

SECTION EDITOR: NORMAN J. PASTOREK, MD

“Living Fancy”

Mackintosh and His World

ONE OF THE MOST PRODIGIOUS talents to arise at the turn of the century was Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928). A man of true Renaissance proportions, he achieved remarkable renown in many artistic disciplines, including architecture, furniture and interior design, graphic art, and painting. His aesthetic sensibility was well articulated and uncompromising: he dictated every facet of construction and design for his buildings from the detailed interiors to the sculpted exteriors. His unwavering dedication to an all-embracing artistic vision may have left some of his clientele less than enthused, and turned away the prospect of more commissions. His Romantic edifices stand as a refuge in the grime-ridden urban sprawl of his native Glasgow, a city that Thomas Carlyle demonized as a “murky simmering Tophet, of copperas fumes.” His unique artistic style is the product of his Glaswegian heritage, combined with decadent continental Art Nouveau and punctuated by Japanese motifs. Given his diverse talents, an essay on Mackintosh, albeit short, must highlight his many-faceted artistic contributions to make any sense of the man and his aesthetic vision. Accordingly, this article will endeavor to present in detail a representative work of architecture and interior design.

Mackintosh, one of 11 children, was born in Glasgow, Scotland, where he thrived for most of his life and created his most enduring works. He trained in the local architecture firm of Honeyman and Keppie, and labored in the evening hours to learn art and design at the Glasgow School of Art where he met his wife and artistic collaborator, Margaret MacDonald. Margaret's sister Frances, also an art pupil at the school, would wed in turn her colleague Herbert MacNair. The Four, as this artistic quartet came to be known, collaborated on numerous design projects; and Mackintosh—often viewed as the pioneering genius behind the group—must be evaluated in context of his participation in the collective Four as well as for his solo efforts. Although his artistic prowess is readily apparent today, his achievements were largely overlooked by his peers, and this neglect compelled him to abandon his native town for the prospect of more recognition in England. However, his self-imposed exile proved artistically and financially devastating, and he departed his corporeal life in virtual obscurity.

Mackintosh's crowning glory is his architectural design, exemplified in the public building Glasgow School of Art (**Figure 1**) and the private residence Hill House. Most of his many splendid objects d'art, whether furni-

ture or decorative paintings, were in fact intended as installation pieces to enhance and complete his building projects. The Glasgow School of Art flourished for half a century prior to the design and construction of the current Mackintosh version commissioned by Francis Newbery, the visionary headmaster who chose the fledgling draftsman's design in the competition held in 1896. Mackintosh's beautiful new façade boasted an intricately complex entrance flanked by the simple layout of large-paneled windows on either side. The railings, window brackets, and imposing lantern and arch of the entrance, all hewn from iron, are balanced with the formidable ashlar of the wall. The interplay of curves and rectilinear shapes also contributes to the desired geometric equilibrium. Apart from the aesthetic charms of the building, Mackintosh outfitted a very workable environment for artistic productivity and completed his task with an exceptionally modest budget. The Mackintosh Building, as it is now called, remains a functioning art school and is the destination of many international pilgrimages.

Housed within his architectural triumphs are the many exquisitely crafted furniture pieces that resonate with the Mackintosh touch. With the collaborative effort of the Four, Mackintosh authored over 400 pieces designed to reside in his buildings' interiors, an environment that he also obsessively controlled and that would achieve consummate expression in his elegant tearooms. Mackintosh promulgated the idea that he intended to “clothe modern ideas with modern dress—adorn our designs with living fancy.” “Living fancy” alluded to the vital and ornamental qualities of his work that extolled the beauties of contemporary design over antiquated patterns. The structural elements of his design reveal the dialectical tension between masculine and feminine forms. The more rectilinear lattice of one of his chairs (**Figure 2**) has strong masculine overtones, reiterated by the ebonized-oak material. In contrast, many furniture pieces are replete with the organic and sinuous forms and embellishments that reflect the more feminine attributes of the Art Nouveau style. Mackintosh's masterful play of these two opposing strains of design impels rhythm and harmony to his interior design.

Whether Mackintosh is apotheosized as the singular force behind his works or viewed as a mere collaborator within a gifted group lies open to debate. However, the distinctive beauty he achieved in so many media is indisputable. Unlike most artists who create isolated works of art, Mackintosh fashioned an entire universe



Figure 1. Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928). Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow, Scotland. Detail: main entrance on the north front, 1909.

in which every element was contrived for maximal aesthetic effect. His legacy has widened from the scholarly circles of architect and design devotees to embrace the lay public who has become increasingly enamored by his exquisite interpretation of beauty.

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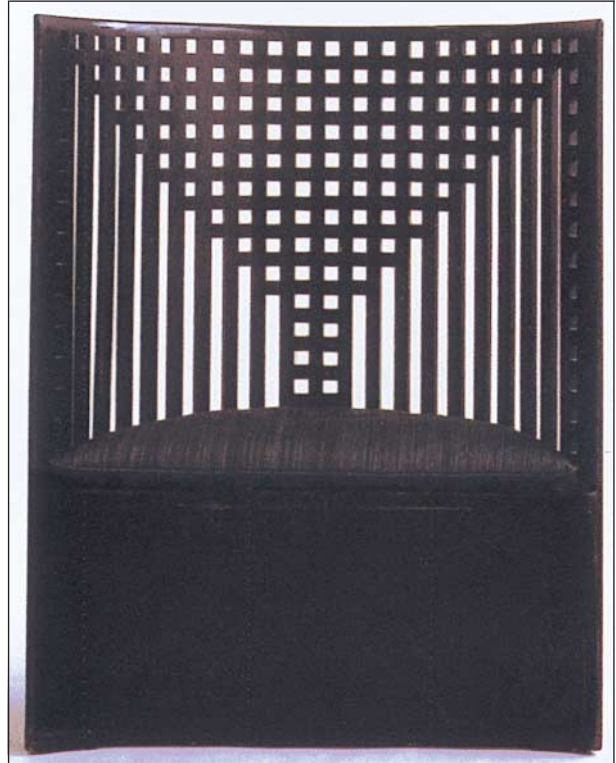


Figure 2. Chair, 1904. For the order desk, Willow Tea Rooms, ebonized oak, reupholstered with horsehair, $46\frac{9}{16} \times 37 \times 16\frac{1}{2}$ in (118.2 × 94.0 × 42.0 cm). Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow, Scotland.