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Globalization and the UK Ceramic Industry (c1990-2010)

Stoke-on-Trent (the Potteries) has been synonymous with the UK ceramic industry for centuries. As late as the 1980s, it was calculated that of those employed in the UK pottery industry, 83% were still located in the Stoke-on-Trent region. However, in Frances Hannah’s Ceramics: Twentieth Century Design it was predicted that the future of the UK ceramic industry would inevitably be greater multi-nationalism, use of cheap labour abroad, and the emergence of design aimed to suit an international taste. Today, the term ‘globalization’ is frequently used to describe the phenomena whereby the more traditional, centralized forms of production have declined.

In terms of how commodities might adapt to this changing environment, Lash and Urry’s analysis of ‘global sociology’ foresaw a situation whereby ‘Objects are emptied out both of meaning (and are postmodern) and material content (and are thus post-industrial).’ Based on Lash and Urry’s theories, designing and design aesthetics become more important than the process of production. In theory, it would become the role of advertising to attach imagery and meaning to the product. But, how straightforward has it been to apply this theory to all aspects of the UK ceramic industry, especially when considering the actual ways in which the ceramics produced have been affected?

In 1991, the UK’s largest proportion of imported porcelain tableware came from Germany. From the end of the 1990s, Chinese imports overtook European, and in a drive to bring down labour costs, shifting production from Staffordshire to the Far East and Asia (outsourcing) then seemed to many observers to be a cogent argument, if not the only way for businesses to survive. However, in the case of the UK ceramic industry, there has been a long tradition of backstamping that has reinforced the notion of place of production. Indeed, the marketing of place, craft and heritage was not in decline prior to the rise of Far Eastern imports, or outsourcing to the Far East, but at its zenith in the 1970s and 1980s. Typical of this tendency was a range called ‘Eternal Beau’ designed by Sarina Mascheroni, produced by Johnson Brothers of Hanley from the 1980s. The backstamp declares that it was manufactured in England (Fig. 1 and 2). Perhaps, previous marketing strategies have actually made it harder for the industry to adapt to the possibilities of globalization.

When Royal Doulton announced in 1995 the development of a manufacturing venture in Indonesia, the emerging debate drew attention to issues of a loss of local craft skills, potential quality issues, and whether the issue of the ‘place of origin’ was relevant to the post-modern consumer. Locally, outsourcing was a highly emotive issue because of job cuts in the Potteries. However, Wayne Nuttbeen, Chief Executive of Royal Doulton, was later quoted in the local newspaper as stating that he had ‘re-invented’ the firm as: ‘...a sales-led company marketing high-branded goods under the names of Minton, Royal Doulton and Royal Albert – rather than a manufacturer.’

Typically, a detachable label might declare where the product was manufactured and this approach to marketing was widely used by many leading manufacturers. For instance, a Royal Albert surface pattern called ‘Ruby Lace’ of 2002, in the ‘Old Country Roses’ range, had a detachable label indicating that it was a Royal Doulton brand, but made in Indonesia (Fig. 3, 4 and 5). As new marketing strategies emerged due to the impact of outsourcing, the word ‘England’ came to signify the origin of the brand, rather than place of production. This is the case with a Johnson Brothers’ cup and saucer made in China (Fig. 6 and 7). Manufacturers, such as Spode, proposed that ceramics could be more like a lifestyle brand. Alternately, it was pointed out in the Staffordshire press that: ‘...like in other areas of consumer goods, the backstamp is starting to mean less as companies spread themselves amid the sweep of globalization.’

Research undertaken by manufacturers led Wedgwood’s marketing director, Robin Ritchie, to declare that:

‘If you ask a customer, they would prefer it to be made in England, but it’s not an important part of the purchase. We have done considerable research to check this. The reassurance of the Wedgwood name is good enough for the consumer.’

Later, when Tableware International published an article concerning the ‘country of origin’ debate, opinions of UK ceramic retailers veered towards the ‘place of manufacture’ having limited importance to the consumer.

Nevertheless, the results of globalization on the marketing of ceramics could be incongruous. For instance, in 2009 Wedgwood introduced a range to celebrate 250 years of business. A mug decorated with backstamps (some of which declare ‘Made in England’) was, according to the label on the cardboard box, made in Indonesia (Fig. 8 and 9). In an article in the Staffordshire press entitled ‘Stamping out the origins’ the observation was that when receiving a ceramic gift, it was likely that the packaging would be disposed of anyway.

Alternatively, a view expressed was that Staffordshire could be the centre of design, and not manufacturing. However, Anthony Wood, Chairman of Arthur Wood & Sons of Longport, took a more cynical view when he argued: A common sight is that of ‘Designed in England’ which is a deliberate attempt to mislead customers into thinking that it is made here, although it could be made anywhere. Other forms of marketing developed which reflected the tendency of UK ceramic firms to import white-ware to be decorated in Stoke-on-Trent.

Interviews with manufacturers and retailers provide insight into the changing approaches to marketing, and how consumers responded to outsourcing. Apparently, attitudes to place of origin can evidently vary. For examples, in the case of the profitable Churchill China, which manufactures in Stoke-on-Trent and outsources to the Far East, a view was that as the younger generation of consumers were living in a global world, there was less interest in where ceramics were produced. However, in an interview, a retailer based in a department store in the north of England, with fifteen years experience of selling Wedgwood, and the other brands connected to this group, stated that:

‘Yes, I think as a company, I think, it was thought they wouldn’t. But, I think they [Wedgwood] under-estimated the customer, and I think the customer is bothered where things are made...’

As far as the Wedgwood retailer was concerned, there was an acute problem in maintaining the prestige of the brand when outsourced to the Far East. There was a disruption of value, and no matter how much focus there was on emphasizing the brand name, the design, or the use of celebrities. It was apparently not enough to bridge the gap in the minds of many consumers.

A problem arose when prestigious UK ceramic brands attempted to place the product at a high-retail value when manufacturing took place in districts associated with cheap labour. It is not a prejudice against Far Eastern goods, as ceramic imports from the Far East and Asia into the UK are not objected to, but the combination of backstamps, and detachable labels creating convergent narratives that cannot always be disguised, and are not ignored, or irrelevant. Subsequent branding and advertising does not entirely create a new meaning, as envisaged by Lash and Urry. In addition, there was evidence that this industrial product still had connections, or pretensions to craft, which also potentially loaded the ceramic commodity with an additional sense of where it was ‘crafted’. According to the Wedgwood seller interviewed, consumers were ‘regularly’ declining to buy Wedgwood when they discovered it was outsourced. Therefore, outsourcing could create perception problems, particularly when considering this prestigious brand.

Not all companies capitulated to outsourcing production to the Far East. Emma Bridgewater, a firm based at Hanley, Staffordshire, reported record sales of £1.1 million for the year ending April 2010 - an increase of 33% on the previous year. The number of employees had risen from approximately 30 in the 1980s, to around 160 by 2010. The Crafts magazine (which is more accustomed to discuss studio ceramics rather than industrial production) also referred to the economic success of Bridgewater. The article stated, ‘It’s this very Britishness that defines the company – every piece is hand-made in Stoke-on-Trent, and Bridgewater herself has doggedly refused to outsource production overseas.’ It is perhaps implied by this analysis that place of manufacture is central to the appeal of this particular ceramic product. Certainly, a combination of surface patterns and backstamps emphasize how and where Emma Bridgewater’s ceramic products were manufactured (Fig. 11 and 12). But surprisingly, the motivation for maintaining production in Stoke-on-Trent stems from a desire to maintain jobs in the UK, not an intentional marketing strategy. Unlike sharinghold multi-nationals, private companies are able to exercise a choice as to where to manufacture, and the degree to which this will impact on profits.

In some cases the marketing, and even the designs might suggest that there has been a reaction to globalization. A Staffordshire firm called Royal Stafford created backstamps that emphasized the Potteries, and surface-pattern designs included the phrase ‘Made in Britain’. Their ‘Britannia range’ of c2009 incorporated images of Britannia, designs with a crown, and the statement ‘Made in Britain’ (Fig. 13 and 14). Unusually, it
4. Backstamp, c2002
5. Detachable label
7. Backstamp, Johnson Brothers was established in Hanley in 1883. (Latterly part of the Wedgwood Group)
8. Wedgwood, mug, bone china, c2009
9. Backstamp
10. Label on packaging
11. Emma Bridgewater, mug, earthenware, c2010
12. Backstamp. Note decorator’s mark, and inspection label
14. Backstamp on tableware
15. The Figurine Collective. Established in 2009. This figure was presented to the Potteries Museum, Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent
17. Backstamp
is the ceramic design itself that communicates to the consumer where it was made. This would be something of an anachronism prior to the impact of outsourcing, and here it can be argued that the impact of the globalization has influenced surface pattern design. Nevertheless, the choice to manufacture in Burslem is not based on the possibility of appealing to an Ethnocentric consumer, but maintaining design and manufacturing agility. In spite of the globalization theories that have predicted greater homogenization, ceramic preferences can still vary from country to country. Responding to demand as quickly as possible is harder when manufacturing takes place on the other side of the world. Thus, in more recent times economists have used the phrase regional resilience to describe tendencies in the UK ceramic industry that are responding to globalization in different ways.

A problem with applying the implications of globalization to the UK ceramic industry is that it ignores how versatile the ceramic products can be. Commemoratives and collectables have been a segment of UK ceramic production. In November 2009, Tony Young, Peter Holland and John Bromley established The Figure Collective, and this is one example of a new company that has emerged in spite of Far Eastern competition. As the company’s name suggests, it has concentrated on the production of figurines, and the company relies on Stoke-on-Trent manufacturers to produce their products, employing some ex-Doulton decorators. As part of the publicity surrounding the setting up of the new company, their first figurine was presented to the Potteries Museum of Hanley (Fig 15). It was reported by one of the owners that people had given up collecting English branded figurines because they were no longer made in the UK, but with a renewed focus on Stoke production, individuals were now collecting again. For some aspects of the UK ceramic industry, distancing itself from the ‘traditional’ place of manufacture raises a complex philosophical question of what constitutes authenticity. Although some marketing theorists argue that ‘authenticity is a contrivance rather than a reality’, Walter Benjamin’s description of uniqueness, or authenticity, was that:

‘Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.’

Paradoxically, even though the surface designs of UK ceramics invariably reflect diverse cultural and stylistic influences, a notion of authenticity often resides in the place and context in which it is made. Globalization impacts on perceptions of authenticity. Even if notions of the UK ceramic industry in the Potteries are in-part constructed (such as outsourcing occurring within Stoke-on-Trent, between different manufacturers), this does not make the consumers’ interest in ‘place of origin’ irrelevant in an increasingly globalized world.

Without even considering the ethical issues of exploiting cheap labour abroad, or the environmental implications of increased shipping, the impact of globalization raises perception issues, as well as the need for manufacturers to maintain manufacturing and design agility. The impact of globalization has not resulted in a complete collapse of the UK ceramic industry. New forms of marketing, design and even small-scale businesses have emerged in the 1990s and 2000s.

However, the focus on the potential consequences of globalization has often been on the decline of regionalism. This is a rather narrow reading of the implications of the debate. As an example, in 1983 Theodore Levitt, from the Harvard Business School, wrote The Marketing Imagination. This influential publication apparently caused Saatchi & Saatchi to adopt a new strategy that encompassed a return to emphasizing place of production. Spode’s ‘Blue Italian’ is an iconic ceramic design that first appeared in c.186. The reason why Portmeirion brought most of the Spode ‘Blue Italian’ production back to Stoke was in part due to the importance of the ‘made in England’ backstamp to its potential consumers (Fig. 16 and 17).

Examining just one industry, and the commodities it produces, demonstrates how a seamless transition to becoming something globalized is not as straightforward as Frances Hannah predicted. The pathway can be less clear, and far more uneven. There is not a straightforward answer as to whether a more globalized approach to manufacturing and marketing can work for the UK ceramic industry. This is due to the fact that in each case the nature of the ceramic product can vary in terms of function, status, demand, heritage, and meaning.


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4 ibid, pp.14-5.
5 The Sentinel, 18/9/2004.
11 Interview conducted by the author with anonymous seller of Wedgwood, in department store, north of England, 14th May 2009.
19 ibid, p.1031.
20 ibid, p.1037.
22 Hannah, F., op.cit., p.100-1.