

Mary Moorcroft  
Josiah Wedgwood & Sons Ltd.

# Design at Wedgwood

'I speak from experience in female taste, without which I should have made a poor figure amongst my Potts, not one of which of any consequence, is finished without the Approbation of my Sally'. Thus wrote the first Josiah Wedgwood in 1768, a few years after he had founded his firm, and his foresighted policies on the importance of design have been retained by his successors through Wedgwood history.

The earliest Wedgwood tableware designs combined function and beauty to a degree extraordinary in any industry, and Josiah's employment of eminent artists is one of the principles the company has retained.

For two centuries, one of the outstanding strengths of Wedgwood has been in the hands of its team of designers – both full-time staff designers in in the factory studios and free-lance artists engaged on special commissions.

Wedgwood has employed many famous artists – William Blake, George Stubbs, John Flaxman, William Hackwood, James Tassie, Isaac Gosset, Lady Diana Beauclerk and Lady Templeton were among those whose drawings, models and designs were used by Josiah Wedgwood in the 18th century; Emile and Therese Lessore worked for Wedgwood towards the end of the 19th century; and in modern times Eric Ravilious, Edward Bawden, John Skeaping, Keith Murray, Robert Gooden, Rex and Lawrence Whistler, Arnold Machin, Richard Guyatt, Angelo Biancini, Eduardo Paolozzi and David Gentleman have been commissioned to produce designs for tableware or ornamental pieces.

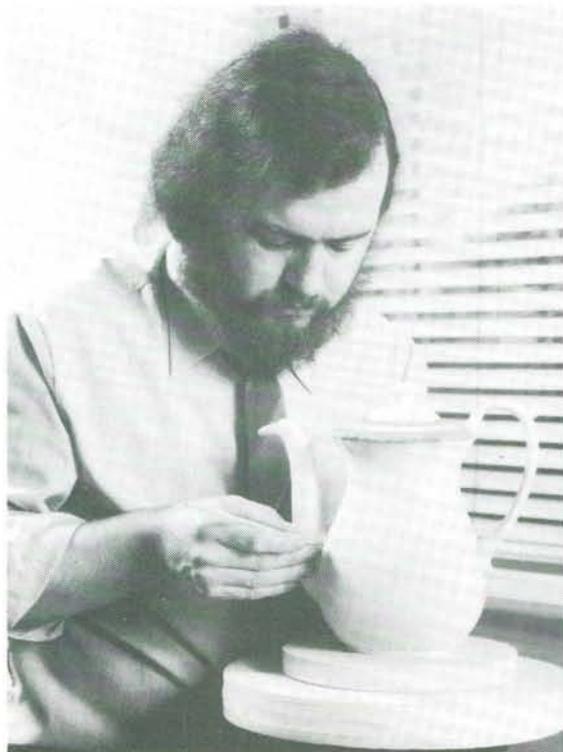
Since the 18th century, the overall responsibility for design at Wedgwood has been in the hands of some internationally famous names – men like Henry Webber, Thomas Allen, John Goodwin and Victor Skeltern – all leading ceramic artists of their day. Indeed, the mainstay of Wedgwood design is undoubtedly – as it has always been – the staff team based at the factory. Today, the company has the largest design staff in the industry, supported by skilled modellers, engravers and graphic artists; and also a design consultant in New York to cater for the special needs of that large and important market.

Ceramic design is concerned both with form (or shape) and the decoration (or pattern) applied to it. A tableware pattern must be suitable for every piece in the shape for which it has been designed, and while it may be a comparatively simple matter to design for the flat surface of a plate, it is often extremely complicated to translate the same design satisfactorily onto the curved surfaces of such pieces as teapots and vegetable dishes. In addition, the ceramic palette is limited, as many colours cannot withstand the high temperatures required in firing. All designers must be well trained in production processes to understand fully the limitations imposed by even the most advanced potting and decorating techniques.

Production of a new pattern costs several thousand pounds, and the introduction of a new shape is much more costly, for several hundred separate drawings may be made when a complete new range of tableware shapes is being prepared. Wedgwood introduces a variety of new product lines

*Right: A modeller in the Wedgwood design studio prepares a plaster mock up of a new shape of coffee pot.*

*Extreme right: Designer Rosalin Cooper putting the finishing touches to a new tableware pattern.*



*A view of the ornamenting shop at Wedgwood, Barlaston, where a team of highly skilled craftsmen ornament the figures on to the traditional Wedgwood Jasper ware.*



each year — collectors pieces, commemorative wares, specially-commissioned products, and also the continuous pattern servicing for specific home and overseas market requirements. The high investment involved in new production makes the selection of new shapes and patterns a difficult and highly important task. At Wedgwood it is carried out by a committee representative of the design, marketing, production and planning departments and of course the important overseas companies.

When a new tableware or ornamental shape is agreed for production, drawings are submitted by the designers to the modellers, where a clay or plaster model is produced in three-dimensional form.

The first model is in 'clay-size' — slightly larger than the finished size — and plaster moulds are made from this original model and, in turn, reproductions from these moulds shrink from 'wet clay' to 'dry clay' size and shrink yet again during the firing process in the kilns. The modeller has to calculate exactly these shrinkages and every tiny detail must be perfectly finished to preserve the fine quality and precise form of the article.

Every detail must be observed by the modeller — each tiny item in a coat of arms, every feature of a person must be faithfully recorded whether it be a portrait, bust or small bas-relief to be produced.

To be chosen for Wedgwood production a design is required to be original, attractive, practical, and of the standard and quality which has made Wedgwood the name that people throughout the world associate with the best in high quality ceramic tableware and ornamental wares.

From the design and modelling studios items move into full production on the factory floor where craftsmen and women are involved at all stages of manufacture.

Many are involved in the traditional skills in the making of Jasper such as throwing, turning, figure-making and ornamenting. Or on the highly skilled decorating of high quality fine bone china in the lithographic, hand enamelling or hand lining sections.

Others work at highly specialised semi-automatic machines for long production runs of platemaking or cupmaking. And yet others cast in moulds a full range of both table and ornamental ware shapes and assemble spouts, handles and feet to complete coffee or teapots.

Most craft training is done entirely on the shop floor where new recruits can spend anything from a few weeks to many years following a training programme to learn their particular skill.

Training periods are relatively short for such skills as figuremaking, selecting and aerographing but rather longer, between one and two years, for lining, enamelling and lithographing and apprentice-type training over a number of years is given for turning, polishing and mouldmaking.

Now in its third century of production, Wedgwood continues to engage highly skilled craftsmen and women — on some processes which have remained unchanged over two centuries — and combines with these traditional handcraft processes some of the latest mechanical methods and scientific aids to ceramic manufacturing.