

Archibald Knox: Beauty and Modernity, a Designer Ahead of His Time

by Anthony Bernbaum

There are many designers and architects who have made their mark on 20th century design but very few are household names. Of those that started the modern movement and influenced design from the very beginning of the 20th century there are perhaps fewer than ten internationally recognised names. Of the two most celebrated you would perhaps choose Charles Rennie Mackintosh from Great Britain and Frank Lloyd Wright from America. Both of these designers were famous and influential in their own time, and asserted their modernist design philosophy pro-actively both through their work and writings. To this group might also be added icons of the “art nouveau” movement, Lalique, Galle and Tiffany; also household names having placed their signature and brand on every piece of work.

In Knox we have a man who enjoyed none of this recognition. He was largely unknown in his time, his designs all being attributed to the Regent Street store Liberty & Co, or on occasion Rex Silver, the head of the design studio who supplied Liberty with much of their metalwork designs. Knox was a reserved man, and made no grand pronouncements about the significance of his work and did not promote his design philosophy publicly.

For those of us that admire

Knox, it is his modesty that in part makes him so attractive. Slowly but surely from around 1975 when the Victoria and Albert Museum staged an exhibition celebrating 100 years of Liberty & Co, Knox’s

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visibility and acclaim have been rising. Today, he has international recognition and his works are on display in major museums from America to Australia. Knox has accomplished this purely by the striking qualities of his designs. His work has spoken for him.

This Exhibition also lets

Knox’s work speak for itself. It brings together from a number of private collections some of Knox’s finest designs in “Cymric” silver, “Tudric” pewter and in jewellery.

The pieces described in this catalogue highlight four themes, together illustrating the breadth of Knox’s design range and influences. Many exhibits in the catalogue demonstrate Knox’s unique take on art nouveau; substituting the continental fashion for highly elaborate whiplash organic patterns with elegant and intricate Celtic designs; perhaps best illustrated in exhibits 2, 17, 36, 40 and 47, together with much of the jewellery. These pieces highlight the massive influence his birthplace and home, the Isle of Man, had on his work and also how accomplished Knox was at harmonizing surface decoration with the shape of the design. Celtic inspired patterns create intricate jewellery or weave across the metalwork linking enamel decoration with bowl handles or clock dials.

Exhibits 1, 8, 9, 10, 22 and 49 highlight Knox the modernist. Notwithstanding that art nouveau itself was a modern movement, breaking away from Victorian design traditions, these pieces all herald future design movements. Pieces exhibit clean simple aerodynamic lines and minimal ornamentation. Many of these items draw from ancient Manx

influences, notably the runic stones of the island, but the pieces themselves might have been designed in the inter war period or later.

Several of the finest pieces in the Exhibition are sufficiently radical and complex that they do not easily fit within any 20th century design timeline and demonstrate Knox at his most avant garde. Exhibits 19, 20, 21, 26 and 35 fall within this category and probably create as stunning an impact today as when they were first seen at the start of the 20th century.

Finally items 23, 25, 32, 50 and 51 in the Exhibition demonstrate several of Knox's earliest works. These pieces were all designed around 1898-1899, in contrast to the other items in the exhibition which were designed between 1900 to around 1905. These rare early pieces lack some of Knox's later design qualities

but offer valuable insight into the development of Knox's work. Many have an arts and crafts feel, being hand made from a heavy gauge of silver.

Whilst Knox is a designer whose reputation is drawn principally from his work, we can reach back in time and gain insights into his design philosophy. Knox was throughout

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Exhibit 10, an example of Knox the modernist



his career a teacher and some of his hand written teaching notes have survived. Unlike Mackintosh, or Lloyd Wright, Knox's stage was a small one, perhaps a class of just twelve or so students, but his words do speak volumes both for his design approach and wit. He was fond of creating maxims that would be memorable to his students and encapsulate key messages succinctly.

The most apposite maxim by Knox that perfectly captures his overall design philosophy and which helped inspire the title of this exhibition is: **“Aim at order: Hope for beauty”**

I can think of no better celebration of Knox's 150th anniversary than this exhibition, which has been a total pleasure to organise and curate. Thanks are due to all those people and



Exhibit 47, an example of Knox's celtic art nouveau style

Continued ▶

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institutions that have made this possible, particularly those private collectors who have generously lent to the Exhibition and those people who have helped with the organisation notably: Stephen Martin; Zoe Hendon, Head of Museum Collections, Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture, Middlesex University; Eric Turner, Curator, Metalwork Collections, Department of Sculpture, Metal Work, Ceramics & Glass, Victoria & Albert Museum; Clarion, organisers of Olympia International Art and Antiques Fair; CPI London, graphic designer and printer; the team at Flint PR; Paul Robinson of the FCR Gallery; Mike Bruce; and Debbie Gooday of The Gooday Gallery.

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Turnbull auctioneers, Sothebys, Lloyds Bank and Blackwall Green insurance brokers. These sponsors have provided encouragement as well as financial support that has been greatly appreciated and which has ensured this exhibition and catalogue have been able to exceed the initial aspirations of the Archibald Knox Society.

Finally there is one person

above all who takes full credit for this exhibition, without whom it would not have happened. Liam O'Neill, founder and chairman of the Archibald Knox Society, initiated the idea of an exhibition for Knox's anniversary, raised critical sponsorship and through the Society has provided a forum by which such an exhibition could take place. His contribution spans the last decade during which, through the work of the Society, our knowledge and appreciation of Knox has increased significantly. This exhibition has drawn interest from media across the world which is testimony to Liam's efforts and, closer to home, Liam has been instrumental in helping establish Archibald Knox as one of the greatest Manxmen.

Anthony Bernbaum
*Exhibition organiser
and curator*

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Exhibit 20, an example of Knox at his most avant garde