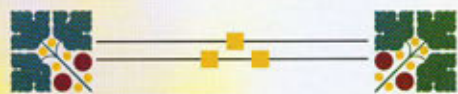


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# STYLE 1900

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# THE GENIUS OF



Figure 1 Vase, 1904. Birmingham, Liberty & Co., H. 19.5 cm, silver, enamel, turquoise. Private collection.

# ARCHIBALD KNOX

*By Stephen A. Martin*

In the late nineteenth century Britain was, perhaps more than any other nation of the time, a crucible for the evolution of modern design. Throughout the country this ferment expressed itself in the many guilds and schools, small groups and individual artists working to revise the heaviness of Victorian taste. Styles and temperaments were as diverse as the designs themselves, with a classic dichotomy being the Mackintoshes in Glasgow to the north and C. R. Ashbee and his Guild of Handicrafts in Chipping Camden to the south. Where one championed a kind of spiritual interior design characterized by a prescient modernist abstraction, the other sought to produce honestly made objects in a revived hand-crafted tradition of an early England. While such artists as these were hammering out their aesthetic mission, the marketing of this new decorative aesthetic was happening as well, often with a similarly innovative, if not aggressive, spirit. This new



brand of decorative arts entrepreneur found its archetypal personality in Arthur Lasenby Liberty, whose London "emporium" seemed almost single-handedly to have introduced "new" design to the wider public. Canny and brilliant, it was Liberty who, in the 1870s and 1880s, established the Aesthetic Movement and Japonism in England. With the same visionary insight, it was he who discerned the almost visceral need of the British buying public for a large-scale revival of their Anglo-Celtic heritage. Always the mercantile opportunist, he responded by providing goods and objects that blended this revivalist spirit with the style-breaking trends of Art Nouveau and proto-modernism. Having the machinery of production and marketing to surpass commercial rivals like Ashbee, all Liberty needed was a designer of genius to be the creative lynchpin who could achieve this synthesis. That designer was Archibald Knox.

It was not until 1975 at the Liberty Centenary Exhibition, presented by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London<sup>1</sup> more than 40 years after Knox's death at the age of 69, and nearly seven decades after his most productive period with Liberty's firm, that his genius was definitively associated with "The Liberty Style", that eponymous designation that has come to mean "British Art Nouveau." The Liberty Style was characterized by the wedding of revivalist Celtic ornamental design with a vibrant sensibility of modern looking simplicity, abstraction and elegance. Once recognized by Shirley Bury, then curator of Metalwork at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Knox's signature became plainly visible on an astonishing variety of silver, pewter, jewelry, ceramic and textile designs between the years 1898 and 1910. This posthumous recognition and appreciation of his skill has led to a meteoric rise in public interest in his work as well as in the value of his designs in the marketplace. Knox's trajectory has climbed further with the publication of a monograph on Knox<sup>2</sup> edited by the author of this article, as well as by a special exhibition of Knox's work. The exhibition opened at The Hunterian Art Gallery of the University of Glasgow in November, 1996, and has been traveling around the United States since April, 1997.

Though we can now discern the hand of Archibald Knox on so many remarkable designs of this period (too many in fact as the demand for "Knox" has increased), who was this man who died in relative obscurity on the Isle of Man, so far from his earlier success in London?

Knox was born in 1864 of Scottish parents who relocated to the Isle of Man, a Celtic outpost halfway between Liverpool and Dublin. His was an engineering family, practical and down to earth, apparently quite at odds with Knox's more solitary, introspective, if not romantic, nature. Rather than spending time working in his father's bustling workshop, Knox wandered the island studying and sketching its ever-changing skies, seas and landscapes. For company he sought out the island's silent sentinels, the hundreds of weathered Celtic crosses. They bore witness to the near-perfect blend of a Celtic pagan spirit—free from any Roman conquest and occupation—and the creative flowering of early Christianity.

It was in these man-sized stone markers that Knox found the doorway to his unique creative style. By studying and drawing the geometric patterns incised on

the stones, and then learning about them from his mentors like Canon John Quine, an amateur archaeologist, and P.M.C. Kermodé, the preeminent expert on Manx crosses, Knox's understanding of their design aesthetic deepened along with his passion for the Celtic spirit. So much so that he would travel to Dublin, a ferry ride from Douglas, to familiarize himself with *The Book of Kells* and *The Book of Durrow*, the two masterpieces of Celtic-Christian manuscript illumination.

Knox might have remained a more narrowly focused "Celtic" artist had he not met M. H. Baillie-Scott, an English interior designer and architect who had moved to the Isle of Man in 1890. It was Baillie-Scott who

probably introduced Knox to the broader developments in the Arts and Crafts movement in England (Ashbee's Guild of Handicrafts was producing some of his furniture designs) and the innovative work in Continental Europe (Baillie-Scott was collaborating with German designers in Darmstadt). Himself actively designing for firms in London, Baillie-Scott undoubtedly encouraged Knox to look in that same direction as a spur to his fledgling career.

Arriving in London in 1897, Knox began teaching at a local art school and began his inevitable, and fateful, journey towards A. L. Liberty, but not before further refining his design sensibility. It is widely accepted that he worked with Christopher Dresser, the most famous of all avant-garde English designers of that time. It is from Dresser that Knox's deeply

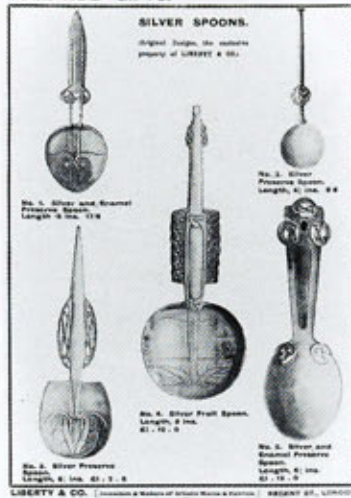
historical style was exposed to more modernist influences, such as the strict simplification of ornament so that it becomes a functional part of an object's overall design; a familiarity and facility with machine processing and production; the incorporation of design elements like revealed hinges and exposed rivets both to highlight the industrial nature of the design and to express the honesty of the work; and the importance of abstracting historical shapes to their most essential formal elements. In short, Dresser was Knox's bridge from the 19th to the 20th century.

It was probably through Dresser that Knox was introduced to the Silver Studio of Design, a firm whose mission was to provide designs in every decorative medium for companies like Liberty's. After contracting with the Silver Studio for roughly two years, Knox eventually began to work directly for Liberty in 1898 or 1899. By this time Knox was ready to become Liberty's resident genius, with several factors accounting for the



Figure 2 Five spoons, dates 1901-1902, all Liberty & Co.

YULE-TIDE GIFTS.



*Yule-Tide catalogue, Liberty & Co.,  
Figure 3 (left) circa 1902-03,  
Figure 4 (right) circa 1901-03.  
Courtesy of the Silver Studio Collection.*

YULE-TIDE GIFTS IN "TUDRIC" PEWTER.



phenomenal success of their professional collaboration. Firstly, Liberty had, as noted, correctly divined the British public's revivalist passion for a distinctly Anglo-Celtic palette of goods in a variety of media. Secondly, he was also keenly aware that, unlike the expensive items produced by Morris & Co. and The Guild of Handicrafts, they must be affordable, i.e., mass produced (mass production of Knox metalwork meant pewter pieces in the hundreds and silver in the tens). Thirdly, Liberty was ahead of his time in recognizing the value of "the designer name" and how this cachet or mystique would incite the desire to purchase and guarantee the association of his objects with "good taste." Finally, Liberty understood that the designs must also have to be adventurous, pushing the limits of established taste to create a niche market, just as he had done years before by importing goods from Japan and India.

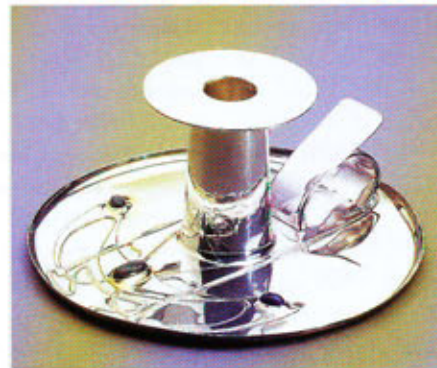
Knox met every demand that Liberty had set for his new line of goods. His Manx-Celtic sensibility suited Liberty's revivalist ideas beautifully. Knox was also able to design for machine production despite his sympathy with his Arts and Crafts colleagues around the issues of craftsmanship and the honesty of the object. He was also entirely comfortable with Liberty's requirement of designer anonymity for the sake of creating a perceived unified style imbued with the cachet of the firm itself. In fact, it was Knox's almost obsessive introversion that made him a perfect creative foil for Liberty and also ensured his post-Liberty obscurity for so many years. And most importantly, it was Knox's particular genius that enabled him to synthesize a Celtic ethos, the sinuosity of Art Nouveau, the rationality and craftsmanship of Arts and Crafts, and a proto-modernist sensibility to produce a signature style.

Although Knox designed for many media, it is in his metalwork and jewelry that the range of his style and the depth of his skill can best be appreciated.<sup>3</sup> The full impact

of Knox's collaboration with Liberty was felt with the launching of Liberty's "Cymric" line of silverwork in 1899, accompanied by a lavish, hard-bound catalogue. A line of pewter called "Tudric" was introduced in 1901 to allow those less well-heeled to enjoy the design spirit expressed in the finer works in silver.<sup>4</sup> After 1901, less expensive Cymric and Tudric objects were marketed by way of catalogues, particularly around Christmas time. Beautifully designed spoons commemorating the coronation of Edward VII were great favorites. [See figures 2 & 3.] It is interesting to note that objects like Knox's most famous pewter tea set were so popular that they continued to be sold into the 1920s. [See figure 4.]

In Knox's early work, between 1897 and 1899, his designs appeared more heavily influenced by ancient Celtic metalwork in both shape and ornamentation. His bowls, vases, tea sets and flatware tended to be more reliant on abstracted organic form, mirroring the Neolithic, Bronze Age origins of pre-Christian Celtic art. The decoration is more the swirl, circle and line of ancient stonework and copper and iron hollowware. These early works are harder to completely attribute to Knox although The Silver Studio Collection has many original designs for these pieces that are clearly in Knox's hand.

From later in 1899 onwards, Knox appears to have found his rhythm and his designs matured accordingly. At this time they became more delicate, abstract and inventive as he incorporated his own unique version of the Celtic knot, the *entrelac*, more and more into his ornamental vocabulary. He was particularly imaginative with the Cymric silverwork. These objects are symphonies of elegant form and dancing knotwork punctuated by rich enamelwork and semi-precious stones. Examples are his vase of 1904 and a chamberstick of 1903. [See figures 1 & 5.] The first piece is a particularly stunning example of



*Figure 5. Chamberstick, 1903, Birmingham.  
Liberty & Co., D. 18.4 cm, silver, lapis.  
Collection of Dr. S. A. Martin.*

how the horizontal Celtic surface design complements the gentle verticality of the vase to produce a delicately balanced monumental form. The second, the chamberstick, is a classic example of how a chased entrelac design can resolve into a functional, yet dramatic thumb piece, and how Knox's spare use of lapis lazuli titillates rather than overwhelms. These two objects typify the more ornamental domain of Knox's mature style. In scarcely two years, Knox seemed to have moved ahead in time, from the Neolithic to the Celtic-Christian period, bringing to life in the better pieces of Cymric modern silver intimations of *The Book of Kells* and *The Book of Durrow*.

Not to leave his pewter work less adorned, Knox would stipulate the decorative use of colored enamel, abalone and mother-of-pearl to complement the soft glow of the high-quality English pewter. The most superb example of Knox's pewter work is his massive "Celtic cross" clock of about 1902 or 1903. [See figure 6.] Originally selling at £6.6.0. (roughly \$26.00), not inexpensive for the time but within range of the solid

middle class, this 14" clock inset with circular plaques of abalone is a masterpiece of abstraction and revivalism at the same time. The most direct representation of an ancient Celtic cross that Knox would ever create, it is also a distinctly "modern" object, simple, elegant and as abstract as any to be created in metalwork for the next fifty years.

Like the clock, Knox's silver chalice of 1903 and a vase of 1902 are examples of the modernist trend in his mature style. [See figures 7 & 8.] The chalice is perhaps one

of the greatest pieces of silver produced in this century, deceptively simple in its design but startling in its modernity. Composed of a cup shape linked organically to its base by interlocking silver tendrils, it succeeds as much by virtue of its simple shape as its use of negative space. Simultaneously light yet solid, the chalice is a modern grail, the archetypal Celtic symbol re-imagined for our times. As if to take duality further, on this, his most elegant and extravagant object (it would have been a special order piece, likely costing a great deal of money for the time), instead of setting a rare or precious stone within the silver stem, Knox placed a shaped piece of serpentine marble, beautiful yet commonplace. The vase, a less rare piece than

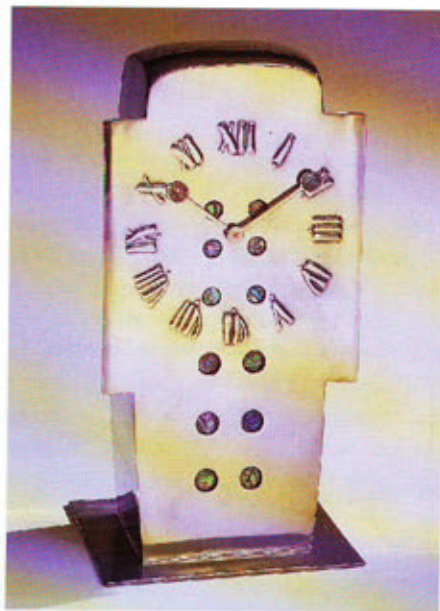


Figure 6. Clock, 1902-05, H. 38.1 cm, pewter, abalone Collection of Dr. S. A. Martin.

dimensional Celtic necklaces, pendants and buckles, Knox perfected his dialogue with line and space, suggested form and the magic of color. Again, using enamels, stones, some rare and some semi-precious, and the expressive potential of gold and silver wire, Knox was able to most purely translate the mysteries of Kells and Durrow into a modern idiom. In a plique-à-jour enameled necklace from 1900-1904 that belongs to Knox's more Celtic-inspired style, he uses the translucency of the enamelwork, set in wirework Celtic shapes, to complement the opals at their center. [See figure 9.] When worn and warmed by the skin, these delicate shapes seem to come alive like small images from the books themselves. At the other end of the spectrum is a gold, pearl and opal pendant from the same period which depends for its beauty and aesthetic power on line and space rather than color and translucent depth. [See figure 10.] No less Celtic, its magic is, however, modern and abstract. Finally, bridging these two poles are his buckle designs, which fall into both styles and are wonderful examples of Knox's calligraphic range. [See figure 11.]

In all, Knox made some 5000 designs for Liberty & Co. Nevertheless, this vast number could not prevent the shift away of public taste from his style. By 1912 he had more or less ceased designing for Liberty, with his last major commission for the family being a gravestone for A. L. Liberty, who died in 1917. This shift appeared to coincide with Knox's own desire to return to the Isle of Man, which he did in 1913, undoubtedly disappointed and battle-weary after several painful personal failures that included his termination from a

the chalice, is no less successful. Again exploiting the dynamic relationship between positive and negative space, weight and weightlessness, these dualities resolve in the slender harmony and utility of a vase that presages later Bauhaus designs.

Knox's Tudric designs were highly popular for their solid yet uncluttered shape, their use of nature-inspired variations of the entrelac (the honesty plant was a particular favorite with Knox and others of this period), and their colored enamels, while his Cymric designs were prized for their elegance, dazzling color and architectural drama. It was, however, with his jewelry designs that he came closest to three-

calligraphy. In the plethora of necklaces, pendants and buckles, Knox perfected his dialogue with line and space, suggested form and the magic of color. Again, using enamels, stones, some rare and some semi-precious, and the expressive potential of gold and silver wire, Knox was able to most purely translate the mysteries of Kells and Durrow into a modern idiom. In a plique-à-jour enameled necklace from 1900-1904 that belongs to Knox's more Celtic-inspired style, he uses the translucency of the enamelwork, set in wirework Celtic shapes, to complement the opals at their center. [See figure 9.] When worn and warmed by the skin, these delicate shapes seem to come alive like small images from the books themselves. At the other end of the spectrum is a gold, pearl and opal pendant from the same period which depends for its beauty and aesthetic power on line and space rather than color and translucent depth. [See figure 10.] No less Celtic, its magic is, however, modern and abstract. Finally, bridging these two poles are his buckle designs, which fall into both styles and are wonderful examples of Knox's calligraphic range. [See figure 11.]

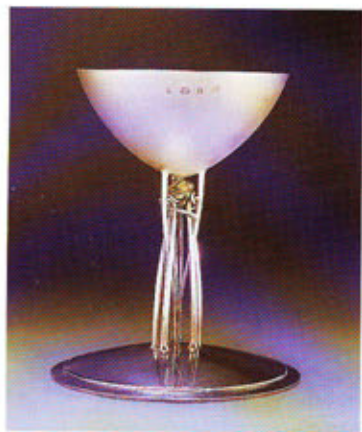


Figure 7. Chalice, 1903, Birmingham, Liberty & Co., H. 22.9 cm, silver, serpentine. Private collection.

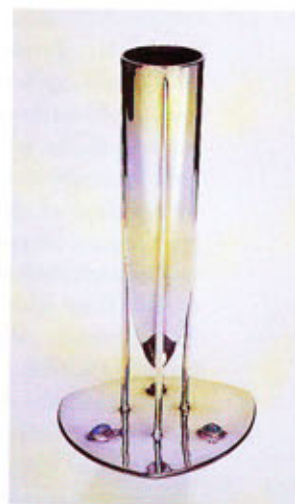


Figure 8. Vase, 1902, Birmingham, Liberty & Co., H. 19.5 cm, silver, turquoise. Collection of Dr. S. A. Martin.



Figure 9. Necklace, 1900-04, gold, opal, plique-à-jour enamel. Private collection.



Figure 10. Pendant, 1900-04, gold, pearl. Collection of Dr. S. A. Martin.

teaching position in London—his methods were criticized for being "too modern"—and an unsuccessful trip to Philadelphia. Despite the declining fortunes of the Celtic revival style, Knox left behind on mainland England a

devoted group of students who formed the Knox Guild of Design and Crafts, committed to making art and craft in accordance with Knox's "creed of imagination, discipline, simpleness and breadth." He himself resumed teaching in Douglas and focused on illuminating manuscripts in his own special style, watercolor painting, and producing some commercial graphic design. He died quietly, in bed while reading John Ruskin's *Elements of Drawing*, in 1933.

Although virtually unknown in his own day, the influence of Archibald Knox on the evolution of modern decorative arts is now undisputed. His particular genius was in synthesizing the divergent spirits of the Arts & Crafts movement, Art Nouveau and early modernism. So elegantly and effortlessly did he achieve this that his position among the pantheon of great twentieth-century designers is assured. □

#### ENDNOTES

1. Bury, Shirley et. al. *Liberty's 1875-1975: An Exhibition to Mark the Firm's Centenary*. London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1975.
2. Martin, Stephen A. (ed). *Archibald Knox*. London: Academy Editions, 1995.
3. I am indebted to several articles by Tony Jones for clarifying Knox's evolving style and the importance of his metalwork. Jones, Anthony. "Knox of Manx and Liberty's of London". In the "Ministry of the Beautiful". In *Imagining an Irish Past: The Celtic Revival 1840-1940*. Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1992, pp. 44-63 and Jones, Anthony. "Archibald Knox: The Venturesome Modernist?" In Martin, Stephen (ed.) *Archibald Knox*. London: Academy Editions, 1995, pp. 53-58.
4. "Cymric" is a derivation of "Cymru", the ancient name for Wales that was undoubtedly chosen at the behest of John Llewellyn, a director of Liberty's and one of its principal shareholders. "Tudric" is probably a derivation of Tudor, perhaps demonstrating the particular Englishness of this new line of pewter wares.

*Stephen A. Martin, Psy.D., is a diplomate Jungian analyst from the C. G. Jung-Institut Zurich and a licensed psychologist in practice in Ardmore, Pennsylvania. He is the editor of Archibald Knox, published in 1995, and is an impassioned collector. Together with Mark Turner, Keeper of the Silver Studio Archives at The Museum of Decorative Architecture and Design in London, he has co-curated the first international traveling exhibition devoted exclusively to the work of Archibald Knox.*

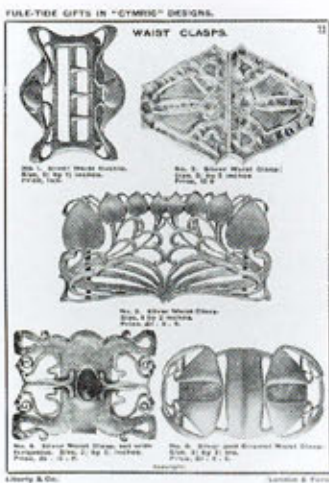


Figure 11. Yule-Tide catalogue, Liberty & Co., circa 1902-03. Courtesy of the Silver Studio Collection.