EHD

Royal Pavilion, Art Gallery & Museums. Brighton.

ENGLISH SILVER AND PEWTER 1880~1910

Designers associated with the Arts and Crafts movement, such as C. R. Ashbee, produced fine metalwork of restrained design from the late 1880s, but Ashbee's commitment to hand crafting meant that his output was small and highly priced. Arthur Liberty had no such scruples about the use of machinery, although he was concerned with raising standards of design and public taste. The 'Cymric' silver range, produced from 1899 by Liberty's in conjunction with the Birmingham firm of W. H. Haseler, was mass-produced and reached a comparatively wide market without sacrificing quality of design.

LIBERTY'S

Liberty's of Regent Street in London, was set up by Arthur Lazenby Liberty in 1875. He had been 'Oriental Manager'

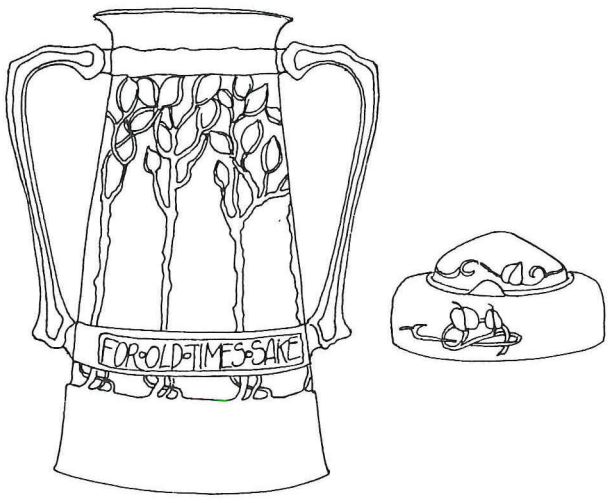

Fig. 1. Liberty "Tudric' pewter tankard and inkwell, c. 1905. Robertson Collection 300391/2

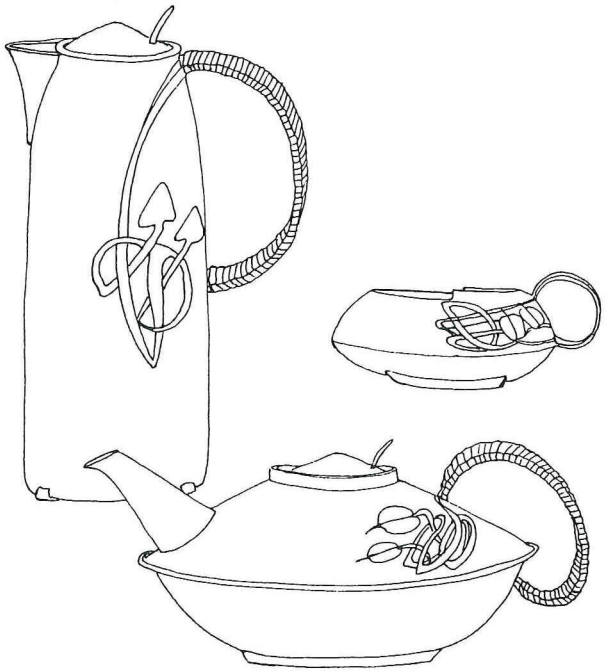

Fig. 2. Liberty "Tudric" tea service designed by A. Knox, c. 1903. Robertson Collection 300382/5

for the firm of Farmer and Rogers for twelve years previously, and at first based his trade upon the oriental objects so popular at the time. Although increased demand later led to a drop in the quality of items imported from Japan, Arthur Liberty's taste was formed by the earliest and best examples, and he managed to retain this standard in the items he sold.

The quality of Liberty's merchandise is reflected in the list of his clientele, which includes William Morris, Ruskin, Burne-Jones, E. W. Godwin, and many other eminent artists and designers. Those who associated themselves with the Aesthetic Movement of the 1870s and '80s found Liberty's a rich source of the

high-quality porcelain, lacquer, and pastel-coloured silks considered essential for an 'artistic' interior at the time.

There had been a jewellery department in Liberty's from 1883, but the first pieces in a recognisable 'Liberty style' were sold there from 1899. Silver jewellery incorporating blue and green enamels, designed by Bernard Cuzner, Rex Silver, and Jessie M. King, was an instant success. The 'Cymric' style was largely created, however, by Archibald Knox, who produced over 400 designs for Liberty, the majority for metalwork.

Knox (1864-1933) had studied Celtic design as a young man, and grew up on the Isle of Man surrounded by the ancient Celtic crosses. His introduction to Liberty's probably came through the architect and designer M. H. Baillie Scott, who also worked for the firm. Archibald Knox used his intimate knowledge of Celtic Art forms when he began to supply designs (at first for fabrics and wallpapers) around 1895. His silver designs are a brilliant but disciplined fusion of

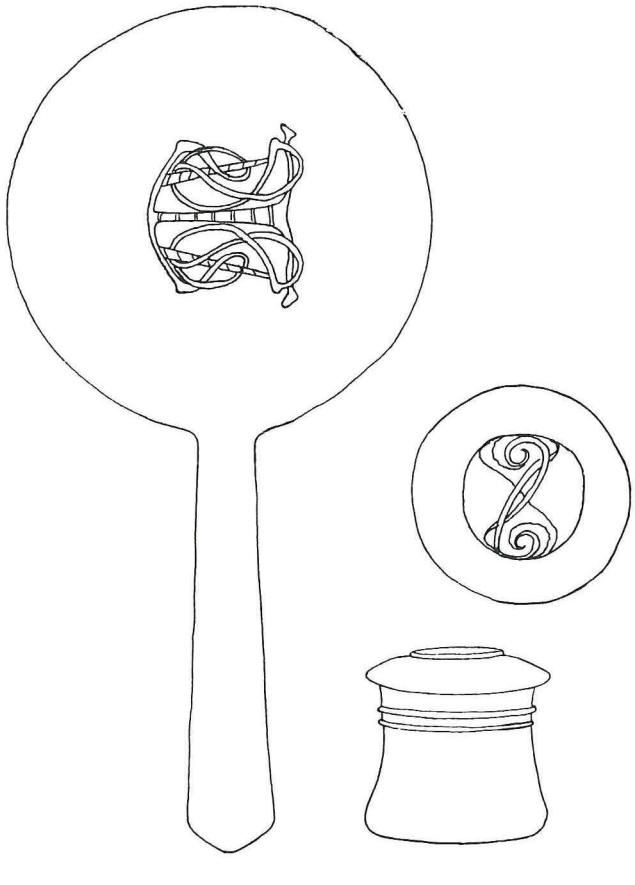

Fig. 3. Liberty 'Cymric' silver toilet set, c. 1905. Robertson Collection 300362/72

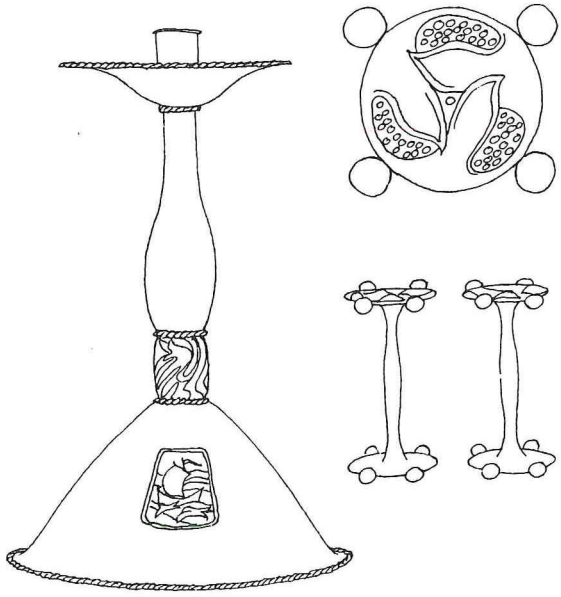

Fig. 4. Silver candlestick designed by C. R. Ashbee, c. 1905. Robertson Collection 300375
Liberty silver knife rests, c. 1905. Robertson Collection 300378/9

Celtic and stylised plant or Art Nouveau motifs. Enamel and semi-precious stones are also used for their decorative effect.

The silver toilet set in the Museum collection (fig. 3) was sold by Liberty's, and has enamel plaques in the Celtic style, although it was not designed by Knox, and lacks his flowing style. Also in the Museum is a pair of silver knife rests (fig. 4) with a stylised pomegranate motif, again employing enamels. The elegance of these pieces becomes more apparent when they are compared with a typically flamboyant piece of Art Nouveau silver, the bowl designed by Kate Harris and made by Hutton of Sheffield in 1900 (fig. 5).

In the 1890s there was an increase in production of pewter ware, particularly in Germany, and Liberty's stocked pieces by such German firms as J. P. Kayser of Krefeld. The popularity of these items may well have influenced the decision to start a range of pewter on the same lines as the 'Cymric' silver. Pewter (an alloy of tin and lead or copper) was readily cast into complex Art Nouveau forms and its relative cheapness meant Liberty's designs could reach a wider public.

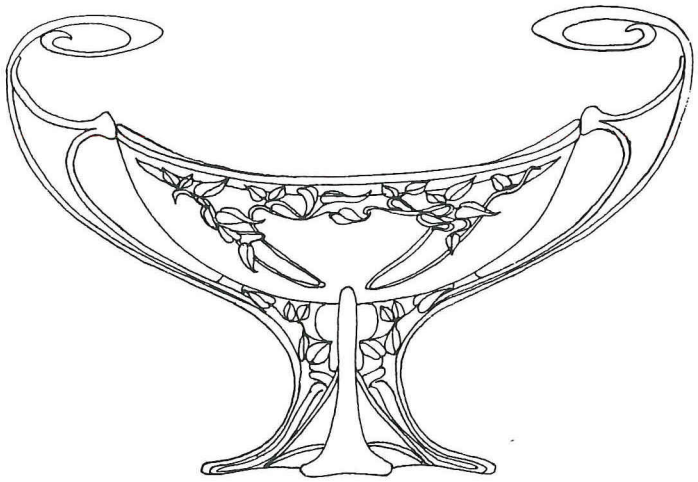

Fig. 5. Silver and glass bowl designed by Kate Harris, 1900. Robertson Collection 300376/7

This new range was named 'Tudric', and sold from about 1903. Knox also designed for pewter, although many designs originally produced for the 'Cymric' range were used. In the Museum collection is a pewter tea service by Knox (fig. 2) with cane-bound handles and a design of honesty, a very popular motif around the turn of the century. It is also found on a Liberty's pewter inkpot and tankard in the collection. (fig. 1)

C. R. ASHBEE

C. R. Ashbee (1863-1942) was another designer whose metalwork echoed the Celtic style. The similarities between some of his designs and those produced by W. H. Haseler for Liberty were sufficient to cause Ashbee to complain. He found Haseler's attempts to make machine-made metalwork appear handcrafted particularly abhorrent.

Ashbee, an architect and designer, launched his 'Guild and School of Handicrafts' in 1888. His aim was to take in young craftsmen and train them in design for their specific craft, while workshops run by members of the Guild produced and sold handicrafts to support the school. It was based in the East End of London until 1902, when he moved all his craftsmen, with their families, to the village of Chipping Camden in Gloucestershire.

In this rural setting, Ashbee felt that he and his men would be more able to create their work in harmony with nature and each other, away from the corrupting influence of London. The Guild's activities included cabinet-making, carving and decorative painting, and the operation of the Essex House Press, started with equipment from William Morris' Kelmscott Press.

The main emphasis of the Guild came more and more to be placed on metalwork, particularly silverware, enamelling and jewellery. Ashbee had a considerable knowledge of English silverware, and this, coupled with experimentation at the workbench with his craftsmen, led to the development of a distinctive Guild style. Multiple wire threads, enamelling and semi-precious stones were combined with elements from Celtic, Elizabethen and 16th-century German metalwork, to produce a highly distinctive and refined style.

In the Museum collection is a silver candlestick designed by Ashbee (fig. 4) incorporating a blue and green enamel plaque. This shows a ship in full sail, known as the 'Craft of the Guild', which is found on many of Ashbee's designs for the Guild.

DR. CHRISTOPHER DRESSER

Designer and Professor of Botany Dr. Christopher Dresser (1834-1904) was, like Arthur Liberty, one of the first to appreciate the importance of Japanese design and philosophy. He was commissioned by the British Chamber of Commerce to report on Japanese manufactures, and visited the country just after the Royal Revolution of 1868 which opened up

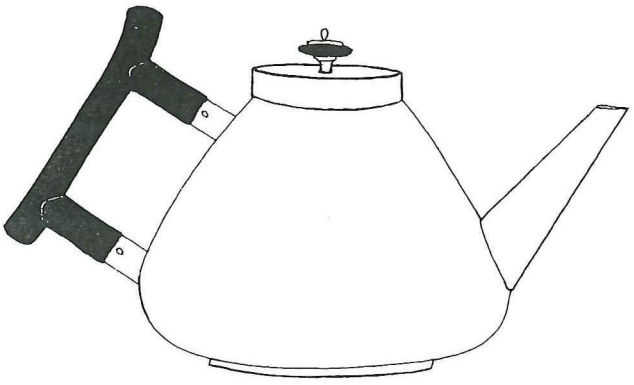

Fig. 6. Silver plated teapot designed by Christopher Dresser. 1878. Robertson Collection 300390

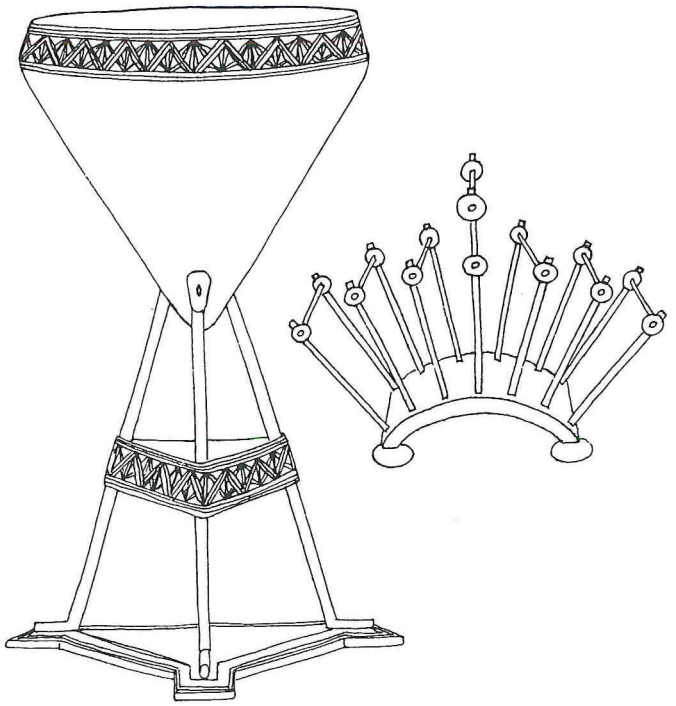

Fig.7. Silver vase and a silver-plated letter rack designed by Christopher Dresser. 1881. Robertson Collection 300374, 300389

trading between Britain and Japan. In 1879 he started a short-lived 'Japanese Warehouse' in Farringdon Street, London.

The following year, Dresser set up the 'Art Furnishers' Alliance' in Bond Street (Arthur Liberty invested £300 in this new venture). It sold metalwork, furniture, glass and pottery designed largely in Dresser's own studio, in which the young Archibald Knox worked for a period.

Dresser saw a definite link between design and the study of botany, but disagreed with the use of naturalistic plant forms as decoration. He was more concerned with the fundamental laws of geometry governing plants, which he felt must also determine the form of designed objects. The simple geometric shapes he derived from nature were combined with references to Japanese, Egyptian and pre-Columbian art; Dresser had a scholarly understanding of historic ornament, though he was highly selective in his use of it.

The conical silver vase in the Museum collection (fig.7) made in Birmingham in 1881, has bands of engraved geometric decoration, and its tripod legs refer to ancient Egyptian forms. Dresser's ceramic designs (see Museum collection) reflect particularly his interest in Peruvian design.

Also in the collection is a silver-plated teapot (fig.6) with a Japanese-inspired ebony handle, made by Hukin and Heath (Birmingham and London) to Dresser's design in 1878. It shows his concern with function: in one of his books he uses diagrams to illustrate his theory on the application of handles and spouts to vessels. Dresser was also anxious to keep his costs low; being mass-produced and only silver-plated, this teapot would not have been too expensive.

The letter rack in the Museum (ma by Hukin and Heath in 1881) is also plat it is another fine example of Dresser's ability to reduce a functional object to extreme simplicity without sacrificing elegance.

Dresser did much in his lifetime t raise standards of design for industria production, and also the status of the designer, whom he felt was more impo tant to society than the fine artist.

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Compiled and designed by Sarah Patterson.