

CHARLES RENNIE MACKINTOSH

By Ken McNaughton

As the nineteenth century rolled into the twentieth, four young people in Glasgow developed an artistic style that became a worldwide phenomenon. The style was exhibited at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore with an installation from October 2019 to April 2020—"Designing the New: Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Glasgow Style."

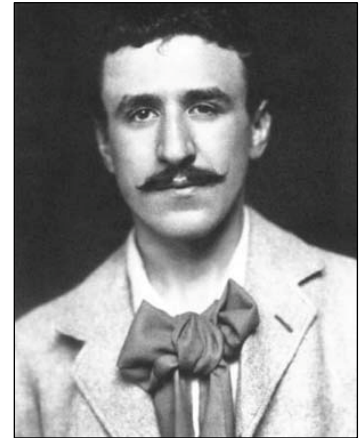


Figure 1. Charles Rennie Mackintosh around 1900
(photo by James Craig Annan).



Charles was born in Glasgow in 1868. In 1883, aged 15 and apprenticed to the architect John Hutchinson, he began attending classes at the Glasgow School of Art. Under the leadership of Francis Newbery, the school involved Glasgow's top architects, artisans, industrialists and business elite. Visiting lecturers and assessors were leaders of the British Arts and Crafts Movement, championing traditional handicrafts, away from mechanized manufacturing. At this time, Glasgow was regarded as the second city of the British Empire because of the scale and importance of its engineering, shipbuilding and manufacturing industries and its prominence in international trade.

Figure 2. Mackintosh designed this poster for The Glasgow Institute of Fine Arts around 1894/5. He draws most directly from Beardsley's frontispiece for Oscar Wilde's "Salomé," transforming Beardsley's bloody head of John the Baptist on the right to a fantastical tall plant on the left.

In 1837, my great great grandfather, John Ross McNaughton, who lived in Kirkintilloch, eight miles northeast of Glasgow, sailed from Greenock—25 miles west of Glasgow in the estuary of the River Clyde—with his wife and one-year-old daughter, to start a new life in Australia. After prospering and raising a large family in "Marvelous Melbourne," he returned to Scotland in 1874 with his wife and son Colin. They sailed on the *S.S. Great Britain*, and stayed with relatives in Govan, three miles west of central Glasgow.

Figure 3. This is one of two poster designs Mackintosh made for The Scottish Musical Review in 1896. The abstract human-plant hybrid also employs singing birds, circles, subtle asymmetry and elongated forms.

By the close of 1893, a number of events had ignited the Glasgow Style. A new British art magazine, *The Studio*, created ripples internationally with the publication of drawings by Aubrey Beardsley; The Glasgow School of Art opened its Technical Art Studios; and the Glasgow publisher, Blackie & Son appointed London-based illustrator Talwin Morris its art director.





Figure 4. Room de Luxe at The Willow Tearooms, Glasgow, designed by Mackintosh in collaboration with Margaret Macdonald for Catherine Cranston (photo by Dave Souza 10 March 2006).

In 1889 Newbery had founded the Art Club of the Glasgow School of Art, which encouraged free thinking and creativity as a respite from the rigorous curriculum. Its annual exhibitions gave The Four's radical imaginations their first public airing. Their revolutionary poster designs served as a manifesto for their new style (Figs. 2, 3). Bold graphics were characterized by emphatic placement of lines and forms subdividing the pictures vertically and horizontally. This, together with the elongation of the human form, stylized human/plant forms, asymmetry and some enigmatic symbolic motifs, became defining characteristics of the Glasgow Style.

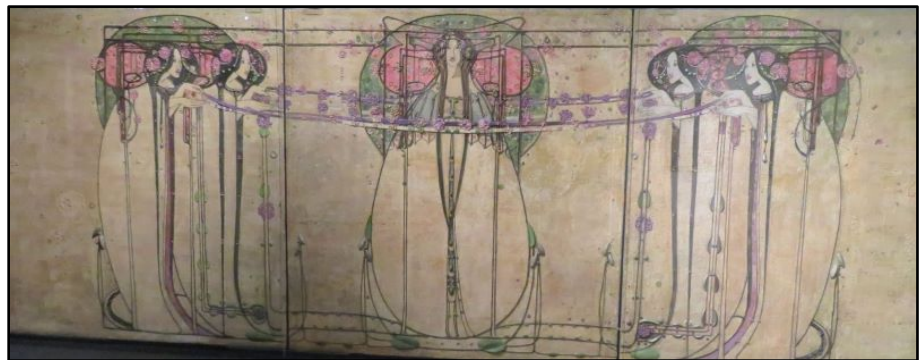
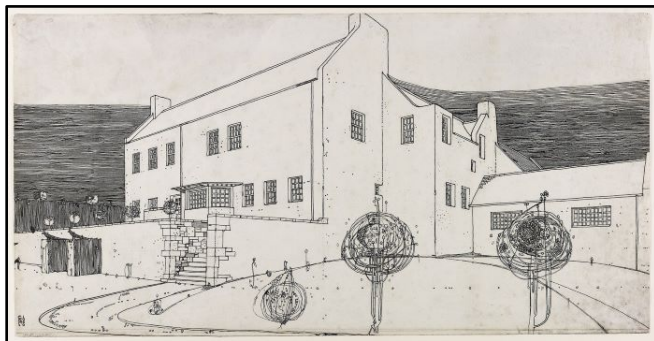


Figure 5. Margaret Macdonald's "May Queen" (1900), a fine plaster frieze on rough burlap stretched over a wooden frame with painted strings creating the dark lines, was installed in the Ladies Luncheon Room at Miss Cranston's Ingram Street Tearooms, along with a companion piece by Charles.

Figure 6. Mackintosh made this drawing of the Windy Hill house near Glasgow in 1900.



In late 1896, as an assistant in the architectural offices of Honeyman & Keppie, Mackintosh began contributing to the interior design of the artistic tearooms of businesswoman and entrepreneur Catherine Cranston (Figs. 4, 5). By the age of 31, he had designed a building for a major newspaper, a church, a church hall, a public school, a university college, an art club gallery, an art school and commissions

for private homes and furniture (Fig. 6, 7). Between 1903 and 1909 Mackintosh worked on two major educational building projects—the Scotland Street Public School on the south side of Glasgow (Fig. 8) and the second phase of the Glasgow School of Art building. Because of their complexity and sophisticated design these structures are now considered his greatest achievements.

Figure 7. Mackintosh designed this table in 1902; its wide, thin legs branch outward and upward to hold the circular top high.



Figure 8. Mackintosh designed the Scotland Street School between 1903-6. Now, as a museum, it tells the story of education in Scotland from the late 19th century to the late 20th century (photo by Finlay McWalter 7 May 2004).



A preamble to the exhibition at The Walters Art Gallery reads:

Between 1890 and 1918, Art Nouveau, a modern design and architectural style inspired by the organic lines of nature, gained popularity and spread through Europe and to the Americas. The city of Glasgow—the innovative, ambitious, industrial heartland of Scotland—was the birthplace of the only Art Nouveau movement in Great Britain: the Glasgow Style.

Figure 9. Hill House, Helensburgh, near Glasgow, designed and built inside and out by Mackintosh for publisher Walter Blackie (photo 2002 by Jeremy Atherton).

Glasgow's contribution to Art Nouveau was a distinctive design vocabulary that grew out of the Technical Studios of the Glasgow School of Art and the radically original work of a group of young people embracing the intellectual and cultural freedoms of the time. At the center of the Glasgow Style was the work of a group of friends known as The Four: architect, designer and artist Charles Rennie Mackintosh; his future wife





Margaret Macdonald; her younger sister, Frances; and Frances' future husband, James Herbert McNair. Many friends and peers also contributed significantly to the uniqueness and variety of the Glasgow Style.

Figure 10. Mackintosh designed this chair for his own house in 1905, a slightly taller version of one designed for a desk in Hill House. The ebonized wood with modern upholstery is rigidly angular with subtle curving lines.

When applied to two-dimensional objects, such as book covers, textiles, posters and stained glass, the Glasgow Style blended elongated and organic lines, personal symbolic languages, and favored motifs to create otherworldly stylized plant and human forms. In its three-dimensional manifestations—architecture, interiors and furniture—it was distinguished by restraint, rhythm and asymmetry. As the defining motifs of the style evolved, a bolder geometry, patterning and coloring emerged.

Through his architecture as well as his interior and furniture design, Mackintosh was always at the forefront of the Glasgow Style's development, simplifying ideas, lines and forms to their essence and working in innovative directions that anticipated the rhythmic patterns and geometry of Art Deco.

Hill House in Helensburgh, Scotland, is one of Charles and Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh's most famous works (Fig. 9). It was designed and built for the publisher Walter Blackie. In 1902, Blackie purchased a plot on which to build a new home. At the suggestion of Talwin Morris, Mackintosh was appointed to design and build. Blackie asked for grey rough-cast walls and a slate roof, and that architectural effects ought to be secured by the massing of the parts rather than ornamentation. The requirements and non-traditional taste of the client allowed Mackintosh full rein for his design ideas. In addition to the house, Mackintosh designed most of the interior, furniture and fittings (Fig. 10), extending even to prescribing the color of cut flowers that the Blackies might place on a table in the living room. Mackintosh spent some time in the Blackie's former home to observe their everyday life. By analyzing the family's habits Mackintosh could design every aspect of the house according to the needs of each user. He believed functional issues should be solved before allowing the design to evolve. The uniform and grayish exterior treatment of the building blends in with an overcast sky. The completely asymmetrical construction forms different roof levels and shapes. The minimum decoration, heavy walls, and rectangular and square windows express a strong, sober construction. The exterior qualities of the building are nearly the opposite of the warm, exotic, carefully decorated and smooth interior. The mansion combined the Edwardian period's traditional 'femininity' of an intimate inside space with the 'masculinity' of the exterior public world.

The popularity of the Glasgow Style began to decline around 1908. By this time some of its key practitioners had retired or left Glasgow to pursue opportunities abroad. Local opportunities for Mackintosh dried up. After a financial review determined he was not bringing enough money into the practice, Mackintosh left Honeyman, Keppie & Mackintosh Architects. In July 1914 the Mackintoshes left Glasgow. Later that month World War I began. Frances Macdonald MacNair died in Glasgow in 1921, and may have taken her own life. Her distraught husband, James Herbert MacNair, destroyed as much of the couple's artwork as he could and never made art

again. Mackintosh and Margaret never returned to Glasgow after World War I. They commuted between London and the South of France, where Mackintosh painted its landscape obsessively. He died in London in 1928 aged 60 after battling tongue and throat cancer; Margaret survived him by just four years.

The exhibition at The Walters Art Gallery assembled 165 works from Glasgow Museums, the Hunterian Museum at the University of Glasgow, The Glasgow School of Art, and loans from private collections. This included furniture, posters, textiles, architectural drawings, books and ceramics made by Charles Rennie Mackintosh and other members of The Four, as well as the larger circle of artists and craftspeople with whom he collaborated.

When I relocated from Manhattan to Historic Ellicott City in 1993, I bought a round table and three chairs of ebonized wood for my new kitchen, which are still very much in use. Each of the three chairs has a tall back with four straight vertical black slats with subtle curving lines, and an upholstered seat—made in Romania. Was the craftsman influenced by Mackintosh? It seems that the preferred style of this Australian in America 1993-2019 was a style developed in Glasgow in 1902 [1].

In his 1936 book “Pioneers of the Modern Movement,” Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, the German-British art and architectural historian said: *Mackintosh’s intense feeling for spatial values ... an overwhelmingly full polyphony of abstract form ... interesting perspectives ... fascinating vistas ... show him as the European counterpart of Frank Lloyd Wright, and one of the true forerunners of the most ingenious juggler with space now alive: Le Corbusier.*

REFERENCE

1. There is a photograph of the table and chairs in Figure 3 of this article:
http://clanmacnaughton.net/docs_articles/8%20BAGPIPE%20MUSEUM-1_rev_Web.pdf.

NOTES

Figures. 2, 3, 5, 7 & 10 are photographs of exhibit items and this text draws on wall notes from the exhibition at The Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, “Designing the New: Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Glasgow Style,” October 2019 to April 2020. This work is copyrighted and may not be reproduced in whole or in part in any medium without written permission from Ken McNaughton Living Trust, 3778 College Avenue, Ellicott City, MD 21043; phone/fax: 410-418-9340; kjmcn@comcast.net (14 December 2019).