

Clarice and Her Contemporaries

INTRODUCTION

1999 was the centenary of Clarice Cliff probably the best known woman pottery designer of the 20th century. She was a designer and pottery owner from the 1920s to the 1960s, but she is most famous for her hand painted designs of the 1920s and 30s.

Few designers had their name included in the pottery backstamp but the influence of women on the development of Staffordshire ceramics in this period has become more widely recognised in recent years.

CLARICE CLIFF

Clarice Cliff was born on 20th January 1898 in Tunstall, Stoke-on-Trent. At fourteen she started work as a paintress for a local pottery. In 1916 she joined the firm of A.J.Wilkinson where she stayed for the rest of her working life.

Clarice's artistic talents were soon noticed. She started to work with the company's designers and attended classes at Burslem School of Art. She was given her own studio at the factory and in 1927 her range of hand-painted Bizarre Ware was launched.

Bizarre Ware was an immediate success. The designs were in the popular Art Deco style and were inexpensive. Clarice added hundreds of patterns to the original range, including the Fantasque and Inspirations series. She also designed the shapes of her pottery, often using geometric forms. In 1931 she became the company's art director. During the war decorated pottery was made for export only. Clarice adapted her style to what would sell overseas, designing many printed patterns based on Victorian originals. Clarice married the owner of Wilkinson's Pottery, Colley Shorter. On his death, in 1963, she sold the factory, retiring to her home in Newcastle where she died in 1972.

Clarice's popularity has overshadowed the work of the many other women designers employed in Stoke-on-Trent potteries in the 1920s and 30s. They came from a variety of backgrounds but they all had to overcome the difficulty of working in what was, at the time, seen as a male profession. Their careers varied widely. Some worked for only one pottery, others were freelance or worked for a variety of companies. Some only designed patterns, others designed shapes as well.

The factories also employed thousands of young girls and women to decorate pottery. Many of them learnt freehand painting during their apprenticeships, others studied at the local Art Schools. A few of these girls became designers, art directors or even factory owners, but their success was built on the skills of the paintresses, most of whom received no recognition for their work.

SUSIE COOPER

Susie Cooper (1902-1995) joined A.E. Gray's decorating company in 1922 after training at Burslem School of Art, and produced many geometric, floral and lustre designs for them. She began her own company in 1929. She was one of only a few women to design the shape of her ware as well as the decoration. Her designs for her own company were simple and restrained. In 1933 she started to produce lithographic prints which could be combined with hand painting to give a more elaborate effect. After World War II she started to produce designs in bone china as well as earthenware. In 1966 her company was acquired by the Wedgwood Group, but she continued to design until shortly before her death.

CHARLOTTE RHEAD

Charlotte Rhead (1885-1947) was born into a family of designers. She worked for a variety of companies from 1905 until her death, including Wood & Sons, Burgess & Leigh, A.G. Richardson, and H.J. Wood, designing mainly, but not exclusively, tube-lined patterns. Although she never became Art Director at any of the factories that she worked for, her designs were highly regarded and, like Clarice Cliff and Susie Cooper, her name was part of the mark used on her wares

MILLCENT TAPLIN

Millicent Taplin (1902-80) studied at Stoke-upon Trent Art School before taking a job at Minton's as a trainee liner. In 1917 she moved to Wedgwood as a paintress where she worked with the designers Frederick & Louise Powell, while attending Art School several nights a week. In 1928 she was put in charge of Wedgwood's hand-craft studio. The following year she was promoted to designer and made responsible for managing the hand-painting department also. From 1935 she began to teach part-time at local Art Schools. After the world War II she became involved in producing lithographic designs. She retired from Wedgwood in 1962.

STAR WEDGWOOD

Star Wedgwood attended a variety of Art Schools, including the Royal College of Art and the Central School in London and Burslem Art School before joining the family company where she was taught by Alfred & Louise Powell. From the late 1920s she had a studio at Wedgwood and produced many designs. On her marriage in 1937 she gave up designing.

COLLECTION DETAILS

Examples of wares by all the above designers can be viewed in the ceramics galleries. More images are available from the 20th century collections online. (available soon)

FURTHER READING

Clarice Cliff Reading List

Susie Cooper Reading List

Charlotte Rhead Reading List