Archibald Knox, the renowned designer often identified as the creative force behind British Art Nouveau (figure 1), did not consider himself British and English, but rather Manx and Celtic. His design aesthetic was first and foremost determined by these deeply internalized cultural connections, which were nowhere more apparent than in the great clocks of his "Liberty Period."

Knox was born in 1864 on the Isle of Man, a tiny island (31 square miles) lying in the Irish Sea. Despite its small size and unlike its far larger cousin, England, Man was spared Roman devastation and retained visible and abundant connections to earlier cultures, including the Neolithic and Celtic, and also to the later Viking culture. The Celts used their design vocabulary (which, in fact, derived from line ornaments on Neolithic standing stones, tomb walls, and pottery) to embellish their metalwork, stone carvings, and coinage. In the medieval period, Christian missionaries adapted Celtic designs for their own use in manuscript illuminations, funerary sculpture, and architectural decoration, transforming them into what could be termed Celtic-Christian ornaments. For Knox, a devoutly religious man who was also sensitive to the pagan world, to be Manx was to be Christian, Viking, Celtic, and Neolithic, a complex mixture that is an essential ingredient of the Isle of Man even today. Throughout his life, Knox would spend hours wandering the Isle, studying its beautiful and constantly changing climatic effects, mystical ambience, and the abundant ruins—all of which would later inspire his artistic output.

Knox's approach to design was bravely individual and imbued with the poetry of an ancient spirit. He interwove the various cultural themes of Man through his work like leitmotifs through a classical symphony. Sometimes they came together in dramatic harmony, but occasionally each would emerge to assert its fundamental voice. In addition, Knox had the ability to integrate these primal melodies into the "tonal" structure of modernism just as it was breaking free from late nineteenth-century fussiness and moving towards abstraction. Although the majority of Knox's work was for worldly patrons—Liberty and his urbane constituency, for example—his designs always retained references to his Manx, Celtic-Christian heritage. And although he worked in London for important but brief periods, his geographical and spiritual roots continued to nourish his contribution to modern British design.
The Celtic-Christian spirit emerges most strongly in Knox’s silver, pewter, and ceramic creations through his imaginative and varied use of the entrelac, cousin to the linear knotted element that is the cornerstone of the medieval Celtic design. He would have seen many examples on Manx monuments, as well as on the pages of illuminated manuscripts such as the Books of Durrow and of Kells (figure 6). However, by imbuing his knots with an asymmetrical sinuosity, Knox transformed the ancient into the modern. He employed the entrelac to its greatest expressive potential in jewelry designs (figure 7). There he caused its lines to become solid and animated, as if lifting them off of the medieval parchment in a whirlwind of gold and silver that could double back, corner, dive under themselves, and reemerge in breathtaking, intelligent diversity. The entrelac was incorporated as a design element in other media as well (figures 8, 9). In each case, his variation on the element completed the design, giving all a beautiful common language.

As important as this aspect of the Celtic-Christian vocabulary was to Knox’s jewelry designs, it is a broader, more inclusive Manx spirit that distinguished his largest and most profound objects, the great clocks of his “Liberty Period” (1900-1905). If line and its play define the entrelac, then that and much more, including volume, shape and presence determine the emotional power of the great clocks. Knox found his inspiration for them in the standing stones and the crosses that populate the Manx countryside. Inseparable from and defining the Manx consciousness, these monuments combine the Neolithic, Celtic, Christian, and Viking, bearing witness to the forces of history that converged on the island. They are to be found on sacred hills, in working fields and especially in and around the many Manx churches built on what may have been ancient places of power.

Knox’s familiarity with the stones and crosses of Man (figures 4, 5) is well documented.1 As a child, he would have known them from visiting Braddan Kirk near his home, as well as more distant churches that also served as repositories for long-fallen or broken religious markers. The stones and crosses were certainly central players in his archaeological studies and creative style. As a student, Knox included observations about Manx monuments in a variety of sources—from an Art Master’s exam to articles published in contemporary decorative arts journals such as The Builder. He was fascinated by their abstract shapes, monumental outlines and strangely carved surfaces, especially as they appeared when viewed against the mercurial light of the Manx sky.
The great clocks are those pewter clocks, which, unlike their smaller kin, are clearly intended to dominate space both by virtue of largeness of scale and austerity of design. The great clocks average approximately 14” in height, while the clocks for table, desk, or nightstand can be as small as 4 1/2” and rarely exceed 8”. Instead of employing the winding tendrils, applied knotted designs, and intricate enamelwork that impart a jewel-like preciousness and striking beauty to his small clock (figures 11-13), Knox relied on shape, the soft sheen of pewter, gentle hammering on numerals, and, in some instances, the strategic placement of abalone to achieve his ends here. And what ends they are. These clocks have an almost anthropomorphic presence, a person-like energy making them companions for their owners, rather than stunn...
erie outline and stark, formal simplicity suggest that this clock is keeping a different sort of time, one far older and less civilized, but no less a part of the human psyche. What anchors this clock in the realm of modern experience are its chased Arabic numerals, which seem to emerge gently from the powerful simplicity of a time before knowing, just as modern consciousness has been born from unrecorded ancestral depths. The clock's hands, inlaid with abalone, seem to symbolize the evanescent radiance of life as it traverses the sacred round of being.

Knox's interest in abstraction is also evident in his only known wall clock (figure 14), a rounded triangular object similar in shape to the abalone plaques mentioned above and an ancient warrior's shield, and the sculpted stone heads of this period, all of which would have been known to Knox.

With the fourth and perhaps most beautiful of his great clocks (figure 10, see cover), Knox achieves even greater abstraction, weaving together what has come before—the Neolithic, Celtic, Christian, and Viking—with what was to be his design future: Modernism. Here, he has abstracted cross and menhir to their logical, archetypal essences, by combining and reducing them to a single, stunningly simple vertical rectangle. By constructing the front with a three-part design consisting of narrow panel flanked by two wider panels, he balances the vertical thrust of the body with design elements that draw the eye outward. Is he also referencing the three-fold nature of the Trinity? His placement of six quadratic abalone plaques on the front, four square and two rectangular, suggests that he has subdued the mystical in favor of the secular angularity. As if to underscore this further, Knox chased each side with a knife-sharp, downwardly pointing trapezoidal panel, punctuated at the top by yet another small rectangle of abalone shell. Viewed as a whole, this clock seems to embody two quintessential modern tendencies—the use of "the square within a square" and the desire for machine-like precision—with magnificent results.

While Knox's Celtic-Christian and Manx design references are somewhat idiosyncratic, his place in the mainstream of modern design is secure. This becomes clear when his great clocks are compared to examples by acknowledged contemporary masters of the genre. Witness the Willow Tea Room clock, designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh in Glasgow in 1903 (figure 17), at about the same time Knox was designing the last example. Both designers achieve monumentality by use of verticals and quadratic shapes, although Mackintosh deploys them differently than Knox, using vertical columns of squares that run up the face and sides of the clock resolving in a simple, huge, circle-within-a-square polished steel face with brass numerals. The effect is stunning. Mackintosh creates a true monolith, yet one very related to Knox's own smaller example. Both are strikingly modern, eschewing the languid and the sinuous of Art Nouveau for the grounded power of the square and the rectangle.

Cover: Figure 10. Archibald Knox, Great Clock, pewter and abalone, height 13 1/2", c. 1902-05, Martin Collection. Photo courtesy of Christie's Images. This page: Left, figure 11. Archibald Knox, Clock, pewter and enamel, height 8", c. 1902-05, Martin Collection. Center, figure 12. 1902-1905, pewter, abalone, height 6 1/2" Private Collection Right, figure 13. Archibald Knox, Clock, pewter and enamel, height 8", c. 1902-05, Martin Collection.
Further comparison leads inevitably to the Wiener Werkstätte, the Viennese workshop where Josef Hoffmann, Koloman Moser, and other artists found the square, the rectangle, and the vertical to be requisite design elements (figures 14, 15). Though at times more decorative and classical than their Anglo-Saxon counterparts (note the use of columns in some instances), these clocks were contemporaneous with Knox and Mackintosh, and obeyed the same modernist imperatives: the predominance of the rectilinear, increasing reliance on primary forms, and movement towards abstraction. This is nowhere more evident than in their handling of the numerals. A comparison among examples by Knox, Hoffmann, and Moser indicates a trend from representational numbers to abstract numerical symbols. It is as if another kind of timelessness were being implied, not of the unrecorded past, but of the unlimited future. In addition, all of their clock designs incorporate Arts and Crafts elements in the hands: the heart shape is used by Knox and Mackintosh, while the stylized leaf shape is preferred by the Viennese. In light of such parallels, one wonders if there was cross-pollination between Knox and the others, just as there was between Mackintosh and the Viennese.2

The deceptively simple rectangular clock pictured in figure 10 is one of Knox’s most historically important objects, giving the feeling of culminating integration, one in which the other great clocks play an essential part, an inner world of his Manx imagination and his role as a master modern designer. It is an integration that helped steer the revivaiist late nineteenth century into the iconoclastic early twentieth. Emerging from a design vocabulary informed by his personal heritage, all the great clocks represent a major leap forward with intimations of Cubism, the Bauhaus, De Stijl, Art Deco, the Machine Age and even of post-modern sympathies. While mysterious in spirit, the great clocks are also simply great clocks, successful not only as tours de force of design but also as functional objects. They secure Knox’s place as a visionary artist, his discerning eye able to glimpse an unfolding future within the elusive remnants of a remote age. It is a vision born of the enormous spirit of a tiny island called Man, in the middle of the Irish Sea, half way between this world and the next; a vision that would influence the trajectory of a new international aesthetic.
