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Archibald Knox at the Silver Studio

This brief guide gives an introduction to the Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture's (MoDA) opening exhibition.

Archibald Knox at the Silver Studio is the first authoritative presentation of Knox's work in England. It is a fitting choice for MoDA's first exhibition since it brings together the museum's important Silver Studio Collection and the work of one of Britain's most talented, yet least recognized, designers of the 1890s and early 1900s.

Archibald Knox (1864-1933) grew up on the Isle of Man where he absorbed the language and motifs of a long tradition of Celtic art. His father and brothers were engineers but Archibald decided that this life was not for him. Instead, he attended Douglas Grammar School and subsequently gained a place at Douglas School of Art. He quickly proved to be an able pupil and after a short while became a pupil teacher, meaning that his fees were paid in return for some teaching duties. As a young man he developed a passion for the Celtic art of the island, becoming fascinated with the carvings and designs that were then coming to be recognised as a rich part of Manx heritage.

Knox's early life forms something of a contrast to the fashionable world of London, where he arrived in 1897. The capital's increasingly affluent and ever-expanding middle classes generated a growing appetite for consumer goods. A number of publications, such as Mrs Panton's Front Kitchen to Garret: (1889), encouraged a greater interest in home furnishing. Increasing prosperity meant that the middle classes could afford domestic help, which in turn meant that middle-class ladies had leisure time in which to visit the new department stores and study magazines about the latest home furnishing trends. Magazines and household manuals such as these encouraged the idea that it was imperative to have the right furnishings in order to reflect - and maintain - one's social status.

Archibald Knox began his association with the Silver Studio in 1897. Arthur Silver had seen the potential of the expanding home furnishing market, and had established the Silver Studio of Design in Hammersmith in 1896. It rapidly became one of Britain's most successful studios producing designs for wallpapers, textiles, metalwork and other decorative items for the home. Designers were employed on both a salaried and freelance basis, and the Studio sold their work to leading manufacturers and retailers. Firms such as Liberty & Co marketed these designs under their own name, which meant that the names of the Silver Studio and its designers were obscured. The Silver Studio continued to operate successfully until 1963, but the period between 1880 and 1910 was undoubtedly its most prolific.

Knox first came to London to teach at the Redhill School of Art, and it is not clear how he developed a connection with the Silver Studio. It is possible that he was introduced by his friend Christopher Dresser who had been a close associate of Arthur Silver before Silver's death in 1894. By whatever means it came about, Knox quickly established himself as a talented designer of 'flat patterns', as the large pastels shown here ably demonstrate.

These large-scale designs for wallpapers and textiles are among the first work he produced for the Studio. Examples such as 12 and 14 demonstrate his keen understanding of the challenge involved in designing a repeating pattern, while retaining a charming simplicity and subtlety. Designs like these were sold to Wylie and Lochhead, a leading Glasgow furnishing firm and wallpaper manufacturer and one of the Silver Studio's best customers.

Despite the undoubted charm of his flat patterns, Knox is better known now for his designs for metalwork for Liberty & Co. Like Arthur Silver, Arthur Lasenby Liberty had recognised the potential of the market for luxury goods and home furnishings. His firm, Liberty & Co opened in 1875 and the Regent Street store quickly established itself as a leader in fashionable taste. It specialised in exotic imported oriental goods, catering for those who wished to decorate their homes in the fashionable 'oriental' style.

Realising the need for his firm to keep up with ever-changing tastes, Arthur Liberty commissioned a range of silverware inspired by the 'Celtic Revival' which enjoyed enormous popularity at the turn of the century. The Silver Age range of silverware was launched in 1899, and Knox's metalwork designs were central to Liberty & Co's enormous success during this period. Knox's designs became integral to what we now think of as 'Liberty Style'. Knox was not the only designer responsible for these ranges, (others included Bernard Cuzner, Oliver Baker and Jessie M King), but he was certainly the central figure.
Gynric silver included numerous "special occasion" items such as cups and bowls that might be given as a prize, or to commemorate a special anniversary. It also included smaller items such as: "ornaments for personal wear, rings, brooches and clips... [and] such dainty ornamental necessities as the slender and graceful vase, the elegant, tripod yet exquisite jewel tray or essence holder... which help to complete the luxurious equipment of the boudoir".

Tudric pewter was less expensive, and the range included a number of more "everyday" items such as the tea service (50) and biscuit barrels (46, 47) shown here.

The Gynric and Tudric ranges were intended as an alternative to the more expensive metalwork then being produced by Arts and Crafts designers such as CR Ashbee. Ashbee and others produced hand-crafted items on a small scale. However, workshops such as theirs were not able to produce the volume of goods necessary for a successful London firm such as Liberty & Co, which therefore looked to produce metal items by larger-scale production methods.

Knox's designs were put into production for Liberty & Co by WH Haseler of Birmingham, a long-established goldsmith and jewellery maker. This firm ensured that items were produced to the high standards that Liberty & Co's reputation for quality required. Knox proved very able to produce designs which were compatible with the demands of large-scale production. They exploited the sort of finish that machines do best, including the smooth cylindrical exteriors of vases such as 38 and 40.

But arguably he also followed in the best traditions of the Arts and Crafts Movement, in that pattern is never simply applied to an object, but is integral to it. The legs and handles of his vases and bowls always form part of the overall shape, as in, for example, 39 and 42. Knox's metalwork designs are characterised by a lack of unnecessary decoration, a sense of proportion and balance, and appear extremely modern at the same time as drawing their inspiration from the past.

The Celtic style which Knox developed through his metalwork designs for Liberty & Co is characterised by the use of interlacing linear patterns and the use of decorative enamel. His designs for textiles and wallpapers also employ these Celtic motifs, such as the knot-work used in 1. It is clear that Knox drew much of his inspiration from the forms and decorative devices of Maive art. Yet he also drew on the ideas of other Silver Studio designers, such as Harry Napper, to develop his own particular Art Nouveau style.

Knox's authorship of many of the designs for Liberty & Co, said through the Silver Studio, has long been the subject of debate. Arthur Liberty did not attribute designs to individual artists, preferring to market them simply under the name of Liberty & Co. Similarly, the Silver Studio obscured the names of its designers, so that after Arthur Silver's death, designs were often credited to Rev Silver, his son, who took over as head of the studio in 1900.

It is unfortunate that the meticulous day book records kept by Silver Studio employees for almost the entire history of the Studio (1880 - 1963) have not survived for the period that Knox was employed. However, Mark Turner has argued that that Rex Silver was in fact responsible for only very few of the designs attributed to him during the period 1911 to 1963, and that it was much more likely that the majority were the work of other designers working in or for the Studio during this period and earlier.

Surviving records for November 1898 show that a number of metalwork designs were sold to Liberty & Co, and it is unlikely that anyone else associated with the Silver Studio at the time would have been able to produce this kind of work. Furthermore, some of Knox's designs for textiles and wallpapers, produced for the Silver Studio, show clear stylistic links to his metalwork. For example, the squared leaf motif is a feature of both textile designs such as 10, 13 and 17 and of bookends and slippers such as 64 and 51.

Knox returned to the Isle of Man in 1900, and continued to supply metalwork designs to Liberty & Co for a number of years. His silver and pewter of this period is seen by some as among his best work, moving from the Celtic ornament of the earlier work to the uncluttered "Modernist" lines of items such as the Gynric tea service (49).

As an intensely shy, even reclusive person, Knox would doubtless have hated the attention which his work currently attracts. His metalwork items - now extremely collectable - and his pastel designs, have a strange beauty which is unlike the work of almost any other designer. It is fitting that MoDA's first temporary exhibition in its new building should focus on the work of this talented yet surprisingly little recognised man.

Zo" Henden
Assistant Curator, MoDA
October 2000

2 Mrs E. Panton, From Kitchen to Table, 1899.
8 See Silver Studio Deskbook, November, 1898, in the Silver Studio Collection, MoDA.
1 Floral textile design
attrib Archibald Knox, ca. 1900
Pen and pencil on detail paper, 150x100mm
Detail of textile design featuring intricate abstract Celtic knotwork pattern.
SD 253697 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

2 Floral textile design
attrib Archibald Knox, ca. 1900
Pencil and pencil on detail paper, 150x100mm
Petticoat design for textiles or walls, design of stylised tulips and stylising acanthus leaves in yellow, green and orange on a mid-blue ground. Possibly attributed to Harry Napper and certainly showing his influence on Knox's work.
SD 1333 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

3 Floral textile design
attrib Archibald Knox, ca. 1897
Pen and pencil on detail paper, 60x75mm
Stylised floral design with green and blue leaves on a blue ground.
SD 254074 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

4 Floral textile design
attrib Archibald Knox, ca. 1897
Petal and pencil on detail paper, 97x74mm
Petticoat design for textiles or walls, design of stylised tulips and stylising acanthus leaves in yellow, green and orange on a mid-blue ground. Possibly attributed to Harry Napper and certainly showing his influence on Knox's work.
SD 1333 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

5 Floral textile design
attrib Archibald Knox, ca. 1899
Pen and pencil on detail paper, 70x70mm
Flat, stylised flowers with interlaced leaves. Predominant colours are blue, mustard and green.
SD 1231 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

6 Floral textile design
attrib Archibald Knox, ca. 1897
Pen and pencil on detail paper, 85x90mm
The square, stylised blue flowers are similar to those in 7. This motif is also used by Knox for his jewellery designs, particularly wall hangings.
SD 254697 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

7 Floral textile design
attrib Archibald Knox, ca. 1897
Pen and pencil on detail paper, 145x285mm
Stylised flower and angle leaf in brown, on a maroon ground.
SD 254697 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

8 Design for wallpaper or carpet
attrib Archibald Knox, ca. 1897
Pen and pencil on detail paper, 355x295mm
Stylised blue flowers and green leaves on a dark ground.
SD 254697 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

9 Floral textile design
attrib Archibald Knox, ca. 1898
Pen and pencil on detail paper, 71x50mm
Hard-edged, stylised design of flowers and leaves, in neutral colours of green, orange, blue and brown.
SD 2142 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

10 Floral textile design
attrib Archibald Knox, ca. 1900
Pen and pencil on detail paper, 585x490mm
Stylised flowers and leaves in orange, yellow and mauve on dark green ground.
SD 2142 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

11 Floral textile design
attrib Archibald Knox, ca. 1897
Pen and pencil on detail paper, 60x60mm
Light and medium green flowers and leaves on a dark green ground, suggesting elements of Celtic knotwork.
SD 254697 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

12 Floral textile design
attrib Archibald Knox, ca. 1897
Pen and pencil on detail paper, 95x75mm
Three long-tailed birds are characteristic of Knox's designs. See also 28 and 31.
SD 25699 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

13 Floral textile design
attrib Archibald Knox, ca. 1897
Pen and pencil on detail paper, 615x325mm
All over stylised design of flowers and leaves in green, yellow, and orange.
SD 1185 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

14 Floral textile design
attrib Archibald Knox, ca. 1897
Pen and pencil on detail paper, 975x75mm
Assymetrical Art Nouveau floral design, showing outstide of yellow flowers and light, heart-shaped leaves in three shades of green on dark blue ground.
SD 252129 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

15 Floral textile design
attrib Archibald Knox, ca. 1897
Pen and pencil on detail paper, 150x100mm
Yellow flowers and green leaves on a blue ground.
SD 256688 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

16 Floral textile design
attrib Archibald Knox, ca. 1897
Pen, pencil and pencil on detail paper, 100x85mm
SD 256671 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

17 Woven textile sample
attrib Archibald Knox, ca. 1900
Machine-woven tapestry, 350x330mm
The design for this textile appears in the 1898 Kinko's photographic records for around 1900 (studio no. 1279). The accompanying drawings, which would have provided details of designer and manufacturer have been lost, so it is impossible to trace a definitive attribution to Knox, but there are strong stylistic similarities with other designs known to be by him, such as 51 and 53.
SD 4717 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

18 Design for a silver photograph frame, 'The Rhoda'
Attrib Archibald Knox, ca. 1900
Pen and pencil on paper, 97x74mm
The silver leaf, floral and Celtic knotwork are all attributes of Knox's metalwork designs.
SD 25172 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

19 Design for a clock, 'The Magnificent'
Attrib Archibald Knox, ca. 1899
Pen and pencil on tracing paper, 240x130mm
Note the influence of Charles Rennie Mackintosh in the decoration of this clock face.
SD 2281 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

20 Sheet of trial designs for casses
Attrib Archibald Knox, ca. 1898
Charcoal on paper, 145x105mm
The vase in the centre of the bottom row is the 'Cymric' vase, 38.
SD 1633 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

21 Design for candlestick, 'The New Mary'
Attrib Archibald Knox, ca. 1900
Pen and pencil on paper, 240x130mm
Design for Tudric pewter candlestick, featured in Liberty's 'Cymric Silverswork and Tudric Pewter' catalogue, ca. 1903.
SD 6157 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture
22 Design for a silver bowl, 'The Deidhlog'
Archibald Knox, ca. 1900
Pencil on tracing paper, 260x260mm
This design for a bowl is believed to be by Knox because of its intricate Celtic interlacing, and to the Deidhlog (a possible connection with Deidlog: the seabed of the Isle of Man). It is inscribed "stated lines represent the sides elevation". In Fas Silk's hand, possibly indicating his involvement in the design process as head of the Silver Studio.
SD 3683 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

23 Two designs for silver clocks, 'The Siong' and 'The Otal'
Archibald Knox, ca. 1900
Pencil on tracing paper, 415x385mm
The upper design is inscribed "The Siong" and the Siong features a "tenslamps fugit" on the dial. The lower clock, 'The Otal' is certainly put into production and is illustrated in the Liberty & Co Catalogue "Cymric Silvers" of ca. 1900.
SD 3683 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

24 Design for a photograph frame, 'Arrosee'
Archibald Knox, ca. 1900
Pencil on detail paper, 330x225mm
The decorated edges of this photograph frame show Knox's ability to combine Celtic style with a more flowing Art Nouveau feel.
SD 3688 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

25 Design for a silver photograph frame, 'The Rhonomy'
Archibald Knox, 1900 - 1905
Pencil and crayon on detail paper, 395x275mm
The name - the name from which the 'Rhonomy' may be a pun on the very obvious influence of Charles Rennie Mackintosh in this design.
SD 3663 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

26 Design for a candlestick, 'The Thosinda'
Archibald Knox, ca. 1900
Pencil on tracing paper, 335x260mm
This design was previously attributed to Fas Silk but is now believed to be by Knox.
SD 3683 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

27 Design for a vase, 'The Cyrus'
Archibald Knox, 1905
Pencil on tracing paper, 292x78mm
This vase was featured in Liberty & Co's 'Cymric Silvers' catalogue, ca. 1900, printed 07.11.04. The inverted cone shape was one used by Knox in many variations for his designs for vases and jugs. See also 30 and 36.
SD 3671 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

28 Design for a silver powder box
Archibald Knox, ca. 1900
Pencil and watercolour on cartridge paper, 370x225mm
This elegant design of birds and flowers is reminiscent of Assyrian but the birds are clearly characteristic of Archibald Knox. See also 12 and 36.
SD 3671 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

29 Design for a silver powder bowl, 'Yona'
Archibald Knox, ca. 1905
Pencil on tracing paper, 230x10mm
The neck and lid of this bowl are decorated with a Celtic interpreted motif. The idea of a bowl supported on legs which are decorative yet integral to the design was one used frequently by Knox. See also 41.
SD 3683 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

30 Design for photograph frame, 'Arrosee'
Archibald Knox, ca. 1900
Pencil on tracing paper, 330x225mm
The design is annotated in Fas Silk's hand, "not used but altered".
SD 3683 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

DESIGN FOR A CHRISTMAS CARD

31 Christmas Card
Archibald Knox, ca. 1900
Dyed paper on hardboard paper
This elegant Christmas card is unambiguously by Knox, since the Manx Museum has a copy of its collection. It was also presented to the museum by a personal friend of Knox, E. Sterpet, of the Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture.

32 Flower vase, 'The Cyrus'
Archibald Knox, 1905
Silver and enamel, 145mm (h)
Inverted cone-shaped vase supported on tripod legs with enamel lower part. The overall shape of this vase is similar, yet smooth rounded style that was to be strikingly modern even half a century later.
LD 32 Private Collection

33 Vase
Archibald Knox, 1905
Silver and enamel, 12.5mm (d)
Tapering cylindrical vase with slightly curved sides on a broad flat foot. The repoussé decoration on the base consists of three plain leaf shapes containing small circles of red, green, and blue enamels. There is a trap of three similar motifs on the sides with a whiplash around the bottom of the body. Part of Liberty & Co's Cymric range. 1905.
LD 32 Private Collection

34 Covered bowl on legs
Archibald Knox, 1899 - 1900
Silver 870k (5mm)
A design for this bowl can be seen at 29.
LD 35 Private Collection
43 Drum-shaped bowl
Ambushed Knox, 1955
Silver turquoise and enamel, 310mm (a)
The acknowledged drum-shaped bowl is decorated with a flowing Celtic-inspired motif in blue and green enamel. The bowl has four D-shaped strap handles above paired legs on a ring-shaped base.
LD 23 Private Collection

44 Cigarette box
Ambushed Knox, 1951
Silver and enamel, 220mm (i)
This silver cigarette box has a Birmingham hallmark for 1951, and was made for Liberty & Co. It is in the unusual form of a flat rectangular box with panels of interlaced foliate motifs enamelled in blue. The box is supported at each corner by a slightly-shaped 'Y' feet resting on a blue, green, and mauve enamelled base. The box is intended for use on a desk.
LD 21 Private Collection

45 Covered cup
Ambushed Knox, 1950
Silver and enamel, 270mm (i)
The bowl of this covered cup has a stylized wave pattern in blue and green enamel, supported on a tall, shaped stem. The stem is comprised of stylized plant forms, tapering to form a 'knob'. This was advertised in Liberty & Co's 'Cymric' Silver catalogue of 1950, priced £5 15s 10d.
LD 23 Private Collection

46 Biscuit box
Ambushed Knox, ca. 1953
Peated with blue and green enamel, 320mm (a)
Square-shaped box with circular lid. Decorated with three horizontal bands of stylized square-shaped leaves and flowers. These squared leaf motifs are similar to those used by Knox elsewhere in his designs for wallpapers and textiles, such as F.P.
LD 37 Private Collection

47 Biscuit box
Ambushed Knox, ca. 1953
Patinated copper, 120mm (a)
The plain copper version of 46 was probably made as a prototype. A similar-shaped box, without a lid, was advertised in Liberty & Co's 'Patented Gifts in Tactile Pewter' catalogue of 1953. As a 'term' piece, showing how designs might easily be adapted for different purposes.
BAODA 1994 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

48 Inkstand
Ambushed Knox, 1953-4
Peated and enamel, 150mm (a)
Cylindrical inlaid with hinged covers set on a square tray decorated with small flowers' motifs at each corner. Enamelled numerous pewter items for Liberty & Co's Tactile range, which was cheaper than Cymric silver, and which included more 'everyday' items such as this one. Peated was more used using a mixture of tin, copper and tinny metal in iron moulds, and could be polished to look like silver.
LD 29 Private Collection

49 Tea service and matching tray
Ambushed Knox, 1932-3
Silver (gary handles to teapot and water jug, 530mm (a))
Tea service designed for Liberty & Co. Beautifully decorated with design inspired by Celtic knotworks, but with a free-flowing 'organic' feel.
LD 18 Private Collection

50 Tea service and matching tray
Ambushed Knox, 1933
Peated with square on copper (cone-covered handles), 976mm (a)
This tea service was one of the first and most successful designs in Liberty & Co's Tactile range of pewter wares. Each item of the set is decorated with a red and brownly acid proof design, with interlaced stems.
LD 44 Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

51 Waisted cup
Ambushed Knox, ca. 1899
Silver, 175mm (a)
The stylish floral design used here is similar to that of 17. Waisted cups and beakers were popular with Liberty & Co's customers who featured a radical 'Aesthetic' form of design.
LD 30 Private Collection

52 Pair of coronation spoons
Ambushed Knox, 1901
Silver and enamel, 142mm (a)
Liberty commissioned Knox to design these silver spoons to commemorate the coronation of Edward VII in 1902.
LD 28 Private Collection

53 Coronation spoon
Ambushed Knox, 1901-1903
Silver and enamel, 124mm (a)
Designed in honour of Edward VII's coronation, the bowl of this spoon is inscribed 'Anna, Coron. 1901', above interlaced decoration.
LD 29 Manchester City Art Galleries

54 Waisted cup
Ambushed Knox, 1901
Silver and enamel, 175mm (a)
The delicate silver interlaced motif comprises of the letters 'ER', again for Edward VIII's coronation.
LD 35 Private Collection

55 Neckpiece
Ambushed Knox, 1900-1904
Gold-enamelled and jewelled, 38mm (i)
A fine gold chain connects two curved pierced gold triangles, each enamelled with a small turquoise pendant suspended on a fine chain. The ensemble is an elongated, pierced oval shape in gold, with three pearls suspended below. These sections are connected by fine chains set with central pearls. The label inside the box reads 'LIBERTY & Co Ltd Regent Street LONDON'.
LD 31 Private Collection

56 Waisted cup
Ambushed Knox, 1901
Silver and enamel, 175mm (a)
Many of Knox's designs for jewellery were produced with slight variations. Both this and 57 were available with or without enamelled details.
LD 32 Private Collection

57 Waisted cup
Ambushed Knox, 1901
Silver and enamel, 100mm (a)
LD 33 Private Collection

58 Waisted cup
Ambushed Knox, 1907
Silver and enamel, 60mm (a)
Symmetrical, low-diameter enamelled parts, set in interlaced silver surround.
LD 34 Private Collection

59 Spoon
Ambushed Knox, 1931-1932
Silver and enamel, 120mm (a)
Circular bowl partly enamelled with long slender stem decorated with Celtic knot motif.
LD 36 Manchester City Art Galleries
60 Buckle
Archibald Knox, 1902
Silver with shagreen
LD 37, Manchester City Art Galleries

61 Clasp chape
Archibald Knox, ca. 1900
Silver, turquoise and enamel, 31x58mm
LD 43, Chesterwood Art Gallery and Museum

62 Money holder
Archibald Knox, 1903
Silver and enamel, 71x71mm
LD 43, Chesterwood Art Gallery and Museum

63 Six buttons and case
Archibald Knox, 1903
Silver, 19mm (diam)
LD 41, Chesterwood Art Gallery and Museum

64 Belt buckle
Archibald Knox, 1903
Silver and turquoise, 59x71mm
LD 40, Chesterwood Art Gallery and Museum

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