

The “cloisonné” or “champlevé” designs of Archibald Knox for Liberty

I have been inspired by the purchase of delightful Liberty pendant in gold with “cloisonné” or “champlevé” opal panels (A711 at this [link](#)), to publish my research on this particularly unusual and beguiling design technique of Archibald Knox.

A711 Knox pendant



Why do I say “cloisonné”, cloisonné enamel requires the creation of compartments (*cloisons* in French) in to which enamel is flooded. The *cloisons* can then be reduced to create thin metal lines separating enamels to great effect. It is this same effect that Knox achieved using opals and stones, as well as enamel. It has subsequently been pointed out to me that where the gold jewellery has been cast, it would be fairer to describe the technique as champlevé opal, which I think is true. Champlevé being somewhat the inverse of cloisonné where the silver is dug away to create pools in which to hold the enamel (or in this case the opal).

Because most of Liberty’s jewellery is undated it hard to know exactly when Knox developed this style. It is tempting to think he used it in silver first using enamels or stones instead of opals. A magnificent mirror dated 1901 (therefore designed probably in 1900-1) is known that sets stones in a manner equivalent to that seen in jewellery using opals. See images.

Fig 1 Knox Mirror (Christies) 1903. "Cloisonné" set stones to bottom of mirror

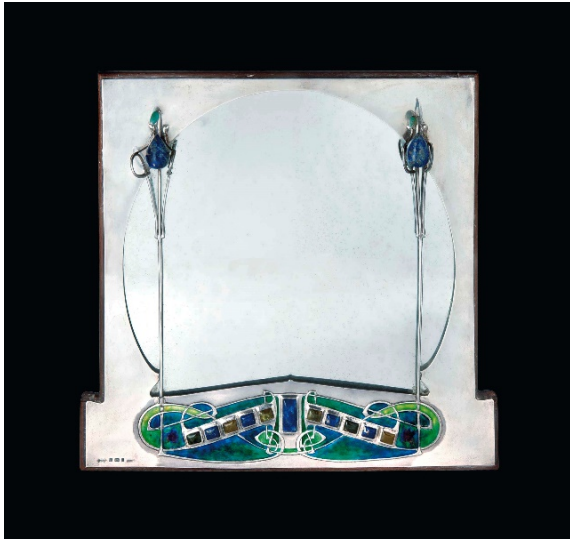


Fig 2 Rose bowl (private collection).1902 "Cloisonné" enamels across Celtic entrelac



Fig 3 Cigarette case (private collection) 1904 "Cloisonné" enamels across Celtic entrelac. The enamel is in fact held between repousse silver so not quite champlevé or cloisonné.



The jewellery may or may not have come before or after this. Based on the chronology of design drawings in the Liberty Jewellery sketch book I think the jewellery would have been introduced at about the same time in c 1901. Images show the true splendour of Knox's work in this style of which the pendant I have for sale is a lovely and understated example.

Fig 4 Pendant Model 1267 top left (page 246 Dr Steve Martin book Archibald Knox). Also shown as Fig 4a

Fig 4 Necklace Model 8268 lower centre (page 246 Dr Steve Martin book Archibald Knox)



Fig 4a (courtesy of Van den Bosch gallery)



Fig 5 Necklace model 1113 (page 247 Dr Stephen Martin's book Archibald Knox)



Fig 6 (Left) Pendant (page 259 Dr Stephen Martin's book Archibald Knox, Tadema Gallery)

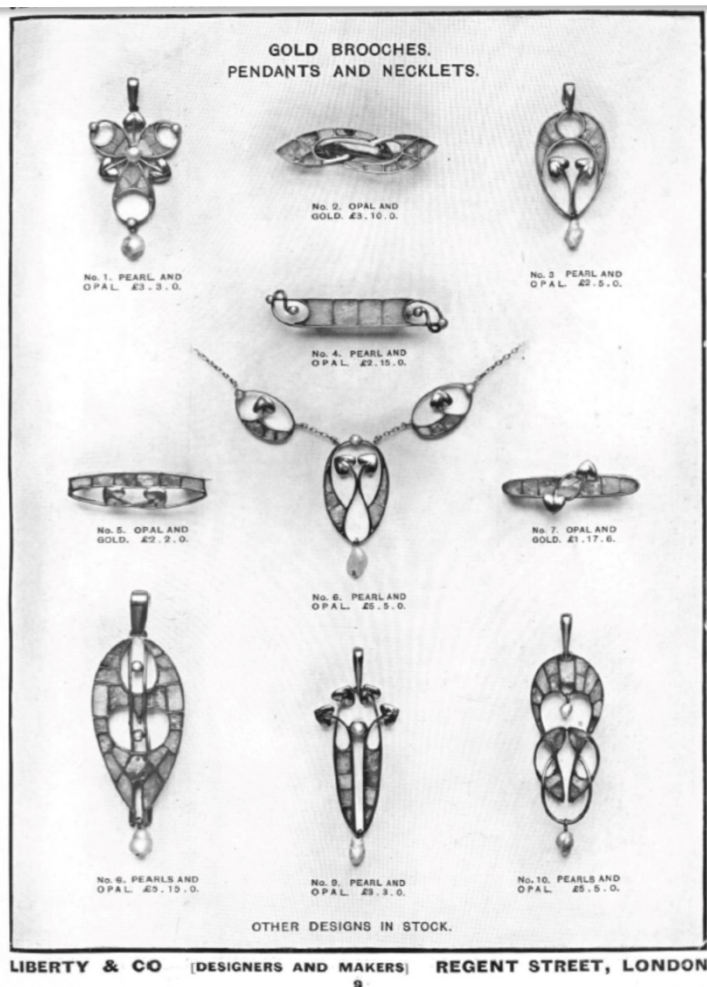
Fig 7 (Right) Pendant (Tadema Gallery)



Fig 8 Bracelet (The Peartree Collection)



The range of jewellery to this style by Liberty is illustrated in a Liberty catalogue from c 1905 and shown below.



How do we know these are Knox's designs and his innovation? In fact we don't know with total certainty because no signed drawing linking the known pieces to Knox exists. However, the style of the work contains so many other features of Knox's repertoire these are very confident attributions, though some of the jewellery may also be Liberty adaptations of Knox designs, which was very common and indeed Knox complained about in a surviving letter to one of his students.

Since publishing the original version of this paper I have now found a Rene Lalique brooch from c 1900 that adopts a similar technique – see Fig 8b below. Was Liberty/Knox inspired by Lalique, or perhaps the other way round!?. The date of the brooch is unknown but approximately dates to 1900 at the same time that Knox was innovating his own style.

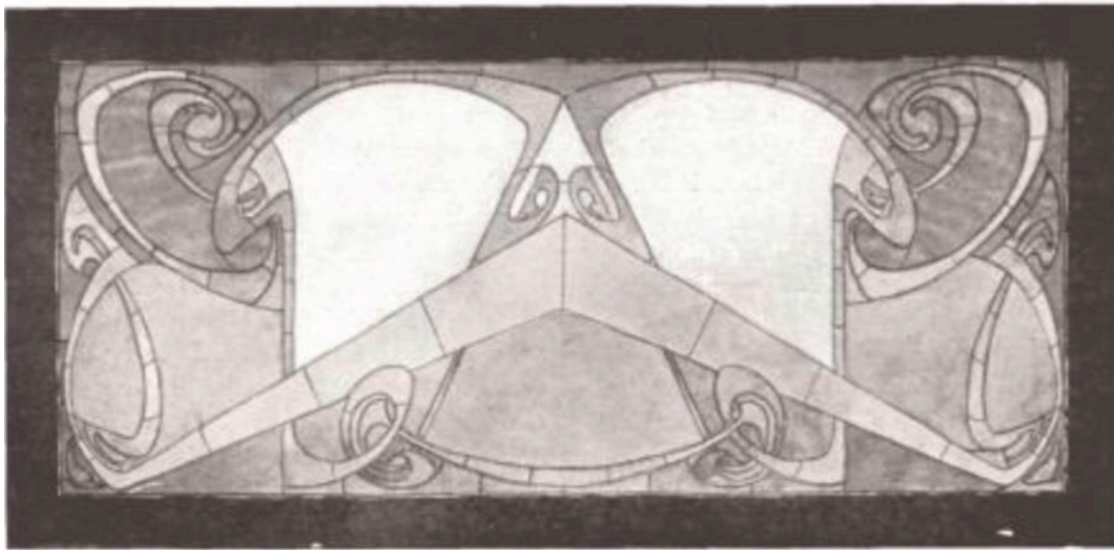
Fig 8b Rene Lalique brooch with “cloisonne opal” (Christies 2017)



Finally, and to throw a small spanner in the works, the image below (Fig 9) of a work displayed at the Internationalen Kunstausstellung Dresden (International Art Exhibition Dresden) from May 1901 and reproduced in *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* in June 1901. It was designed by the Viennese architect Rudolf Melichar. It is clearly very much in the style of Knox and his cloisonne work.

Might this in fact pre-date Knox's work? The mirror referred to above assayed for 1901 could not have been assayed before May 1901 – The Birmingham assay office's date calendar ran approximately, from May each year, not calendar years. It is compared to the detail on Knox's mirror to show the similarity of design.

Fig 9 Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration June 1901



Could it be that Knox himself, directly or indirectly via Liberty, was inspired by this work. I cannot disprove this but I believe it incredibly unlikely that an Austrian hand would originate this design. I am confident that it was inspired by Liberty/Knox's work and represents Knox's poorly acknowledged but significant influence on design across Europe, which indeed gave rise to the very term "Liberty style".

Perhaps there is an even earlier mirror, or similar design, still to be found assayed for 1900!

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