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the ARCHIBALD 
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REFLECTIONS ON ARCHIBALD KNOX

by Stephen Martin



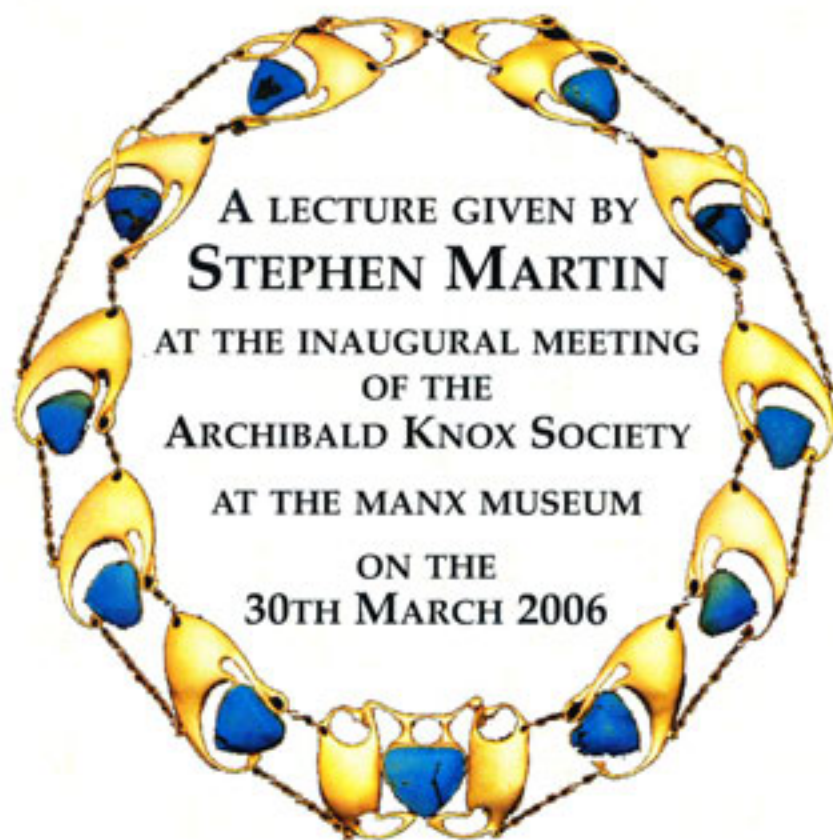
Archibald Knox

Photo: National Heritage

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A LECTURE GIVEN BY
STEPHEN MARTIN
AT THE INAUGURAL MEETING
OF THE
ARCHIBALD KNOX SOCIETY
AT THE MANX MUSEUM
ON THE
30TH MARCH 2006

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

It is a great pleasure to be with you tonight on this historic occasion, the formation of the Archibald Knox Society. It is the rightful recognition for an artistic genius that ranks among the greatest designers of the modern era. I am indebted to the founding members of the Society and in particular to its indefatigable founding director, Liam O'Neill, for the creating the forum by which Knox studies may evolve and broaden. I wish to thank also Manx National Heritage, the Centre for Manx Studies and all the sponsors, individual, institutional and corporate without which the very best ideas go unborn.

Over the years since the publication of my books, I have been asked often to speak about Knox. Each time I have a particular thought: How am I to understand that it is an American depth psychologist, a Jungian analyst, and not an art historian, not a curator, not even a Manxman who is given this honor. The answer is most odd, but carries a truth that transcends logic. One day, quite unexpectedly, unbidden, I was seized by an unknown force; I fell in love with Knox. In love's true fashion, I did not find Knox, he found me; first in a madness of desire, in this case to own objects designed by him that equates to the desire

to possess the beloved. Then, over the long years of my relationship to him and his work, in the ever-deepening appreciation of the depth that lay in both which is exactly how one might describe the evolution of mature relational love. First comes the ease and conviction of passion, the unrelenting desire for the object, then comes the process work of relationship that includes understanding, discernment, conflict and deep respect (how extraordinary is this artist). In this love affair with Knox I came to know something of his soul that in turn led to my own soul. This is the role of love in life; it is through the myriad aspects of the beloved that we come to know our deepest selves. The greatness of Knox and his art seized me so powerfully that I was compelled to help bring to both their deserved recognition. This strange love affair culminates in my being here tonight.

Artist, teacher, Manxman, chronicler, designer, Cistercian, mystic, painter, Freemason, Celt, Anglo-Catholic, eccentric, gentleman. These are some of the ways in which Archibald Knox has come to be known. What has fascinated me about Knox is his multi-dimensionality, his many shapes, a quality that I have likened elsewhere, quite romantically to Manannán mac Lir, a mercurial tutelary presence in the mythology of Mann. Mindful that C. G. Jung, my other hero,



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once remarked that it would take a team of biographers to capture his many-sidedness, it seemed eminently sensible to include in the "Big Book" the points of view of 18 experts in an attempt to flesh out the phenomenon that is Archibald Knox. The formation of the Archibald Knox Society is the natural and rightful extension of that mindfulness. Its creation enables this dynamic dialogue to continue and broaden beyond what could lay between the covers of a book. This dialogue will take into account that Knox, by virtue of his artistic and personal complexity, his role in the evolution of Modern Design, his identification with the Manx spirit, requires a forum by which to explore the expanding influence of this man, his art, and his spirit on the culture of the times.

I am glad to say we are now closer to the means by which to unveil the many Knoxes that comprise his genius

Tonight the body of my remarks will be directed towards helping you envision 'my Knox'; that is, to become familiar with my perspective on what feels intrinsic and essential about the man and his art. It is my hope that in these musings you will recognize elements of 'your Knox.' To this end, I would like to pose three questions as we embark on this new phase of Knox scholarship. They are:

What is the legacy of Archibald Knox?

What is the "iconic" Knox?

Archibald Knox: the man and the myth. What is the future of Knox scholarship?

The first question is quite specific in intent. By 'legacy' I am referring to Knox's own thoughts and ideas about art and life. In considering this question I am guided by the etymology of the word 'legacy' that stems from the Old Germanic root meaning "*enchanter who speaks with magic words.*" What is the magic that he wished to convey to his students and the wider world?

The second question will focus on a small selection of objects that delineate something of Knox's quintessential creative style. To them might be added your particular favorites thus creating a dialogue that might be continued within the container of the Society.

The third question I have subtitled 'man and myth', and not, 'man or myth.' In my long years as a Jungian analyst I have come to know a few unlikely absolutes: History is relative and open to interpretation, there is no such thing as objective fact; and, our lives are shaped as much by external events as by internal stories, the archetypal myths that live through us. Facts alone do not make for history. History is at best approximate and enlaced with the emotionally toned perceptions of those who experience it, those who witness it, those who record it and those to whom it is reported. Real history is like a Knox cloudscape, a moment in time, a mood captured, washed with hue and meaning. The spirit of future Knox scholarship must remain open to fact and story, data and myth.

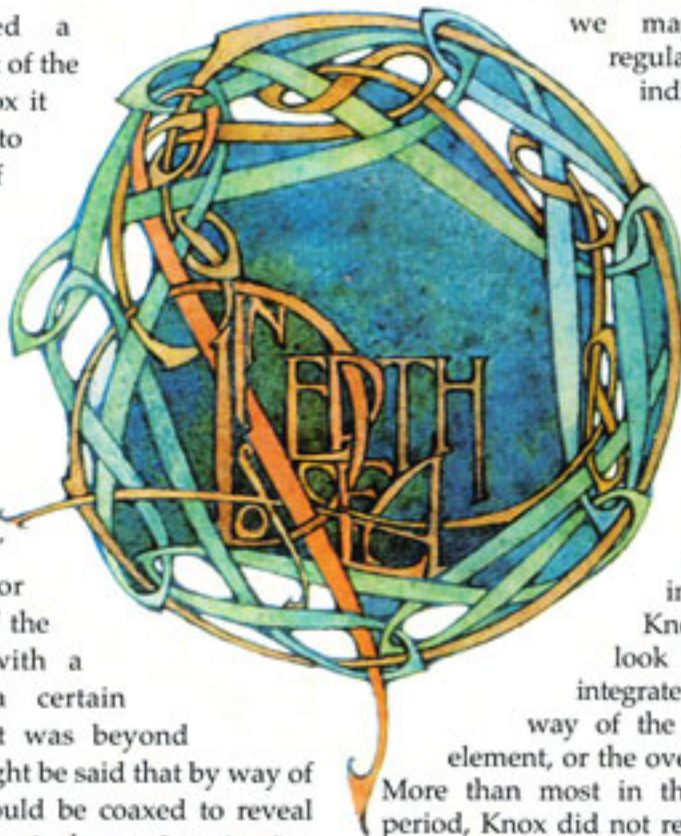
THE LEGACY OF ARCHIBALD KNOX

The legacy of Archibald Knox is both explicit and implicit. As a teacher and writer, Knox shared what he thought to be important principles when making art. In addition, if one surveys his work as a whole, self-evident design consistencies emerge that may also be distilled as fundamental principles of the creative process. From the psychological perspective, we can also say that making art is akin to making life. The explicit principles that guided Knox's approach to art are very good implicit rules by which to live.

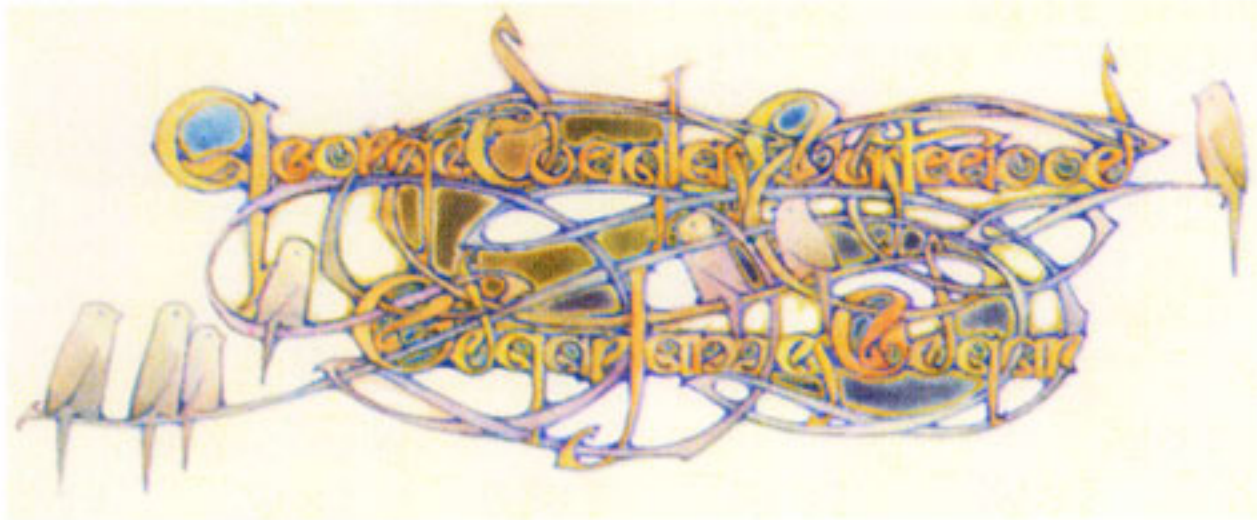
Imagination seemed a preeminent ingredient of the work of art. For Knox it was all well and good to master the craft of making; this did not in itself guarantee that what was made was art. For him, imagination was that capacity to go beyond the literal and open the mind's eye to, as he said, "it's higher excellence." Imagination was for Knox the suffusion of the design experience with a sense of magic, a certain something extra that was beyond simple copying. It might be said that by way of imagination nature could be coaxed to reveal the mysteries that lay at its heart. Imagination is the transformative lens of the artist's eye that draws forth and makes manifest the 'magic' or the soul of the art object.

The perfect example of this transformative process is Knox's legendary facility with the Celtic interlace. We know that Knox was profoundly familiar with the island's ancient crosses and their interlaced carving as well as with the spectacular illuminated manuscripts and exquisite metalwork of the Celtic Christian period (The Book of Kells and Durrow, the

Ardagh Chalice, The Tara Brooch and the Shrine of St. Patrick's Bell). As you will see later when the discussion turns to the "iconic", Knox most certainly did not slavishly copy or transpose these intricate design elements onto his own work. Quite the contrary; his imagination seized their essence and redefined them so that static became sinuous, formulaic became inventive, and the expected became revelatory. Through the lens of his transformative imagination Knox brought forth what Marshall Cubbon, speaking about his greatest work of illumination, *The Deer's Cry*, called "aesthetic fulfillment, [and] beauty laced with religious mystery." Therefore, the first of Knox's teachings is for every one of us to approach life with an enlivened, transformative imagination so that we may see through its regularity to its spontaneous individual potential.



Implicit also in Knox's approach to Celtic interlacing is another wisdom teaching, the synthesis of the ancient with the modern. Though a self-declared "venturesome modernist" whose work for Liberty & Co. sometimes seemed like it was created today, in his design process Knox could nevertheless look backwards easily and integrate an ancient aesthetic by way of the interlace as a design element, or the overall shape of an object. More than most in the evolving Modernist period, Knox did not reject the past. Instead, this remarkably humble man was open to the influences of the Manx, Viking, Celtic, indeed, even Neolithic cultures, bringing to them the modernist sensibility that "less is more." This synthesis of the known and the emergent, the ancient and the modern, made for an art that evokes depth, stirs the spirit, feels holy. This integration of divergent aesthetic spirits made for an art that was beyond well designed or clever, stylish or trendy. It was unique, even radical in its greater appeal for us today in a cynical post-modernist era searching for its lost relationship to the transcendent than it was for



Book of Remembrance, St Ninians High School

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the orderly Victorian world in which it was born. As a life lesson, Knox's wisdom rings true: the creative life is a work of integration, flavored with humility, that takes nothing for granted and values what is ancient within us and around us while at the same time boldly expressing the possibilities of a future. The well-lived life bridges the past and the future.

Knox was a man of deep faith, in art, in nature and in God. Nowadays it is fashionable to look upon faith of any sort with suspicion, preferring the seemingly omniscient capabilities of science. In my business, this suspicion takes the form of a preference for behavioral formula rather than dream, biochemistry rather than meaning. The example of Knox's rich, eccentric and devoted life highlights the limitation and colorlessness of this fashion. By my intuition, Knox was devoted to the life of the soul and committed to its expression. By soul I mean the felt experience of mystery, transcendence and meaning in life. His appreciation for these qualities is recognizable by all who are struck by and marvel at the breathtaking beauty of a piece of silver, who stand in complete awe before one of his illuminated pages, or who delight in stories about his watercolor expeditions. What was it that drove him to paint image after image of the changing face of Man, or draw endlessly his complex interlaces, or to produce over 5000 designs for Liberty & Co? Ambition was not the impetus for this passion; rather it was the absolute recognition that the purpose of art was, quoting another creative mystic, Paul Klee, "to make visible the invisible." What must have made this possible was an abiding faith in a

transcendent reality. Knox was able to dip into the well of his own faith, in God, in the imagination, in the inner world and distill the transcendent background of nature and the ordinary. The lesson is clear: to live creatively is to have faith in an inner reality that does not need to be logical, observable or conform to collective values. To live creatively is to live from the inside out; it is to be guided by the felt sense of inner mystery that forms the basis of our deepest individuality. By living this way, as Knox lived, life becomes enchanting.

THE ICONIC KNOX

"Iconic" etymologically derives from the root meaning of "icon" or "iconic", to be like or a likeness of. The scope of genius resolves sometimes surprisingly easily into the iconic; the complexity of a creative process winnowing down naturally to a few succinct, emotionally laden, visually recognizable, signatory motifs that carry the essence of that genius. One might say that what is iconic is the symbolic shorthand for the artist's style and quality of soul.

To discern what is iconic for an artist whose creative output was diverse and prodigious and whose personality was so private is no easy task. The iconic made itself known to me by letting go of the particular and contemplating the general and not being entrapped by the beauty of a singular work, or the charm of a special story. In so doing three essential signifiers of Knox iconicity declared themselves

- shape, design and content. Consideration of these three will, I think, denote a sense for what is iconic, that is, what is "a likeness" of Knox.

Like the infant that is first of first learning to recognize what it sees, when I look at Knox the initial iconic marker is "shape." It is the shape of an object that tells me "I am home", much like what the shape of the mother's face represents for her child. When we examine the few slides that I have selected that illustrate this first iconic signifier, what predominates is the familiar shape of Manx crosses. Undoubtedly



because of their silent forceful presence on the island, young Archie came to know them intimately, bonding deeply with them as one might with friends from early childhood. It is well known that Knox's deep connection to these stones was expressed in early drawings, in writings, in his having made them the subject of student exams as well as the topic of Silver medals won.

Knox's work speaks for itself. Here are several images of Manx crosses and the drawings of them Knox prepared for his 1893 article, *Ancient Crosses in the Isle of Man*, in *The Builder*. If you allow your eye to trace their outlines you will see as we move from ancient to modern how he maintains the cross and menhir-like shape in his clocks, frames, gravestones and even in one of

the beautiful illuminations from *The Deer's Cry*. In a related variation, rather than emphasizing rectilinear volume, Knox was clearly captivated by this other shape, one that tapers and bulges instead of relying on sheer volume and mass. Knox adopts this other form and indulges in the undulating relationship of the above and below, artfully employing positive and negative space that evokes the human form. He incorporates this gestalt in designs like the candlesticks or his famous covered cup, and resolves mass into trunk or stem, much like the cross on whose narrow stem rests the roundel of the crucifix.



Thus, when one encounters an object purported to be by Knox, one's first instinctive impression of shape signals this iconicity.

As the perceptual apparatus of an infant matures, the next step in apprehension is "line"; beyond the basic shape of the face the infant distinguishes by virtue of line, the mother's smile, her eyes, her brow. Similarly the next iconic marker of Knox is his handling of the interlace, which is no less than an enlivened line. It is probable that early on in his life Knox developed an instinctive attachment and familiarity with this design element, that he was so to say "imprinted" by it. As he grew more mature aesthetically he likely began to perceive the graphic potential of the carved interlaces on the Manx stones. In due course his

evolving eye encountered and integrated the role of the interlace in Celtic metalwork and manuscript illuminations. Knox's genius was of course in how he absorbed these archetypal symbols of the relationship between the God and his creation, and transformed them from

the illuminated page we see the interlace in relationship to the overall shape of the design, adding to it, enhancing it, much like how worship of God makes Him a living reality in the human world.



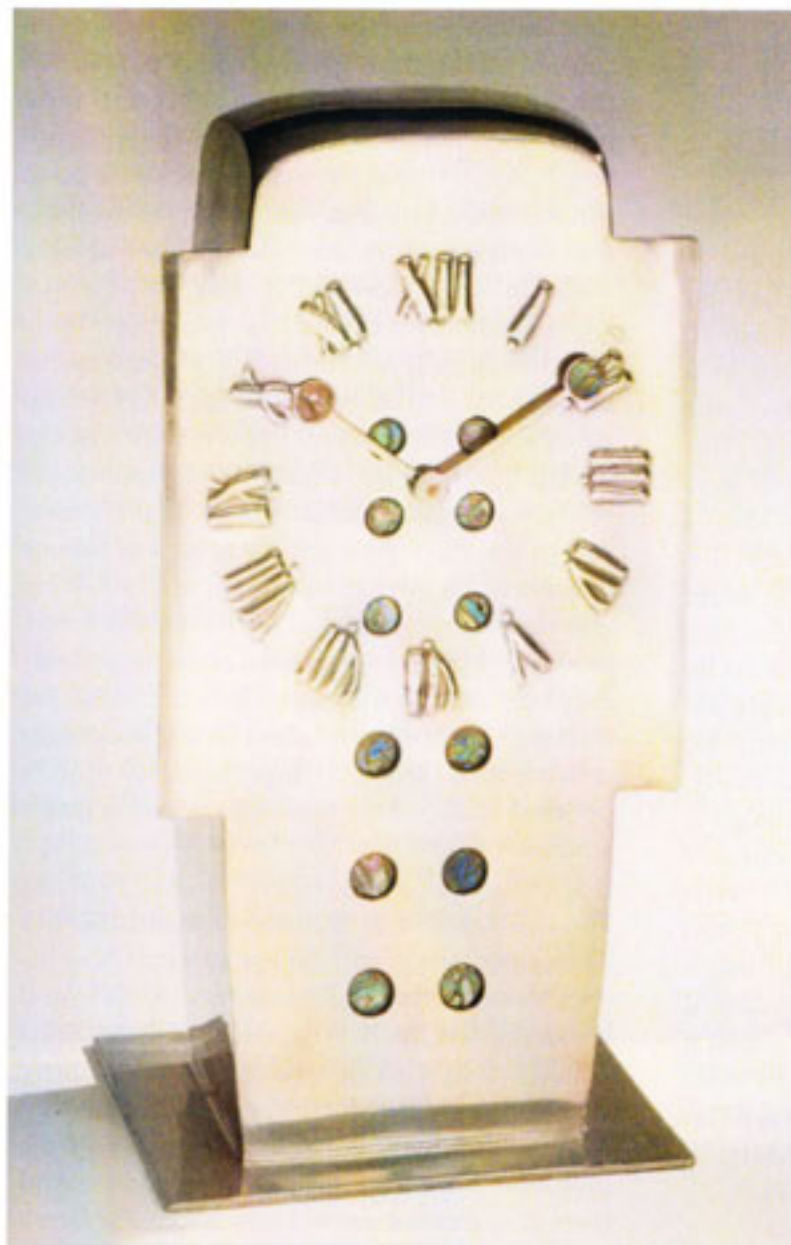
Metropolitan Museum, New York

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formulaic sacred design elements to something far different. By infusing them with idiosyncratic vitality, spontaneity, and sinuosity Knox individualized them, giving them a more human flavor and altering their symbolic story. Where period Celtic interlacings expressed in a regular and formulaic way how the cosmos is in the service of a distant God, Knox's interlaces are about how entwined the living, flowing soul is in God's world, and how passionate that relationship is. Thus, when we look at representative examples in silver, enamel, or on

Finally, when developed sufficiently, the infant learns to recognize "content." Shape and line give way to knowing "what." Thinking that Knox was primarily an abstract artist, I was surprised to rediscover that he refers visually again and again to a singular iconic symbol – the bird. I must give credit reminding me of this to Linda Cottier and her most excellent work on the *Book of Remembrance*. The origination of Knox's preference for the image of the bird (often the little bird) is a subject of genial debate. Was it Baillie Scott or Knox who, in the early 1890s first happened upon this evocative graphic element? The question is moot if one follows its flight through Knox's creative forest. Here are a series of flagons and hollowware that, if you let your imagination go, begin to aviate, become like birds, with beaks and flaring crowns. Upon returning to Man in 1912, the bird form took flight in a more direct and symbolic fashion in the haunting pages of the *Book of Remembrance* where little birds perched on the interlaced branches of an old boy's name symbolized his death in the service of the nation. And in the exquisite and plentiful graphic work of Knox's later period, the bird form figures prominently. In fact, Alan Kelly's most excellent invitation to the first meeting of the Knox Society is festooned with Knox's

avian friends. What did this iconic content mean for Knox? It is not hard to conclude that the little bird was the icon of the human soul; an agile yet fragile traveler through the shifting skies of life, symbolic throughout myth and history, of how we, humans, though earth bound, have souls that can soar. Hardly surprising for a man suffused with the ancient spirit, as was Knox, that the bird, cousin to the Holy Spirit, would have become the most discernible contextual icon in his work.



Cross Clock 1902 - 1905

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THE FUTURE OF KNOX SCHOLARSHIP

More than any of my remarks so far this central question is what brings us together tonight. Implicit in the establishment of the Archibald Knox Society is the insistent desire to know more about him and his work. As I mentioned earlier, knowing can be actual or approximate, factual or psychological. Knox the Manxman is that aspect of Knox scholarship that relies on gathering and analyzing historical details. The mythic Knox is that part of the endeavor that proceeds by way of the psychological and the imaginative. Where the former relies on the tangible and concrete, the latter is about rumors and story, unforeseen motivations and inferred passions. It is about how the mythic or imaginative informed Knox's personality and creativity.

When we say that, by most accounts, Knox had a mystical nature, we enter this province of future Knox scholarship. Factually we know that he loved his solitude and private creativity; the "mystical" aspect of it, the mythic in it, however is about Knox being moved by currents so

deep and inward, so personal yet so formative, that only intimations of its character can be sensed from the work itself.

I want to set a challenge to all of us who love Knox; I want to pose a series of questions that might help define the boundaries for a future Knox scholarship. I shall separate these questions into the two categories for the purposes of explication and elucidation; delineating Knox the man from the "mythic" Knox, knowing full well how each will inform the other. Complete scholarship must take place both in the light of day, and in the halftones of the evening. It is up to scholars present and future to sharpen their vision and be audacious in order to see in both.

There is much that we "know" about the general life of Knox the man; his school activities and academic areas of expertise, his mentors, his facility with Celtic design, his tenure at the Silver Studio in London and his collaboration with Liberty & Co of London. We know that he took a short, unsuccessful trip to Philadelphia (my home town) returning a mere six months later. We know about the successful career as a teacher in London and then on the island following his return in 1912. We know of his prodigious work as a graphic designer that as well as his peregrinations as an eccentric watercolorist. We even know some about his mentorship of the Knox Guild for Design and Craft.

WHAT ELSE WOULD WE LIKE TO KNOW ABOUT THE MANY ASPECTS OF KNOX'S OUTER LIFE?

Of immense interest would be the evolution of Knox's creative aesthetic. How and when did the transition occur in him from being a superb copyist of traditional Celtic interlacing to a master of the sinuous, highly idiosyncratic entrelac? How did this loosening, this enlivening, this vivification occur? What were the catalytic forces that altered Knox's perception of line and plane that ushered in this staggeringly beautiful radicalization of a *sacred form*? Was it the result of intellectual deliberation, trial and error, and meditations on nature or mystical revelation? How deeply did Knox's relationship with Baillie-Scott affect his aesthetic? Who influenced whom stylistically; did Baillie-Scott really encourage Knox to go to London and connect with Liberty & Co; did they together pour over copies of *The Studio*? Who was the first to introduce the "little birds"? Then there is Christopher Dresser and the story that it was through him that Knox became acquainted with the Silver Studio and Liberty & Co; that it was from an acquaintance with Dresser's work that Knox was nudged towards the "less is more" aesthetic of modernism or the honesty of exposed rivets and beauty of trefoil bases.

And there is more I want to know. Why did Knox, in 1900 at the height of his successful reinvention of the Celtic Revival, chose to leave London, ensconce himself in a cottage in Sulby Glen, and establish a long distance professional relationship with his principle employer, Liberty's? How did Knox make the leap from neolithically inspired shapes in the late 1890s to his most modernist forms in a scant few years? How does creative evolution on this scale actually happen?

What really, truly happened in 1912 to cause Knox to leave London so precipitously and so permanently and embark on what might only be described a flight to the New World? What really happened between him and his good friend, A. J. Collister, that caused him to jettison his most intimate male relationship such that

they would never speak again, as well as to consign to the trash in an obvious moment of fury and despondency a cache of the most beautifully rendered design drawings of our time? What would have caused Knox to be so furious with Collister, who in some respects was like his twin brother, and then presumably with himself? How did it come to pass that Knox gradually assumed the mantel of Manx designer from J. M. Nicolson and develop his unique, unmistakable Manx style? How did Knox's graphic vision evolve and change during this last third of his life and should there not be a systematic scholarly study of this critical area of Knox's creative activity as well as volume devoted to his prodigious graphic output? What was Knox's relationship to his clients, the design process, the pricing? And what of the stonework? A comprehensive analysis of design process and working methods, the client/artist/stonecutter collaboration and the importance of Knox's personal relationships to the client awaits future scholars.

We also await a systematic reconstruction of Knox's pedagogy, with an eye towards how his own visionary creativity informed it. It would be fascinating to have a sense of how Knox would teach, what he valued, in short a move past the more anecdotal image of the beloved mentor in order to grasp a fuller sense of the profound nature of his teaching style. And there is so much more to know about *The Deer's Cry* and *The Book of Remembrance*. Are there preparatory drawings, or documentation relating to these superb works that illuminate Knox's working method or personal thoughts and feelings about them?

These questions and many more form the basis of a scholarship that will extend the knowledge about Knox the man. Yet what about the psychological Knox, the interpersonal Knox, the mythic Knox? About these aspects we can pose a cavalcade of other questions. Starting early on with this "approximate knowing", what can we discern about the psychological mechanics of Knox's family, his relationship with his parents and siblings? What was it like to be Knox's friend; was he loyal, fierce, demanding, generous? What about Knox's intimate life? Did he love, and if so, how and whom? Was he

a solitary or lonely man and did this separateness contribute to his artistic greatness? What more can be known about his spiritual life and its relationship to the established church and the to fairy life of the island? Was his spiritual devotion the devotion of a pagan? Or was his spirituality, like his sexuality, more that of an Edwardian gentleman, reserved and altogether quite "normal." Or might his spirituality be that of a mystically inclined solitary whose concourse with his inner process is best expressed by his marvelous interlacing that is a psychological hieroglyph visually delineating the ineffable relationship of his soul to God?

How influential was the broader Celtic-Manx heritage on Knox's imagination? How did he synthesize those deep currents with his own Anglo-Catholicism as well as his profound belief in art and imagination? Put simply, how can we discern how this man perceived his own depths, how he imagined his inner life and how the ravishing products of it have become synonymous with this very special island?

The formation of the Archibald Knox Society is a momentous event. It is the platform from which will emerge a more comprehensive understanding of Knox's aesthetic and its impact on the history of modern design. This in

turn will consolidate Knox's position as one of the greatest and most influential designers of the modern era. It will encourage the further discovery of unseen primary materials, letters and documentation as well as preparatory material relating to his creative process. The Archibald Knox Society will, quite simply, create the momentum that will help to make the wider world more aware of this man's considerable achievement.

Yet the Archibald Knox Society may also serve a different, more intimate purpose. The Society will have a vital impact on the further evolution of Manx identity; for in this artist and man are the archetypal qualities of what it might mean to be Manx; fierce creativity interlaced with solid individuality, deep attachment to ancient traditions, a special sense of community and patriotism and a profound love for the ever changing natural landscape of his island home. From my perspective as an outside admirer, a Manxman manqué, the extraordinary creative genius of Archibald Knox cannot be separated from his beloved Mann. Knox's genius makes us all Manx and the Archibald Knox Society will, in the years to come, enlighten us as to what Archibald Knox's greatest gift to the Isle of Man may well be.

Thank you.



Flatwork Set c. 1902 Private Collection