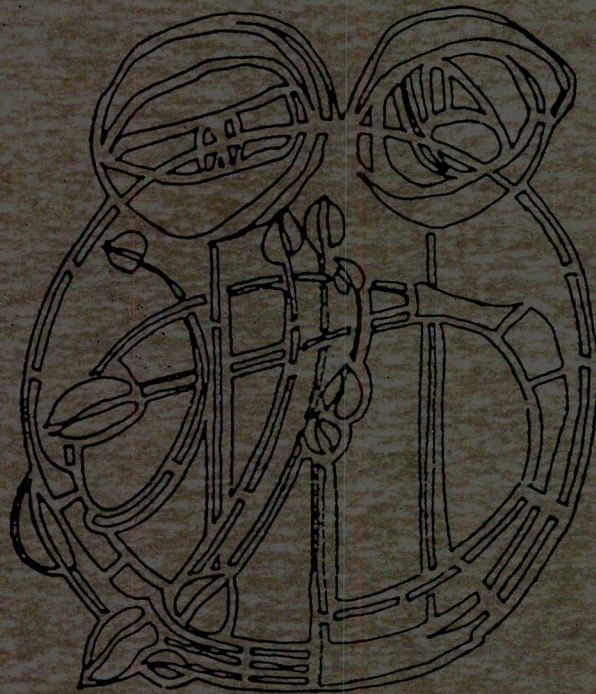


National College of Art & Design  
Faculty of Design  
Department of Design



**The Interpretation of the work of  
Charles Rennie Mackintosh  
and his influence on Architecture & Design today**

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Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design and  
Complimentary Studies in Candidacy for the Degree of  
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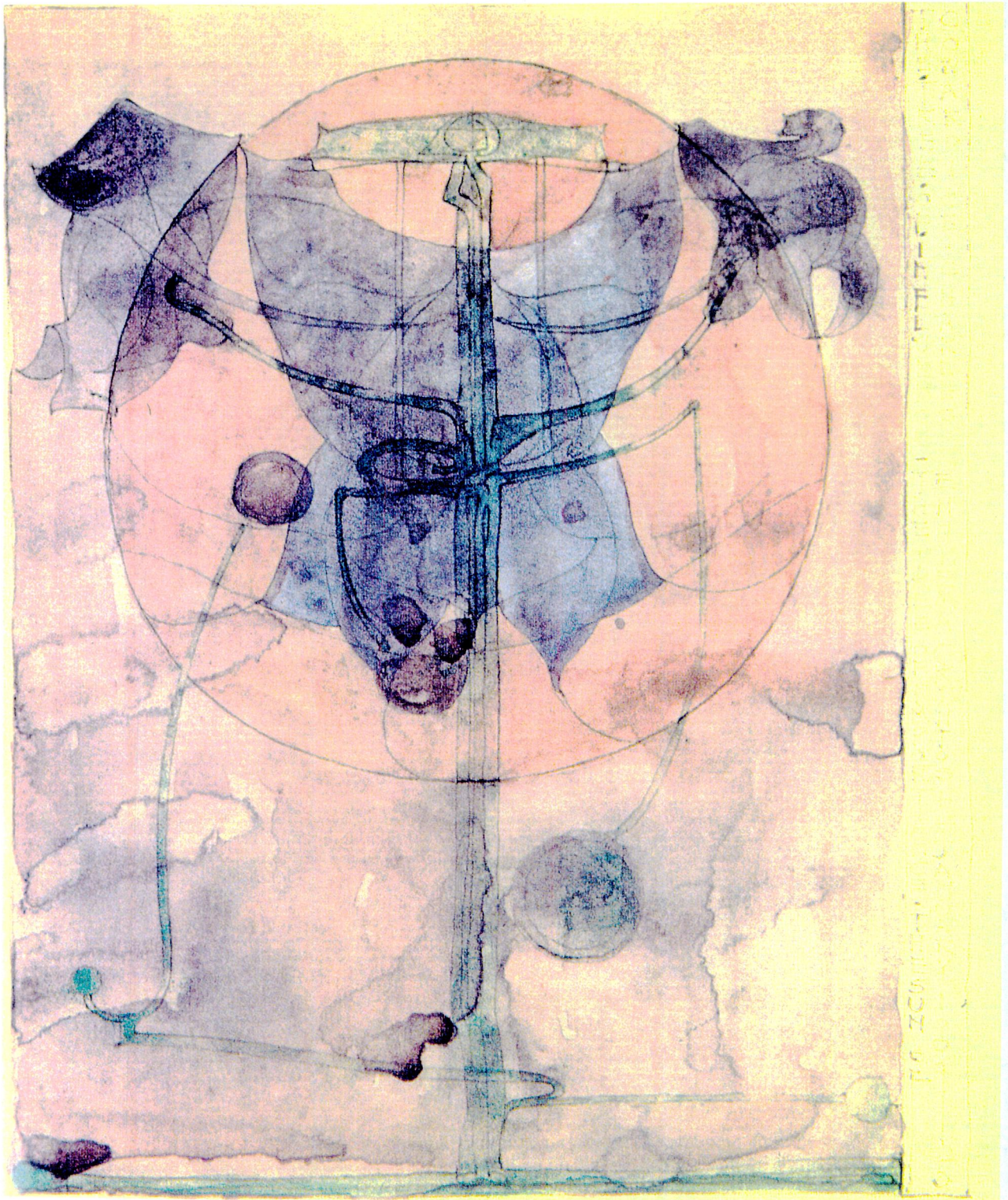


Fig.1 Mackintosh: The Tree of Influence, 1895.



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## Introduction

In 1992 David Brett, Reader in History of Design at the University of Ulster, published his book, C.R. Mackintosh, the Poetics of Workmanship. Brett wrote with the intention of "enriching our understanding of both buildings and interiors by introducing another perspective" and also of "offering an interpretation, a 'Poetics'... liberating in its effect, opening up the world to our curiosity" (Brett 1992, p9). The question is, why has Brett and so many other authors chosen Mackintosh as their subject, and why has he experienced such a revival at the height of Post-Modernism?

There are few architects or designers whose work inspires a greater cult following than that of Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928). Despite a relatively short working life, with few commissions, he has had an enormous influence on architects and designers during the nineteen eighties. He is acknowledged as one of the forerunners of Modernism, yet is his true place in design history not that of a forerunner of Post-Modernism? This thesis will examine the rise of Mackintosh parallel to Post-Modernism, and look at the ideas and works by both in context.

Andrew Macmillan sees Mackintosh's genius in his "sensitivity to the singular potential of existential



phenomena", (Nuttgens 1988, p31). This seeing beyond the normal and mundane, this use of the mystical and the magical comes very close to Charles Jencks' definition of Post-Modernism:

Post-Modern Architecture is doubly coded, half Modern and half conventional in its attempt to communicate with both the public and a concerned minority, usually architects, (Jencks 1984, p6).

The buildings' symbolism is taken in by the public at a subliminal level, there is an unconscious recognition of something in their memory, whereas architects understand the meaning behind the buildings. They are able to 'decode' the symbolism. Thus Post-Modern architecture appeals to everyone in different ways.

Modernism can be seen as the search for the rational, and this was its downfall, disallowing the human condition to enter the design process. Notions of good architecture, good design provoke debate, provoke thought. If the Modernist ideal is carried through to its logical conclusion, there is only one solution to any problem. No deviation is allowed and therefore all architects, by applying the rules, would come up with the same solution. What started out in architecture as fresh and new in the nineteen-thirties, looks tired and dated when still being applied in nineteen-seventies office blocks. With the fall of the International Style architects and designers were again allowed to look to the past, to use design history as a stepping stone to new principles, new



ideas.

The beginning of the cult of Mackintosh can be dated to the publication of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Modern Movement by Thomas Howarth in 1952. This book placed Mackintosh's importance in design history. However the group of Mackintosh devotees was still small and languishing under the powerful presence of the Modernist movement who considered Mackintosh an Art Nouveau ornamentalist. They preserved his work and with the fall of Modernism and the realisation that there was something more to architecture and design, something that makes a good work stand out from the rest, Mackintosh's ideas were revived.

Many of these ideas are still being defined. Since the mid-seventies many books have been written about Mackintosh, but none have discovered what makes him a great designer, what inspires such cult following among other architects and designers. Brett comes close with his Poetics of Workmanship, citing Mackintosh's use of 'masculine' and 'feminine' values in his design (Brett 1992, p76). Whatever the cause, the effect transcends architecture and design, producing an object that is by its nature undefinable. Critics will never agree on what makes him such a brilliant designer, each level in a design leads to a deeper level. The more it is understood, the more the realisation that so much is left to be discovered. Perhaps the best definition of Mackintosh comes in his own comments on beauty and taste:



The only true modern individual art, in proportion, in form and in colour, is produced by an emotion, produced by a frank and intelligent understanding of the absolute and true requirements of a building or object - a scientific knowledge of the possibilities and beauties of material, a fearless application of emotion and knowledge, a cultured intelligence and a mind artistic, yet not too indolent to attempt the task of clothing in grace and beauty the new forms and conditions that modern developments of life - social, commercial, and religious - insist upon, (Nuttgens 1988, p100).

In analyzing Charles Rennie Mackintosh's influence, one has to take into account the influence <sup>s/of</sup> on Mackintosh himself. Whether he was a forerunner of Modernism or Post-Modernism he was definitely eclectic. Hill House and Windyhill are heavily influenced by traditional Scottish dwellings. Motifs on several buildings have been taken from Japanese heraldic 'mon'. The genius in Mackintosh is that he fused these influences with his own ideas to produce a distinctive style that was both traditional and modern.

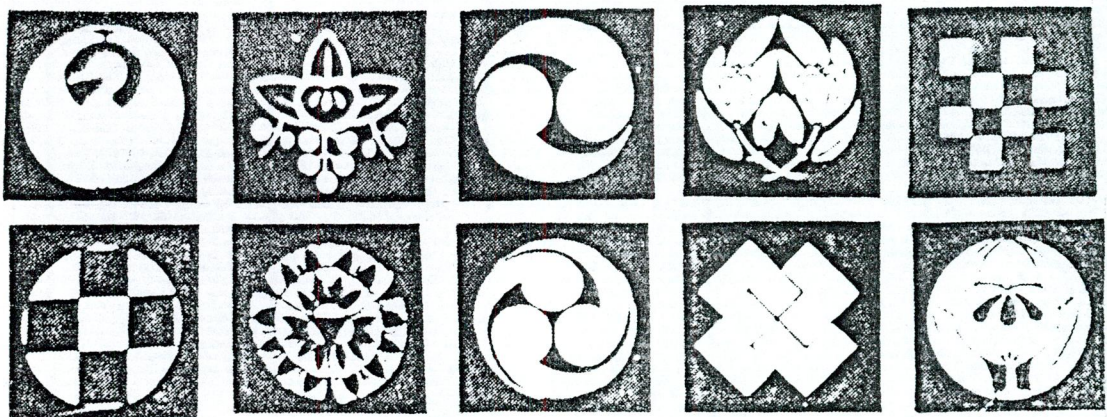


Fig.2 Japanese heraldic mon.



## Heritage Centre for an Art Lover

The reinterpretation of a Mackintosh design.

The most noticeable feature of a Charles Rennie Mackintosh building is its "Unity of Style"(Brett 1992, p10). Each of the designs and completed projects exhibits this unity which demands attention. A famous opinion given by Richard Muther on the occasion of the 1900 Vienna exhibition :

Go through the rooms of an exhibition, whether in Vienna, London, Paris or anywhere else, and you will be aware of a great unity of tone. You stand perhaps in the room of Mr. and Mrs. Mackintosh, you will see thin, tall candles, chairs and cupboards thrust upwards in pure verticals, pictures with slender elliptical forms whose outlines are governed by the linear play of a unifying thread... The stylistic unity of the room has become manifest to you,(Alison 1978, p23).

Everything was designed by Mackintosh, a small detail may be picked up and expanded to give the building a harmony of elements. Everything is considered: furniture, carpets, light fittings, wall paper and cutlery. He even did the flower arrangements for the exhibitions. An example of this attention to detail was at the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative art in Turin. The flowers ordered for the display were not good enough for Mackintosh, who exploded, "We can only have the flowers I arrange". Going into the surrounding countryside Mackintosh picked his twigs and branches and returned to the exhibition to construct his 'proper' display,(Moffat 1989, p4). An account of the extreme perfectionist



Mackintosh was, a trait that can be seen throughout his career, even in his later painting.

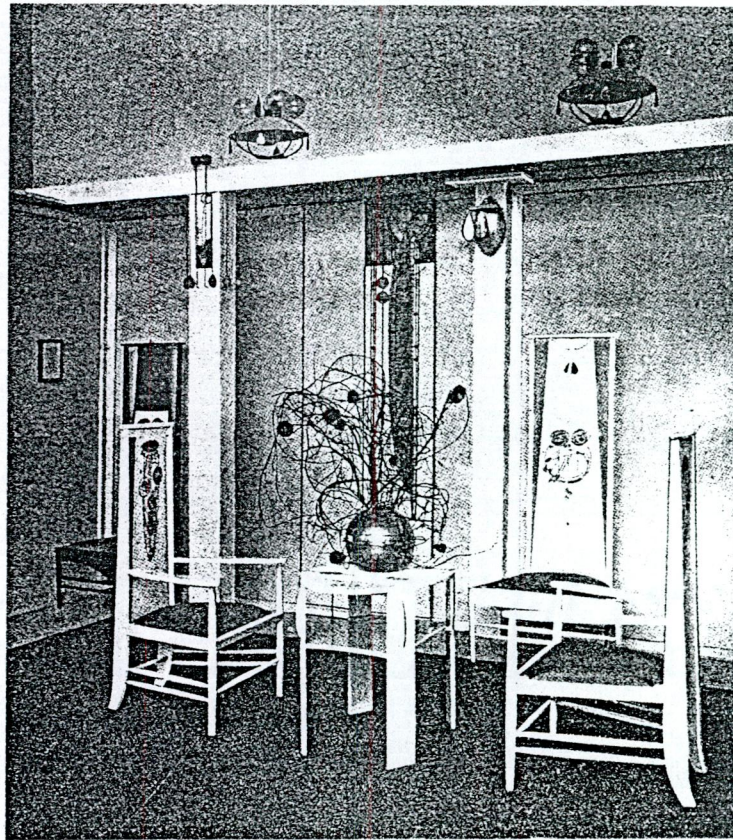


Fig.3 Mackintosh, Rose Boudoir, Turin 1902

It is this attention to detail which sets Mackintosh, along with a small group of other architects such as Robert Adam, into a higher order. Most architects have neither the time nor the inclination to go into every detail of a commission. The work is handed to assistants or stock components are chosen regardless of their suitability. The overall harmony of the building as a complete entity is lost. Mackintosh and Adam were perfectionists to whom no detail was too small to be considered. This theory holds true for most architects at the forefront of design today, they have a personal vision which extends to



every detail of a project. There can be no compromises in their design. Perhaps great architecture and perfectionism go hand in hand.

An example of this kind of designer is the architect Norman Foster. It has been said that he could have made much more money, been much more successful (as success is often seen to be more related to quantity than to quality), by increasing his staff and taking on more work. If the work is there, why should he not expand to fill the demand? The reality is that if Foster increased his practice and workload he would lose control of the project. The details would be given to someone who, if not less talented, would not have the same vision as he. The building would then become a Foster 'style' building, which can be done, and are being done, by many other practices. Foster is choosing to keep control of the whole design process, from concept to working drawings, and is refusing to degenerate into corporate design where everything is a compromise. By staying relatively small each project is his alone, made reality as closely as possible to the original vision. It is not many architects who would turn down a chance to produce many more buildings with the corresponding rise in fees.

Mackintosh may not have had the same choice as Foster, he did not enjoy the same popularity then that Foster enjoys today, but being the person he was, it is certain he would have put himself in the same position, to retain



control of everything. Many books on Mackintosh condemn the fact that there are not many more Mackintosh buildings, blaming the lack of commissions on the lack of discerning patrons. In many ways it is a shame, but it focused him on the commissions he did get, and made them the masterpieces that they are.

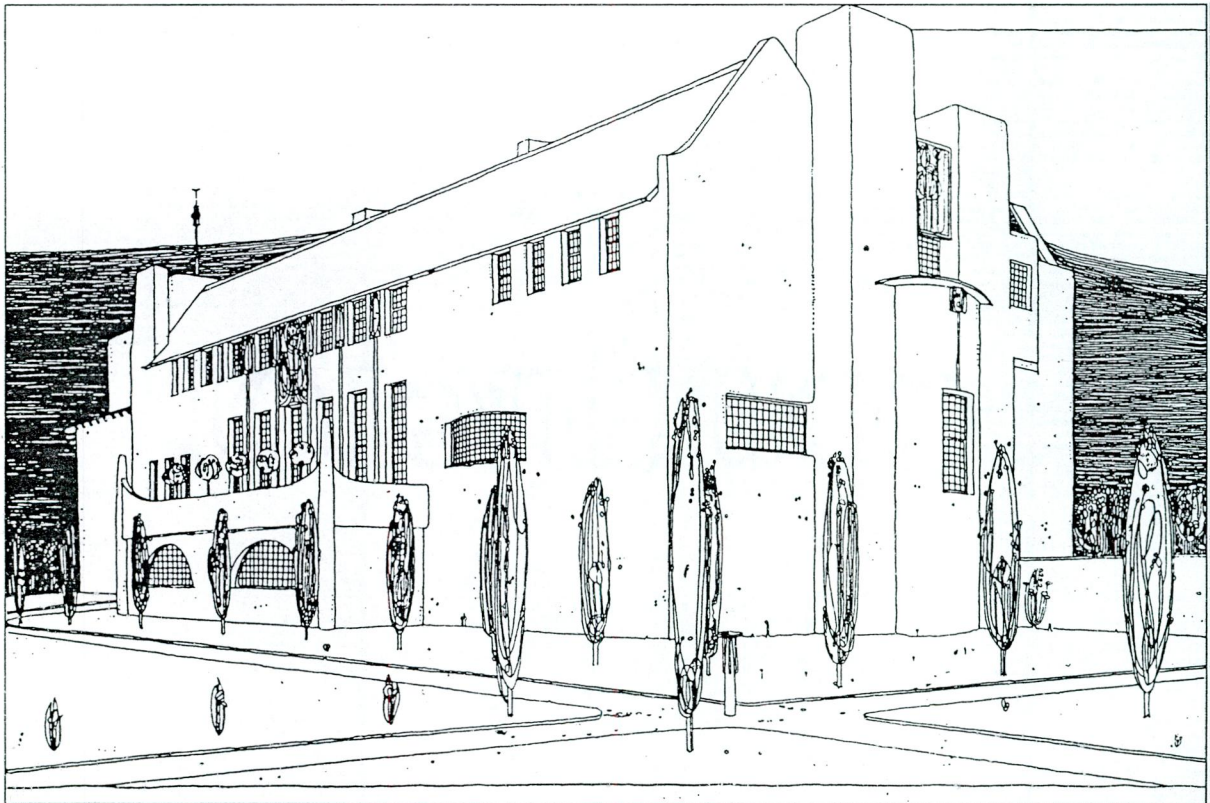


Fig. 4 Mackintosh: House for an Art Lover, view from the south-east 1901.

Perhaps the most interesting case of Mackintosh not having complete control over a project is the competition entry for a House for an Art Lover. Because it was purely a theoretical exercise it freed Mackintosh from his normal financial constraints. It is also designed as if Mackintosh himself were the 'Art Lover', showing a continuation of



the spirituality that manifests the design for his flat at 120 Mains St. Much has been written about Mackintosh getting close to his patrons to find out exactly what their needs were, what they themselves wanted. This design can be said to be the closest thing to a pure Mackintosh design, designed by him, for him. Unfortunately because of the late submission of certain perspectives, The Mackintosh entry was disqualified and the building was never built.

Some ninety years later however, the story of 'The House for an Art Lover' takes a new twist with it being constructed in Bellahouston Park in Glasgow. Frank A. Walker put it very well when he confessed in an article in the 'Scotsman':

What is being done is not, after all, restoration, nor is it rehabilitation, conservation or preservation. In effect it is almost an attempt at reincarnation, (Murray Feb 1990, p15).

The problem with this reincarnation is that Mackintosh never built the House for an Art Lover. He built a house for a publisher and a house for a businessman, but not for an art lover. To try to reference it against either Hill House or Windyhill would be wrong. Each of Mackintosh's buildings is a separate entity, conceived for a specific purpose for specific people. There are different parameters in designing for different functions. Again it returns to the originality of Mackintosh; the interior was designed first to a specific set of constraints, and the



elevations followed from this. To change the function of a room would change the floorplans and hence the elevation. This is why no matter how many buildings Mackintosh had designed, it could not be determined accurately how he would have built the House for an Art Lover. They can give guidelines, but never hard and fast rules. The building as constructed in Bellahouston Park is not a Mackintosh building, it is a Mackintosh 'style' building. Much thought has been given to interpreting Mackintosh's original drawings, yet those building it have missed the principle behind the design. The client for the project, Graham Roxburgh, envisaged the House for an Art Lover as a 'shared heritage centre'(Murray Feb 1990,15) housing offices and studios as well as being open to the public at weekends. Mackintosh designed the house as a private house for a wealthy client. Had he been designing a shared heritage centre the difference between that and the competition entry would have been the difference between the Glasgow School of Art and Hill House. Each building is different, conceived for a specific purpose, each works very well at that purpose. The Glasgow School of Art still functions extremely well as an art college, would it still function as well if it were converted into apartments? In effect this is what is being done to the House for an Art Lover, the conversion of function is perhaps the single most important reason why it cannot be considered a true Mackintosh work. In his book, The Poetics of Workmanship, David Brett draws attention to the distinction between the public and



private areas in the work of Mackintosh. Brett defines the public areas as masculine; rugged, dark, with the materials and methods of construction clearly exposed, and the feminine; smooth, white, curved, with all construction hidden. (Brett 1992, p103). To change the function of the rooms is to negate the effect which Mackintosh wished to convey. Even to allow public access to the white rooms is to destroy the effect:

The overall effect of the white rooms is to induce a restrained, almost ritualised, sensuousness in those who enter them; the body becomes charged with body-consciousness, (Brett 1992, p103).

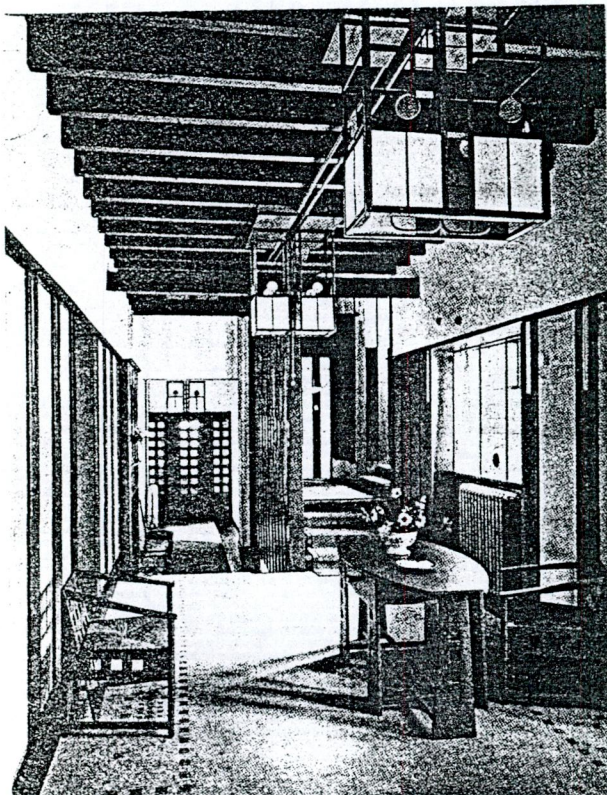


Fig5. Mackintosh: Hill House  
Entrance Hall, 1902-3.

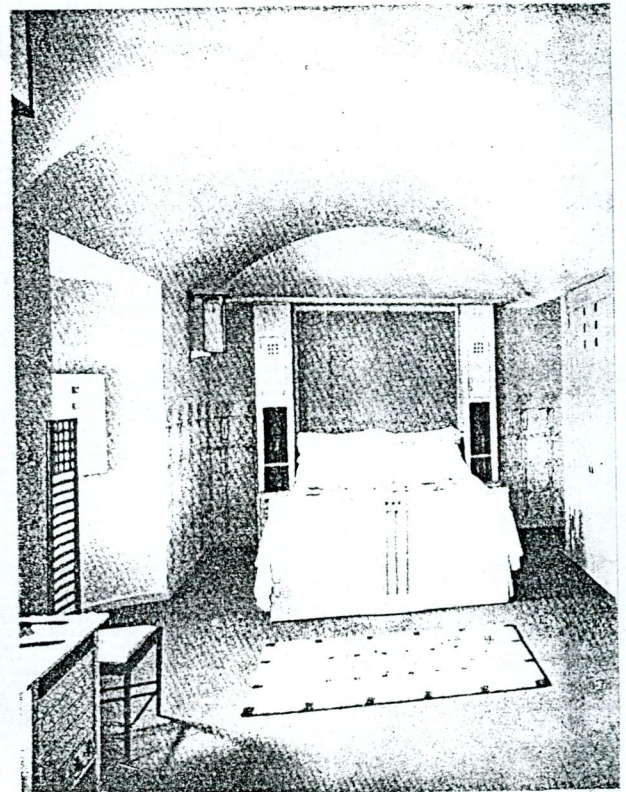


Fig. 6 Mackintosh: Hill House  
Main bedroom, 1902-3.



Brett goes on to explain this body-consciousness, proposing that it becomes self-consciousness when confronted with a white interior whilst wearing street clothes. Carrying this a stage further, allowing public access in large numbers overpowers the spiritual effect of the room. The 'white interiors' are some of Mackintosh's most important works, yet they are meant to be the most private. Few people see them as Mackintosh meant them to be seen.

Many architects seem to hold Mackintosh in 'Worshipful reverence,' (Murray Feb 1990, p15). His work is copied slavishly with little of the originality of thought that he himself had. A consequence of having lettable studio space in the 'House for an Art Lover' is that a new dormer window is to be created on the entrance facade. Whilst this is necessary to make the project economically viable, it is impossible to predict how Mackintosh would have done it. Instead the window is a close copy of one at Windyhill. This 'montage architecture' is fundamentally against Mackintosh's principle of the building conceived as a whole:

In each case the architects are having to exercise a great deal of creative imagination - unfortunately it is someone else's creative imagination they are being called upon to use. Perhaps we should be training a new breed of designer forgers, who can work fluently in the work of Mackintosh, (Best May 1990, p37).



Attention must be paid to the timing of the reemergence of Charles Rennie Mackintosh. His rise is inextricably linked to the rise of Post-Modernism. Where the House for an Art Lover is an honest attempt at a 'new' Mackintosh building, Post-Modernism is unashamed at its use of pastiche, plundering the archives of design history for images, including those of Mackintosh. Modern building techniques are a major cause for this style, again referring to Jencks and his 'double coding' of modern and conventional. Building regulations today define rigidly how a building will be constructed. Even with the House for an Art Lover concrete slabs were laid behind timbers to resist fire. This has the effect of lessening headroom and therefor altering the proportions of some of the rooms. Buildings today are constricted by both the Building Regulations and the cost of construction. Practically all large buildings are constructed from reinforced concrete slab, the cheapest and safest method of construction. The stamp of originality, the architect's signature, comes with the design of the facade. Post-Modernism has plundered the past and combined it with the Modern, consciously parodying past architectural styles. It is the antithesis of Modernism, which totally rejected the past:

Post-Modern Architecture inverted many of the principles of Modernism, the latter was against ornament, so Post-Modern architecture was for it; the latter was against mixing styles, so Post-Modern architecture was in favour of stylistic eclecticism; the latter made a radical break with the past, so Post-Modern architecture was historicist or combined the



old and the new; the latter was serious, so Post-Modern architecture delighted in humour and pastiche,(Walker 1992, p).

Post-Modern architecture is a parody of previous style, but it is a conscious parody. All of the principles of Modernism cannot be ignored, the methods of construction such as the use of reinforced concrete, cannot be changed, but they can be played with. Historicist images and architectural jokes can be created. An example of this is the extension to the Tate Gallery done by James Stirling. The concrete courses seem to be the exposed, reinforced concrete floors, an example of the Modernist principle of exposing materials and construction. However when the eye reaches the corner the course ends, showing that it too, like the brickwork is merely ornament. Mackintosh also made subtle jokes in his work, the bay window on the first floor looks more important than it actually is, only giving light to a lavatory.



Fig. 7 James Stirling: The Clore Gallery.



By parodying Charles Rennie Mackintosh architects are trying to capture the mystical quality of his work. For architects and designers who recognise his work, a building based on a Mackintosh design is an obvious reference, whilst for the majority, without design awareness, the design will strike a chord because of its inherited symbolism. This parallels very closely on the definition of Post-Modernism and perhaps gives a reason why Mackintosh has such influence on recent design. Buildings which have become accepted as post modern can be seen to be very close to Mackintosh's unbuilt designs for art studios in Chelsea.

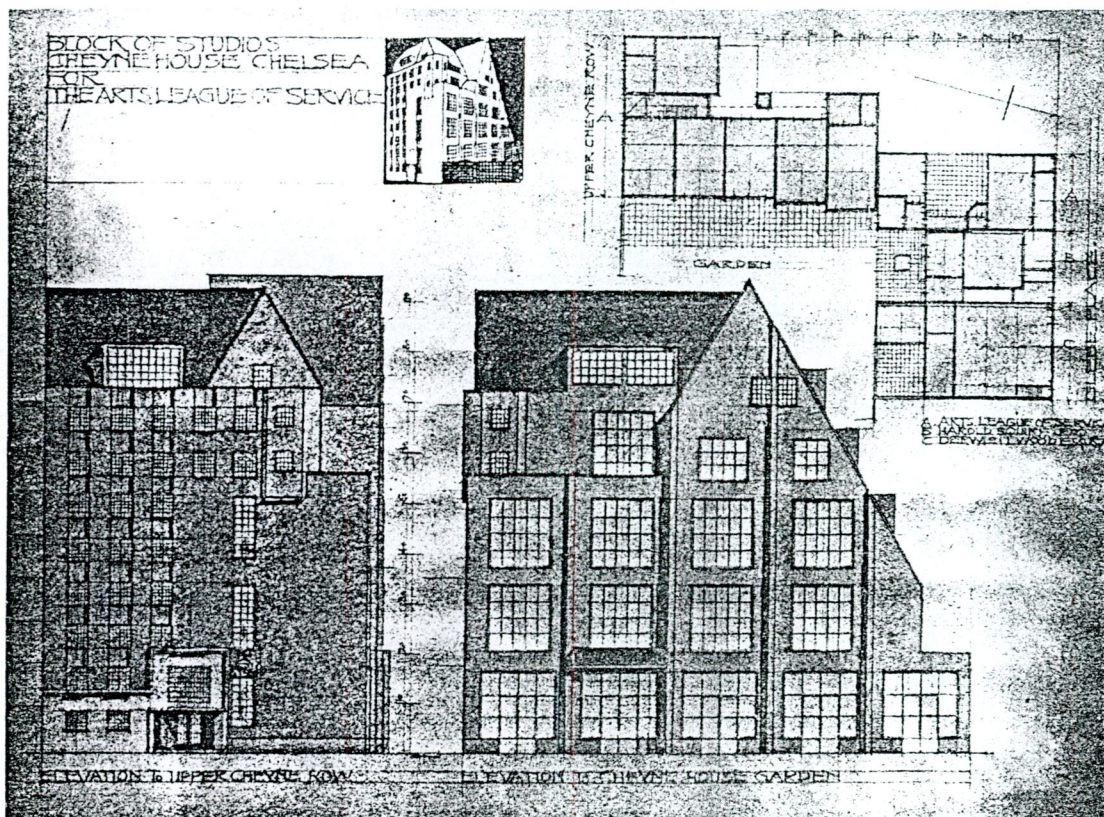


Fig. 8 Mackintosh: Proposed studios for the Arts League of Service, 1920.



These buildings, which owe much to the Mackintosh oeuvre, are in some ways more honest than the House for an Art Lover which is proposed as a true Charles Rennie Mackintosh building. Both are not his work. The House for an Art Lover, had it been built by Mackintosh, would have been very different to that which stands in Glasgow today. If he had a commission for a 'shared heritage centre' it would be nothing like the House for an Art Lover. Unfortunately the sad fact was that Mackintosh received few commissions, and no complete architectural commissions after the completion of the west wing of the Glasgow School of Art in 1909. The question 'what if?' arises. What if Mackintosh had been able to refine his ideas on further from the Glasgow School of Art? What if he had more patrons who appreciated his work? Mackintosh's furniture followed his architectural work quite closely. his later designs for W.J. Basset-Lowke, 78 Derngate in 1916; and The Dugout, 1917, for Miss Cranston, show Mackintosh was close to refining a Modernism of his own, a more human modernism. Howarth, writing in 1952 referring to the extension at the back of 78 Derngate, states that to the best of his knowledge there was no other work in Britain that bears so clearly the characteristics of the Modern movement(Howarth 1977, p200).





Fig. 9 Mackintosh: Interior 78 Derngate, 1916

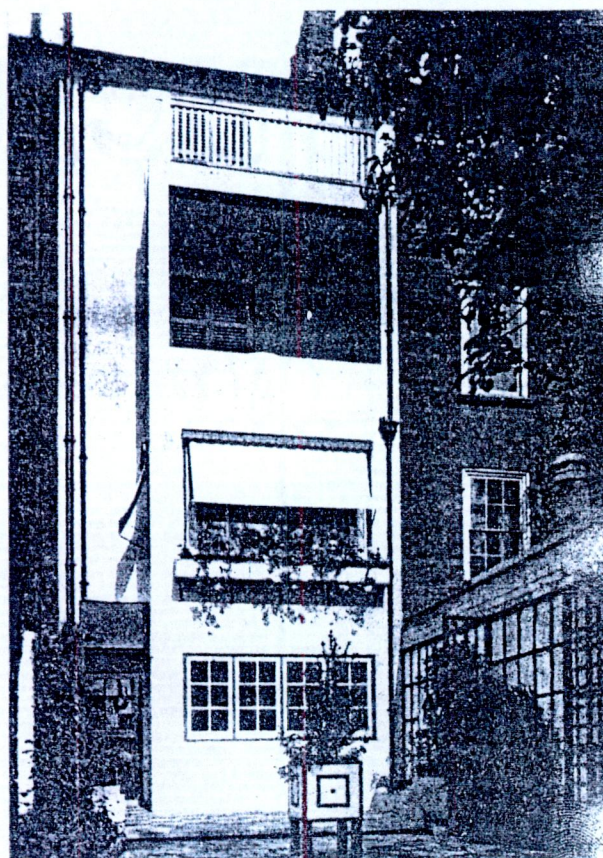


Fig. 10 Mackintosh: Exterior of extension to 78 Derngate, 1916



Howarth also, in a lecture given in 1983, selected two unrealised projects: Mies van der Rohe's glass skyscraper and Mackintosh's studio residences in Chelsea (Nuttgens 1988, p57). The glass skyscraper has been built in different forms, and Mackintosh's design obviously has an influence on many Post-Modern buildings, and in 1983 Howarth saw the merging of these two ideas into a new form of architecture. Ten years later in 1993 in can be seen to have happened in certain cases. What is considered 'good' architecture today, whilst getting larger, has retained its attention to detail, it is more humane. Buildings are for the people that use them and not merely monuments to architects. Many historians credit Mackintosh as a proto-modernist. This is true, but he can also be held as the creator of a form of Post-Modernism.



## The Hill House Chair

### Pastiche and Post-Modernism.

The Hill House ladderback chair is perhaps the one object most associated with Charles Rennie Mackintosh. The chair has become a contemporary icon. Reproductions are manufactured and sold, and furniture designers copy the image regularly. The image is even used in advertising.

*"Design may be thought of  
as the well-doing  
of what needs doing"*



WHEN CHARLES RENNIE MACKINTOSH  
DESIGNED HIS CLASSIC HILL HOUSE CHAIR HE  
CAUSED A SENSATION.

APPEARANCES, OF COURSE, CAN BE DE-  
CEIVING AND WELL-KNOWN.

THORN LIGHTING, TOO, NEVER LETS A GOOD  
DESIGN GO UNREMARKED. PERFORMANCE.

INSTEAD, TO COMBINE OUR EXPERIENCE FIRST  
IN DEVELOPING THE VERY FINEST RANGE OF DIS-  
PLAY LIGHTING LUMINAIRES - MODELS THAT BRING  
NEW GROUNDS IN EFFICIENCY, CLARITY AND  
RELIABILITY.

AND ONLY THEN DO WE ENSURE THAT THEIR  
APPEARANCE PERFECTLY COMPLEMENTS THEIR  
UNIQUELY ADVANCED PERFORMANCE.

YOU COULD CALL IT DESIGN. THAT'S NOT  
LIGHTING, TO HIDE - AND EVERYTHING TO REVEAL.

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SCENE LIGHTING. OUR RANGE OF LUMINAIRES  
SATISFIES THE MOST EXACTING REQUIREMENTS IN  
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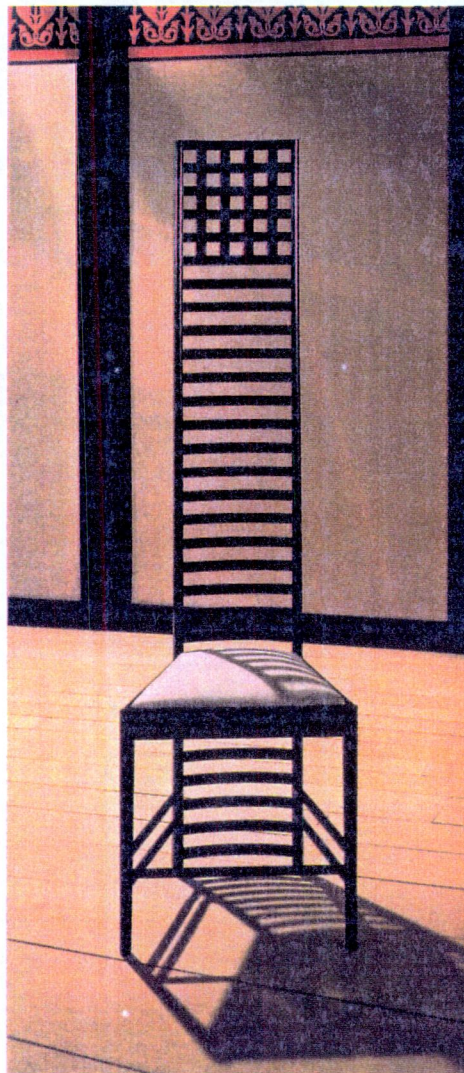
THORN LIGHTING IS COMMITTED TO COM-  
MITMENT TO EXCELLENCE. IT'S A STANDARD FROM  
WHICH WE NEVER DEVIATE - AND A QUALITY THAT  
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HILL HOUSE CHAIR - C.R. Mackintosh 1907

Fig. 11 The Hill House Chair as used to advertise Thorn lighting, 1988.



Few pieces of furniture achieve this status as cult objects. The ladderback chair is an especially good case as it was never meant for mass- or even small scale-production. It was designed for a specific purpose in the hill House bedroom, yet it stands on its own as an object. As Filippo Alison describes:

The rigorously functional distribution of specially designed objects - furniture and objects - contributes to the organic unity of the interior, (Alison 1978, p98).

The chair is a sign that Mackintosh was freeing himself from curvilinear design and moving towards a more rectilinear approach which reached its peak with later designs of furniture and interiors. There is a definite move towards "ornamental abstraction"(Alison 1978, p58) not merely for decorative purposes but in search of a new definition of space. Mackintosh seems to be defining something new, close to a form of modernism. The chair, like Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Chair is a symbol of this new theory.

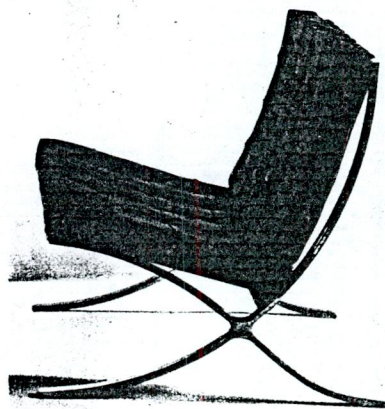


Fig. 12 Mies van der Rohe: The Barcelona Chair, 1929.



Yet there are differences, Mies' chair encapsulates the International style, using new materials in chair construction, with a functional, machine made aesthetic. Mackintosh's Hill House chair, on the other hand, draws inspiration from the Arts and Crafts movement and Japanese imagery, an eclecticism which is very close to Post-Modern theory. When one looks closer however one sees the difference between image and reality. The Barcelona Chair whilst giving the image of mass production, is in fact hand made. Mies saw it almost as a sculptural piece. The Hill House chair makes no pretensions to be anything but wood, yet this wood is highly lacquered, giving it a smooth flat appearance. Mackintosh doesn't hide the wood like he did on other pieces of furniture, he works with it. The Hill House chair gives the impression that both machine and hand compliment each other. Mackintosh is being true to both the materials and the method of construction, yet still stamps his individuality on the chair. He carries the design of the chair to its limits, the sections of the rungs and supports are of minimum cross-section, drawing a close parallel with Foster and Rogers, the 'Hi-Tech' architects working from the late seventies onwards, whose use of materials such as steel and glass as construction materials, was designed to reduce their buildings to the minimum mass for the maximum strength. These could be seen as a direct descendant of the Hill House chair, the weight of which is only three kilograms.



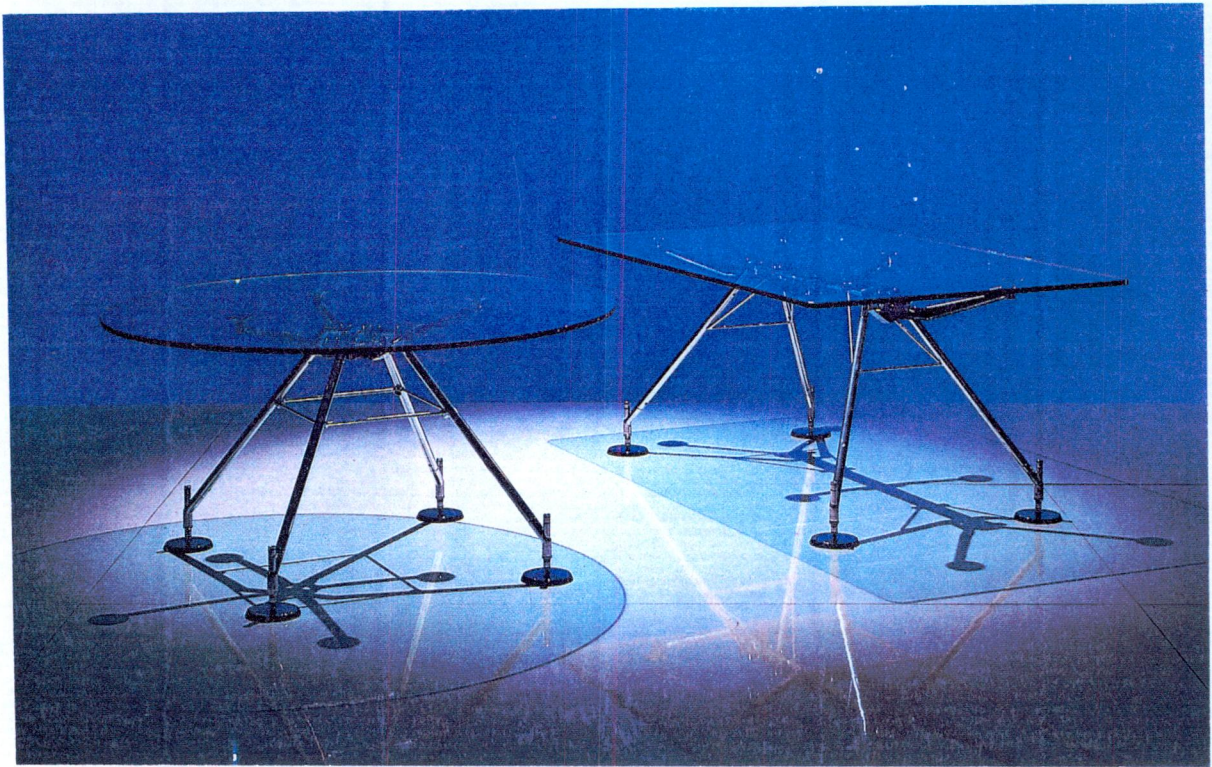


Fig. 13 Norman Foster: Nomos Furniture.

Mackintosh also experimented with the ladderback chair by using techniques more usually seen in painting. The chair was influenced by Japanese images, seen by Mackintosh through the medium of Japanese prints, which were widely available at that time. The main characteristic of these prints is the distinct absence of any form of depth and perspective, deliberately aimed at accentuating the decorative effect of the work through a marked two-dimensional quality,(Alison 1978, p13). When looking at the Hill House ladderback chair, this idea crystallises into a three-dimensional object. in its true setting at Hill House, in a white bedroom, there appear two of these high backed chairs. They stand out starkly against the light coloured room and furniture. The chairs act as a twin focus for the room, attention is drawn to them as the only two 'definite' objects in the room. Yet



because of the accentuation of the back, the seat seems to fade into the background. The chair appears as a two-dimensional panel hanging on the wall. The chair defines the space in the room, but does not overpower, because of its disguise.

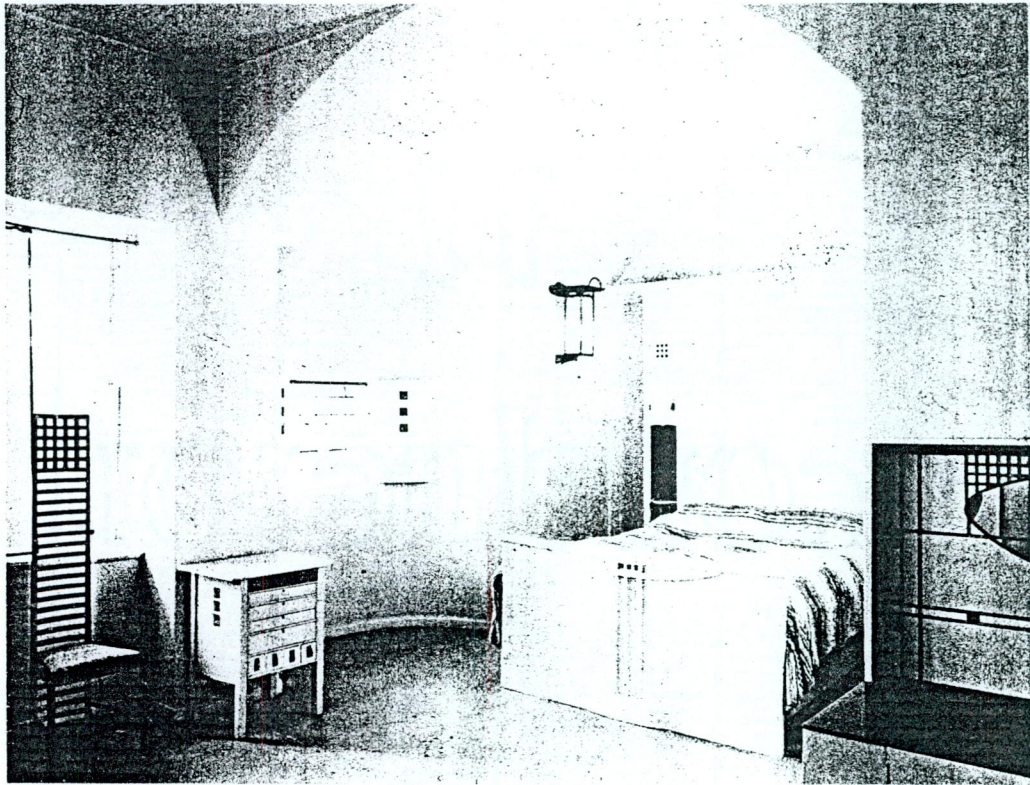


Fig. 14 Mackintosh: Hill House Bedroom showing one of the Ladderback chairs, 1902-3.

Mackintosh achieved the acme of his capacity for synthesising his vernacular patrimony in abstract terms, complimentary figurations disappear. The meaning of the chair is found in the line, which has now become both more assured and more inventive (Alison 1978, p102).

Mackintosh has taken the vernacular ladderback chair, a functional, austere, piece of furniture and created a work of art.





Fig. 15 Peter Pierobon: Ladderback chair.

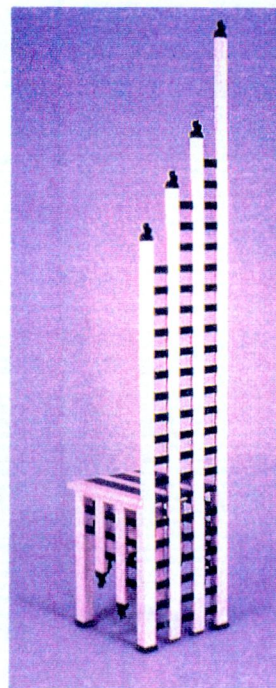


Fig. 16 Susan Pfeiffer: Ladderback chair.

In a recent Dublin exhibition of American chair design entitled *Please be Seated*, there were two chairs showing direct lineage from the original Hill House ladderback chair. Both Peter Pierobon and Susan Pfeiffer are reinterpreting Mackintosh according to the Post-Modern principle of accepted pastiche. Pierobon even goes to the extent of saying in the exhibition: "It was my intention in designing the ladderback chair to extend the oeuvre of Charles Rennie Mackintosh" (*Please be Seated* 1992). Both these chairs in one exhibition are perfect examples that illustrate the influence of Mackintosh on contemporary furniture design. Furniture designers today are pushing



at the barriers between art and design, yet Mackintosh was doing this in a private house in 1901. Both of the chairs in this exhibition can be related to the Hill House ladderback chair, but only Pierobon admits it. There is a logical progression from Mackintosh and his interpretation of vernacular, Japanese and Arts and Crafts ideas, to Pierobon and his interpretation of Mackintosh, and the postmodern ideas. It is obvious that Pierobon understands this process of interpretation and influence, and produces his own aesthetic from it. This understanding of the process of influence is extremely important in the design process. Without it, it is impossible to chose the images that will make the work 'doubly coded', it will become a confusing composite of styles. Pfeiffer seems to have fallen into this trap. She seems to be denying Mackintosh's contribution whilst still being influenced by him. Writing in the catalogue she "wants to entice the viewer with the beauty of her work, and through it encourage preservation of our environment"(Please be Seated 1992). She is denying the pedigree of her work, this is the fundamental difference between conscious pastiche and unconscious pastiche.

Conscious pastiche can be defined as understanding the process of influence. As with Pierobon, only by understanding this process can a design be changed into a new object or work. It is central to the idea of stylistic eclecticism. Not only does the work itself, the Hill House chair, need to be understood but Mackintosh himself, his



influences, his position in design history, even the cult of Mackintosh need to be examined. Unconscious pastiche is the denial of influence, the thought that one's work is original when it is not. Post-Modernism brought in the idea of working with pastiche instead of working against it. One of the reasons that Modernism failed eventually was its rigidity. Later exponents of the International Style were so hesitant in progressing the movement that it stagnated. Design must always look forward or backwards, but never in on itself.

Peter Pierobon pays homage to Mackintosh, and seeks to reinterpret his work as a piece of Post-Modern furniture. He 'consciously' keeps to Mackintosh's principles while at the same time creating an original piece of furniture. Pierobon makes a personal statement literally within the framework of Mackintosh's design. Anyone who knows Mackintosh's work will automatically notice the references to him, whereas those who do not will see a perfectly proportioned, beautiful chair. Pfeiffer on the other hand goes the way of 'unconscious pastiche', having no organised system of images. When looking at her chair the viewer is confused as to its paternity. Many different images seem to be there; Mackintosh, skyscrapers, vernacular furniture. The meaning of the chair has become obscured. Instead of extending Mackintosh's ideas she seems to be taking a step backwards. She seems to want to produce a completely original work while at the same time using Mackintosh as a stepping stone.



Instead of working with Mackintosh's design she is working against it. Out of the two designs, it is Pierobon's which is the more original. Pfeiffer lacks the understanding necessary to decode Mackintosh. This understanding of Mackintosh theory, of his principles that influenced him and his design is a fundamental need in understanding his furniture:

The procedure has essential hallmarks: First the need to retain the original figurative formula which enshrines the designer's stamp, and second, the need for a clear awareness that one must provide for much more than aesthetic satisfaction alone, and go beyond the purely formal realm of figuration in order to meet adequately the new users needs. These wider values can be embraced by a mode of thought which takes account of technology and psychology, (Nuttgens 1988, p152).

Pfeiffer neither retains the original formula nor considers the symbolism. The chair is not far enough away stylistically from what is an extremely strong image. Neither is it close enough, like Pierobon's, that the family resemblance is obviously a play on the work of Mackintosh. The symbolism too, is mixed, veering more towards the architectural than the mystical. The design is such a blend of influences that no one can give the chair a solid focus.



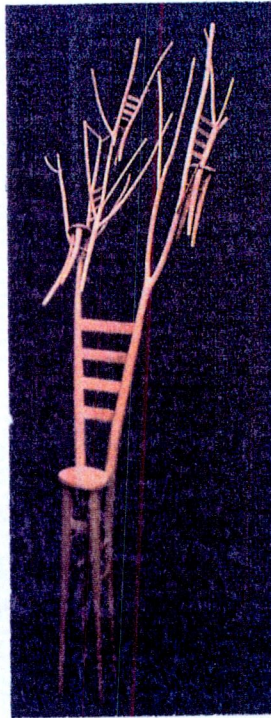


Fig. 17 Michael Larson: Chair Tree.

Another chair in the exhibition which parallels Mackintosh's symbolism quite closely is Michael Larson's Chair Tree. This is obviously not based on Mackintosh directly, but it does share the same symbols as influences. Howarth draws attention to the Willow Tea Rooms where: "...the multiplicity of high spindly backs was intended to resemble a forest of small willow trees"(Howarth 1977, p50). A group of these chairs around a dining table creates a sense of intimacy, a clearing in a forest. Alison also alludes to this imagery in his description of the Hill House ladderback chair. In his flat at 120 Mains St, Mackintosh carries this a stage further, the whole room is designed to create a sombre, mysterious setting for what to him was a most important ritual, eating and drinking (Howarth 1977, p45). Mackintosh succeeded in giving his chairs a magical,



mystical quality. Michael Larson gives his chair the same quality, seeing it as: "...imparting a mysterious, magical, numinous quality that is not normally associated with furniture or other common objects" (Please be Seated, 1992). These two designers approach the idea from different angles, the chairs are totally different concepts. Mackintosh highly abstract, heavily based on Japanese imagery and construction techniques, Larson almost vernacular. Yet they both share the same mystical quality; stretching their verticality to the limit, almost sculptural in their appearance. They are both impractical as seating, yet perfect as symbols for a mysterious, magical ritual. Lethaby conceived a building to be an image of the cosmos: "...in which the pillars and the roof trees are the Tree of Life upholding the vault of Heaven". Lethaby's symbolism - in which the archaic and the modernist are inextricably mixed - was without doubt part of the overall mental formation of the young Mackintosh (Brett 1992,p94). Two designers from different continents, and working ninety years apart, interpret the same ideas and strive for the same results. On the surface the chairs have nothing in common, in the subconscious they provoke the same feelings. It is amazing that Mackintosh, working in a different world was able to define these ideas. It also gives a reason why he was never accepted in such a rigidly structured social system.





Fig. 18 Mackintosh's design as a symbol of trees.

As a symbol Mackintosh's Hill House ladderback chair is extremely successful. As a practical piece of furniture, as has been mentioned previously, it leaves much to be desired. For domestic chairs such as the Hill House chair, the construction is not critical, they were not meant for sitting. However for other Mackintosh high-backed chairs such as those used in the Tea Rooms, the story is one of continual repair. Many had to be reinforced with metal brackets and often the backs were reduced to a more reasonable height (Howarth 1977 p50). Looking at Mackintosh's architectural work, everything functioned extremely well. Perhaps it was the only construction available at the time, Glasgow furniture manufacturers were not of the same calibre as those of Japan. It is a case of the idea being more important than the reality.



Modern reconstructions of Mackintosh furniture have solved the problem, but not without some compromises. The Hill House chair is relatively unscathed, but the design of some other chairs has been changed to make it easier for modern construction methods. It is a case of producing the furniture economically. Mackintosh has become a cult figure and his furniture is big business. There is now a large market for reproductions of his furniture and, although many companies have been quick to exploit this with copies of Mackintosh furniture which do not live up to the originals in quality:

On the other hand an attempt is being made to make genuine reproductions available to the public. In Italy, Spain and Canada, these carefully documented Mackintosh pieces are being produced (Nuttgens 1988, p55).

Perhaps these reproductions, and some of the pastiche of his work, can be put into perspective by the high prices being fetched by Mackintosh originals. Five pieces acquired by the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto; a single bed, washstand, dressing table and mirror from Hous'hill, and a white cabinet, similar to those in the Southpark Avenue drawing room were sold for more than £300,000 in 1984. The original Hill House chair is priceless, as there were only ever two produced, perhaps then, the reproductions are a good thing, in that more people can enjoy it?



## From Howarth to Brett

### Books on Mackintosh

In spite of his short career, Mackintosh is probably one of the most written about architects of our time. During Mackintosh's lifetime at the peak of his popularity in Europe, articles regularly appeared in The Studio, and Decorative Kunst magazines. These articles, including illustrations of his designs contributed to the spread of his ideas. It is because of these articles that Mackintosh was to have such an influence on the Vienna Secession and hence, become known as a forerunner of Modernism. Pevsner sees the influence Mackintosh has as being the conversion from curvilinear Art Nouveau to the rectilinear form:

Mackintosh alone, we repeat, could be a witness for the defense and the prosecution of both Art Nouveau and anti-Art Nouveau (Pevsner 1936 p144).

Mackintosh bridged the gap between Art Nouveau and Modernism, yet he belonged to neither. The years between 1897 and 1907 were his most fruitful. He worked on his own terms, yet because he was unconventional was treated with antipathy outside Glasgow. When the International Style came into architecture, Mackintosh was disowned as an Art Nouveau ornamentalist. In looking at Mackintosh he cannot be placed with either group, he must be considered on his own.



Howarth sees Mackintosh as going into decline in 1909 (Howarth 1977, p303). This is borne out by the literature produced at that time. Between 1909 and 1928, the year of Mackintosh's death, there were only two articles on his work that appeared, both concerned with his fabric designs. Mackintosh's influence during his lifetime was limited to a burst of activity spanning only ten years. These years also encompassed Mackintosh's European exhibitions. None of his later work was to have any influence because it was not seen.

Two years after his death the first of what was to be many biographical appreciations, 'Charles Rennie Mackintosh, his life and work' by Desmond Chapman-Huston. This source is one used by many subsequent writers, but it contains many factual errors which have become accepted over the years. Articles began to appear over the nineteen thirties with the high points being the Mackintosh Memorial Exhibition held in Glasgow in 1933, and *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* by Nikolaus Pevsner. These helped to clarify Mackintosh's contribution towards the definition of a new theory, Modernism. During the late nineteen forties and early nineteen fifties Thomas Howarth began to present articles on Mackintosh, culminating in 1952 with the publication of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Modern Movement, of which he said:



In this book, I have tried to present an objective study of the life, work and influence of this extraordinary man, accrediting him with neither more nor less than the evidence would permit, and considering his achievements, his successes and failures alike, against the background of contemporary events in Europe (Howarth 1977, p.xvii).

Howarth's book is extremely comprehensive, perhaps the reason why future authors would have so many problems. He was writing within a generation of Mackintosh's best work, and was able to talk to those who knew Mackintosh at various stages of his life, Francis Newberry, Mary Newberry Sturrock and Herbert MacNair. He was writing about a man who had been dead for only twenty years. Howarth was also able to look at Mackintosh objectively, assessing his influence on Modernism while it had not yet fallen out of favour. No author writing now on Mackintosh's life could improve on Howarth, all information available on Mackintosh was gathered by him, what needed to be done was a critique of Mackintosh when the International Style failed and again with the emergence of Post-Modernism. Mackintosh is an architect whose work can be reassessed with each new architectural movement.

Howarth wanted the book to provide "as accurate a record as possible of Mackintosh's life and times", (Howarth 1977, p.xviii). The book was intended to awake awareness of Mackintosh and cause the preservation of his work. In some ways he was successful, but others such as the Ingham Street Tea



Rooms were badly damaged through being used as a storeroom. It must be remembered that Mackintosh had not been recognised as the master architect that he was at this time, he had not achieved cult status. Today it is unthinkable that any of his work should be destroyed, in some part this is due to Howarth and his book bringing Mackintosh to the awareness of many more people. These Mackintosh devotees were still, however, a small group. Howarth's book, first published in 1952, did not sell out of its first printing until the nineteen seventies, with the second edition being published in 1977. Since then Mackintosh has been recognised throughout the world.

Howarth's book is the definitive work on Mackintosh, but there are areas where he does not go into as much detail as the majority of the book. The book cannot be faulted on the architectural projects, both proposed and realised. Howarth even anticipated the problems associated with the building of the House for an Art Lover, especially the lack of shading on the elevations making the roof junctions unclear. also the influence of Mackintosh on the Secessionists has been dealt with comprehensively. The fact that Howarth is so strong on the architectural is hardly surprising; from 1939 to 1946 he taught at the Glasgow School of Architecture and was professor of Architecture at the University of Toronto since 1958. Mackintosh's genius, however, was that he was not simply an architect, he mixed architecture with furniture, industrial and textile design and spent the last years of



his life as a painter. It must be realised that Howarth wrote on what he knew best, and did not dwell on things like furniture and fabric designs, and only gave passing reference to the influence of Symbolism on Mackintosh, and his use of it in his work. The fault of many of the books written since Howarth can be laid on Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Modern Movement. They focus on his architecture, dealing fleetingly with furniture, mostly as it relates to the interior. Mackintosh gave equal importance to every aspect of his work, every detail was considered. Both Filippo Alison and Roger Billcliffe have redressed the balance somewhat with their books on Mackintosh's furniture, but every book so far written leaves out some thing that goes to make up Mackintosh.

The rise of Charles Rennie Mackintosh began with Howarth in 1952, but only began to achieve cult status with the rise of Post-Modernism during the 1970s. From 1977 the cult of Mackintosh (and proportionally the number of books published) grew to what it is today. It seems that every detail of Mackintosh's life has been written about, every chapter in Howarth has been expanded, and therein lies the problem. Many of the books written have a remarkable similarity to each other. Both Filippo Alison and Roger Billcliffe have catalogued Mackintosh's furniture. Alison in 1978 with Charles Rennie Mackintosh as a designer of furniture gave some criticism of each selected piece furniture, whereas



Billcliffe in Charles Rennie Mackintosh catalogues every known design, drawing and actual piece of furniture. As a work of reference both fill the gap left by Howarth, but Alison's work goes further into the meaning of the chairs. Each chair has its own place, its own inherent symbolism. Billcliffe separates the furniture into two styles, the organic, symbolist furniture and the more geometrical (Billcliffe 1979, p14), yet he fails to discuss why Mackintosh continued to design both during his career, favouring neither one over the other, or why he chose a particular style for a particular place. Again it is the curious fact that so many authors research every detail of Mackintosh's work, yet fail to see the theory behind it. Billcliffe explains what Mackintosh designed, Alison explains why.

This common fault runs through most of the book written. They deal with a certain facet of Mackintosh's life or work, researching every detail, but not explaining why. Mackintosh's influences are well documented, yet they are also the influences of many other architects working at that time. It is the way that Mackintosh formed these influences into ideas and principles that is the most important. Books have been written dealing with aspects of Mackintosh from a book solely on the Glasgow School of Art, to the publishing of Mackintosh's diary. Summaries of Howarth crop up again and again that deal with Mackintosh in the same way and under the same headings. The problem with writing a history of



Mackintosh is that the original was so comprehensive, there is no new information available. Because of the popularity of Mackintosh, books on him are fashionable and sell well. It seems that for many books the text stays the same while only the pictures change.

Then in 1992 David Brett published a book that explored the theory behind Mackintosh. The Poetics of Workmanship:

shifts the emphasis in Mackintosh studies from the descriptive to the interpretative by concentrating on the decorative aspects of Mackintosh's originality as an architect and designer, and by opening up Glasgow's turn of the century world to include, shipbuilding, art education, Symbolism, the neo-occult and nascent feminism, and locates Mackintosh at the nexus of an unusually rich diversity of influences, (Brett 1992, introduction).

Brett is the first to go against the traditional, Howarth method of a book on Mackintosh. The Scottish vernacular and Japanese influences are still discussed, but in company with many more. Perhaps this is why he has angered so many Mackintosh fans. The view of Mackintosh as proposed by Howarth has been around for so long it has been accepted as dogma, Brett has dared to advance new theory. Brett not only explains the theories that were popular at the time and which Mackintosh was obviously exposed to, but explains how they influenced him. In moving away from the traditional view of Mackintosh, Brett admits that his connections cannot be proved, but it is a fresh approach to Mackintosh and his







work. In the future books on Mackintosh will have to be written as a critique, assessing his work in relation to Post-Modernism and future architectural trends. Howarth's book introduced Mackintosh to people, books like Brett's need to be written to explain him in context.



## Conclusion

Thanks to Pevsner and Howarth, Charles Rennie Mackintosh is seen as a forerunner of the Modern Movement. With the International style fallen from grace and the hype of Post-Modernism giving way to acceptance, it can be seen that Mackintosh has much in common with Post-Modern ideology. His buildings and furniture are never just objects, they are invested with a delicate interaction of different symbols, subtle plays between the actual form and the images it raises in the mind. A Mackintosh chair is never just a chair, it is a tree in a clearing, a wall hanging; much more than a piece of furniture. Jencks talks about Post-Modern design being 'doubly coded', Mackintosh was developing this principle even before Modernism. He is different things to different people, but his design is always enjoyable.

Only when the 'cult of Mackintosh' begins to take over do things start to go wrong. To build the House for an Art Lover as a 'Heritage centre' may be the only way to get it built, but it is a fundamentally changed design that is standing today. Similarly with pastiches of his furniture; whilst trying to invest the design with some of Mackintosh's mysticity they come to close to the original design and the pastiche pales in comparison. Mackintosh captured the true essence of Post-Modern design seventy years before the term itself was defined.



Brett sees Mackintosh as "continuously and knowingly poised between contraries"(Brett 1992, p136) and that the critical tension made Mackintosh significant,(Brett 1992, p136). Perhaps it is because he was constantly searching for a new form of architecture within his sphere of influences, because he could not accept the pragmatism of contemporary architecture, that he is so closely associated with Post-Modern designers. Mackintosh stood as a link between Art Nouveau and Modernism, yet he belonged to neither. Post-Modernism is also a link, between Modernism and an architectural style not yet defined. In the future it may well be realised that Mackintosh had more of an influence on Post-Modernism than is thought today.

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