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# Symbolism of Celtic Design

## The Symbolism of Celtic Design and Jewelry

The visual vocabulary of Celtic design expresses many messages. Those who are attracted to these symbols and designs in modern times and who choose to use the motifs of ancient times in today's world are often frustrated by an apparent lack of reliable information about their meanings.

Scholars are very cautious about assigning meaning to a specific knot or spiral. There are really only a few "official" Celtic symbols with widely accepted meanings. Some claims about symbolism are shamelessly bogus statements invented by clever marketers. Some modern innovation is, however, a valid expansion of the Celtic tradition as it adapts to new times and new visions and should be considered authentic in this context.

There is a common expectation that the meaning attached to a symbol in modern times should be the same that ancient artists intended for that same symbol. Everything changes with time. Our present interest in Celtic design does not simply skip a thousand years from the age of the Book of Kells to the present. Many of these symbols have been used in every century since the Dark Ages.

The art of the Celtic Revival of the 19th and 20th centuries is as much the heritage of the CyberCelt of the Third Millennium as is the magnificent Celtic Art of Pagan and early Christian times. A few Celtic motifs have meanings that are more-or-less a consensus of contemporary Celtic designers and artists. The meanings attached to these symbols can often be traced to the rediscovery of Ireland's cultural history in Victorian times as well as the emerging sense of national identity in Scotland, Wales, Isle of Man, Cornwall and Brittany as these cultures struggled to maintain their unique traditions and characteristics.

The current Renaissance of Celtic Art in celtic jewelry adds new agendas and a new imagination about how the old relates to the new. Some recent Celtic symbolism is very innovative adaptations of contemporary concerns, intellectual fashions and spiritual trends. Artists are by their nature creative and imaginative. An intuitive sense of symbolism should be recognized for what it is; the communicative intent of the artist.

The following explanations are offered as a guide to understanding some of the more important symbols and emblems of Celtic Art. The links are to in depth articles on each topic.

## ST Andrew Celtic Knot

**Knots and Interlace** There is a common folklore that each knot has a specific meaning. The problem with this idea is that there are no facts to back it up. There is no "Rosetta Stone" or reliable "dictionary" of knots. A general symbolism of Celtic interlace can be expressed as representing the repeated crossings of the spiritual and physical paths in our lives.

The never ending path is often said to represent "permanence and the continuum of life, love and faith". How valid is this statement in an historical sense? Read more.

**Eternity Knot** There is not just one knot that can be called an "Eternity Knot". Any knot that has a closed path, with no beginning or end may be symbolic of eternity or continuum. It is debatable if this was ever the intentional meaning of ancient scribes, but since this meaning was suggested by the great Scottish Celtic art teacher of the 20th century, George Bain,

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it has been an accepted meaning by many artists and craftsmen. Since knotwork is often used as an emblem of heritage, the symbolism of "continuum" reinforces the endurance of the tradition.

Lover's knot Likewise any knot can be a "lover's knot". Most commonly knots that link separate paths are used as lover's knots. The "Josephine Knot" or "Granny knot" is a linking knot that is frequently called a lover's knot.

Josephines Knot Ring

Celtic Heart Pin

Heart knots are a rather recent addition to Celtic symbolism. Hearts as symbols of "love" date from the later medieval period but have become an established part of the contemporary Celtic repertoire in the last decade of the 20th century.

Celtic Cross The cross with its characteristic circle is probably the most widely recognized of all Celtic symbols. Large stone crosses, known as "High Crosses" emerged as a major sculptural tradition in Ireland, Scotland and other Celtic lands from the 9th century or earlier. During the Celtic Revival new monuments in this style were crafted that added a self-conscious message of Celtic heritage to the widely recognized emblem of the Christian faith.

More About Celtic Revival Crosses The circle is often described as an halo or an eternity symbol. Much has been made of the similarity between the Celtic Cross and pagan sun symbols. There is a mystic tradition among Celtic Christians of interpreting this as a clairvoyant anticipation of the coming Gospel by the pre-Christian Druids. More about the History and Symbolism of the Celtic Cross

Symbols of the Evangelists

The four winged creatures of the prophecies of Ezekiel and The Revelations of St. John came to be identified with the four Evangelists in early Christian symbolism as early as the 2nd century. The Man symbolized St. Mathew, the Lion St. Mark, the Calf St. Luke and the Eagle St. John. In the 4th century, St. Gregory wrote a commentary on

Ezekiel identifying the four symbols as the stages of Christ's life. Christ was born a man, in his death he was sacrificed as a calf, a lion in his resurrection and an eagle in his ascension to heaven.

In early Gospel books, including the great Celtic Gospel manuscripts of Kells and Durrow, the symbols of the Evangelists were represented arrayed around the cross and also individually at the beginning each Gospel. Reproduced details from these historic sources as well as original compositions in the Celtic tradition have drawn on these sources, such as the Evangelists Cross by artist Lisa Laughy shown above.

After interlace, spirals are the most commonly recognized of Celtic design motifs. Spirals are among the most primal of the human artistic vocabulary and are found in most artistic traditions. Spirals adorn Irish Stone Age monuments at Newgrange, dating from 2,500 B. C. The La Tene style of spiral ornament is the defining artistic characteristic of the Celtic Iron Age. In the Golden Age of Celtic Art, beginning in the 7th century A. D. a very complex style of spiral ornament emerged that is referred to as Ultimate La Tene.

Spirals in nature such as snails or plants and in natural phenomena such as whirlpools or galaxies, give the mind much in the way of metaphors for cosmic symbolism. These sort of nature relationships are frequently and quite validly used by modern Celtic artists as symbolic content.

Another school of thought gives significance to the direction of the spirals. Clockwise or sunwise circling, a'deasail, is traditional in Gaelic blessing gestures and good-luck practices. To move sun-wise is to be in harmony with the earth. Conversely geis or spells are made with anti-sun-wise motion. This gets a little tricky since spirals may be read as either flowing inwards or outwards. Many spiral arrangements contain equal numbers of whorls going

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each way and are thus in balance. The numbers of whorls or the number of arms of spirals can be used as number symbols, the most common being three for the Holy Trinity and four for the Four Directions.

Like knotwork, the style of spirals themselves are in modern times symbolic as an emblem of Celtic culture. There is no hard and fast universal meaning for Celtic spirals. They may be created simply for the sake of their beauty but there is much room for creative and imaginative, even playful interpretations.

Click for an article by artist Jen Delyth on the symbolism of spirals and Celtic design  
Articles by Stephen Walker published in Dalriada Magazine Celtic Interlace; An Overview Part 1 Celtic Interlace; Continuum Part 2 Celtic Interlace; Continuum Continued (part 3) In Search of Meaning (part 4)  
This page is a work in progress. Animal interlace

Birds

Dogs Tree of Life