Clarice Cliff
A Bizarre Tale

by Ed Martel.



Clarice Cliff was born into a working class family of pottery workers in Tunstall, Staffordshire in 1899. Here, she grew up in and around the potteries where her passion and flair for design were nurtured. Despite her only formal coaching in art consisting of one half-hour school lesson per week, she grew to love drawing and design. Her talent and enthusiasm for the subject led to her being awarded with scholarships to attend her local art schools.

Although she later passed the exams required to become a teacher, Clarice decided to continue to learn the various branches of her first love, pottery decorating, instead. In 1916, aged seventeen, she joined A. J. Wilkinsons to take her second job as a a lithographer, having served an apprenticeship at Hollinshead & Kirkham, Tunstall. The shortage of workers during the war, coupled with the success and growing popularity of A. J. Wilkinsons, was instrumental in the decision to employ women in what was traditionally seen as a man's domain.

The Wilkinson Pottery.

A. J. Wilkinsons began production in 1885 after Arthur Wilkinson, owner of the Batavia Pottery of Stoke, took over the Central pottery in Burslem. When he died six years later, his brother-in-law Arthur Shorter, manager of Wilkinson's Stoke works, took over as head of both potteries. Under Shorter, A.J.W. Ltd. prospered and soon purchased the Royal Staffordshire pottery in Burslem. Colly Shorter, son of Arthur, joined the company in 1898 as travelling salesman, and was later to become a prominent figure in the lives of both A.J.W. Ltd. and the as yet unborn lithographer Clarice Cliff.

The Newport Pottery Company.

In 1920, following some years of success, the Shorter Brothers - Colly and the younger Guy - were able to purchase the Newport Pottery in Burslem. A. J. Wilkinson Ltd became The Newport Pottery Company. At about the same time, Clarice Cliff, still working as a lithographer for the same company, began to show not only an interest in, but also a certain aptitude for work in other departments of the pottery. Finally, in 1922, Clarice's potential was noticed by manager and mentor John Butler, and she was allowed to begin an apprenticeship as a modeller. Following the production of one of her designs - a candlestick - Clarice was moved to the Newport Pottery site. Suggesting to management that old, plain stockpiles of ceramics here might be more saleable if decorated in the modern Art Deco style, the patterns, now famous across the world and synonymous with the Art Deco movement, were allowed to emerge from Clarice Cliff's hand.

Over the coming years, Clarice developed a unique style which led to the production of her infamous 'Bizarre' range by 1928. Sales for the Newport Pottery Company rocketed, with tens of thousands of items being produced and sold across the world every year: in Canada, the USA, Brazil and Australasia as well as in Europe. This in no small part due to the fabulous marketing skills of Colly Shorter, which included the introduction of specialist lines for large high street department stores, special appearances by Cliff and her 'paintresses' and an almost constant presence in the newspaper columns.

The popularity of Clarice Cliff's designs, including the ranges 'Inspiration', 'Café au Lait' and 'Fantasque', meant that the Newport Pottery Company easily weathered the storm of the Depression of the 1930s. The company continued to expand during this difficult time, and Clarice Cliff ware was reported in over 300 newspaper articles in the first few years of the decade alone. Clarice was soon rewarded, by her appointment to the position of Art Director - the first woman ever to be given that lofty title in the Potteries.

The War Effect.

Production at Newport continued to flourish until the Second World War dictated that both the forces and the munitions factories took many of the workers away from the potteries. During the war, the Newport Pottery Company produced primarily plain, white tableware destined for the armed forces, whilst at home people were encouraged to 'make do and mend'. Investment, modernisation and the need for mass-production following the war allowed little room for hand-painted goods, and printed pottery became the main focus for production. Clarice Cliff died in 1972 aged 73, by which time she had become a Director and then Chairman of the Newport Pottery Company, before it was finally purchased and merged with the Albion and Hadderidge Potteries of Burslem in December 1964.

Clarice Cliff Today.

Clarice Cliff reproductions based on original patterns are still made today by Josiah Wedgwood. However, it is the the original pieces of this most collectable, Jazz-Age, Art Deco tableware which command the higher prices and the fervent interest of collectors and dealers at fairs and auctions alike. In London, Christie's regularly hold Clarice Cliff sales. The next such sale is on the 9th October, where highlights include an Orange Erin Charger (estimate: £2500 - £3500) and a Blue Firs conical coffee service (estimate: £2500 - £3000). Visit www.christies.com for details. Gardiner Houlgate of Bath also hold regular Clarice Cliff sales; the next is on 5th October; telephone 01225 812912 for details.

The Clarice Cliff Collectors' Club, founded in 1982, issue 'The Review' three times a year to members, which carries articles about Clarice, Bizarre ware, archive material and auction news. Limited editions of Clarice Cliff ware are also made available exclusively to members. For details please write to: Subscriptions, C.C.C.C., Fantasque House, Tennis Drive, The Park, Nottingham NG7 1AE. The website www.claricecliff.com provides a Collectors' Gallery, Clarice Cliff Biography, Picture Gallery, Patterns & Shapes directory and further details and information for students. Brighton Museum and Art Gallery, East Sussex features a large twentieth century design section which includes a number of items donated by Clarice Cliff following a retrospective exhibition in 1972, the year before her death. For details please telephone the museum on 01273 290900.

Some notes for buyers.

By the end of 1931, when Clarice Cliff became Art Director of the Newport Pottery Company, over 150 designs by her hand were in production, prolific by any standards. Largely, those designs originating from 1928 and 1929 fall into pattern numbers 340-402, and those designed between 1930 and 1931 fall into numbers 403-499. Within these boundaries, pattern numbers were not always given chronologically, so care should be taken and specialist advice sought if exact dating is required. To add further confusion, some pattern names were applied to different patterns within different ranges. One notable example, Christine, features bold colours and large stylised patterns in 1934, whereas its 1937 namesake is a far more subdued, dainty and realistic floral depiction.

Additionally, one should note that not all patterns designed belong to a range, neither are all patterns named. Those belonging to a named range (e.g. Appliqué, Inspiration, Latona, Delecia, Moderne, Gloria, Café au Lait, Goldstone, Patina, Lugano) all carry a titled backstamp. As indeed, do the immensely popular Fantasque and Bizarre, both not so much ranges as titles for larger, diverse groups of related patterns.

Courtesy of www.claricecliff.com, the 'Flower' grading on the next page gives a good indication of price bands for Clarice Cliff designs. For a large selection of auction hammer prices from sales accross the UK, see our online Price Guide database at www.antiques-info.co.uk.

The 'Flower' grading.

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The most vividly coloured, hand painted, all-over floral designs mainly dating from 1929 to 1935. A large vase would cost £750 to £2000, a small vase £300 to £1000, an Early Morning set £1750 to £4000, a small fancy £150 to £500.

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Brightly coloured hand painted designs, either in a smaller range of colours or only partially covering ware. A large vase would cost £500 to £1000, a small vase £250 to £600, an Early Morning set £1250 to £2500, a small fancy £150 to £400.

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Brightly coloured hand painted designs which only partially cover ware, or have Delecia or Café-au-lait finish. A large vase would cost £400 to £800, a small vase £200 to £500, an Early Morning set £1000 to £2000, a small fancy £100 to £300.

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Less collectable hand painted designs, or hand painted designs only produced as a 'shoulder pattern' leaving much of the ware plain. Values unpredictable, but mainly under £100 for a plate, £50 to £100 for a cup and saucer, £100 to £250 for a teapot or coffeepot.

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A printed or lithographed floral design, little or no hand painting.

Archive Examples.

Clouvre: Freehand on-glaze floral designs on a light or dark Inspiration-glazed ground. Variations include Tulip and Water Lily. ✶✶✶✶✶

Berries: A cluster of red and orange berries with leaves among yellow and green blocks (1930) ✶✶✶✶✶

Black Flower: A stencilled black flower and leaves on a multi-coloured striped ground (1929) ✶✶✶✶

Blue Daisy : A freehand blue, pink, and orange daisy with complex lines and curves (1930). ✶✶✶

Cherry: Blue fruit with purple leaves, outlined in jade (1929) ✶✶✶

Brunella: Blue and rust stylised flowers as an edge motif, very similar to Ravel (1929) ✶✶

Crepe-de-Chine: An all-over printed floral pattern, with hand painted detail in either dominant green/yellow, blue or red colourways (1933) ✶



The Prospect Street entrance to A.J. Wilkinson Ltd., Stoke-on-Trent.

Publicity photograph by Clarice Cliff. Conical tableware decorated in Florida pattern.





Publicity photograph by Clarice Cliff. Conical coffee set decorated in Chloris pattern with shape 497 Inspiration vase.

Glossary.

Bander and liner: decorator who puts bands of colour on ware, applying the paint on brushes whilst rotating a potter's wheel.

Biscuit: the name given to ware which has had just one firing to harden it before it is glazed.

Cafe-au-lait: name for a technique of stippling a colour on ware, which then had a design added over it.

Delecia: created in 1929, enamel colours thinned in turps could be made to run down the ware. Formed part of the Delecia range.

Early Morning set: a teaset for two comprising teapot, milk and sugar, two cups, saucers and plates. Designed for the first cup of tea of the day and also popular with housewives for use when a visitor called.

Enameller: a decorator who applied colour freehand or within another decorator's outline

Glost: ware which has been glazed but is undecorated; stored in the glost warehouse

Honeyglaze: the tradename for the clear glaze used on Newport Pottery. This had one per cent iron oxide content.

Lithography: the art of applying printed transfers on ware as the main decoration.

Missus: a woman who supervised a decorating shop and trained the workers in the techniques.

On-glaze: decoration applied to the ware after it had been fired and glazed, which was then re-fired in the enamel kiln. This was the main style of decoration used on Clarice's hand-painted ware.

The Potteries: a collective name for the six Staffordshire towns of Hanley, Tunstall, Longton, Burslem, Fenton and Stoke.