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The Symbolic Art of Charles Rennie Mackintosh

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A member of the Edinburgh Lodge has written an article relating to Charles Rennie Mackintosh and his Theosophical influences.



Early Recognition and Glasgow School of Art

While serving his apprenticeship in Glasgow, Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928) attended evening classes in architecture at Glasgow School of Art. The School, under the remarkable direction of Francis (Fra) Newbery (1855-1946), was recognized as one of Europe's leading design schools, its main function being to educate industrial artists and ornamentalists.

In 1891 Mackintosh won a travelling scholarship, visiting France, Italy, and Belgium, where he produced masses of line drawings and many watercolour sketches of buildings. The artist Sir James Guthrie was much impressed by the drawings and, when told they were by an architectural student, he turned to the School's Director, saying: "Hang it, Newbery, this fellow Mackintosh ought to be an artist!"

But Guthrie echoed Newbery's feelings that Mackintosh should design the new School of Art on a steep hill in the heart of Glasgow. Mackintosh was twenty-eight when he produced the initial design and in his early forties when the second phase was completed. It was his first important commission, the most celebrated of his architectural designs, and (some would say) the beginning of modern architecture.

The MacDonald Sisters and the Glasgow Four

In 1892 Newbery introduced Mackintosh to the Macdonald sisters, Margaret and Frances, who had registered as art students in 1890. Newbery had noticed similarities in their style of work and encouraged them to collaborate and to exhibit together. With Herbert MacNair, Mackintosh's friend and fellow architectural student, they were to form a group known as the Glasgow Four, the most original and internationally influential artists that Scotland has produced.

Symbolism was crucial to their art, together with those intangible, indefinable and mystical qualities found in the group's watercolour sketches up to 1900. Indeed, Herbert MacNair, late in life, confided that in the group's early works "not a line was drawn without purpose, and rarely was a single motif employed that had not some allegorical meaning" (Howarth).

Art as a Spiritual Quest

Like Kandinsky, Mackintosh was searching in his work for "the soul that lies beneath appearances" and, also like Kandinsky, he found that this soul was best expressed through a poetic mood of symbolic illumination. In the 1890s and early 1900s a spiritual atmosphere pervaded Scotland's cultural life, and many influential artists and writers were either group members or followers of Rosicrucian, Theosophical, or Spiritualist thought. There are many indications that the Glasgow Four's ideas and inspirations were deeply affected by such movements. As Timothy Neat puts it, "There was a revival of the belief in the 'cosmic character' of art: a belief that the making of art and the viewing of art should be, above all, a spiritual quest."

Connected with Rosicrucianism was the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, based in London from 1887 with the poet William Butler Yeats as its best-known member from 1893. Jack Yeats, the poet's painter-brother, was also a member and closely

connected with the Glasgow Four. Their ideas and lifestyle seemed to follow the spirit of the Rosicrucian's, if not those of the Order of the Golden Dawn, with its secret writings, ambiguous words, images, and acronymic names. As Neat cautions, "Rosicrucian beliefs should not mechanically be sought in the work of the Four; but an awareness of Rosicrucian and Symbolist values can undoubtedly help illumine many of the objects these artists created for their fellow men and the heart of mankind."

The Symbolism of the Rose and the Feminine Principle

The Glasgow Four used the rose so often as an iconic symbol that it was characteristic of them. H. P. Blavatsky ("Traces") calls the rose the grandest and noblest of nature's symbols, adding: "To the Rosicrucian, the 'Rose' was the symbol of Nature, of the ever prolific and virgin Earth, or Isis, the mother and nourisher of man, considered as feminine and represented as a virgin woman by the Egyptian Initiates."

There are echoes of Mondrian in the work of all four artists, particularly the Dutchman's Theosophically inspired *Evolution Triptych* (1910-11). And his oval-shaped compositions seem to relate to the "World Egg" discussed by H. P. Blavatsky in relation to cosmic birth and evolution. There is a high degree of feminist thinking in many of the works of the Four. The return of the goddess or the feminine principle, which has found expression over the last few decades in art and ecology, occurred much earlier in the art of the Glasgow Four. Mackintosh's interiors have a perfect unity of the feminine and the masculine (yin and yang), deriving naturally from his partnership with his wife. In 1927, he wrote her, "You must remember that in all my architectural efforts you have been half if not three-quarters of them." He believed that Margaret had genius, whereas he had only talent.

Theosophical and Rosicrucian Influences

The meaning of Mackintosh's stylized abstract concepts seems to have eluded many commentators, but they are more ethereal and less eerie or melancholic than the images of the sisters and MacNair. Mackintosh said, "You must be independent, shaking off all the props tradition and authority offer you, and go on alone. The artist's motto should be, 'I care not the least for theories or for this or that dogma so far as the practice of art is concerned—but take my stand on what I consider my personal ideal.'"

That ideal may have contained a great deal of Theosophy and Rosicrucianism, and works reproduced in *The Magazine* (a hand-made "scrapbook" intended for circulation among the Glasgow Art students), to which Mackintosh contributed drawings, throw a little more light on these esoteric concepts.

For instance, *The Harvest Moon* of 1892 -3 is the earliest of a group of symbolic watercolours and is almost certainly influenced by Rosicrucian and Theosophical thought. Timothy Neat proposes a symbolic interpretation: "The clouds which lie horizontally across the moon, rather like two bars, can be read as levels, as

stratifications, of spiritual being. . . . The bars of cloud that cross Mackintosh's moon give symbolic expression to just those values Kandinsky believed important. The naked woman in the cloud . . . clearly exists in a lower, more physical zone than the moon-maiden above her."

In another painting by Mackintosh called *Winter*, certain ideas of Blavatsky's are expressed, using the analogy of a seed called "Hiranyagarbha" or the "golden egg" or "golden womb," from which a universe is born, like an oak from an acorn by self-becoming or self-unfoldment. "To the follower of the true Eastern Archaic Wisdom," Blavatsky (*Secret Doctrine* 2:588) asserts, "every atom of Nature . . . contains the germ from which he may raise the Tree of Knowledge, whose fruits give life eternal and not physical life alone." And *Winter* depicts the universe, vegetation, and humanity coming into being.

The twin female's figures in this painting may represent our dual nature, spiritual and physical. In their ceaseless striving towards perfection they are flawless, their form set to become Divine Humanity, and one feels that Mackintosh is illustrating the power of human beings to transcend the limitations of changing and inconsistent matter by asserting their superiority over all perishable forms. At the top of the design is a veiled image of the sun (which will change winter into spring), and a third of the way up a plant stem is a vivid heart-shaped green leaf of life. Above it, stylized buds symbolize the "flower of art" to come. The stem terminates within a ring, an emblem of wholeness and potentiality, which then spreads out to enclose the two women, becoming their hair.

The Tree as a Sacred Symbol

Mackintosh's attention was directed to soul-growth; what interested him was the Force that directs growth, the ever mysterious and ever unknown. As Blavatsky (*Secret Doctrine* 2:589) wrote, "For this vital Force, that makes the seed germinate, burst open and throw out shoots, then form the trunk and branches, which, in their turn, bend down like the boughs of the Aswattha, the holy Tree of Bodhi, throw their seed out, take root and procreate other trees—this is the only FORCE that has reality . . . as it is the never-dying breath of life."

Blavatsky's *Theosophical Glossary* comments, "From the highest antiquity trees were connected with the gods and mystical forces in nature. Every nation had its sacred tree, with its peculiar characteristics and attributes based on natural, and also occasionally on occult properties, as expounded in the esoteric teachings." The symbol for sacred and secret knowledge in antiquity was a tree; hence dragons (symbols of wisdom) guard the Trees of Knowledge. Among the many representations of the rose, the cross, the square, and the circle, it is the tree, in various stylized forms, that dominates Mackintosh's art and architecture. In his architectural lectures, Mackintosh quoted from W. R. Lethaby's *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth*, which propounded a cosmic symbolism whereby a tree is both a symbol of the universe and a basic form of building construction; so the Tree of Life now becomes a symbol for inspired architecture.

From his earliest 1894 pencil and colour wash drawings Mackintosh depicted the Tree of Life. The sculpted relief carving above the entrance to the Glasgow School of

Art portrays two maidens guarding a central tree, which is an emblem, both of the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. Mackintosh also sets another Tree of Life within the oval glass insets on the doors of the ground floor, while the library is closely linked with the Tree of Knowledge in a series of visual puns (leaves on balusters, leaves in books). In Queen's Cross Church Hall, Mackintosh ornamented the composite trusses with a Tree of Life emblem and the church's east window with a T-shaped Tree of Knowledge or Cross; even the apple in relief on the internal doors can be associated with the Biblical Tree of knowledge of Good and Evil.

Devas and Faeries

Mackintosh did not commit himself as strongly to the fairytale world as did his wife and her sister, but when he did so, his faeries are more substantial than their depictions. There are two surviving fairy paintings, so perhaps the Devas were another source of inspiration in the late 1890s. The Devic Kingdom—life from the lowest elemental to the highest archangel—was often spoken of in the faerie lore of Celticism and in the current occult literature. It might also account for some of the extreme distortion of organic forms and elongated figures by the other group members.

All these influences permeated Charles Rennie Mackintosh's watercolours, with the exception of his later flower studies and landscapes, and no one else produced such symbolist paintings while designing buildings that became milestones in the development of twentieth century architecture. Mackintosh wrote: "You ask how you are to judge architecture? Just as you judge painting or sculpture form, colour, proportion, all visible qualities—and the one great invisible quality in all art, soul."

Anna and Patrick Geddes

Yet another connection between the Mackintoshes and Theosophy involves their close friendship with Anna and Patrick Geddes and provides some insight into their artwork. The Geddes's, who were at the forefront of the Celtic Revival in Scotland, had personal connections with Annie Besant and Theosophy. Patrick Geddes had tutored Besant in natural science in London from 1874 to 1878, after she was refused admittance to the University because she was female.

Geddes also spent some time with Besant in India, and they often shared their vision for a better world. "A knowledge of Theosophy . . . as well as the Geddes's' utopianism might well have become part of the Mackintoshes' life," writes Janice Helland, who continues:

There is no evidence to suggest they actually became theosophists but considering their other interests (the Celtic Revival, Maeterlinck, symbolism) a philosophy that blended Eastern thought with Western (emphasizing the inter-connectedness of all living things) would surely have attracted their attention. Given the interest aroused in Glasgow by Max Müller's lectures during the 1890s, and the possibility that "The Four" were exposed to ideas about Eastern thought and philosophy at that time,

Geddes's personal relationship with one of theosophy's most important figures would certainly have interested the Mackintoshes.

Theosophy and Career

When Mackintosh left Glasgow in 1914 with his wife, he was perhaps very careful about becoming labelled a Theosophist, or a member of any other esoteric group. The Glasgow Style was never accepted or understood in Britain (though it was influential in Vienna and Germany). Perhaps Mackintosh, like Gustav Holst, was diffident about telling people that he was interested in Theosophy, as that interest might affect his career, as happened to the composer Cyril Scott.

An Almost Forgotten Genius

Mackintosh never painted another symbolic watercolour after 1898, when the creative partnership of the Four was nearing its end. By 1910 he was undergoing personal problems, and artistic fashions were changing. Expressionism, Cubism, and Futurism replaced European Symbolist art, and on the approach of World War I, idealistic communism ushered out religious mysticism. In 1889 the Theosophist Édouard Schuré had been firmly convinced that the world was on the threshold of a great spiritual era and that the time was ripe for a spiritual art. But "the epoch of the great spiritual" failed to arrive on schedule, and by 1914 the ideals of the Glasgow Four had disappeared from public consciousness. Mackintosh became an almost forgotten man of genius, while the other group members were relegated to near oblivion in the art world. All had to wait half a century before the true value of their art and the breadth of their achievements were finally understood.