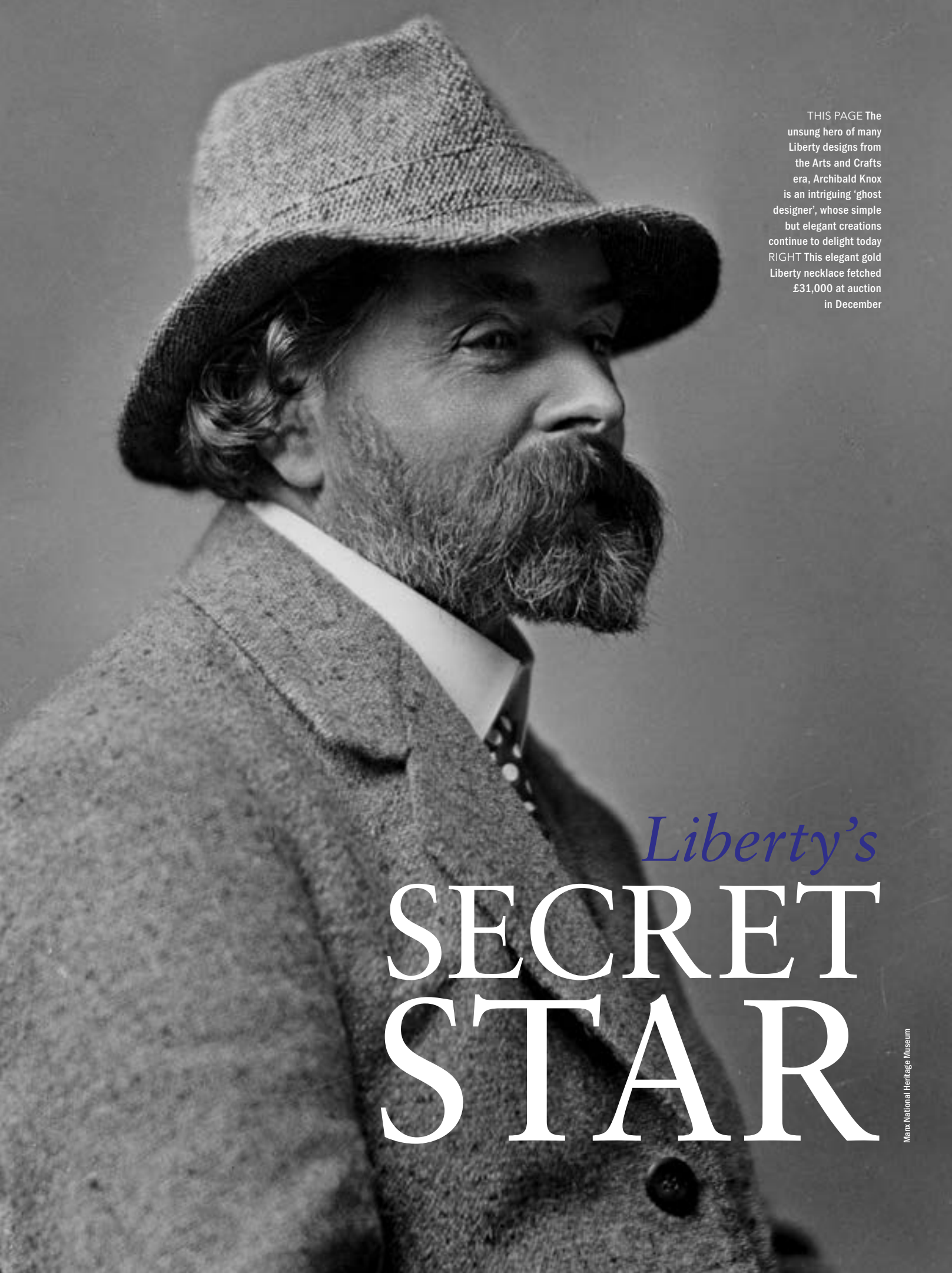


THIS PAGE The unsung hero of many Liberty designs from the Arts and Crafts era, Archibald Knox is an intriguing 'ghost designer', whose simple but elegant creations continue to delight today
 RIGHT This elegant gold Liberty necklace fetched £31,000 at auction in December

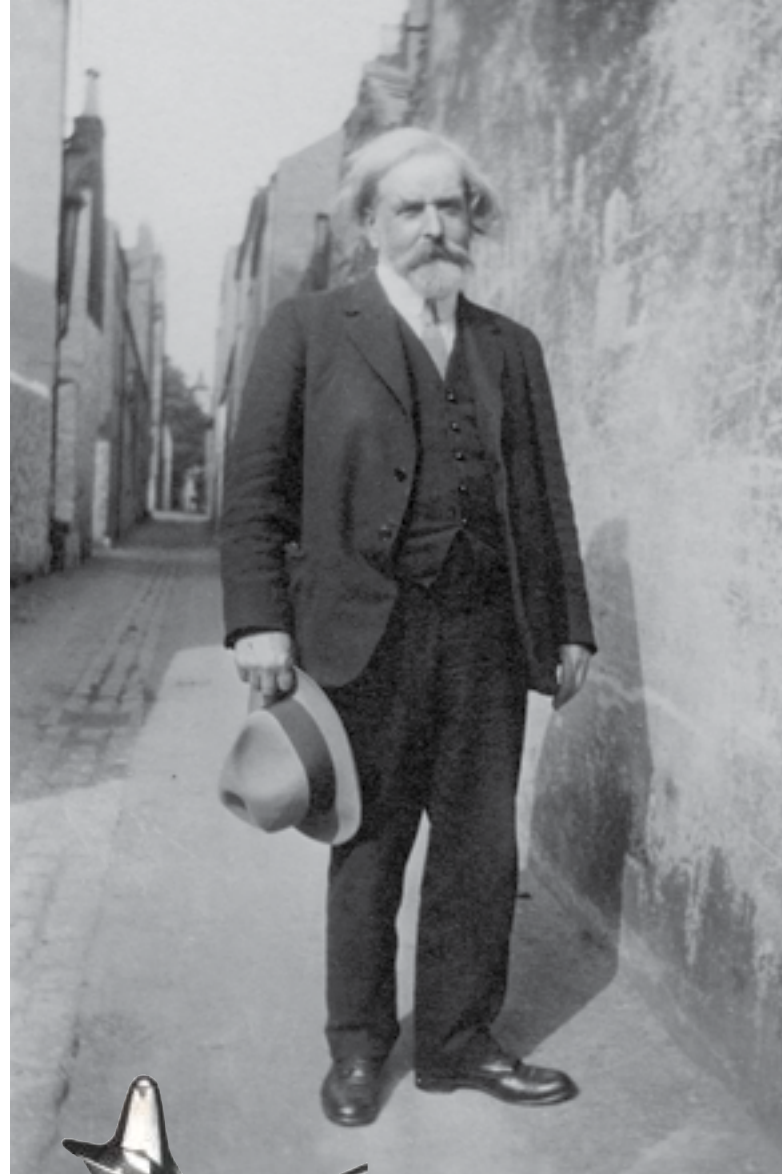


Liberty's
**SECRET
 STAR**

Manx National Heritage Museum



Last December saw the auction of an elegant Liberty necklace, designed by enigmatic Arts and Crafts designer Archibald Knox. As **ELLIE TENNANT** discovers, the sale revealed a renewed interest in this mysterious man's work and life



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he saleroom at Mallams in Oxford on 10th December 2015 was packed – standing room only – with bidders all straining to see the most hotly anticipated lot of the day, a glittering gold necklace (c1900–1904) designed by Archibald Knox (1864–1933) with peacock-like enamel plates graduating from green to blue, shimmering subtly. ‘It was a really exciting day,’ recalls jewellery specialist Louise Dennis of Mallams. ‘The estimate was £5,000 to £7,000 but we had lots of interest and the price kept rising. When the hammer finally fell at £31,000, going to a private UK collector, there was a round of applause.’

The necklace beat the previous record for a piece of Knox jewellery, a gold and turquoise necklace that sold at Sotheby’s New York in 1999 for \$32,473 (£22,500). ‘Part of the reason the necklace we sold fetched such a large sum was its provenance,’ says Louise. ‘It was gifted to Hilda Rundman (1869–1956) by Girton College, Cambridge, to thank her for her fundraising efforts. She was at the forefront of social change and became an MP in 1928 – this is a necklace with real impact that suits a strong woman.’

The sinuous entrelac (Celtic knot) curves of this simple but elegant Celtic Revival necklace also give the piece lasting appeal. ‘The design is what makes it so special,’ says Louise. ‘As with many Arts and Crafts pieces, its worth is not in the intrinsic value of the materials but in the good design. It’s perfectly proportioned, the swag drops beautifully and it looks gorgeous when it’s on.’

The design for the necklace was found in an archive Liberty sketchbook and is thought to date from 1900–1904, Knox’s most prolific period when he designed a plethora of items for Liberty, including silverware, pewterware, textiles, carpets, clocks, mirrors, jewellery and furniture.

Knox arrived in London from the Isle of Man in 1897 to teach art. ‘He started working for Liberty that year through an independent studio called the Silver Studio and he then worked directly for Liberty until 1906,’ says Dr Stephen Martin, Pennsylvania-based historian, author, honorary president of the Archibald Knox Society and the man who is generally referred to in the industry as ‘the oracle’ on all things Knox-related, having studied him for 25 years. He has edited two books on his subject and his third, *Knox*, is due out in November. Knox designed many

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Knox in a lane behind his studio and home at 70 Athol Street, Douglas on the Isle of Man; a pewter and enamel ‘Tudric’ clock designed by Knox for Liberty c1905; Knox’s silver, enamel and turquoise box for Liberty c1904; a silver flagon by Knox for Liberty c1903, which along with the box is from the collection of Dr Stephen Martin



ABOVE, TOP A panorama of the southern end of the Isle of Man, which greatly influenced Knox, with a Celtic Cross in the foreground ABOVE, BOTTOM A gold brooch with a single opal, designed by Knox for Liberty c1900-1904

pieces for the first Liberty ‘Cymric’ silver catalogue, which was published in May 1899 and for the ‘Tudric’ pewter range launched in 1902. ‘Some say he produced about 500 designs for Liberty but I’ve counted at least 1,000,’ says Stephen. ‘It intrigues me that an individual artist can have a period of such exceptional creativity. The time and the skill and the mystery came together for one shining moment – he was the brightest star for that short length of time.’

An underappreciated talent

Knox wasn’t recognised or celebrated as a leading Arts and Crafts designer until the 1970s. ‘The Silver Studio was a brand that masked Knox with

obscurity and Liberty had a policy of not crediting individual designers, preferring instead to promote the Liberty name,’ says Anthony Bernbaum, director of the Archibald Knox Society and founder of Arts and Crafts gallery The Peartree Collection in London. In 1975, a few V&A curators put together an exhibition called Liberty 1875-1975, which introduced Knox as a principal designer. Stephen adds: ‘Before that, nobody paid much attention to him. He’s one of the most gifted and underappreciated designers of the last century.’

Between 1880 and 1910, Knox’s name was only mentioned six times in major decorative arts journals, whereas William Morris was mentioned 750 times. This has led Anthony to refer to ➤

KNOX STYLE: OUR PICK OF THE HOTTEST LOTS

A ‘Cymric’ mirror designed by Archibald Knox in 1903 for Liberty, made from silver with enamel, lapis lazuli, amazonite and green hardstones. It sold for £50,000 (est £40,000–£60,000) at Christie’s London on 30th October 2013



This elegant silver cup and cover, designed by Knox for Liberty in 1901, fetched £43,000 at Hampstead Auctions, London, on 27th March 2014, eventually going to a buyer for an incredible 10 times the estimate of £4,000–£6,000



On 19th May 2015, a collection of Knox pieces belonging to the late collector Sarita Warshawsky went to auction at Sotheby’s New York. This stunning 1901 ‘Cymric’ clock in silver with enamel, turquoise and green hardstones was estimated to make \$20,000–\$30,000 (£13,850–£20,800) but it went for \$125,000 (£86,500)



This rare three-piece 1903 ‘Cymric’ coffee service with tray, sugar basin, milk jug and coffee pot fetched \$118,750 (£82,300) at the same Sotheby’s New York auction on 19th May 2015 – much more than the \$30,000–\$50,000 (£20,800–£34,500) estimate

Mallams, Oxford; Manx National Heritage Museum; Alamy; Christie’s Images Limited 2013; Hampstead Auctions; Sotheby’s

Knox would stand for hours in a soaking rain, transfixed by the scene before him, unwilling to take shelter

Knox as a 'ghost designer'. Today, his pieces are highly sought after. Brad Pitt is rumoured to be a keen collector (he even called his son Knox), while auction prices for Knox items are at an all-time high. 'I think people are returning to the ideals shared during the Arts and Crafts era,' says Louise. 'In a world dominated by mass production, we seek quality craftsmanship and pieces that represent independence of spirit.'

An enigmatic character

Despite his design legacy, little is known of Knox's personal life, beyond the bare facts. Born in 1864, in the Manx village of Cronkbourne to Scottish parents, Knox enrolled at the newly-opened Douglas School of Art in 1880, where he later became a pupil-teacher in 1884. He left for London three years later to teach art and pursue his love of design. He lived on and off on the Isle of Man and in London in the years that followed, designing remotely for Liberty when he was away, until 1913 when he finally settled on the island. He continued to teach art and produce a rich range of work until his death in Douglas in 1933. The Isle of Man was never conquered by the Romans, and remains a wild Celtic outpost of ancient spirituality and breathtaking natural beauty. It seems Knox was heavily influenced by his environment and island life.

'Knox would reportedly stand for hours in a soaking rain, transfixed by the scene before him, unwilling to take shelter,' says Stephen. 'The Isle of Man has a vibrant folkloric reality. Knox's enamels and



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
An ornamental turquoise earthenware jardinière designed by Knox for Liberty c1900-1905; he designed this 'Bollelin' charger in pewter with a blue-green enamel decoration for the Liberty 'Tudric' range c1902-1905; an interesting silver and enamel brooch designed by Knox for Liberty c1902



watercolours are likened to the sky and the landscape, but the mystery in his work comes from his relationship with that culture.'

Ancient carved stone Celtic crosses on the island influenced Knox's entrelac designs and, fittingly, he went on to design his own stones – gravestones for islanders – as well as one for Liberty founder Arthur Lasenby in 1917, long after he stopped working for the store.

It is Knox's modesty and simplicity that inspires Stephen the most. 'He was shy and introverted, unlike many artists' he says. Knox's designs reflect his personality. Marrying form, function and decoration, they are simple, elegant and subtle. 'His work contrasts greatly with the frenzied female forms of continental art nouveau style at that time,' Stephen adds. 'There's something unearthly and magical about his designs. You can almost feel the spirits in his work. The Isle of Man is linked to the Celtic god Manannán mac Lir, so the island is suffused in mystery. My favourite piece of Knox's pewter is a cross clock, which captures this spiritual quality of the god and of the island. It shimmers – not like the glint of silver – but like the sheen of the moon. It's exquisite.' ■

EXPLORE KNOX'S WORLD

Head to the Manx National Heritage Museum in Douglas on the Isle of Man to see examples of Knox's metalwork and watercolour paintings.

'Although the world knows Archibald Knox for his Celtic designs for Liberty, on the Isle of Man he is best known for his distinctive watercolours of the Manx landscape,' says Yvonne Cresswell, curator of social history at the Manx National Heritage Museum. 'Knox produced hundreds of watercolours but rarely exhibited them. The vast majority are unsigned and undated – only a handful he gave to friends were signed.'

If you visit the Isle of Man, you can also see several war memorials that Knox designed after the First World War. Some of these can be seen at: St

Matthew's Church, North Quay, Douglas; Lonan New Church; and Kirk Michael Parish Church. He also designed gravestones and several of these designs can be found in Braddan Cemetery and the Douglas Borough Cemetery. Knox's own grave is in Braddan Cemetery. His gravestone reads: 'Archibald Knox, artist, humble servant of God in the ministry of the beautiful.'

- Manx National Heritage Museum, Douglas, Isle of Man, IM1 3LY. 01624 648000; manxnationalheritage.im
- Browse the collection online at imuseum.im
- For video lectures, information about designs and Knox's life, visit archibaldknoxociety.com
- Find out more about Archibald Knox in the new

book *Knox* edited by Dr Stephen Martin, due to be published by ArtMedia Press and distributed by Antique Collectors' Club in November 2016. For more information, contact Stephen at drsamartin@gmail.com

WHERE TO BUY

- Patch Rogers, The Clockhouse, Lombard Street, Petworth, West Sussex, GU28 0AG. 01798 345266; gallery.acfc.co.uk
- The Peartree Collection, Anthony Bernbaum, visits by appointment only. Exhibiting at Olympia International Art & Antiques Fair, 27th June to 3rd July 2016. 020 8731 8023; thepeartreecollection.com