



The Employment of Matter: *Pottery of the Omega Workshops*

Among professional artists there is ... a vague idea that a man can still remain a gentleman if he paints bad pictures, but must forfeit the conventional right to his Esquire if he makes good pots or serviceable furniture.¹

Pottery design in Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century was considered to be in a perilous state, caught between the tail end of the Arts and Crafts movement – the ‘unornamental “ornaments” with which thoughtless people crowd their living rooms’² – and the unchecked might, or ‘decadence’,³ of Stoke-on-Trent.⁴ Christopher Dresser’s striking ceramic designs for Minton and the Linthorpe Art Pottery in the 1880s had rarely escaped a stifling historicism; William de Morgan finally gave up potting to write novels in 1907; and only a few small independent firms such as the Ruskin Pottery, which specialised in flamboyantly glazed vases in imitation of late Chinese porcelain, continued production (fig. 14, p. 28). Despite the success of the Arts and Crafts movement in revitalising handicraft, pottery did not enjoy the success of other disciplines. As Alan Crawford writes, ‘pottery and weaving ... before the war had been somehow less spectacular than the movement’s furniture and metalwork’.⁵ Although capable of embodying the immediacy of handwork, the transformation of the artist-craftsman’s sensibility into clay proved elusive.

In this context, why did Roger Fry encourage the Omega Workshops to venture into the unfashionable and technically challenging medium of ceramics? Undoubtedly the inclusion of pottery extended the Omega’s output, but this decision was also underpinned by Fry’s wider ambition for art to address the imagination through the senses by a ‘synthesis of design’.⁶ In his seminal exhibition of 1910, ‘Manet & the Post-Impressionists’, Fry attempted to redefine the landscape of English art by offering work which rejected factual representation or ‘the appearance of things’⁷ in favour of returning to ‘the principles of primitive design’.⁸ While the paintings, sculpture and works on paper in the exhibition are well documented, less well known is that Fry included nine ‘vases en faïence’ painted by the Fauve artists André Derain, Maurice de Vlaminck, Othon Friesz, Pierre Girieud and Henri Matisse. The inclusion of the Fauve pots was a challenge to the conventions of representational painting and a material demonstration of Fry’s ambition to restore the expressive power of art. As Stella Tillyard has written, ‘It was explicit in Post-Impressionist theory that an object could stand side by side with a painting as a work of art’.⁹ In a public lecture at the Grafton Gallery Fry described the

Fig. 13
Omega Workshops (Roger Fry),
Side or fruit plates, 1914–15, c. 19 cm (d).
The Courtauld Gallery, London
(Samuel Courtauld Trust).



Fig. 14
William Howson Taylor, Vase and cover,
c. 1915. Manufactured by Ruskin Pottery,
Birmingham. Stoneware, flambé glaze,
35.6 cm (h) × 15.2 cm (d). Victoria and
Albert Museum, London.

Fauve pottery as best representing his ideas, explaining, ‘There is no immediately obvious reason why the artist should represent actual things at all ... I would instance as a proof of the direction in which the post impressionists are working, the excellence of their pure design as shown in the pottery in the present exhibition ... The artist plays upon us by the rhythm of line, by colour, by abstract form, and by the quality of the matter he employs.’¹⁰

In May 1910, Fry reviewed an exhibition of early Chinese pots organised by the Burlington Fine Arts Club, a group of collectors based in Savile Row. The combination of robustness and refinement in this newly discovered stoneware pottery, flooding into the West for the first time in the wake of the Boxer rebellion of 1900, was very different from the blue-and-white porcelain that had dominated Europe for three centuries, and demanded a new form of critical appreciation. While antiquarian scholars were concerned with establishing dates and provenance, Fry applied contemporary frames of reference to these early Chinese ceramics, interpreting them in the light of the emerging canon of primitivism (*fig. 15, right*). Singling out a Song bowl, he wrote, ‘All the astounding skill of hand of the potter is here devoted to the refinement of the rough, primitive pot, not to its elaboration into something quite different as happened in later centuries.’¹¹ During 1910 he employed the term ‘primitive’ frequently, using it to describe a variety of art forms, from the paintings of Matisse to Islamic sculpture of the Sassanian period,¹² drawings by the Kalahari bushmen of South Africa,¹³ and quattrocento painting.¹⁴ As with many of Fry’s ideas, these views reflected artistic developments in Paris but, as Christopher Reed has shown, Fry was among the first in England to ‘adopt this expanded notion of the primitive’, applying the term descriptively, rather than quantifiably, to denote a frame of mind or approach to art, rather than a particular culture or period in history.¹⁵

Fry’s appreciation of these two differing forms of ceramic art effectively mapped out his personal ceramic journey. The early Omega pottery, with its semi-abstract, vibrant brushwork and emphasis on decoration rather than form, owed much to Fauve ceramics, while the later monochromatic tableware aspired to the austerity and subtlety of early Chinese pottery. The very first Omega pots were bought-in and decorated with ordinary paint, for display purposes rather than sale. However, by late 1913 Fry had started to experiment with throwing, under the tuition of George Schenck, an 81-year-old artisanal maker of ‘flower pots’ in Mitcham, Surrey.¹⁶ Fry and, briefly, Vanessa Bell, under Schenck’s direction, threw a variety of simple bowls, vases and jugs, many of which were glazed in a semi-opaque white majolica suitable for painted decoration.¹⁷ Aiming for the ‘spontaneous freshness of primitive or peasant work’, their rudimentary forms were redeemed by lively painting by Fry, Duncan Grant and Bell, which complemented the rest of the Workshops’ output.¹⁸ In the Omega catalogue of 1914 Fry stated that the Workshops’ aim was to make ‘objects for common life’, and described its artists’ refusal ‘to spoil the expressive quality of their work by sand-papering it down to a shop finish’.¹⁹ Unlike many of the other Omega products, the pottery was, he emphasised, ‘made on the wheel by artists’ rather than being ‘executed to their design’, and expressed a ‘sensibility both of proportion and

surface'. This 'sensibility' is the key to understanding Omega pottery. Judged by the standards of fine craftsmanship or industrial consistency, the pots are heavy, with rough edges, untrimmed foot-rings and prominent throwing rings. One of the largest Omega pieces known to have survived from this time is a turquoise vase of 1914 which, due to its impressive size, featured in several of the Omega's advertisements (cat. 60).²⁰ Although previously catalogued as coil-built,²¹ it was in fact thrown in two sections, joined and re-thrown (after a struggle). Fry was determined to question conventional standards of beauty and 'not to flatter by the pretentious elegance of the machine-made article'. In response to the question, 'When is a work of art finished?' Fry stated, 'Finish of the usual kind is more often a work of patience than of art!'²²

Within a year Fry became dissatisfied with Schenck's limitations, and with the haphazard production of individual pots. His thoughts turned to the social consequences of making pottery, the 'why' as well as the 'how'. A review of another historical survey exhibition in 1914, this time of early English earthenware, provided the opportunity to affirm these views.²³ 'First of all, we must premise that pottery is of all the arts the most intimately connected with life ... A poet or even a painter may live apart from his age ... but the potter cannot ... go on indefinitely creating pots that no one will use.'²⁴ In late 1914, the young artist-assistant Winifred Gill, who practically ran the Workshops, introduced Fry to the Dorset factory of Carter & Co. (later Poole Pottery), and a new phase of Omega pottery began. Fry effectively became the Omega's potter from this point on – a practical consequence of his determination to learn to throw on the potter's wheel and of his perseverance in addressing all aspects of pottery production. With plans to make a dinner service and tea sets using the new facilities and skilled workforce at Carter's, the nature of the Omega's pottery began increasingly to reflect Fry's changing attitude to industry.



Fig. 15
Northern Song Dynasty, large
Jun ware jar. Stoneware, shiny blue
glaze, 21.3 cm (h) × 22.8 cm (d). Victoria
and Albert Museum, London. The vase
was previously in the Eumorfopoulos
Collection, part of which was lent to
the Chinese Exhibition of 1910.



Fig. 16 (above)
Omega Workshops (Roger Fry), back of hand-thrown soup dish with impressed  mark (cat. 57H, detail).

Fig. 17 (opposite, above)
Bauhaus (Otto Lindig), Coffeepot, 1923. White-glazed stoneware, 25.2 cm (h). Klassik Stiftung, Weimar.

Fig. 18 (opposite, below)
Roger Fry, Vase, 1916 or after. Black-glazed earthenware, 15 cm (h) × 12.4 cm (d). Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.

Before the launch of the Omega Workshops Fry was critical of industrially manufactured ceramics, writing that Wedgwood ‘probably contributed to the final destruction of the art, as an art, in England’.²⁵ He expanded on this in the 1914 Omega catalogue: ‘of all crafts, none has suffered more than pottery from the application of scientific commercialism. We now use almost entirely articles which have lost all direct expressiveness of surface modelling. Our cups and saucers are reduced by machine turning to a dead mechanical exactitude and uniformity.’²⁶ But in 1915, confronted with limited time and means to develop new work and fulfil orders efficiently, Fry faced a paradox. His solution was innovative, if not inspired, for he created a hybrid method of production that captured the expressive qualities of the hand he valued so highly, while combining it with the efficiency of industry.

Existing research suggests that Carter & Co. made moulds from Fry’s hand-thrown pots in order to produce larger quantities of work while still retaining the characteristics and irregularities of the originals.²⁷ Certainly Fry wrote to Vanessa Bell, ‘I’ve done standardised breakfast and teacups, vegetable dishes, milk jugs, so that all these can be repeated ad lib and I think I’ve got very good shapes but of course it meant doing it frightfully carefully as it was to be a repeated shape and the casting always loses something’.²⁸ However, despite this fascinating documentary evidence, none of the hollowware (cups, jugs, teapots, coffeepots, tureens with carved and modelled handles) in the three largest public collections of Omega pottery in the UK show any evidence of being cast, but are instead hand-thrown.²⁹ Only the plates and shallow soup bowls seem to have been mechanically reproduced, not by casting but by the industrial technique of jiggering whereby flat slabs of clay were spun over plaster hump moulds in a process similar to throwing. The surviving Omega flatware consists of a mixture of hand-thrown and jiggered pieces, although the difference between the two is not immediately apparent. The thrown pieces are heavier, with rough, irregular backs (fig. 16, *left*), while the jiggered plates and bowls are lighter, with neater backs, although they were probably then finished with a hand-held profile that left further subtle variations. The heavily impressed Omega stamp and unfettled burrs on the foot-rings is a reminder that the hand was always an important part of the making process for Fry.

As a small and innovative company, Carter & Co. was sympathetic to Fry’s approach, but Fry had to adapt to their schedule: ‘All last week I was down at Poole potting ... I had to do everything myself (I mean they couldn’t let me have one of their workmen to help)’.³⁰ His commitment to making pots either by himself or with the help of Carter employees is clear, and in 1916 Fry wrote to Philippa Strachey that he had been working ten solid hours a day.³¹ Despite the successful collaboration with Carter’s, Fry remained cynical about the effects of industry on artisanal work, stating, ‘I should much prefer to be able to give an idea to a man ... and get him to work out his own expression of it. But the modern workman has not the same mentality as the medieval workman’.³²

Fry regarded pottery as ‘essentially a form of sculpture ... its surface should express directly the artist’s sensibility both of proportion and surface’.³³ Like the severe Chinese stoneware and early English earthenware he admired,



he chose to emphasise the Omega forms through the use of monochromatic glazes. The surviving Omega tableware is glazed in a range of colours, starting with an off-white majolica or tin glaze which, when thinly applied, reveals the warm underlying colour of the earthenware clay. From 1915 a transparent deep blue and opaque black were introduced, but there are also accounts of yellow and purple glazes being used. Single-colour glazes enhanced the forms and, in addition, provided the perfect foil to food: ‘the plates are obviously waiting for salad – vivid green lettuce, shy radishes, and magenta beet-roots! Fruit would be a Futurist feast in those black bowls’.³⁴ This striking tableware, with its abandonment of decoration, sits in stark contrast to the Omega’s earlier highly decorated pottery and to wider ceramic trends in Britain and Europe.

The few surviving designs on paper for Omega pottery (cat. 42–45) reveal an ambition to establish a new order of design comprised of pared-down forms and geometric volumes with angular points of articulation. Inevitably, the drawings describe a design ideal that was probably beyond Fry’s technical ability to realise, as the actual pots are far less schematic and have softer lines. The potter Quentin Bell, son of Clive and Vanessa, discussed Fry’s formalist approach many years later, describing a sauceboat (fig. 19, *below*) as consisting of a ‘series of rotund curves. The lip is almost a small hemisphere growing from a large hemisphere which is the bowl. The handle is a quarter of a circle. It is a prototype of the ceramics of our century. From it a generation has learned to avoid fussiness and indecision’.³⁵ An underlying structure of cones, spheres, quadrants and triangles is also clearly evident in the Victoria and Albert Museum’s tea set (cat. 51–55). The teapot is formed of two truncated cones joined at the widest point, a tube-like spout, flat lid and pulled oval handle, while the flared cylindrical cup sits in a flattened saucer, its handle a sharp arc cut out by hand, and the whole finished in a white glaze which clearly shows the inflexions of hand-held tools. Neither backward-looking nor derivative, the tea set is a pioneering example of hand-made modern design.



Fig. 19
Omega Workshops (Roger Fry),
Sauceboat, 1914–15. White-glazed
earthenware, 8.2 cm (h) × 22.8 cm (w).
Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Within six years the Omega was producing a successful range of modernist tableware. Despite being the first critic to appreciate the formal qualities of early Chinese stoneware and English earthenware, Fry refused to adopt the historicist approach of Arts and Crafts potters or the studio potters who followed. The Omega's incongruous mix of studio and industrial practice resulted in a range of innovative, artist-designed work that was exceptional in Europe, and would not be matched until Theodor Bogler and Otto Lindig produced their experimental pottery in the workshops of the Bauhaus in the 1920s (fig. 17, p. 31). It also predated Bernard Leach's ill-fated attempt to make a range of practical slipware in 1928, and the Leach Pottery's Standard Ware range of stoneware in the late 1930s. Roger Fry and the Omega artists' rejection of the twin pillars of craftsmanship and industry in favour of progressive design and material expression, allied to domestic use, produced a body of work that has been undervalued by fine art, design and craft scholars. But the Omega Workshops established important precepts for ceramic practice in Britain, marking the beginning of a chapter in which modernist ideas shaped concepts of design and the expressive handling of materials, and provided a model for collaboration between artist and industry in the twentieth century.

1. Roger Fry, 'A Modern Jeweller', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 17, no. 87 (June 1910), p. 169.
2. Charles Holme, 'The Potter's Art-Object Lessons from the Far East', *The Studio*, vol. 24, no. 103 (1901), p. 48.
3. Arthur Hayden, *Chats on English Earthenware* [1909] (London: Fisher Unwin, 1919), p. 44.
4. 'The development through more than a thousand years of all the ceramic arts, porcelain not excepted, was brought to a standstill by the great English industry.' Emil Hannover, *Keramisk Haandbog*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen, 1919); quoted in Bernard Rackham and Herbert Read, *English Pottery: Its Development From Early Times To The End Of The Eighteenth Century* (London: Ernest Benn, 1924), p. 124.
5. Alan Crawford, ed., *By Hammer and Hand* (Birmingham: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, 1984), p. 23.
6. *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*, exh. cat. (London: Grafton Galleries, November 1910), p. 12, reproduced in *A Roger Fry Reader*, p. 84.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 10, reproduced in *A Roger Fry Reader*, p. 83.
8. Roger Fry, 'The Grafton Gallery - 1', *The Nation* (19 November 1910), p. 332, reproduced in *A Roger Fry Reader*, p. 86.
9. Stella Tillyard, *The Impact of Modernism: The Visual Arts in Edwardian England* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 76.
10. Roger Fry, 'Post-Impressionism', *The Fortnightly Review*, vol. 89 (May 1911), p. 862, reproduced in *A Roger Fry Reader*, p. 105.
11. Roger Fry, 'The Chinese Exhibition', *The Nation* (23 July 1910), p. 593.
12. Roger Fry, 'The Munich Exhibition of Mohammedan Art' (originally pub. 1910), *Vision & Design* [1920] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 86.
13. Roger Fry, 'The Art of the Bushmen' (originally pub. 1910), *ibid.*, p. 68.
14. Roger Fry, 'Post-Impressionism', *The Fortnightly Review*, p. 865, reproduced in *A Roger Fry Reader*, p. 102.
15. Christopher Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture and Domesticity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 125.
16. Winifred Gill, quoted in Judith Collins, *The Omega Workshops* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1983), p. 100.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 101, quoting Vanessa Bell: '...we left [Schenck] to copy some again, but I doubt if he'll have done it decently'.
18. *Omega Workshops Descriptive Catalogue*, p. 4.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Fry developed a turquoise glaze that R.L. Hobson of the British Museum thought 'quite remarkable' and which also features on a very large tureen, now in a private collection, London. R. Fry to Lady Fry, 5 December 1914; in *Letters of Roger Fry*, ed. Denys Sutton (London: Chatto & Windus, 1972), p. 382.
21. Judith Collins, 'The Omega Workshops', PhD thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, 1988, p. 185.
22. 'A Visit to the Omega Workshop. Mr Roger Fry on Modern Design and Applied Art', *Drawing & Design*, vol. 5 (August 1917), p. 77.
23. *Early English Earthenware & other Works of Art*, Burlington Fine Arts Club, 1914.
24. Roger Fry, 'The Art of Pottery in England', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 24, no. 132 (March 1914), p. 330, reproduced in *A Roger Fry Reader*, p. 202.
25. Roger Fry, 'Wedgwood China', *The Athenaeum*, no. 4055 (15 July 1905), pp. 88-9, reproduced in *A Roger Fry Reader*, p. 192.
26. *Omega Workshops Descriptive Catalogue*, p. 10.
27. See Collins, *The Omega Workshops* (1983); Isabelle Anscombe, *Omega and After: Bloomsbury and the Decorative Arts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981); Fiona MacCarthy, 'Roger Fry and the Omega Idea', in *The Omega Workshops 1913-1919: Decorative Arts of Bloomsbury*, exh. cat. (London: Crafts Council, 1984), pp. 9-22.
28. Roger Fry to Vanessa Bell (c. 1916-18), quoted in Collins (PhD thesis, 1988), p. 202.
29. Collections at The Courtauld Gallery, the Charleston Trust, and the Victoria and Albert Museum.
30. Quoted in Collins, *The Omega Workshops* (1983), p. 129.
31. Roger Fry to Philippa Strachey, c. 19 October 1916, Women's Library Special Collections, ref. no. 9/27/A/48.
32. 'A Visit to the Omega Workshop', p. 76.
33. *Omega Workshops Descriptive Catalogue*, p. 10.
34. 'Phrynette's Letters to Lonely Soldiers' by Marthe Trolly-Curtin, *Sketch* (4 October 1916), quoted in Collins, *The Omega Workshops* (1983), p. 130.
35. Transcript of a radio broadcast for an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1963. Quoted in Anscombe, *Omega and After*, p. 37.