware designs as his enduring achievement, for Bemrose it was his decorative ware:

> In America his wares were eagerly sought by discerning collectors, but what pleased him most was the recognition he received from the Far East. Indeed, he would often remark, half humorously, that to see his best work one had to travel abroad. Several American museums possess representative collections of Moorcroft ware, and before the war, good displays were to be seen at Vienna, Brussels and, I believe, Tokio [sic].[46]

And yet, for all this, Bemrose recognised that his conclusion could only be provisional; such was the irreducible diversity of Moorcroft's work, one might recognise its distinction, but one could not yet do it justice:

> It is, as yet, too early to appraise him satisfactorily; time alone will decide. To some he will appeal most strongly as a great colourist; to others his superb drawing in clay on clay will make the most lasting impression. In any event, the statement made at the beginning of this article is surely valid. He was a great potter.[47]

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[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid., p.31.

[46] Ibid., p.33.

[47] Ibid.