

CARLTON WARE NEWSLETTER #40

from

Ian Harwood & Jerome Wilson

This month, we are delighted to bring you an excellent article that we know you will all find most interesting and informative. Our thanks to Barry & Elaine Girling for all their time and effort in researching the following:

Violet Elmer - Artist and Designer (1907-1988)

A review by Barry & Elaine Girling

Violet Elmer, one of the foremost English Designers of ceramics, has remained a little known figure. Better known contemporaries are Clarice Cliff, Susie Cooper and Charlotte Rhead. In view of the considerable body of work undertaken during the period 1928-1937 it is perhaps appropriate that, some hundred years after her birth, an assessment of her contribution to the decorative arts should be made.



Violet Irene Ellen Elmer, born on the 29 March 1907 at Grandpont, Oxford, was the youngest of Thomas and Jane Elmer's three children. Her father's occupation was somewhat quaintly described as letter carrier (postal). From this secure family background, Violet rose to become a significant artist and outstanding designer.

Her early education at Oxford was as a pupil at the Central Girls School. She then attended the City of Oxford College of Technology, situated in New Inn Hall Street, although it seems that the college used various premises in the City - a different venue for each subject. Miss Elmer first enrolled in 1922 and again in 1923 when she was sixteen.

That she was a gifted artist was confirmed in her late teens when she succeeded in a National Arts Competition. Some of Violet's submissions created in 1924/5 survive in plates, which embrace still life and historic style. Others gave examples of wallpaper and carpet design. Her success in the competition undoubtedly provided the spur to a burgeoning career.

Subsequently, an Exhibition in The Potteries, featuring some of her artwork, proved to be a life-changing event. Her work was seen by Mr F C [Cuthbert] Wiltshaw, of Wiltshaw and Robinson's Carlton Ware Pottery, Copeland Street, Stoke-upon-Trent and the company wished to acquire her paintings. However, perhaps not surprisingly, the young Miss Elmer was unable to attribute a value to them. The matter was eventually resolved satisfactorily, following a letter from Mr Wiltshaw offering her a position as a designer at the factory.



3387 **Floral Comet** c1930



3388 **Fantasia** c1930



3411 **SCROLL** c1930 Handcraft



3447 **Explosion** c1930



3453 **Awakening** c1930



3557 **FAN** c1931



3651 **Scimitar** c1932



3695 **Egyptian Fan** c1932



3700 **Rainbow Fan** c1933

Initially Violet was reluctant to leave Oxford for The Potteries. At the time it must have been a considerable undertaking and especially for one so young. However, in 1928, she accepted the opportunity and left home to take up lodgings at Newcastle-under-Lyme, to embark on a role as designer of Carlton China at the Copeland Street Factory. The desk from the Factory, complete with paint pots, and on which her designs were produced, survives to this day.

The Company, widely known for its many and varied earthenware products was established in 1890 by Messrs Wiltshaw and Robinson. It survived for a century, being most prominent during the period 1911–1966 whilst under the control of the Wiltshaw family.

As well as her general drawing, it should be recorded that Violet was a fine water-colourist and perhaps there are elements indicative of future ceramic designs contained in the paintings signed and dated 1927.



In 1928 – a difficult period - Messrs Wiltshaw and Robinson assumed control of the nearby Vine Pottery, the well-known china making concern of Birks Rawlins and Company. Carlton's diversification into porcelain tea ware unfortunately did not last long, for after only four years of ownership a receiver was appointed and Birks Rawlins & Co. was wound up as a going concern. However, of the many services produced, a considerable number feature the young artist's designs.

It was during the Art Deco period that the company employed three prominent designers; firstly the renowned Enoch Boulton, who followed Horace Wain to the factory in 1921, before eventually moving to Fieldings Crown Devon in 1929. Secondly, Violet Elmer 1928-1937 and finally Rene Pemberton another designer of whom little is known.

It is in the company's high-end "best ware" products of the late 1920's and 30's that Miss Elmer produced her best work. Following success with the chinaware lines and probable involvement with the "Handcraft" range and no doubt assuming the mantle of Enoch Boulton in the process, a further period of prolific activity was to follow.



3767 **DEVIL** c1933



3788 **BELL** c1933



3813 **WAGON WHEELS** c1934



3815 **Needlepoint** c1934



3818 **HOLLYHOCKS** c1934



3891 **SKETCHING BIRD** c1934



3949 **FLOWER & FALLING LEAF** c1935



3971 **RIVER FISH** c1935
Shabunkin



4018 **Secretary Bird** c1936

Many were the exotic art deco and fantasy designs which were to flow from her pen in the ensuing years. These were to adorn the manufacture of the company's earthenware products such as ginger jars, vases, chargers, tea and coffee services.

As her output during this period would have produced a design catalogue the equal of any other, it is a matter of concern that Violet has remained anonymous for so long. Most of the patterns were intricate, required many firings and consequently were time consuming and expensive to manufacture. It was with commendable skill that the workforce was able to transfer the vision into reality.

Concerning identification, it was not the custom at The Pottery to allow designers to sign their work; with the exception of the backstamp the only symbols shown relate to paintresses and gilders. Nevertheless, by relating known dates to the sequencing of pattern numbers, it is possible to identify those designs attributable to Miss Elmer.

Finally, after almost a decade of service, circumstances conspired to end her designing association with the company. Firstly, on the 25 June 1938, she married schoolteacher Arthur Joseph Lawton of Longton, Staffordshire, at St Matthews Church Oxford, just a short distance from her place of birth. Secondly, although her designs are still as vibrant and in keeping with current lifestyles, Violet was "of her time" in that her unmistakable skills epitomised that flamboyant evocative inter-war period.

However, with the outbreak of the second great conflict, major changes were to take place. In common with similar industries, production was restricted by a shortage of manpower and materials. Reduced markets also put the Copeland Street Works into considerable difficulty. This finally brought an end to such a liberating phase of artistic expressionism. After the war, fashion changed and in the period of austerity that followed, ceramic design had, of necessity, to become more one dimensional and mundane. Never again would the quality, excess and elegance of the earlier years be matched.

Following the end of her professional design career, the new Mrs Lawton, with the benefit of her husband's cabinet making skills, would go on to stylishly decorate the interior of their house at Westlands, Newcastle-under-Lyme. There they resided for over four decades.

Violet and Arthur were held in high regard. They had a love of children although no family of their own. She involved herself in charity work and social pursuits such as rambling, drama and gardening. Finally, having survived her husband by several years, she died on the 8 March 1988.



She was an exceptional lady and deserving of recognition as one of the finest designers of her time. Her artistic creations live on as her unwritten obituary.

We would like to thank John Franklin, Graham Meredith, John Parks, and Norman Timms, for giving freely of their time.

We are especially grateful to Ian and Jerome for their considerable assistance in the matter. ©ECBG07

All ceramics and water colours from the collection of Elaine and Barry Girling; factory given names in capitals.

Additional photos:

1938 black & white wedding photo, Arthur Lawton and Violet Elmer

1985 colour picture of Violet Lawton nee Elmer

Once again we send our thanks to Barry & Elaine for all their time and effort in putting together this most interesting article. We understand that the research is ongoing and when any additional information comes to hand we will be only too happy to pass this onto you all.

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