

George Bain (1881–1968) was a Scottish born artist who was studied at the School of Applied Art, the Edinburgh School of Art, The Royal College of Art in London and Royal Scottish Academy Life School and the Edinburgh College of Art. ¹ When studying, he worked to support himself as a newspaper artist and as an illustrator of books and magazines. ² This was to provide him with a commercial awareness that he utilized later in his career. Whilst at the Edinburgh College of Art he gained a DA degree in 1915. During World War I, he joined the Royal Engineers where he worked as an artist in the 26th Division's theatre. The end of the war saw him return to Kirkcaldy High School, where he had previously been teaching, to take up the post of Principle Art Teacher. He remained in teaching until 1946 when he tried to start a College of Celtic Cultures in Drumnadrochit but failed due to lack of financial support. In was whilst he was in Drumnadrochit that he was introduced by Hugh A. Fraser, M.B.E., M.A. to the work of J. Romilly Allen that was to become such a huge influence on his later work. ³ Bain moved to Codsall, Staffordshire along with his wife, Jessie, in 1952 where he lived until his death in 1968. ⁴

Bain is recognized as being an important influence in modern Celtic Art. He is credited with working out how the early Celtic artists created their distinctive designs, especially spirals and knotwork. What started out as a hobby to understand the process the original artists used developed into a serious body of research. This, in turn, led to the publication of a series of booklets about specific aspects of Celtic Art (starting in 1945) which were eventually published together under the title, *Celt Art, The Methods of Construction*, in 1951. ⁵ Once he understood the mathematics used in the construction, Bain was able to reproduce the original designs. However, this was not enough to satisfy Bain who believed that "...the mere copying of the ancient work is as valueless as it is impossible, but by understanding the methods, new designs and even new methods in this peculiar art may be produced". ⁶ As he so clearly states in his book, "Theory may inform but Practice convinces." ⁷ Bain believed that his students and fellow artists should be able to create their own Celtic Art based on personal interpretation of the early Celtic Art. This was the premise for his work, which encompassed a vast range of applications from greetings cards to carpet designs to knitting pattern designs and much, much more. ⁸ By talking a small

¹ Groam House Museum, *Georg Bain Collection (date unknown)*
<https://georgebain.groamhouse.org.uk/about/> [accessed 15 May 2024].

² Groam House Museum

³ George, Bain, *Celtic Art : The Methods of Construction* (Constable, 1977), p. frontispiece

⁴ Groam House Museum

⁵ George, Bain, *Celtic Art*

⁶ George, Bain, *Celtic Art*

⁷ George, Bain, *Celtic Art*

⁸ George, Bain, *Celtic Art*

sample of Bain's work, it is possible to very clearly see how he has used key elements of Celtic Art that originate from carved stones and ancient manuscripts and applied them in a way that is both modern and yet obviously still identifiable as Celtic at the same time to everyday objects. Some examples of which are shown below:

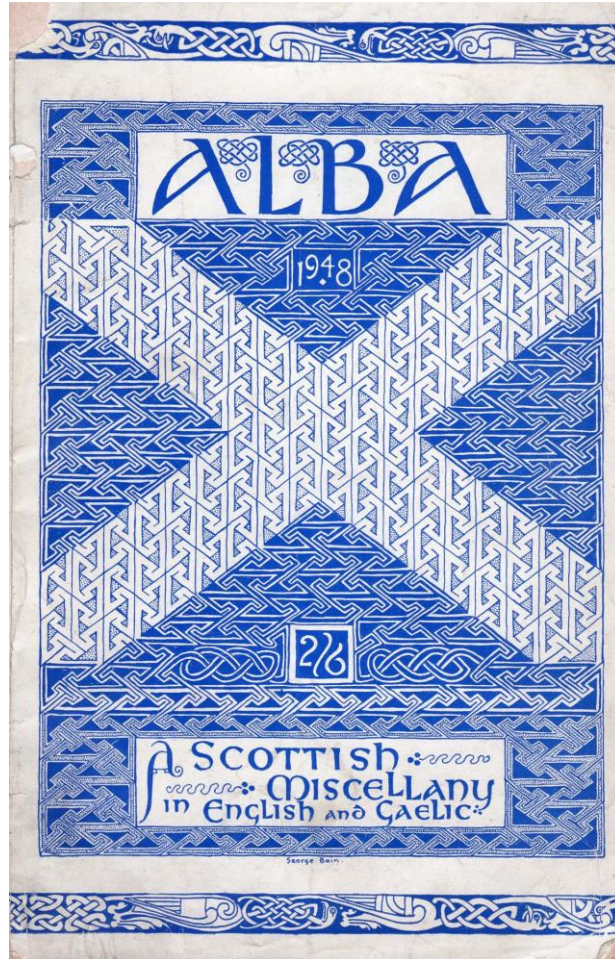


Figure 1: Magazine Cover by G. Bain. Credit: Museumcrush.org



Figure 2: Key Pattern Knitting Chart designed by G. Bain. Credit: Groamhouse.org

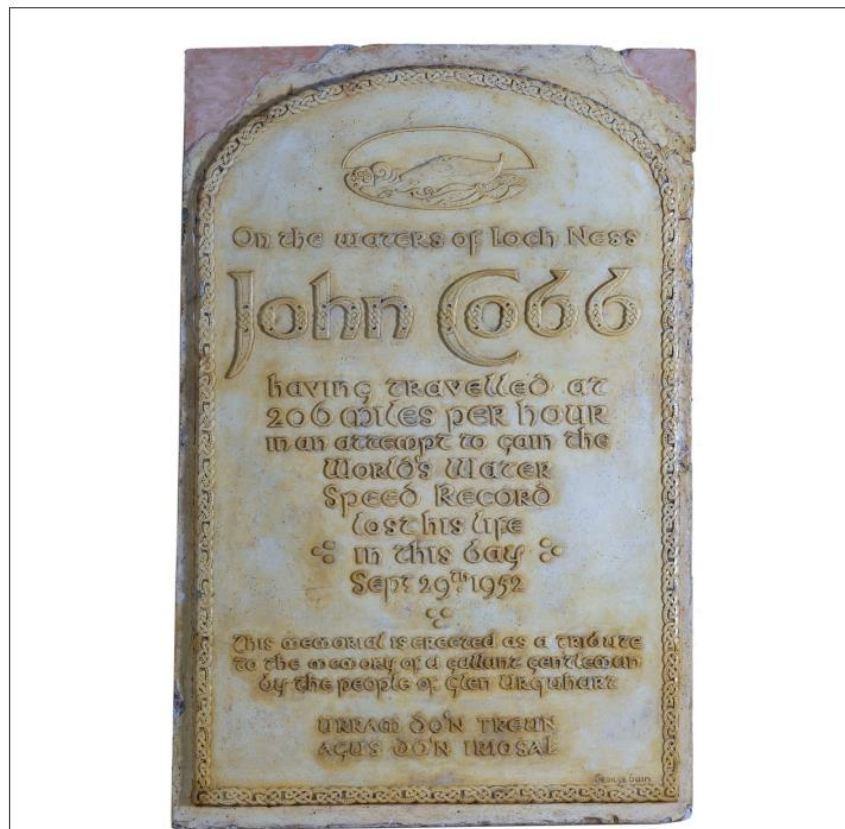


Figure 3: Memorial plaque with knotwork border designed by G. Bain. Credit: Groamhouse.org



Figure 4: A Celtic Hunting Rug, designed by G. Bain. Credit: Bonhams Auction House

In each of the four examples above, Bain has incorporated Celtic Knotwork into his design. In Figures 1 and 2, it is used in a more modern geometric, repeating style whereas in Figures 3 and 4 it is used in a more traditional way by defining a border around the design. The introduction to *Celt Art, The Methods of Construction*, provides a clear insight into the people who were highly influential to Bain's research and subsequent development of his own style of Celtic Art. The first person mentioned is J. Romilly Allen (1847-1907), who was a Welsh archaeologist.⁹ Allen's book *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland* published in 1903, marked the start of a new era in the analysis of Celtic design.¹⁰ In fact, Bain refers to Allen as 'the original pioneer in this form of research'.¹¹ Also mentioned by Bain in this introduction is Eoghan Carmichael who published *The Elements of Celtic Art* in 1922 and whom Bain credits with discovering key elements in the construction of knotwork panels (Pictish School).¹² Ella Carmichael, sister of Eoghan, provides a link to the next person Bain mentions in his introduction, the painter John Duncan 1866-1945).¹³ Duncan used Ella as inspiration for his drawing *Anima Celtica*, published in *The Evergreen*:

⁹ Dictionary of Welsh Biography, ALLEN, JOHN ROMILLY <https://biography.wales/article/s-ALLE-ROM-1847#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&manifest=https%3A%2F%2Fdamsssl.llgc.org.uk%2Fiiif%2F2.0%2F5174529%2Fmanifest.json&xywh=979%2C1041%2C1645%2C1353> [accessed 16 May 2024].

¹⁰ J. Romilly Allen (John Romilly), and Joseph Anderson, *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland* (Balgavies, Forfar: Pinkfoot, 1993)

¹¹ George, Bain, *Celtic Art*, p.22.

¹² George, Bain, *Celtic Art*, p. 45.

¹³ John Duncan, <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/artists/john-duncan> [accessed 16 May 2024]

Book of Spring, published in 1895.¹⁴ Duncan's painting of Tristan and Isolde (1912), may have shown Bain how traditional Celtic Art can be meaningfully incorporated into contemporary art.¹⁵ This is especially true of the Celtic style design on the sleeve of Tristan's garment. Simpler designs by Duncan, such as a book cover for the deluxe edition of *Centenary Burns, 1896* are like work done by Bain.¹⁶

Groam House, an independent museum situated on the Black Isle in the Scottish Highland, houses the George Bain collection which is recognized as a Nationally Significant Collection (by Museum Galleries Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Government).¹⁷ The museum is located close to Drumnadrochit, where Bain had tried to establish a College of Celtic Cultures. There was a synergy between his drawings and the sculpture displayed at Groam House that led to some of his work being loaned to the museum for an exhibition in 1997. Bain's family concluded that Groam House would be a suitable place to receive his archive, including works not related to Pictish art. With the help of a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund in the mid-2000's plus monies from other sources, other works by Bain were acquired by the museum and added to the George Bain Collection providing an important resource for those interested in the work of Bain.

It is from the Groam House collection that the next two pieces of Bain's work have been selected for a more detailed analysis. Both are the designs of greetings cards and are most likely to date from just after World War II when Bain was working with William MacLean Publishers Ltd of Glasgow. This is the publisher who printed his original booklets on Celtic design and later merged them into *Celt Art, The Methods of Construction*. They were also responsible for commissioning Bain to produce greeting card designs and other illustrations for books and magazines they printed.

In the first example, see Figure 5., there is a large horseshoe in which is placed a triskel containing three horses. The repeating horse design in the roundel is identified by Bain as being taken from the horse on the Incised Inverurie Pictish stone (known as Inverurie 4), see Figure 6.¹⁸ The stone had only one horse, but Bain has cleverly manipulated that design to create something totally new by placing 3 identical images nose to tail, equidistant around the circle with their straight off-side forelegs linked in the center. The remaining three legs of each horse are carefully woven together with a continuous line of golden knotwork. Bain has added subtle detail to each of the horses in the form of lines of blue dots which outline some of the body, tail and legs. The horseshoe links to the horses in the roundel and to the ancient superstition of horseshoes bringing good luck, for this appears to be a Good Luck card. The horseshoe takes on an almost chalice-like form, appearing to hold the roundel safely within its heavily decorated form. The width of the

¹⁴ John, Duncan <https://dura-dundee.org.uk/2016/07/15/john-duncan/> [accessed 15 May 2024].

¹⁵ Tristan and Isolde <https://www.wikiart.org/en/john-duncan/tristan-and-isolde-1912> [accessed 16 May 2024].

¹⁶ Macdonald, Murdo, George Bain Memorial Lecture 2024 - Celtic Art Defined: Precursors of George Bain's Art, 18 April 2024 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gbg3_Ptsj9s [accessed 16 May 2024].

¹⁷ <https://groamhouse.org.uk/about>

¹⁸ Inverurie 4, <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/elphinstone/bbaf/location/inverurie/#faq65> [accessed 16 May 2024].

horseshoe is far greater than would be expected in an actual shoe but by drawing it like this, Bain has maximized the area in which he can decorate. In contrast to the roundel, the horseshoe is far more colourful and full of zoomorphic art as seen in the Book of Kells and noted on page 110 of *Celtic Art, The Methods of Construction*. Bain has used interlacing snakes and birds with sharp talons along with ribbons of knotwork to fill the space. The motifs feel soft and curvy, and Bain continues this feel by writing his acknowledgments along a curving line that mirrors the bottom of the horseshoe. As was usual with Bain's greetings cards, the message was written in both Gaelic and English using a font similar to that found in the Book of Kells. The entire design has a very coherent look and feel, akin to that of an ancient manuscript, but at the time it also has a modern twist.



Figure 5: Greeting card designed by G. Bain. Credit: Groamhouse.org



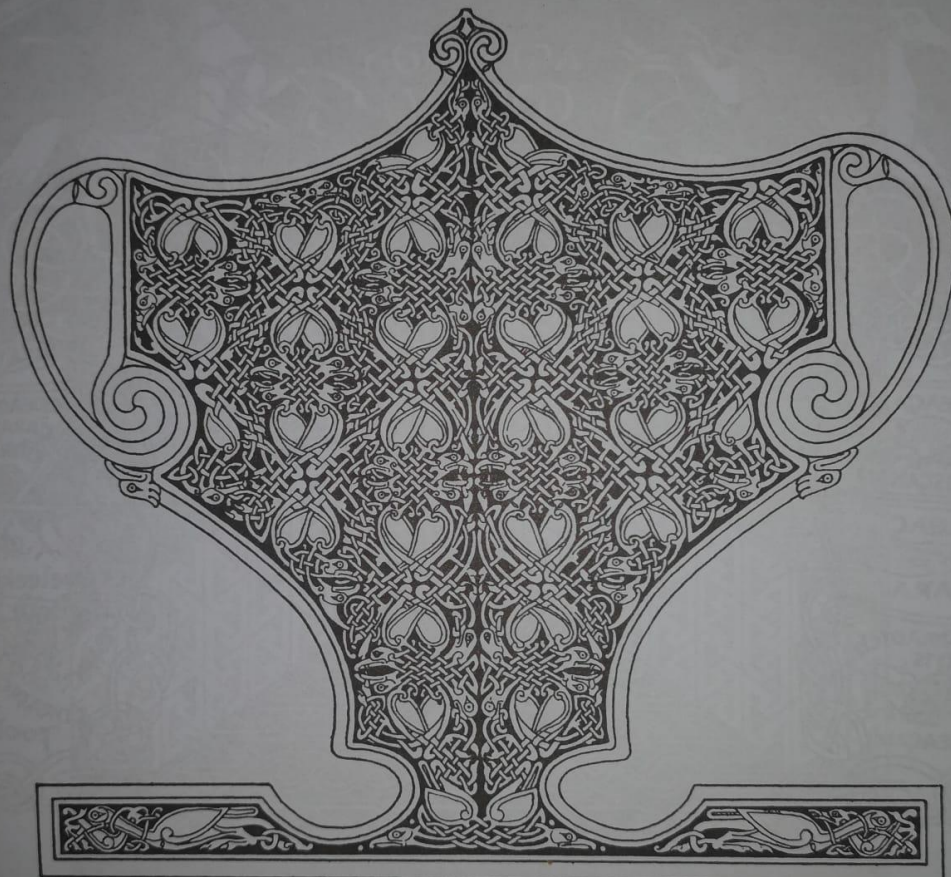
Figure 6: Inverurie 4 with design superimposed to show detail. Credit: University of Aberdeen

In the second example, see Figure 7., Bain has taken a very different approach to the first example. Here, he has created a shape that represents a large double-handled trophy. The bold outline is suggestive of metalwork with spirals and upside-down bird's heads supporting the handles. As you would expect, the trophy is symmetrical but so is the pattern of interlacing birds that adorns the trophy. In fact, it is symmetrical about the vertical axis. Figure 8 is taken from Bain's work, *Celt Art, The Methods of Construction*, and shows the design complete with his trademark message in both Galic and English. In fact, so synonymous with Bain is this pattern of interlocking birds that it is used on the cover of the 1977 version of his book, see Figure 9. Bain took inspiration for the pattern from the opening page of the Gospel of Luke in the Lindisfarne Gospels, see Figure 10.¹⁹ On this page this is an odd-shaped space on the lower left of the long descender of the letter q that the scribe has filled with interlacing birds, see close-up image, Figure 11.

¹⁹ <https://www.lindisfarne.org.uk/gospels/gospels2.htm> [accessed 16 May 2024].



Figure 7: 'Lindisfarne Birds', greeting card designed by G. Bain. Credit: Groamhouse.org



Designed by George Bain, with acknowledgements to an unknown artist of the Book of Lindisfarne

Thum boidh fòin fhaidh nan faidheal
Fillte ri dealbh do bheatha.

MAY THE BIRDS OF FRIENDSHIP OF THE GAEL BE EVER WOVEN INTO THE WEB OF YOUR LIFE.

Plate 11

Design for Greeting Card.

Figure 8: 'Lindisfarne Birds', black and white greeting card designed by G. Bain. Credit: G.Bain

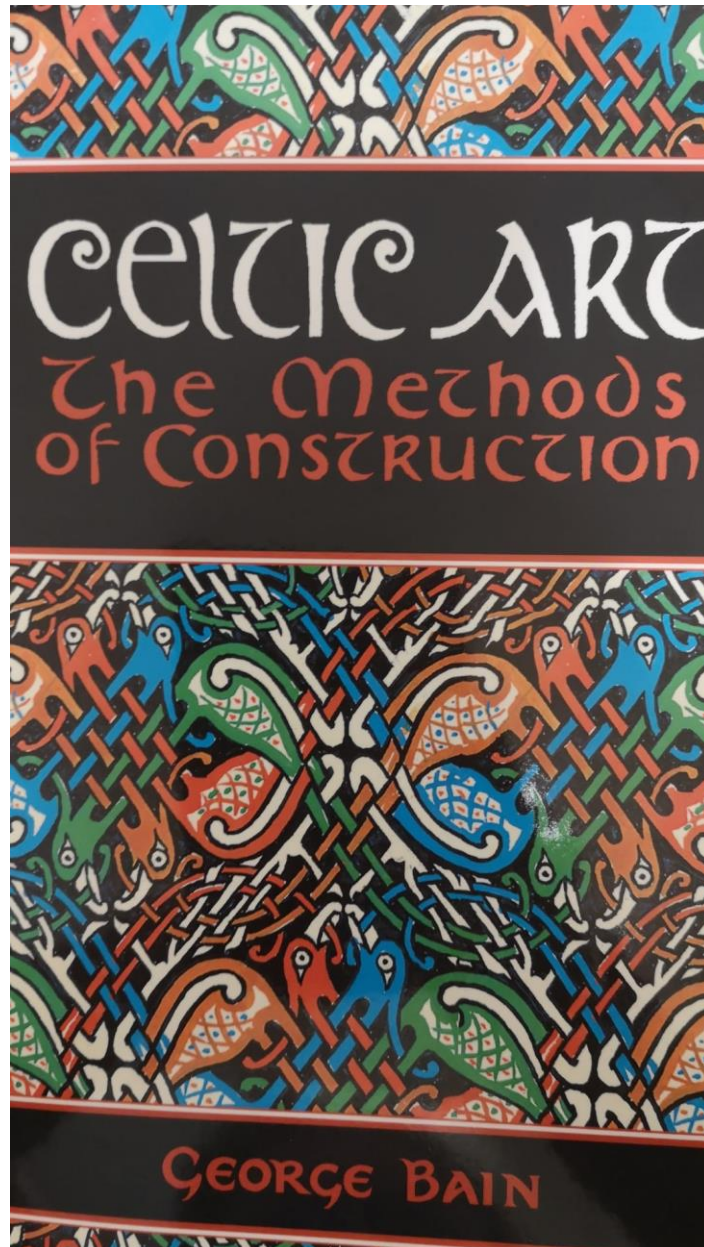


Figure 9: 'Lindisfarne Birds', coloured book cover by G. Bain. Credit: G.Bain

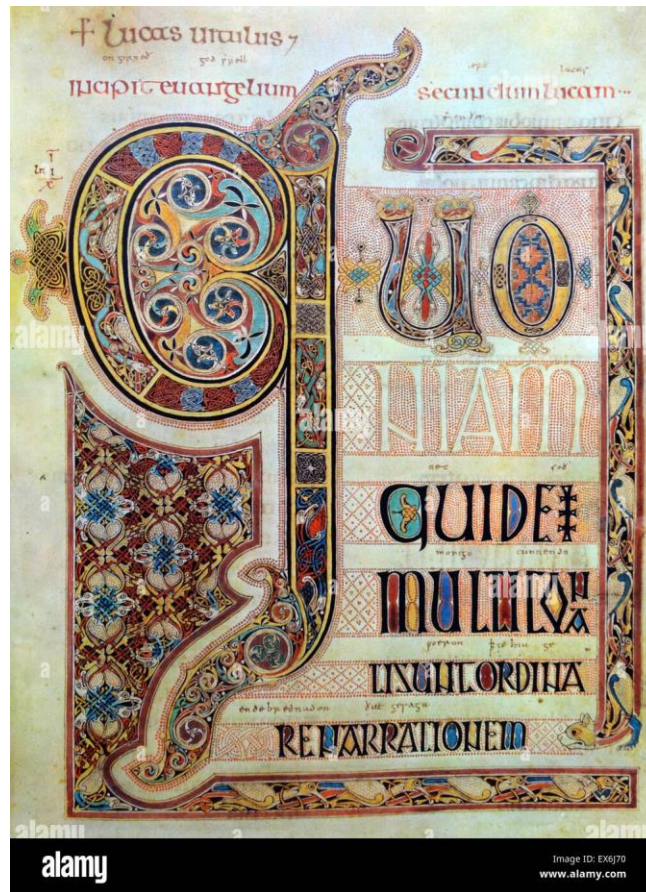


Figure 10: 'Lindisfarne Birds', opening page of the Gospel of Luke in the Lindisfarne Gospels. Credit: World History Archive



Figure 11: 'Lindisfarne Birds', detail taken from opening page of the Gospel of Luke in the Lindisfarne Gospels. Credit: World History Archive

In conclusion, Bain made a massive contribution to the world of Celtic Art. Firstly, by recognizing the pioneering work done by J. Romilly Allen in his work *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*. Secondly, by further devoting so much time and effort into further deciphering the ways in which the ancient scribes had constructed the knotwork, spirals and other key elements. Thirdly, by not being afraid to take his new-found knowledge of ancient skills and using it in totally new and fresh ways. Finally, he was a natural born teacher who believed in making his discoveries readily available to all so that they too could continue the long history of Celtic Art by making their own unique designs.

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