

## Enoch Boulton's Crown Devon Geometrics



Hand Painted Susie Cooper Moon and Mountain Design Circa Late 1920s



Hand Painted Susie Cooper Coffee Can Circa 1927



Crown Devon Pattern A 19 Duo



Rare Boulton Geometric Vase. Circa 1933 - 34

'Geometrics' is a generic label used to describe modernist Crown Devon flat brush wares produced in the 1930s. In this account, we will review a range of hand painted and modernistic patterns that reveal the breadth of Fielding's output during this period.

While he was still Chief Designer at Carlton Ware, Enoch Boulton had noticed how Susie Cooper had transformed the product lines of A E Gray and Company in the early to later 1920s. In response, he took the first experimental steps to introduce a range of 'freehand' wares to the Carlton Ware range.

By the time he was lured over to Crown Devon in 1929, Boulton was highly familiar with the inroads made by both Susie Cooper and Claris Cliff in the field of abstract shapes and colourful, hand applied design. He set about creating a range of free hand and abstract patterns for Fieldings. It has been mentioned earlier that from the outset of his appointment he was responsible for a virtual design epidemic at the Devon Pottery: his employment at Fieldings was a major part of a strategy to revitalise the Company's design portfolio to enable it to survive and indeed grow in the dual era of populist art deco design and depression.

Boulton and the Fieldings team gathered a constant flow of market intelligence to ensure that the Devon Pottery remained at the cutting edge of decorative design. And, it is clear that some, but not all by a long shot, of the inspiration for Crown Devon's geometric output was Susie Cooper.

Cooper started work in 1922 for A E Gray at the age of 19, quickly challenging her deployment as a paintress by insisting she be given the design position to which she had initially applied. She established rapidly a reputation as an innovative designer, and her classic swirling lustre designs and brilliant colour palettes earned Grays a silver medal at the Paris exhibition in 1925. Her time at Grays is marked by the release of bold abstract patterns such as the Moon and Mountains and Cubist designs, regarded today as classics of British populist Art Deco. Cooper's development of banding as a distinct and separate design class was a significant breakthrough and had an important influence on British ceramic design of the 1930s.

The examples of Cooper's work in the 1920s illustrated on the previous page demonstrate a designer in complete syncopation with the European styles of the time, who drew from and extended the continental style to make a major contribution to the beginnings of the populist Art Deco movement in the United Kingdom. The examples overleaf are present for another reason, and that will become clear when we begin to compare the Devon Pottery's output with Cooper designs.

Fieldings were late, compared with Shorters and Grays, in entering the flat brush, freehand genre. A. E. Gray's decorating factory was situated quite near the Crown Devon works, and, as in any close knit commercial community, each player knew exactly what the other was up to. Beresford- Hopkins, Reginald Fielding, Ned Taylor and other pre-Boulton Fieldings staff need only walk into Grays showroom to see what they were producing. Cooper left Grays in October 1929, but the company continued to produce Cooper designs along with other patterns throughout the 1930s.

When Boulton arrived at Crown Devon in late 1929, there was a natural convergence of opinion at Fieldings to tap into the emerging popularity of freehand painting styles, and what better source of inspiration than the successful output of Fieldings near-neighbour A.E. Gray?. Boulton was well acquainted with Cooper and her work, and he was also conscious of the volume of Cooper designs Gray's were shifting in the home market after her departure.

He set about creating a series of patterns, using Cooper's work as a guide for his first designs, and by October 1930 Fieldings had released a series of geometric patterns that exploited the burgeoning esteem in which the middle classes held these decorative beauties. It is highly probable that the Crown Devon 'A' patterns were initiated by Boulton just after he joined as designer in 1929. Surviving pattern books start with A patterns in the early 220s and end with A 736 entered in the very early 1940s. By the time the pattern numbers reached the five hundreds, it was the mid 1930s.

In contrasting the early Boulton Geometric designs with Cooper's Moon and Mountains pattern produced for Grays, there is a strong similarity in the overall design. True, Boulton has used a slightly different palette on one and opted for autumn tones on the other example shown, but, still, there is a clear resemblance to the Cooper patterns. However, even in these early designs, Boulton has added his own interpretation, intersecting the overlapping circles with chevrons ('V' shaped motifs), replacing Cooper's 'M' shaped intersections. In Pattern A20 he inverts Cooper's 'M' into a double chevron.



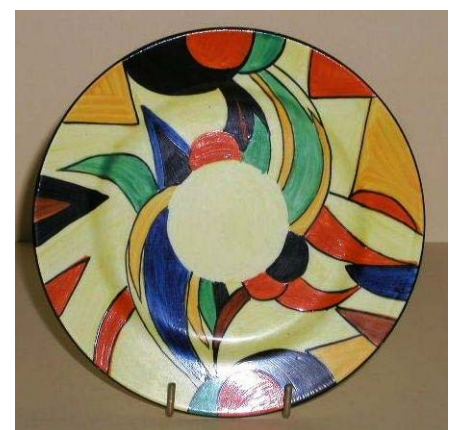
Egg Cups and Stand Pattern A19



Pattern A 20 Jug



Pattern E2 Ewer



Detail of pattern A29 on Saucer



Pattern A32 Teapot

Having mastered the format, he began to branch out and create an array of stylised modernist and floral patterns that were highly original and captured perfectly the mood of the time. The rare pattern E2 on the previous page is an excellent example of the 'freehand' geometric style influenced by cubism and exploits the shape of the piece fully. The underglaze colours are applied to create a softer watercolour effect and it is one of the more sought-after Boulton hand painted designs of the time.



Star Vase Pattern A84

Boulton designed a variety of abstract patterns to augment the initial geometric patterns. Pattern A29 overleaf, for example featured an asymmetric design of circles, chevrons, straight and curved lines filled with bright colours on a rich cream ground. Pattern A 32 shown opposite was sparser in design, but even when gracing a traditional shape it is nonetheless striking.

The range of patterns and application techniques was diverse and designed to cater to various tastes. Pattern A 84 on the Star Vase opposite features a striking combination of colours, softened and textured with strong, linear brush strokes, while the more conservative eye was satisfied with patterns such as A71 featuring stylised tulips and daisies with abstract leaves on a black ground. It graced a range of shapes and presented best on bulbous and other Art Deco shapes.



Stylistic Floral Pattern A71

Some of Boulton's 1930s patterns were the epitome of 1930s jazz age style and drew from his earlier Carlton Ware experiences with geometric design. Pattern A348 is a classic, featuring interplay between upright and reversed chevrons, rectangles and semi circles, and, in the example shown below left, brilliantly contained within the circular shape of a ribbed bowl.

Fielding's geometric designs came to market at highly competitive prices, cheaper in fact than many competing lines produced by rival potteries. Fielding's commercial maxim of bringing high quality and excellent design to market at prices well within the reach of people of ordinary means was in full play with the company's geometric range.



Pattern A348 Footed Bowl

But, how did the company manage to manufacture products of superior quality at such accessible prices? A combination of factors allowed it to operate on such a competitive footing. Improved manufacturing processes and efficiencies; more dependency on in-house or associated companies for colour and materials supply; a policy of high volume to offset reduced margins and careful management of labour costs allowed the Devon Pottery to fulfil its dual mission of affordability and quality.

It must also be remembered that the labour market in the early



Orient Pattern Vase



Orient desk Set



Orient Coffee Set



Orient Pattern Octagonal Bowl

1930s was a buyers market, and people were reminded in many subtle and not so subtle ways that they were lucky to have a job. The rigid class structures of the time and the strong upper hand the merchant classes had over labour meant that Staffordshire earthenware manufacturers could pay their employees a pittance. The work in the potteries was hard, long, not without hazards and very poorly rewarded. In fact, the medium life span of a pottery worker in the twentieth century was around 42 years!

And now we approach the apex of Fielding's range of geometric designs. The penultimate of all Crown Devon Geometrics was the Orient Range. Orient is pure 1930s excess: sybaritic materials carrying an essentially modernist design with sharp triangles within triangles, softened with a brilliant rouge orange floral emblem, the leaves highlighted in black over a white ground, which gives contrast to the pale green primary ground. Triangles saturated in gold add opulence to this lavish, eclectic pattern.

Why eclectic? Because Boulton was a master of eclecticism, almost to the point of eccentricity. The inspirations for many of his patterns came from an incredibly diverse range of sources. Somewhere in the depths of his design consciousness was filed a memory of a Susie Cooper hand painted pattern produced for Grays in around 1927. Whether it was conscious or unconscious, Boulton chose this floral motif as the centrepiece of his Orient design. He added abstract leaves to the floral piece, sharpened the cut-off angle of the emblem and highlighted the inner petals in white. But, the floral pattern is unmistakably influenced by the Cooper design shown on the coffee can on the first page of this Geometric designs section.

Boulton had, once again, 'lifted' a design element from an established pattern and created something altogether more exciting and eye-catching. This is a fundamental characteristic of his genius as a designer. Clearly Boulton conjured up many of his own design constituents and produced countless original and decoratively important patterns, however, some of his most collectable and, indeed, outstanding, patterns draw from established themes and take them to a point hitherto not realised. This characteristic of his design intellect is no less impressive than that of Clarice Cliff and Susie Cooper, much of whose work is derivative of continental design trends.

Essentially, Boulton did exactly what Cliff and Cooper did: draw from an incredibly diverse range of inspirations and add a peculiarly British folk art perspective and flourish to the designs, making them part of British popular design culture.

The high-end Orient pattern was applied to mainly ornamental and luxury tablewares and many of the pieces, particularly the coffee sets feature lavishly gilded interiors. They match

anything on the market at the time and can be described truly as one of Boulton's crowning achievements.

Perhaps, and this may well depend on your preference for either sybaritic or modernistic Art Deco design, Boulton's most superlative creation amongst the 'Geometrics' was the pattern opposite: a rare and vivid expression of British populist Art Deco designed for those few who could withstand the overwhelming tension of black set against red.

Boulton's simple palette of black, grey, white and rouge orange combine in a striking design not dissimilar to earlier Carlton Ware zig zag and jazz patterns whose provenance is subject to debate. In this striking geometric pattern, Boulton again features his adaptation of the Susie Cooper floral motif to soften the jagged forms within which it is enclosed.

Further tempering is achieved around the rim with a crazy patterned relief defined in black and mitigated with outlines of grey against a white backdrop. In all, not a design not for the faint-hearted, it has an 'imperial' or 'totalitarian' quality about it, not dissimilar to some of the 1920s Soviet offerings in ceramics.

Oriental-style jars and covers were very fashionable in the inter-war years, and were produced by a number of factories. This example of pattern 2135 has a Dog of Fo (guardian of a Buddhist temple) on the lid.



Pattern 2135 Geometric Art Deco Ewer



Pattern 2135 Temple Jar with Dog of Fo on lid

