

The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

NO. 114

FOR RELEASE:

Wednesday, Nov. 13, 1974

CHAIRS BY CHARLES RENNIE MACKINTOSH

Chairs by Charles Rennie Mackintosh, an exhibition of 20 chairs by the famed Scottish architect and designer, with 11 drawings and photographs of original room settings, is on view in the Philip L. Goodwin Galleries of The Museum of Modern Art from November 13 through January 12, 1975. Mackintosh (1868-1928) was one of Britain's most original architects, chiefly known for his pioneering building, the Glasgow School of Art. These chairs and the accompanying material reveal a very important but little-known facet of Mackintosh's work.

Mackintosh's stress on structural clarity, combined with his use of ornamentation, has had an enormous influence on modern architecture. While the ambience of Mackintosh's architecture cannot, by its nature, be duplicated, the chairs in the exhibition, designed from 1897 to 1910 and reconstructed by Professor Filippo Alison of the University of Naples, provide a key to the formal structure of Mackintosh's interior environments and illustrate his architectural evolution.

Mackintosh has been portrayed as both the most accomplished practitioner of the style known as "Glasgow Art Nouveau," and as a pioneer of modern architecture. "These are two different but nevertheless, not mutually exclusive views because Mackintosh assumes in one figure two legendary roles: the Heir and the Prophet," writes Emilio Ambasz, Curator of Design who directed and installed the exhibition.

Mackintosh first began to achieve recognition for the Glasgow School of Art and for the design of posters, book illustrations, leaded glass, beaten metal work and furniture produced by "The Four," a group which Mackintosh formed with his wife, her sister, and a close friend. Although English art critics never accepted them, the group, and especially Mackintosh, enjoyed an extraordinary reputation in Europe, after their great success at both

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the Exhibition of the Vienna Secession of 1900 and the 1902 Turin International Exhibition. Mackintosh's reputation was to become firmly consolidated by the design of a series of interiors of tearooms in Glasgow, commissioned by Miss Cranston. Mackintosh designed everything for these magical environments -- crockery, cutlery, vases, ornaments, chairs, carpets, glass, panels, and murals.

The influences upon Mackintosh were numerous; the English Arts and Crafts school, the monastically severe canons of the Scottish vernacular, and the Art Nouveau style from Europe. His early chairs, made of stained or white painted oak, often combined sensuous linear Art Nouveau ornamentation with rigid geometric structural elements. As Mackintosh's work evolved, the results went beyond the simpler products of his antecedents. Although still robust, his chairs' linear structure began to reflect the character of Japanese prints, notably the elimination of depth to enhance the decorative aspect of the image. The drawings of room settings particularly reveal how Mackintosh conceived an interior as a two-dimensional entity, in which a chair loses its functional identity and becomes an integral part of the interior's ornamentation.

Mackintosh also often used chairs as architectural as well as ornamental elements, often assigning them the all-important role of spatial delineators and sub-dividers. This was the case with the high-backed chairs for Miss Cranston's tearooms. It was another characteristic of Mackintosh's advanced thinking that he considered the structure of the chairs essentially as a geometric construct, but one which had intrinsic decorative quality. Applied ornament, such as carving, inlays, or painted designs, was used only to enhance the non-structural elements of the chair, usually the back or the head rests.

"Mackintosh never abandoned tradition, yet he was a prolific inventor of new forms. The Scottish, Arts and Crafts, and Art Nouveau modes co-existed in his work, overlapping in time, whether as analytical attitude, iconography, or synthesizing purpose," explains Emilio Ambasz. "He was the unique figure who reconciled the seductive ornamental powers of Art Nouveau with the Modern Movement's redemptory passion. For him these were not opposing ideologies, but rather different formal manifestations of the same deeply felt desire to create a world in harmony with its earthly contingencies."

Mackintosh is represented in the Design Collection of the Museum by an original side chair with oval backrails from the Argyle Street Tearooms, gift of the Glasgow School of Art, and a fish knife and fork, gift of the University of Glasgow. These items are on permanent display in the Goodwin Galleries. Three of the chairs in the exhibition, the ladderback chair, the chair with oval backrail, and the curved lattice-back chair, are now in commercial production, and are available for purchase. Two of the reproductions have been recently acquired by the Museum.

Transportation of the chairs from Italy, and of the original drawings from Scotland, has been underwritten by Cassina, licensee by permission of the University of Glasgow Trustees for the reproduction of some of Mackin-

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tosh's designs. This exhibition will travel to three other American museums, whose participation has made the realization of this project possible.

The Museum of Modern Art acknowledges the support of its exhibition program by the New York State Council on the Arts.

 Photographs and additional information available from Michael Boodro, Assistant, and Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53 St., New York, NY 10019. Phone: (212) 956-7504; -7501.

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CHAIRS BY CHARLES RENNIE MACKINTOSH

November 14 - January 12, 1975

WALL LABEL

Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868 - 1928) was one of Britain's most original architects. His fame rests mainly on his greatest achievement, the Glasgow School of Fine Art, a pioneering building without which the history of modern architecture would have been very different. The chairs here exhibited - lovingly reconstructed by Professor Filippo Alison of the University of Naples from originals and drawings extant at various Glasgow public and private collections - show very important, but little-known aspects of Mackintosh's decorative talents and formal imagination.

Regretfully, the ambience of his architecture cannot, by its nature, be brought in to bear witness to the refined splendor of his environmental concepts. Nevertheless, the chairs shown here, designed from 1897 to 1910, and the accompanying original drawings and photographs, provide a key to the formal structure of his interior environments, illustrating his architectural evolution.

Mies van der Rohe described Mackintosh as "purifier in the field of architecture." These few words just about sum up Mackintosh's method. Identifying the influences which stimulated his work is a more complex task. Some authors have portrayed him as the most accomplished practitioner of the style known as "Glasgow Art Nouveau." Others have described Mackintosh as a pioneer of modern architecture. These are two different but, nevertheless, not mutually exclusive views because Mackintosh assumes in one figure two legendary roles: the Heir and the Prophet.

As an Heir, Mackintosh received British and European patrimonies. His national inheritance was a dual one: English and Scottish. With the English Arts and Crafts school of William Morris, Ruskin and Voysey, he participated in the moral revolt against Victorian falsification of forms and feelings. Designing everything, from the cutlery to the doorknobs of his houses, was not only the result of ideological allegiance to the concept of comprehensive design proposed by Morris and Ruskin - it was also an act of purification, a measure of self-defense against the prevailing eclectic atmosphere. As a Son of his land, Mackintosh accepted his filial duty towards the indigenous tradition of Scotland as part of the same bonds, which, as he liked to say, united him to its defiant countryside, its wildflowers, its proud memories, and its sturdy institutions. But for him, the monastically austere canons of the Scottish vernacular were more than a source of formal reference. They assumed the character of a decanting attitude which pervaded his design choices.

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As for the legacy which came to him via Europe, it was part of his wife Margaret's dowry. Herself a distinguished artist, she came into his work bearing the flowers of the Art Nouveau style. Notwithstanding the fact that Mackintosh became known as the leading exponent of the "linear Art Nouveau," as distinguished from the more botanical characteristics of the Continental version, he nevertheless always remained, perhaps by temperament, detached. Free flowing lines, and elegantly stylized figures had a place for him only in the non-structural parts of his architecture: textiles, tapestries, wallpapers, screens, murals and moldings.

Mackintosh's early chairs show him paying his dues to the Scottish tradition he so devoutly respected. But, as his work evolved, the results went beyond the simpler products of his antecedents. An important factor was the way he elaborated the prevailing Japanese influences which had also affected the work of another glorious contemporary, Frank Lloyd Wright. Although still robust, the chairs' linear structure began to reflect the character of Japanese prints, notably the elimination of depth in order to enhance the decorative aspect of the image. The preference for a marked two-dimensional quality was to remain with him throughout his career. The drawings of interiors here displayed reveal how Mackintosh conceived an interior as a two-dimensional entity, wherein the chair would seem to lose its functional identity to become an intricate part of the interior's ornamentation. But Mackintosh went several steps further. While utilizing the same decorative iconography for the furnishings of the room as for its walls, in order to achieve stylistic unity, he also assigned to the chairs the all-important role of spatial delineators and sub-dividers. (Such was the purpose of, for example, the high back chairs for Miss Cranston's Tearooms.)

Another unique characteristic of Mackintosh's advanced thinking is that he considered the structure of the chair essentially as a geometric construct, but one which had intrinsic decorative quality. Ornament, when applied, was used to enhance the non-structural aspects of the design, usually the back or head rests. For him, the structure was the main protagonist. It was this aspect of his work which had the greatest influence on Josef Hoffmann and Peter Behrens, and later on the Dutch group of the Stijl and the generation of modern architects for whom structural clarity was to become the guiding norm. But Mackintosh's poetic feeling for structure was far more complex, and went much deeper than what the Modern Movement needed for its revolutionary slogans. While it is true that he strived for a definition of the structure as a pure entity, he was also too much of a sensualist to find full satisfaction in a conceptual model, regardless of how elegant it might have been. The structure became for him more than a schematic organization of stresses into a classical geometric pattern. He perceived the structure almost in animistic terms, as an organism whose component parts formally respond to each other. Having exhausted the expressive potentials of the Art Nouveau iconography, he discovered that it was in the garden of his own creatures where the new Flora dwelled.

Mackintosh never abandoned tradition, yet he also was a prolific inventor of new forms. The Scottish, Arts and Crafts, and Art Nouveau modes co-existed in his work, overlapping in time, whether as analytical attitude, iconography, or synthesizing purpose. He was the unique figure who reconciled the seductive ornamental powers of Art Nouveau with the Modern Movement's redemptory passion. For him these were not opposing ideologies, but rather different formal manifestations of the same deeply felt desire to create a world in harmony with its earthly contingencies.

Emilio Ambasz
Curator of Design

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CHARLES RENNIE MACKINTOSH

Biographical Notes

Charles Rennie Mackintosh was born in Glasgow in 1868, one of 11 children of a Police Superintendent. In 1884 he became apprenticed as an architect to the firm of John Hutchinson. During this period and for a few years after 1889, upon completing his apprenticeship, he entered the firm of Honeyman and Kippie as a draughtsman. He won prizes in a number of local and national architectural students competitions. But the first official recognition as a promising architect came to him when he won the competition for the Glasgow Institute of Architects Tenth Alexander "Greek" Thomson Travelling Scholarship, which took him to France and Italy in 1891.

While at Honeyman and Kippie, he made the friendship of another draughtsman, J. Herbert MacNair, and together they attended classes at the Glasgow School of Art. This School was the area's most prestigious center of artistic activities, due mainly to its director, Francis Newbery, who later became Mackintosh's friend and protector. At the School, Mackintosh and MacNair met two sisters, Margaret and Frances Macdonald, who shared their interests and aesthetic inclinations. Known as "The Four," they became a very close-knit group, designing and drawing together watercolors, posters, book illustrations, leaded glass, beaten metal work and furniture. Their designs' distinct Art Nouveau characteristics became known as the "Glasgow Style" when they later began to exhibit in London and abroad. (Theirs was to become a lifelong partnership. MacNair married Frances, and in 1900 Mackintosh and Margaret married.)

Mackintosh the architect revealed himself in 1896 when he, with the moral support of Newbery, won a competition for the design of the Glasgow School of Arts new building. Built in two phases (1897 - 1899 from the East facade to the main entrance, and 1907 - 1909 completion of the remainder), this pioneering building has remained Mackintosh's most accomplished work.

While Mackintosh's own reputation grew on the Continent, and the works of "The Four" were publicized by, among others, the important German theorist Muthesius, English art critics, with some memorable but few exceptions, remained markedly indifferent, when not downright hostile. Mackintosh and his colleagues of "The Four" were dismally received when they exhibited in 1896 at London's Arts and Crafts Society Exhibition.

This unjust reception was soon to be corrected. Vienna, and especially Josef Hoffmann, had been struck by the atmospheric grace and refined structural rigor of the Scottish artist. In 1900, the Glasgow group had a grand success at the Exhibition of the Vienna Secession, an acclaim which was to be repeated at the 1902 Turin International Exhibition.

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After the Italian exhibition, Mackintosh's name became well-known all over Europe - articles on his work were written and his designs were exhibited in Venice, Munich, Budapest, Dresden, again in Vienna in 1905, and in Moscow, in 1913. In his authoritative book "Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Modern Movement," (1952), Thomas Howarth indicates that, following the success of the Moscow exhibit, which took place in 1913, the French were also intending a Paris show for 1914 which never came about because of the outbreak of World War I.

Mackintosh's next commission, after the Glasgow School of Art, was Queen's Cross Church, 1897 - 1899. But his reputation was to become firmly consolidated by the design of a series of interiors for a number of tearooms commissioned by Miss Cranston. These tearooms, reflecting their owner's refined taste, provided a serenely enchanted atmosphere where the people of Glasgow could, for an hour, fancy themselves the inhabitants of a magical environment, outside the domain of their own city. In 1897 he worked with George Walton and with the members of his group on the decoration of Miss Cranston's Buchanan Street and Argyle Street Tearooms, to which he later made additions in 1905. Mackintosh designed everything for these rooms - crockery, cutlery, vases, ornaments, chairs, carpets, glass, panels and murals. Miss Cranston's commissions continued in 1904 with the Willow Tearooms, and the rooms continuously added from 1901 to 1912 to the Ingram Street Tearooms.

Windyhill, at Kilmacolm, designed in 1899 - 1900 for William Davidson, was the first of Mackintosh's medium-sized private houses; followed by Hill House, at Helensburgh, commissioned in 1902 by the publisher Walter Blackie. Other buildings include the Daily Record Building, 1901; Scotland Street School, 1904 - 1906; interiors for his own apartment, 1900, and for the house he moved to in 1906.

These were Mackintosh's most productive years. Whether because his work was too advanced for Glasgow or because his increasingly withdrawn nature, aggravated by heavy drinking, created a vacuum around him, Mackintosh left Glasgow in 1913 for the Suffolk Coast. From late 1915 to 1923 he lived in Chelsea, but besides an interesting house built in Northampton in 1916 - 1917 for the Bassett-Lowke family, the commissions for houses and the two for three artist friends (never built), and the 1920 commission for a theatre (also never built), Mackintosh provided no more architecture. After designing textiles during the last year of World War I, Mackintosh retired even farther in 1923 to Port Vendres, France, to paint landscape watercolors. He remained there until 1927 when cancer of the tongue forced him to return to Great Britain, where he died on the 10th of December, 1928.