The broad outline of the remarkable career of Archibald Knox, is well known. An immensely talented, though extremely modest man, Knox made his way to London from his home, the Isle of Man, in the waning years of the 19th century. He did so, as the story goes, at the encouragement of another eminent designer of that period, M. H. Baillie Scott. Although undocumented, it is also believed that Baillie Scott introduced Knox to Dr. Christopher Dresser in whose London studio Knox worked for a few years before joining the very successful London design firm, the Silver Studio that had been founded in 1880. Knox followed Harry Napper, a colleague from Dresser’s employ, to the Silver Studio. A gifted designer in his own right, Napper joined the Silver Studio to manage it after the death of Arthur Silver and until his two sons, Rex and Harry, reached majority. It was at the Silver Studio in late 1897 that Knox began his mature professional career, designing a variety of wallpaper, textiles, silver and pewter objects. Many of these designs were subsequently sold to Liberty & Co. In fact, it is Mark Turner’s contention that Knox’s exceptional talent was the compelling factor that brought Liberty & Co back to the Silver Studio as a client on an on-going basis, as that relationship had cooled somewhat in the mid 1890s. Eventually Knox began producing more and more metalwork designs that were sold to Liberty’s for its new Cymric line of silverware and for what was to become its Tudric pewter line a few years later. It was during this period that Knox produced his first jewellery designs that included brooches and buckles. When Arthur Silver’s sons, Rex and Harry, came of age in 1900 and assumed joint directorship of the firm, Harry Napper elected to leave, embarking on a successful free-lance career that included continued work with the Silver Studio. Perhaps encouraged by Napper’s example, or by a desire to be fully independent, or even by a wish to

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N.B.: Most of the references made through the body of this paper refer to my book, Archibald Knox. The title of the chapter and page numbers will be provided where cited, as are the page numbers of additional images. A schedule of illustration references can be found at the end of the article.

References to ‘Model numbers’ in the text are to Liberty catalogue numbers.

1 - Archibald Knox. Photograph by CT Holding. Copper frame with inset Ruskin ceramic plaque, h 65 cm, 1900-04. Private Collection.

2 - Cutlery design, pencil on paper, c1900-04. Private Collection, Illustration: John Jesse.
Knox was a singularly gifted draftsman, despite the ironic fact that his father, a marine draftsman, had dismissed his son’s skill when a youth. Some of his working drawings of metalwork and pastel textile designs that may be found in the archives at the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture, the Victoria and Albert Museum and in a private collection, (2, 3), amaze by the fluidity, sinuosity, and elegance of their line. This complements the intelligence and inventiveness of Knox’s overall design sensibility that combines practically with a startling beauty. The drawings display what I would characterize as an extraordinary visual self-confidence that reflects Knox’s capacity to imagine design effortlessly and inventively. One need only compare these drawings to his extremely complex illuminations from the post-Liberty period to appreciate the consistency of that visual self-confidence. Nowhere is this seen more convincingly and dramatically than in his jewellery designs. In the nearly 1000 jewellery designs he created for the Silver Studio, for Liberty & Co and, as we shall see, possibly for other firms as well, we have unique documentary access to the process of Knox’s creative imagination.

Let us trace the various components of Knox’s imagination that I believe are discernible when considering his jewellery designs. Principal amongst them is the overwhelming sense that Knox imagined two-dimensionally and would conceive of all his work from that perspective. It was his genius that then enabled him to successfully translate two-dimensional blueprints into the breathtaking forms of his many spectacular objects. Knox’s jewellery is, however, special. While it is three-dimensional, it maintains an essentially two-dimensional character as it moves from the flat plane of design to the bas-relief of execution, whether brooch or pendant, necklace or buckle, bracelet or ring. Each piece is like calligraphy come to life, a bit of living manuscript illumination, capturing Knox’s particular sense of movement and elegance, enlivened by the play of positive and negative space, outline and design integrity. (4).

Also recognizable among the many designs are three factors that, I believe, continually shaped and directed Knox’s visual imagination. One or more of them might be free of the direction of a young Rex Silver and even younger Harry Silver, Knox left as well, returning to Man around 1900. By then, Knox’s value to Liberty’s had been clearly established, so much so that he no longer needed the Silver Studio to act as his agent. Now, from afar, Knox became the principle creative engine that drove what was to become Liberty’s near decade-long dominance of the commercial decorative arts field.

4 - Design for cake tray, c1900-04. Victoria and Albert Museum: Illustration; The Board of Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum: Design for fish servers, c1900-04. Private Collection; Illustration; John Jesse.

3 - Design for cake tray, c1900-04. Victoria and Albert Museum: Illustration; The Board of Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum: Design for fish servers, c1900-04. Private Collection; Illustration; John Jesse.

Floral or plant motifs are the second potential. They are more evident in Knox’s designs for the Silver Studio. During this early period, the floral and plant motifs Knox employed for his designs of buckles, wallpaper, textile, and metalwork are quite inventive and inspired, traits that diminish over time to be replaced by a certain formulaic quality. This devolution makes some sense in context: During this initial phase in Knox’s professional career when he was living in London amongst other active artists, he was probably strongly influenced by the prevailing Arts and Crafts aesthetic. Once this phase ended and he was back on Man, his plant and floral motifs figurred into Knox’s design vocabulary, in particular his signature ‘stylized honesty’ leaf form that he so often used on everything from tea sets to jewellery, their prominence in his work was to an important extent contingent on his living in London and being actively exposed to those working in the Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau traditions.

With the exception of a series of silver buckles, where his repeating plant-like motifs displaying this initial inventiveness date from the Silver Studio period,(10, 11), all his other plant forms, principally the leaf shapes that are incorporated into his jewellery, seem more like embellishments rather than the essential basis of a finished design. (12, 13).
In addition, Knox’s post Silver Studio rendering of floral and plant motifs is more stylized than many of those by his contemporaries, where such forms are often more naturalistic. Not only does this stylization illustrate the above point but it also suggests Knox’s preference for the abstraction of the entrelac in terms of how he visually conceived plant and floral motifs.

The third, though least influential, potential I call the “historical”. It pertains to the general outline or shape of some pieces that visually resonate with Neolithic, Norse and Celtic objects. Scattered amongst the designs are outlines and shapes reminiscent of Celtic funerary masks, enamelled trappings and shield bosses, as well as Neolithic pots, Norse helmets, the centre plaques of Celtic crosses and the overall outline of illuminated elements from Celtic manuscripts. Some of Knox’s brooches and pendants have an especial affinity to these historical references that, when studied closely and compared to the ancient originals, can be clearly seen.

III

While it is commonplace to assess an artist’s work in comparison to his contemporaries in order to determine who influenced whom as well as to create some kind of artistic pedigree, this method falls short with Archibald Knox. Its failure is the result of Knox’s exceptional originality. Like the Isle of Man itself that escaped the homogenizing effects of a Roman occupation two millennia ago, Knox appears to have avoided the levelling effects of the collective art world around him. Perhaps because of an extremely introverted personality that resisted the influence of others, or of an inviolate set of aesthetic principles developed not by some doctrinaire artistic education but evolving from the inside out as a young artist on the Isle of Man, Knox followed his own imagination. Nothing is observable in his work of continental Art Nouveau’s preference for steamy, feminine figuration or the more wildly organic, if not hysterical, whiplash. His brand of abstract motif, the entrelac, remains composed in its elegance.

Even though Knox’s work is fundamentally abstract in nature, the angularity and impersonality of Jugendstil is bypassed for a kind of liveliness with which Knox informs his brand of abstraction. Ashbee’s style that often drew inspiration from a fidelity to plant and animal forms is worlds away from Knox’s design ethos. Though undoubtedly culturally-aware, Knox remained, from what can be discerned by visual comparison with the work of his contemporaries, significantly unaffected by outside sources, thus allowing his unique vision to flourish.

This supposition gathers a good deal of traction when considering the over 700 jewellery designs for Liberty’s that Knox created between 1900 and 1904. Mainly, they would have been executed while he was in residence in Sulby Glen, having chosen to leave London early in 1900. This extraordinary number has Knox producing on average nearly 200 jewellery designs per year, in addition to the thousands of designs he was providing for silver, pewter and ceramics. How much time or desire would he have had to research the work of others, and how...
easy would that have been given his relative distance from the artistic centres of the world? Even if, as is likely, he would have had access to contemporary design literature such as The Studio Magazine (perhaps sent to him by Liberty’s which advertised heavily in it, or in conversation with others involved in the art world of Man), it seems that Knox could have been little more than reminded that other designers were out there. Moreover, we have no evidence either anecdotally or in writing that Knox was communicating with other designers and a well-known story suggests as much. During the Great War Knox was engaged as a censor in the Knockaite Alien’s Internment camp. Sometime during his tenure there, Mackintosh furniture was being manufactured by the skilled craftsman among the German detainees for the residence of W. J. Bassett-Lowke in Northampton. Despite this crossing of paths, so to speak, there is no evidence that Knox knew about this activity or, if he did, whether he cared. Though in the waning years of his career, Mackintosh would have surely been known to Knox and, if he or his work mattered to Knox, should they not have elicited some kind of reaction? None is recorded. The inevitable conclusion is that Knox’s unique style was the result of his intense introversion, coherent design palette and an instinctively driven, reflexive creative process that required relatively little if any outside stimulation.

Just how busy Knox actually was helps us to appreciate why he would have been so self-contained. Analysis of the existing Liberty & Co jewellery stock book that appears, on stylistic grounds, to cover the years from 1899 to approximately 1920 reveals that Knox was the dominant designer for the period during which he was active.10 I arrived at this conclusion that Knox was both critically important to Liberty’s and stunningly prolific by the following method: From the stock book I selected pages where at least one indisputable Knox design appeared. I then tallied all the designs that appeared on those pages while counting the number of designs among them that were clearly from Knox’s hand. Following that, I then compared the absolute numbers and rendered percentages. The results are impressive. Of the 1200 or so designs that appear on the 93 pages from the Liberty jewellery stock book that represent Knox’s active creative period, he appears to have designed at least 756 of them, a full 63% of all designs included. Although Liberty & Co employed a stable of talented designers, one man, Archibald Knox, appears to have created nearly two-thirds of those designs marketed by this company during this period! In light of such evidence, even with a reasonable margin of error, it is unlikely that Knox was working with astonishing vitality, purpose and self-confidence. All of this reinforces the notion that Knox’s creativity was decidedly self-generative, an internally directed process of continual artistic ferment. Perhaps a meaningful comparison would be with an artist like Mozart who composed work after work out of his own musical imagination with relatively little concern for his contemporaries.

W. H. Haseler & Co of Birmingham was the primary jewellery supplier for Liberty & Co. Although the earliest designs were manufactured by Liberty’s itself soon after establishing the Cymric line of silverwork in 1899, Haseler’s and Liberty’s joined forces shortly thereafter. The silver jewellery was mainly die stamped and hand finished while gold designs were handcrafted throughout. In keeping with the Arts and Crafts tradition, Knox selected a variety of semi-precious stones for his designs but seemed to gravitate towards the blue-green colour scheme of turquoise and opal. Although Persia was the principle source of turquoise at this time, I believe that Liberty’s also employed turquoise stones that were being mined in the American southwest and first came on to the market in the 1890s. This chromatic preference was also evident in Knox’s tendency to use this same spectrum for a good deal of his enamelling. Nevertheless, given Knox’s creative range, it is no surprise that the list of colour variation and materials he designated and used is actually much broader: Enamel colour schemes could include reds, violets, and yellows and the stones of choice could just as easily be pearl, abalone, amethyst, moonstone, emerald, aquamarine, topaz, citrine and even an occasional diamond, (20 to 25). While it is likely that Knox would often specify stone and colour scheme, once the design left his studio and entered the production process, changes might ensue that would be initiated by commercial demand. The craftsman fabricating his pieces in the workshop would have executed such changes with input from the Haseler and Liberty directorate.

That same commercial demand made for some confusion as to the chain of manufacture of Knox’s jewellery designs. While it has been generally assumed that once completed, the jewellery designs would be solely the provenance of Liberty & Co, Shirley Bury’s groundbreaking research11 has revealed that Haseler’s took a much more proactive role in this process. She discovered that Knox dealt directly with Haseler & Co after his return to the island in 1900, and that Haseler’s did a good deal more than formerly thought to promote and shape jewellery production with Liberty’s. In fact, according to Vivienne Becker,12 although Liberty’s main rival, there is evidence to suggest that Murrle, Bennett & Co may have in fact supplied Liberty’s with jewellery designs. Included in that company’s stock lists are entries entitled “Cymric” undoubtedly referring to the Cymric of Mr. Liberty. It is a tempting question as to whether Knox, as a freelance designer, might have sold designs to Murrle, Bennett & Co, as he likely did with W. H. Haseler & Co. If this were the case, an analysis of designs bearing the marks...
of these two companies would be called for in order to determine how many more designs might be attributed to Knox during this period of explosive creativity. Furthermore, this may help to explain why so many pieces of jewellery marked Murrle, Bennett & Co compellingly echoes Knox’s singular style. That careful analysis has yet to be done.

How are we to finally assess the importance of Knox’s jewellery designs in the grand scale of oeuvre? Perhaps the following symbolic comparison expresses it best:

In 1949 the Nobel-prize winning author from Argentina, Jorge Luis Borges, published a short story entitled, The Aleph. Complex and ingenious, the tale is about a mystical point in space, the aleph, in which one can see all of God’s creation simultaneously. Borges’ inspiration for the aleph, named after the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet that also symbolizes the beginning from which all else issues, was the Kabbalistic Jewish concept of the En Sof, or the limitlessness of God. I equate Knox’s jewellery designs with Borges’ aleph. In them, Knox affords us a glimpse of the source of his imagination in its infinite potential. In them is divined all that Knox has designed or that he might be inspired to design, just as in the aleph might be divined all that is possible in the mind of God.

Dr. Stephen A. Martin is editor of Archibald Knox, the definitive text on the life and work of the great Manx artist, published in 2001 by ArtMedia Press, London. In addition to this text and his previous one on Knox published in 1995 by Academy Editions, Dr. Martin co-curated five comprehensive museum exhibitions of Knox’s work in 1996 and 1997 in the UK and the US. The honorary president of the Archibald Knox Society, Dr. Martin is also an internationally respected Jungian analyst and president and co-founder of the Philemon Foundation, dedicated to preparing for publication the unpublished works of C. G. Jung, the eminent Swiss psychiatrist. He can be reached at smartin@philemonfoundation.org or drsamartin@gmail.com.

14 - Necklace: gold, turquoise and pearl, Model No. 8008, 1900-4. Illustration: Tadema Gallery.
15 - Pendant: gold, pearl and enamel, Liberty Model No. 1314, 1900-4. Illustration: Didier Antiquités.
16 - Pendant: gold, pearl and enamel, Liberty Model No. 1314, 1900-4. Illustration: Didier Antiquités.
17 - Four pendants, all dated 1900-04. From top, clockwise: enamelled; turquoise matrix with baroque pearl drop, Model 8084; enamelled, Model 500/53; turquoise, Model 8060. Collection Victor and Gretha Arwas.
18 - Three pendants and a brooch, all dated 1900-04. Pendants, from left: gold set with turquoise, Model 500/52; gold set with turquoises, Model 500/56; gold set with blister pearl, ruby and a blister pearl drop, Model 500/55. Brooch: gold set with blister pearl, rubies, and pearl. Collection Victor and Gretha Arwas.

22 - Pendant: gold, diamond, aquamarine, Model No. 8931, 1900-04. Illustration: Tadema Gallery.


21 - Pendant: gold, emerald, diamond and pearl, 1900-04. Illustration: Tadema Gallery.

24 - Ring: gold, diamond, 1900-04. Private Collection.


References

3. In 1900 Rex Silver was 21 and Harry Silver 19. Knox was considerably older at 36.
4. I would designate the post Liberty period as beginning in 1910.
7. Apperception is the comprehension or creation of a new idea by way of assimilating the sum of one's previous knowledge and experience. It is equivalent to the synthetic process of imagining.
8. For further illustrations, see Martin (2001) pp. 244, top right; 247, top right; 250, bottom right and bottom left; 258, bottom right; 264, top; 265, top row, 2nd from left; 266, middle; 262, bottom right and bottom left.
10. Page 259, top middle; Page 260, bottom right; Page 261, middle left.
11. Compare Knox’s use of the more abstracted floral motifs to C. R. Ashbee’s delicate naturalistic rendering of the same.
13. See also Martin (2001) pp. 249, top right and top left; 250, top left; 259, bottom right and bottom left; 261, top; 265, third row right and left; 266, top.
14. Four superbly illustrated texts provide excellent comparative material.
15. Four superbly illustrated texts provide excellent comparative material. They are:
16. It is nearly impossible to accurately date Knox’s designs. With the exception of the records of the Silver Studio in which some Knox designs were recorded and dated, there exists no other documentation. And, because the period of Knox’s most significant creative activity is so short and condensed, only about 6 to 8 years from 1898 through 1906, the speed at which the various types of design must have issued from his pencil does not allow any reliable chronological ascription. It feels almost as though there was a constant stream of designs with overlapping styles emerging one after the other.


1. Page 71 top: Archibald Knox. Photograph by CT Holding. Copper frame with inset Ruskin ceramic plaque, h 65 cm, 1900-04. Private Collection.
6. Page 17 (Top): The Incarnation initial (the Chi Rho page), folio 34R, from the Book of Kells, early 9th Century. Illustration: The Board of Trinity College, Dublin.
9. Page 265 top left: Brooch: gold and opal, model 1111, 1900-04. Illustration: Tadema Gallery. Compare this with our cover illustration, which shows the same design inset with a pearl.

References