

The Scottish world record holder

by
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nobody's heard of...



Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh

MOST people in Scotland, and particularly in Glasgow, are well aware of the artistic and architectural importance of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and his influence over generations of other artists, designers and architects. Many will also be aware of his part in *The Glasgow Four*, or at least recognise that name, but is it reasonable to assume that it is less widely known that another one of *The Four* was his wife, Margaret? Or that the other female member was her younger sister, Frances?

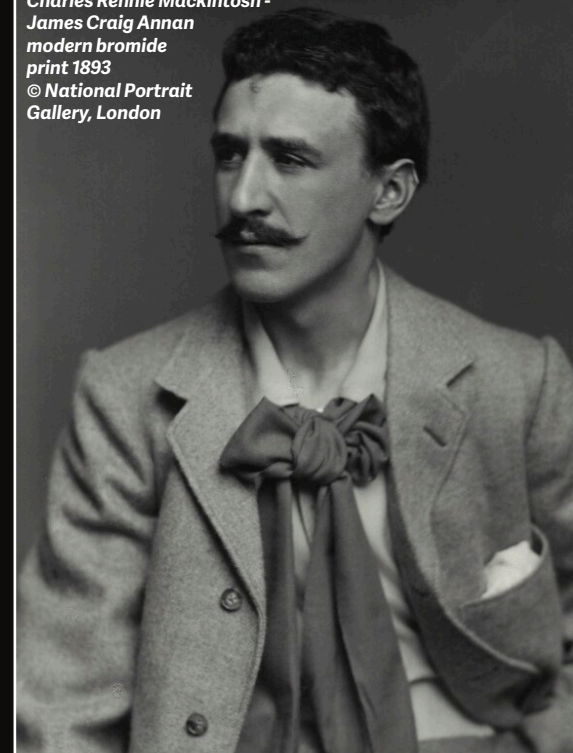
The girls were born in England, in the West Midlands, but it seems that when their Glaswegian father retired as a mining engineer the family moved back to their Glasgow roots. When the girls enrolled at Glasgow School of Art in 1891, they were presumably unaware that they were embarking on not only their artistic careers, but a life journey that would see them meet their future spouses and develop into *The Glasgow Four*. Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Herbert McNair, those future spouses, completed *The Four*. They were friends and architectural colleagues who were also studying at the School, and the group were most probably introduced deliberately by Francis Newbery, the innovative head of the School, because all four shared similarities of artistic style.

The sisters had initially found fame as part of an earlier all-female group, *The Glasgow Girls*, along with Jessie M. King, Ann Macbeth and Jessie Newbery (wife of Francis Newbery). With this group, Margaret and Frances started to develop what became known as the *Glasgow Style*, a form of decorative and interior design that was seen as modern at the time yet heavily influenced by ancient Celtic symbolism and folklore. These influences may be viewed as part of a trend, the *Celtic Revival* or *Celtic Twilight*, that had been growing since the mid-1800s. This Celtic trend also covered literature and poetry, as well as the visual arts, and was particularly popular in Germany, Scotland and Ireland. There were also more organic, nature-based elements of their work that may be viewed as part of the emerging *Art Nouveau* movement.

When the sisters ambitiously opened *The Macdonald Sisters Studio* in Hope Street, Glasgow in the mid-1890s they continued to work together in this evolving genre. Between them they would go on to produce art in a range of media, including book illustrations, embroidery, graphics, metalwork

All four shared similarities of artistic style

Charles Rennie Mackintosh -
James Craig Annan
modern bromide
print 1893
© National Portrait
Gallery, London



and textile designs. This collaborative element was clearly something that was fundamentally important to Margaret in her work, and she later extended her interests into interior design and furniture in partnership with Mackintosh. By 1900, the couple were not only professional partners but also husband and wife. A year earlier Frances had married Herbert McNair and their subsequent move to Liverpool signalled the end of *The Glasgow Four* and the sisters' artistic partnership.



Willow Tea Rooms



The Seven Princesses



The Red Rose and the White Rose

Mackintosh and Margaret's first major joint project is generally accepted as the creation of the interior design for a room in Miss Cranston's Tearoom in Ingram Street in Glasgow, the *White Dining Room*. From there other notable projects would include *Hill House* in Helensburgh, *The Willow Tea Rooms* in Glasgow and many exhibition pieces such as *House for an Art Lover* (designed in 1901 but finally built between 1989 and 1996 in Bellahouston Park).

Exhibitions were very important for Margaret in establishing her reputation as an individual artist as well as for the couple's joint projects. Recognition in London, Paris, Vienna, Turin, and Venice, among many other cultural centres, saw the *Glasgow Style* grow in prestige and it began to influence other artists and designers. Gustav Klimt is just one recognisable name claimed as having been influenced by Margaret's work.

Her output was highly stylised and, as a result, open to wide interpretation by art aficionados. Although she utilised a wide range of techniques and media, ranging from traditional watercolours



House for an Art Lover, Glasow. Credit Shutterstock



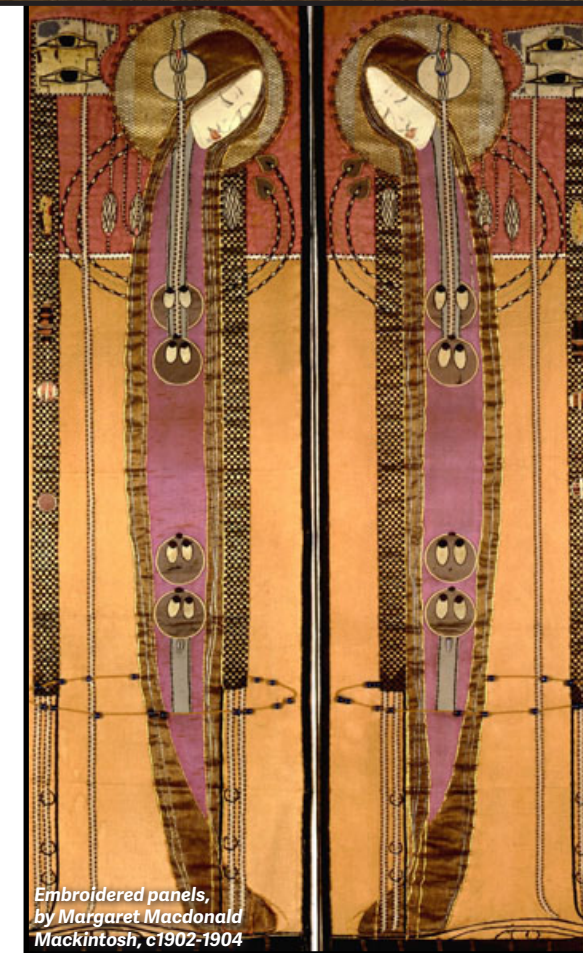
The Hill House Helensburgh. Credit Shutterstock

Yet Margaret has often been referred to as a 'marginalised wife', living in the shadow of her husband's genius or merely being seen to have 'contributed to' rather than 'created' by virtue of her own abilities. Perhaps the norm at the time, but history recording her work in this way does a great disservice to an extremely talented woman. Indeed, Mackintosh himself is quoted as saying, "Margaret has genius, I have only talent." In recent years, maybe reflecting the long overdue reappraisal of the perceived gender hierarchy in the art world, there has been growing awareness of not only the importance of Margaret's influence over her husband's work but also her own achievements.

Evidence of this belated recognition came in 2008 when Margaret's 1902 piece, *The Red Rose and the White Rose*, sold at auction for the not inconsiderable sum of £1,700,500 – a world record for a Scottish artwork. Familiar to art lovers as a print, the original panel was constructed using painted gesso over hessian, with glass beads, and formed part of the *Rose Boudoir*, a room setting designed by the Mackintoshes for the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art in Turin in 1902. Margaret's contribution included *The Red Rose and the White Rose* and *The Heart of the Rose* as well as other smaller gesso panels. *The Heart of the Rose*, featured on *iScot's* front cover this month, sold at the same auction for £490,000.

In this month of International Women's Day, perhaps we should take the time not only to recognise the achievements of women but also to consider to what extent some of these achievements have been underplayed or ignored. In particular, in Scotland, just as we continue to acknowledge

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Embroidered panels, by Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh, c1902-1904



Margaret Macdonald. Credit GSA Archives

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to metalwork, she became particularly identified with works produced in gesso. Gesso is a form of plaster of Paris, more usually used as a basis for traditional oil paintings, and Margaret was a pioneer of using it in its own right.

A critic writing in the German avant-garde art magazine of the time, *Dekorative Kunst*, described Margaret's contributions to *The Willow Tea Rooms* as being "outstanding for her illustrations of mystic poetry; Maeterlinck's imaginative writing, and the visions of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, echo profoundly in her soul ... under their influence her hand creates drawings, paintings and reliefs whose unusually meticulous and delicate execution never hampers their spiritual clarity. I know no plaster relief by any living artist which can be compared to hers." High praise indeed!



The Immortals: Frances Macdonald, Margaret Macdonald, Katherine Cameron, Janet Aitken, Agnes Raeburn, Jessie Keppie, John Keppie, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Herbert MacNair

the importance of the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, we would do well to promote the influence of his wife and professional partner. And, equally importantly, we should look afresh on the artistic achievements and enduring legacy of this under-recognised genius, Margaret Macdonald.