

**Dark/Masculine—Light/Feminine: How Charles Rennie
Mackintosh and Margaret MacDonald
Changed Glasgow School of Art**
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Abstract

Glasgow was by tradition a classical city like its rival Edinburgh. In Glasgow Classicism remained in Italianate buildings with monumental Greek, Egyptian and abstract forms. In the 1880s and the 1890s, when Charles Rennie Mackintosh (Glasgow 1868-London 1928) was beginning his career, Glasgow architecture became more diverse, combining a generalized Scottishness with freedom and variety. With a design philosophy solidly rooted in Scottish tradition, the sophisticated Mackintosh disregarded the architecture of Greece and Rome, in his opinion unsuitable for Scotland. The aim of this paper is to show how by using a fruitful male/female polarity the Mackintoshes managed to combine husbandly elements of architecture and wifely interior designs in order to produce a domestically comfortable microworld which, after years of oblivion, has become the perfect tourist package for Glasgow.

Art Nouveau is a period of Art History between 1890 and 1914, clearly influenced by William Morris's Arts and Crafts Movement, which renovated architecture and decorative arts. Art Nouveau is bidimensional and juxtaposes powerful rectangular structures with long and delicate curved lines used as decorative elements. Wood, iron and stone become as malleable as plastic. This new style was born in connection to the scientific advances which began with the industrial revolution and the bourgeois desire of modernization. Its name comes from a furniture shop opened in Paris in 1890 and from there it spread to the rest of Europe and America under different names: *Art Nouveau* in Britain and the United States, *Jugendstil* in Germany, *Secession* in

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Austria, *Le Style Moderne* in France and *Modernismo* in Spain with Antoni Gaudí as a most remarkable example.

Glasgow was by tradition a classical city like its rival Edinburgh. In Glasgow, Classicism remained in Italianate buildings with monumental forms that are variously Greek, Egyptian and wholly abstract.¹ In the 1880s and 1890s, when Charles Rennie Mackintosh (Glasgow, 1868-London, 1928) was beginning his career, Glasgow architecture became more diverse combining a generalized Scottishness with freedom and variety —loose grouping, a picturesque skyline and an eclectic range of sources. With a design philosophy solidly rooted in Scottish tradition, the sophisticated and eccentric Mackintosh disregarded the architecture of Greece and Rome, in his view, unsuitable for the climate of Scotland and “foreign and far away” (Robertson, 1991: 51). He believed that the Scottish Baronial style, which drew its inspiration from Scottish castles and tower-houses of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, adapted to modern society, would satisfy contemporary needs. Mackintosh thought of it as a vehicle of freedom and a real and practical kind of modernity with a strong nationalist charge.² And so Mackintosh *did* build and design but he was not alone.

When enrolled at the Glasgow School of Art in 1884, he developed an artistic relationship with Margaret Macdonald, who later, in 1900, would become his wife. They worked together around the needs of people, people seen not as masses but as individuals who needed not a machine for living in but a work of art. The aim of this paper is to show how by using a fruitful male/female polarity the Mackintoshes managed to combine husbandly elements of architecture and wifely interior designs in order to produce a domestically comfortable microworld which, after years of oblivion, has become the perfect tourist package for Glasgow.

There are many buildings in Glasgow, but why does the Glasgow School of Art make the spectator meditate more than any other? Why did Mackintosh die in total obscurity after so many years of success? Why do the Mackintoshes not sound as seriously academic as

¹ Many of these buildings were designed by Alexander Thomson. When Thomson passed away in 1875 “the Classical tradition in Glasgow almost died with him” (Crawford, 1995: 14).

² Rita Reif (1979: 48) describes Mackintosh’s chairs as “baronial thrones”.

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Norman Foster or Frank Lloyd Wright but, on the contrary, have been adopted by the world of merchandising with all those mugs, T-shirts, furniture, jewels, and mirror-frames? It is true that manufacturers, retailers, auction houses, those in the media and those in charge of promotion at the City Council make a lot of money, but thanks to this propaganda everybody in Glasgow and throughout the world knows about Charles Rennie and Margaret Mackintosh.

Not many documents survive about their private life. Hermann Muthesius and Joseph Olbrich were delighted with such a friendly couple and gave them publicity and friendship.³ The Mackintoshes were working people who made a creative project of their marriage. They successfully mixed a dark male outside world of architecture with a light female atmosphere of interior decoration which, in Allan Crawford's words, clearly means "inwardness [and] sexual intimacy" (1995: 66). Mackintosh's imagination is said to have flowered in the company of women. From his first contact with Margaret MacDonald as a student of the Glasgow School of Art he was intrigued by her images of dreaming women, rose trees and suns.⁴ Mackintosh's male world with its plain façades and straight lines was within the walls of the office of the architects Honeyman and Keppie for whom he became an architectural assistant in 1889, to later, in 1904, he became a partner until 1913 when he left the firm.

Although Margaret's name is not frequently recognized as an author, Mackintosh and herself built and designed several buildings in Glasgow and Northampton. The early years of their marriage were the most fruitful period of his life. Individually or as a team, their projects are complex to understand in the spectators' minds. Their mysterious use of lights, symbols, lines and structures require a bigger effort than with any other architects and designers because these works of art are not only to be looked at but they also look at the audience themselves.⁵

³ Muthesius called them the *Künstlerpaar*.

⁴ Margaret MacDonald, her sister Frances and Herbert McNair were known as "The Four." They exhibited posters, furnishings, and a variety of graphic designs in Glasgow, Vienna and Turin. These exhibitions helped to establish Mackintosh's reputation.

⁵ It is commented that the black, white and ultramarine silk stripes that he designed for the guest room at 78 Derngate in Northampton were migraine inducing. When Wenman J. Bassett-Lowke—the owner of the house—ushered George Bernard Shaw into the room he told him, "I trust the décor will not disturb your sleep." Shaw replied "No, I always sleep with my eyes closed" (Howard, 1983: 201).

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The Mackintoshes' production is so vast that it would take pages to deal with. The Attractions List recommended by the Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society includes the Hill House, the Mackintosh House, The Willow Tea Rooms, Ruchill Church Hall, the Church at Queen's Cross, the Glasgow School of Art, Martyrs' Public School, the Daily Record Building, Scotland Street Museum, and the House for an Art Lover. Let us concentrate on the Glasgow School of Art as an example of his solo career, and the Hill House at Helensburgh, the houses at Mains Street and Florentine Terrace, reconstructed at the Hunterian Art Gallery, and the Willow Tea Rooms at 217 Sauchiehall Street as instances of collaboration with Margaret.

The Glasgow School of Art was undoubtedly the finest of Mackintosh's architectural projects started in 1897 and completed in 1899. The governors of the school emphasized that the budget at their disposal was small, and that a very plain building was all that was required. In a period when every edifice had Greek columns or Gothic arches, the façade of the School of Art was revolutionary because of its radical discontinuity, its combination of huge windows and plain masonry and functional simplicity. Mackintosh created a deliberately asymmetrical design by placing the entrance off-centre. The Principal's room is over the entrance, with a balcony slicing across the oriel window; above that is his studio, set back and reached by a stair tower. The Library is said to be the masterpiece within the masterwork. What Crawford calls "the power of the square" (1995: 154) dominates the room thanks to the three great oriel windows with a dark band running across them. It contains three connected spaces: the library, its balcony, and its store above. The basic layout of the room depends on eight posts, whose attractiveness resides in the balcony with three uprights, chamfered and painted. The chamfers were coloured, not with Mackintosh's usual tender violet, pink and purple, but in strong blue, green, red and white, and in a strict sequence. William Buchanan points out that they stand for the four elements —water, earth, fire and air (2004: 118).

We might say that when Charles Rennie married Margaret we lose sight of him as an architect for a few years, as furniture and interiors took up much of his time. If in the 1880s he explored the outside world, at the beginning of the 20th century his wife took him by

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the hand and together they entered an intimate and personal world. After their marriage they designed the interiors and furniture for their first home at 120 Mains Street in Glasgow. The big drawing-room bedrooms were hung with fine muslin, and the background colours were light canvas, carpets and white paints since this was a room thought of as feminine. The dining-room was much smaller and darker because it was thought of as masculine. The walls were covered with a plain, grey-brown paper, and the woodwork was stained dark conferring the room a sepulchral effect under the white ceiling.⁶ In the bedroom the most stunning piece of furniture is the full-length cheval mirror with delicate pink glasses near the top resembling tendrils. Muthesius believed that all these motives had a meaning. They were organic lines of life which added a sometimes human quality to furniture (1902: 215). The frame of the mirror becomes wider when it reaches the bottom as if symbolising a female hip. All the objects in the flat –cupboard, tables, chairs– were worked by Charles Rennie’s formal and Margaret’s romantic imagination and given new dimensions, spatial and ethereal. As Nikolaus Pevsner points out they associated Puritanism and sensuality seducing the spectators by creating an almost spiritual atmosphere (1998: 16). However, their ideas might not have been quite so convincing when used on other people’s furniture.

In 1901 the publisher Walter Blackie asked Mackintosh to build a house in Helensburgh, a town north of Glasgow, with fine views of the river Clyde. The overall impression is that of a comfortable, modern building very much in harmony with the landscape. The southside incorporates a distinctly Scottish feature, a round stair tower tucked into the angle made by two walls. The Hill House is not just a sequence of rooms: “it is a home whose largest meanings and smallest details were transformed by the Mackintoshes’ art” (Crawford, 1995: 123). As we move around the house, we find it full of alternations and gradations of light which reinforce the masculine/feminine scheme of meanings: gloom in the vestibule, half-light in the hall, bright light beckoning us on the stairs and welcoming us in the drawing room and bedroom. When the sun comes out, the whole house responds to it.

⁶ Mary Sturrock –Francis Newberry’s daughter– was a frequent visitor to the mackintoshes and in an interview she remembered that their houses were always pretty and fresh. A bright red glowing fire, the right sort of cake, a nice tea, and kind hearts—and lots of fun (Davies and Bedford, 1973: 284).

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In 1906 the Mackintoshes moved to the more fashionable area of Hillhead and converted an end house at 6 Florentine Terrace (later Southpark Avenue). Visitors to the reconstructed interiors of the house begin with the dining-room stencilled with Margaret's roses weeping green and silver tears which embody fertility and virginity. Then they go up the stairs; as they come into the studio-drawing room they have moved from dark to light, experiencing the Mackintoshes' orchestration of the masculine/feminine convention. The light which floods into the drawing-room from the south window is reflected back by the white walls and white-enamelled woodwork. The chairs –higher than the sitter's head– are almost ghosts or creatures staring at us (the highest chair that Mackintosh designed stood about 1.8 metres tall).

During much of 1903 the Mackintoshes were working on new tea rooms for Kate Cranston in Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow's most fashionable shopping street. Mackintosh designed a showy city building using stucco curves and squares. The spaces inside were arranged into three tea rooms on the ground floor, an exclusive vaulted room on the first floor, and billiard and smoking rooms on the second. He tried to create distinct spaces, while light and vision could pass through them. This way you could watch other people in the room while eating. Sauchiehall means "alley of willows" in Gaelic and willow motifs recurred throughout. The Salon de Luxe –a room for ladies– is basically Margaret's creation. The leaded glass in the magnificent double doors filled with stalks, buds, roseballs are an example of her paintings. In Nathaniel Harris's words the Mackintoshes had created a kind of shrine, filled with a solemn symbolism that was a little incongruous in a tea room (1996: 45). However, for Allan Crawford "this was the commercial version of the room as a work of art" (1995: 114).

We may ask ourselves why this world of marvel did not transcend to other British cities or why it was so ephemeral. In my view, there might be several reasons: Glasgow was more peripheral than a European capital city for a sufficiently efficient transmission of their designs; the Mackintoshes designed such intense interiors that they seemed to refuse both the vitality of ordinary life and the basic requirements of comfort; the couple were too fond of the total integration of architecture and interior design and demanded such a great commitment on the part of the clients that the latter could not modify their designs and then broke their contracts; the high quality of

their works were only accessible to the richest people who just looked for the special and not the general. In the years prior to WWI Classicism was again the form of modernity for progressive architects and Mackintosh remained static. He moved to London in 1914 and the war itself and the lack of contacts in the city made contracts an almost impossible task.

However, to conclude, we can say that, despite their successful international projection in Vienna, Turin or Berlin the Mackintoshes were not so annoyed because of the sudden lack of attention or the fact that they were not required for important projects. They enjoyed working on small commissions such as houses, flats and studies inspired in national and regional vernaculars. They were artist-lovers on the highest spiritual plane, and the story of their love is recounted in what they did. Charles Rennie and Margaret designed not with stone and plaster but with people's thoughts and perceptions. Their creations are open as if they were inviting the spectators to intervene and keep communicating with them through time. This is what you feel when your Glaswegian friends take you to visit their works of art.

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