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Margot Coatts, ed., *Pioneers of Modern Craft*. Manchester, University of Manchester Press, 1997, 143 pp., 50 black-and-white illus., hb. £40.00, pb. £11.99

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Book Reviews
Comptes-rendus de livres

MARGOT COATTS, ed., *Pioneers of Modern Craft*. Manchester, University of Manchester Press, 1997, 143 pp., 50 black-and-white illus., hb. £40.00, pb. £11.99.

Pioneers of Modern Craft is a deceptive book. Such a sweeping title leads one to expect an international analysis of craft pioneers, but instead one is presented with a collection of monographic essays on British craftspeople. Does this indicate that all pioneers of modern craft are British? Certainly not, but it demonstrates the relative importance of British research and writing on contemporary crafts that such a broad title remains unquestioned by the international craft community which was excluded from the contents of the book. That being said, *Pioneers of Modern Craft* is undeniably important in what it does achieve: the creation of a collection of articles on significant figures in modern craft.

Growing out of a series of twelve British Craft Council funded lectures based on key figures in twentieth-century craft, *Pioneers of Modern Craft* is credited by General Editor Paul Greenhalgh as being a vital stage in the development of craft history, the monograph stage. While theoretical debates in art and design history focus on the dangers of biography and the cultivation of genius through monographs, craft history exposes its vulnerability as an emerging field by encouraging the creation of monographs. Libraries and bookstores often feature biographies of individual craft figures who are deemed genius enough to enter the margins of "art:" Bernard Leach, Lucie Rie and Peter Voulkos for example.[1] So it is somewhat unsurprising to see Leach and Rie appear again in a book on pioneering craftspeople. Perhaps craft history must have an index of craft pioneers with biographies in order to create the foundation upon which such monographic essays can be critically analysed. Or is craft history simply repeating the mistakes already made by art and design history in delineating aesthetic and ideological genius through the selection of individuals worthy of biography? Editor Margot Coatts stresses that the importance of the text rests in its creation of a collection of biographic essays that "establish some ground rules for marking out the scope of the modern decorative crafts" (xv).

Pioneers of Modern Craft was not written in a void, however, and editor Margot Coatts remains aware of the pitfalls of her project, acknowledging that her "role-call of subjects ... remain contentious" (xii), and that her desire for an empirical investigation of the individuals within different craft disciplines necessarily means selecting specific disciplines which operate outside team activities, such as glass, ironwork, stained glass and bookbinding (xiii).[2] Coatt's desire to cultivate sophistication within the discipline of craft history is of vital importance, and the well-written articles do succeed in establishing the groundwork for exploring the concept of pioneers in the crafts.

Not all pioneers highlighted in the book were hands-on craftspeople. Some, like Charles Robert (C.R.) Ashbee, were entrepreneurs dedicated to the notion of craft. Alan Crawford's excellent essay, "The object is not the object: C.R. Ashbee and the Guild of Handicraft," offers a concise history of the Guild of Handicraft, established in 1888, and places Ashbee's romantic expectations within a social context. Crawford offers the reader new information on the Arts and Crafts movement outside the popular focus on John Ruskin and William Morris. Examining Ashbee's idealism and privileged middle-class position, Crawford stresses that Ashbee focused on materials, not objects, highlighting his belief that machines had a role in the modern craft workshop. While this led to a successful business (by 1900 the Guild had over 30 employees), Ashbee's romantic view of the country as the natural home for craft eventually forced the Guild to enter into liquidation in 1907. In a few brief pages Crawford leads the reader through the Guild's decline, emphasizing that "Ashbee had forgotten how urban the Guild of Handicraft was" (8) and that, despite Ashbee's attempts at a Ruskinian social reform, in the end the Guild was about work, not art.

It is appropriate, then, that Annette Carruthers' piece on Edward Barnsley follows Crawford, for she begins by describing Barnsley's roots in "an atmosphere of dedication to the design and execution of craftwork in an unspoilt rural situation" (13). Barnsley, a fine furniture maker, was born in 1900 into a craft community formed by his father and uncle. This craft community was based on Arts and Crafts ideals, but by World War One it recognised that these ideals had not been achieved. While Carruthers succeeds in describing Barnsley's role in the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society of the 1920s and 1930s and his reclaiming of craft for its own sake, she never adequately describes the fundamental Arts and Crafts ideals from which Barnsley operated. Despite that, Carruthers offers the reader a concise history of the formation of the Crafts Centre of Great Britain and the gaining of financial support from the government which led to the formation of the Crafts Council in 1964, using Barnsley's involvement as the guide. Carruthers observes that Barnsley was the second generation of the Arts and Crafts movement, a craftsperson who specialized in one craft. Carruthers' distinction is key to the remainder of the articles, which focus on single craft media.

Oliver Watson's take on Bernard Leach is prefaced by a statement which betrays the British-centrism of the entire text. Watson states that "Leach is the only studio potter yet who has achieved such popular and international renown" (22). There are those who might disagree. Despite Watson's assertion of Leach's supremacy in the international ceramics world,[3] his

article is particularly strong for its critique of Leach. Watson demonstrates that during his time in Japan, 1910–20, Leach paid little attention to the traditional potteries, with his main focus being the urban artists like his teacher, Ogata Kenzan VI, and not the country potters. Leach's dedication to pottery as a worthwhile means of expression meant that he was able to overlook the last vestiges of Japan's country potteries and rebuild his own tradition. Watson points out that in 1928 Leach considered his manufacture of tableware as an economic necessity, not a philosophical conviction, and that he considered himself primarily an artist, not a craftsman. Watson's article is interesting for its critical view of Leach, long accepted as an iconic master of traditional studio pottery, but Watson stops short of making his piece an investigation into Imperialism and Orientalism. These issues are being addressed as the reconsideration of Leach is gaining in popularity, with Edmund de Waal's writing focusing on issues of imperialism in Leach's relationship with the Japanese.[4]

While Watson mentions Leach's financial realities, Colin Banks makes Edward Johnston's economics his focus in "Facing fundamental things: Edward Johnston and earning a living." Johnston, a calligrapher, well-known for his 1906 book *Writing & Illuminating & Lettering*, hated industry because of its links with money. Banks traces Johnston's attitude toward industry and his influence as the President of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in straining the relationship between British crafts and industry. Banks points out the irony of Johnston's role as "industrial design consultant" for London Transport, where he designed the famous circle with transverse bar for the underground. In an essay that is part history, part personal reminiscence, Banks' focus on the technical and the occasional abrupt shift in subject force the reader to work at piecing together the flow of Johnston's work.

Malcolm Haslam's essay provides the most successful critical perspective, as he uses the issue of class to understand William Staite Murray's work and career aspirations. In comparing Leach and Murray, Haslam makes clear Murray's desire to be an artist, as compared to Leach's belief in the potter as a traditional craftsperson. This is an interesting comparison, as it contrasts with Oliver Watson's assessment of Leach's consideration of himself as an artist. Murray's desire for pottery to be contextualized within modern sculpture and painting for criticism and viewing speaks about society's perception of the social status of the craftsperson versus the artist. It is over this point that Haslam makes a strong argument that Murray's desire for the "cachet of Royal Academician" guaranteed him a "recognized badge of gentility" (49). In referring to Murray's role in the Royal College of Art,[5] Haslam focuses on Murray's prosperous but "in-trade" background which led to his anxiety about class. To operate as an artist within a high-art institute like the Royal College of Art allowed Murray to pursue his role of artist, which also included careful attention to his attire, the titling of pieces, and exceptionally high prices for his stoneware. His early 1930s pot "Song of Songs" had a price tag of over £160. Haslam makes an important link between Murray and the critics, specifically Herbert Read, Charles Marriott and H.S. Ede, who were essential in establishing Murray as artist rather than artisan. Murray's interest in oriental religions and their relevance to modern art is also discussed, again providing an interesting contrast to Leach's involvement in Asian religions through his friends in Japan. Haslam concludes by asserting that Murray's achievements as an artist contributed to the destruction of the obstacles between art and craft, an observation with merit, but which like the selection of a group of monographs to provide sophistication to the study of craft, simply replicates boundaries already established by the "high" art world.

Where Haslam succeeds in discussing issues of class surrounding William Staite Murray, Barley Roscoe virtually ignores them in the article on Phyllis Barron and Dorothy Larcher. While acknowledging that Barron was from a wealthy family and financially independent, the issue of class is not raised. Phyllis Barron and Dorothy Larcher both studied painting, later turning to fabric work, specifically indigo printing. While Roscoe does a good job in giving the reader technical details of the women's work, with references to the tasks of preparation, the role of the local women used in the workshop remains unexplored in critical terms. The involvement of Roger Fry in granting Barron and Larcher an "enthusiastic" review of a 1926 exhibition in *Vogue* and Charles Marriott's "supportive and favourable review in the *Times*" (69) are mentioned without situating their importance to the reception of Larcher and Barron's work. The eventual closure of Hambutts House, the site of Barron and Larcher's production and exhibitions, following the outbreak of World War Two, Dorothy Larcher's turn to flower paintings and Phyllis Barron's focus on local government are used as conclusions to the history, done without situating these changes within their social contexts.

The late Peter Dormer's chapter assumes that the reader is already familiar with the work of David Pye as a woodworker, turning his attention to Pye's writing rather than his production. While this does provide an interesting look at issues within craft theory, it is difficult for readers unfamiliar with Pye to follow the references to production. This makes one wonder if a British audience might be more involved in Pye's history than their North American or European counterparts. Dormer's writing, however, is concise, and he creates a convincing picture of Pye's "crusade through the dogma of Modernism" (80), leading the reader through attempts to counter the "pseudo-scientific and pseudo-poetic claims of modernism" (73). Pye's insistence on definitions as the basis for communication, whether provi-

sional or final, leads Dormer to question the absence of craft terminology and tools within his set of scientific definitions. This line of questioning is important, for it allows Dormer to open up a discussion of the designer Pye's concern with the importance of appearance and emphasis on standardization. Dormer suggests possibilities for the lack of direct craft references by situating both Pye's writing and his production within art and design categories through the issues of function and ornamentation.

Where Dormer begins a discussion of issues within design, Mary Schoeser continues them in her piece on Marianne Straub. Marianne Straub came to Britain from Switzerland to study powerloom weaving because the Swiss technical colleges would not accept women. In addition to enhancing her artistic practice, Straub's goal was an understanding of the mechanical and scientific aspect of powerloom weaving. Schoeser makes an interesting case for the importance of Straub's studies with Ethel Mariet in 1933 where she gained "firsthand exposure to the English craft tradition" (84). Schoeser emphasizes that this allowed Straub to have "craft credibility" while she worked as an industrial designer. Straub's combination of craft and industrial skills, and her involvement in the Central School of Art and Craft (1956–63), indirectly refer back to Crawford's discussion of C.R. Ashbee. The main focus of Schoeser's piece is on the advances made by Straub due to the flexibility within her craftsmanship. The demands placed on Straub as an industrial designer (between 1933 and 1970 she made one warp a week) were due to her "rare" combination of industrial and craft skills.

Tony Birks' "Lucie Rie and her work with Hans Coper" focuses on the relationship between Rie and Coper, both emigrants to Britain before World War Two. Theirs is a fascinating story, which Birks succeeds in telling while highlighting some of the difficulties faced by Rie as she settled into the established British craft scene. Birks asserts that Rie was short of confidence, situating herself as a craftsperson with respect to Coper, the major ceramic artist. Rie was a wheel-based container maker who disliked teaching and avoided intellectual discussions – "I close my eyes and make pots" (97). Birks contrasts this approach with that of Coper, a superb teacher who created functional ware in sculptural forms (bowls set rim to rim). By tracing Rie's education and artistic success in Europe, he makes a case for the difficulty she encountered when meeting Bernard Leach and William Staite Murray, who did not like her work. Rie's work during the war making buttons and her 1946 meeting with Coper lead to an interesting discussion of their making of domestic ware and their successful marketing as "contemporary design." A discussion of Rie's technique of sgraffito (parallel or radiating lines etched into the clay body), Coper's break from the domestic to the sculptural, and Coper's departure from the workshop in 1958 conclude with Birks' assertion that while Rie and Coper were productive, innovative artists, they are known through their work and not their personalities. Unfortunately, Birks does not investigate the gender-based implications of Rie's deference to Coper. Nevertheless, it is one of the strengths of *Pioneers of Modern Craft* that Leach, Staite Murray, Rie and Coper are all discussed, for it allows the reader to understand that Rie and Coper were operating somewhat as cultural outsiders, which influences contemporary perceptions of the their work within the scope of British craft.

The work of the silversmith Gerald Benney is discussed by Eric Turner, with an emphasis on his long and distinguished career based on co-operation between craft and industrial design. Turner begins his chapter by focusing on the religious fraternity, the Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic established by Eric Gill in 1920, which lasted until 1988. As a student at Brighton, Benney was greatly influenced by his silversmithing teacher Dunstan Pruden, a former member of the Guild. Turner credits Benney with having "bridged the ecumenical divide" (109), being an ecclesiastical silversmith for multiple faiths. In addition to his ecclesiastical silversmithing, Turner describes Benney's education at the Royal College of Art and the difficulties the RCA was having at the time reconciling its mandate with industrial design demands. Benney's timing led to his work within industrial design, and Turner emphasizes his long and successful career with Viners, a Sheffield manufacturer of domestic silver. Turner's emphases on the shifting demands for silver and the optimism of the 1950s and 1960s offer readers a unique approach to the issue of the demand for craft skills within industrial production based on a market-dependent material.

Jeremy Theophilus examines another craftsperson influenced by Eric Gill in "A questioning eye: David Kindersley and his workshop." Kindersley's work in lettering was based on practice, a philosophy stemming from his apprenticeship with Eric Gill from 1933 to 1936. Kindersley worked largely for Cambridge, both the university and the city. He was involved in the formation of the Crafts Centre, the forerunner of the Crafts Council. To Kindersley's credit, he always acknowledged the importance of the client in an artistic relationship, not only economically but artistically. He was also open to the possibility of computers as positive tools for lettering practice in the future. Kindersley was traditional in his approach to his apprentices, believing that "the apprentices need a strong character not to lose their own artistic identity, and a lot of wisdom on the part of the 'master'" (124). Theophilus is unquestioning of the role of the "master," accepting that Kindersley played such a pivotal role without revealing Kindersley's interest in maintaining his status.

Tanya Harrod writes the final chapter on "The modern jewellery of Gerda Flockinger." Harrod begins with Flockinger's arrival in England in 1937 from Austria, where modernism had

been accepted. Harrod uses Flockinger's personal acceptance of modernism as a starting point in describing her integration of fine art into jewellery. Emphasizing Flockinger's use of non-precious and unconventional materials (copper, wooden beads and seedpods), Harrod states that Flockinger "emerged as a striking modernist" (135). The influence of Flockinger's work was widespread, with sales through Mary Quant's shop, exhibitions at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and teaching at the Hornsey School of Art. Harrod credits Flockinger with creating what she describes as "decorative modernism," a successful alternative modernist strain fuelled by the "rediscovery" of the Arts and Crafts movement and Art Nouveau in the 1960s and "hedonistic consumerism." Harrod's concluding chapter works nicely as an examination of modernism, whose influence runs as an undercurrent throughout the majority of the chapters.

The diversity of writing styles and critical approaches contained within *Pioneers of Modern Crafts* makes it difficult to generalize about the book as a whole. While some authors tackle important social issues such as class, the majority of articles operate as historical pieces with a focus on technique and style. The creation of monographs which neglect the social aspects of emergent craft history simply perpetuates the stylistic descriptions that the new art history is struggling against. The lack of issue-based examinations is frustrating, as many of the artists chosen afford excellent opportunities to discuss problematics such as team work versus individual production, the role of gender in the selection of materials and markets, and the difficulties of cultural integration into British society. The monographic essay can be a vehicle for the discussion of theoretical issues, but unfortunately *Pioneers of Modern Craft* falls short of this ideal, with some articles offering only a superficial peek into the lives of specific craftspeople.

In reading this book, there exists a disturbing feeling that *Pioneers of Modern Craft* was not written with the intention of reaching as large an audience as possible. In *The Culture of Craft*, also published by the Manchester University Press in 1997, Peter Dormer writes in his introduction that he regards "all the chapters in this book as a contribution to a family argument provided either by members or friends of the family." [6] With contemporary craft history struggling to break free of its marginalized status within the world of art, perhaps it is no surprise that *Pioneers of Modern Craft* exists as a slim, black-and-white illustrated volume. Perhaps *Pioneers of Modern Craft* is operating as another contribution to the notion of the crafts that celebrates its marginal role. The specialization of subjects, adoption of canonical boundaries from traditional art history, and scarcity of issue-based articles may indicate a willingness inside the craft community to continue with publications modelled on traditional historical models. While *Pioneers of Modern Craft* offers an advance for craft history by establishing a base of artists from which to continue research and discussion, the question craft historians should be asking themselves (in this age of interdisciplinary boundary crossings) is whether the establishment of nationally biased icons of craft in the form of a collection of biographies is essential in itself to a history of craft?

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Notes

1 In the cases of Leach, Rie and Voulkos, their material, clay, is essential in allowing them to enter into history as artists rather than craftspeople. Britain's Herbert Read, art critic and former curator of Ceramics at the Victoria and Albert Museum 1922–1931, espoused the view that pottery was plastic art in the most abstract form, lending some credibility to the material of clay within the British art world.

2 It is of interest that Coatts classifies glass as a team activity while in North America the glass artist Dale Chihuly has successfully negotiated his place within the monograph tradition as an independent artist.

3 It should be noted that Oliver Watson is the Chief Curator of Ceramics and Glass at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

4 Edmund de Waal, "Homo Orientalis: Bernard Leach and the Japanese Soul" in Tanya Harrod, ed., *Obscure objects of desire: Reviewing the crafts in the twentieth century* (London, 1997), 117–25.

5 When Murray was appointed head of the pottery department at the Royal College of Art in 1926, he had been in competition for the post with Bernard Leach.

6 Peter Dormer, ed., *The Culture of Craft: Status and Future* (Manchester, 1997), 16.

C. Jean Campbell, *The Game of Courting and the Art of the Commune of San Gimignano, 1290–1320*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997, 352 pp., 51 half tones, 6 line illus., ISBN 0-691-01210-5.

The image of the commune of San Gimignano retained by the modern-day traveller is that of a romantically perched hilltown, complete with towers and gates. What seems at first glance medieval, such as "picturesque crenellations," is all too often the result of rather disastrous restoration. Even the Communal Palace was not spared a later facelift. Yet, there are times in which restorations are most revealing, as when a rare secular fresco cycle is reconstituted. This is the case in the chamber of the bell tower (the *Torre del Popolo*) of the communal palace, the subject of this study.

The fragmentary narratives here, including the seduction