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The Studio of Two Sisters

Despite attempts in the last century to erase or deny the importance of their art, the sisters Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh (1864-1933) and Frances Macdonald (1873-1921) created a unique style in *fin de siècle* Glasgow worthy of critical attention.

Frances Macdonald, *Prudence and Desire*, after 1911, pencil and watercolour, 35.2 x 29.9, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.

http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/walker/exhibitions/doves/finalwatercolours/prudence_desire_frances.aspx

The sisters Margaret and Frances Macdonald registered to enter the Glasgow School of Art in 1890. From a privileged background, the Macdonald family had moved to Glasgow in the late 1880s; by 1900 Glasgow was to become one of the world's wealthiest cities, an emblem of the British Empire. The city established its wealth by industry, predominately ship and locomotive engineering, but its initial industrialisation had begun by the production of textiles in the eighteenth century. In this economic prosperity, the Glasgow School of Art had been established in 1840 by the government in order to train designers to enhance the production of manufacture designs, skills which were considered as vital in the creation of marketable goods. This resulted in a strong focus on design, and indeed, manufacturers required technically able designers rather than 'inspired' artists.

Women living in Scotland were not allowed to attend university until 1892. However, in the 1850s there developed a new social group of middle class women, who out of necessity had

to create an income for their families. Design was considered an acceptable profession for women to earn a living from, in particular from the media of embroidery and watercolour, due to their association with 'feminine' qualities. It was this restricted notion that the Macdonald sisters would latterly distort and challenge; the precedents of their original style can be linked to the concept of the 'New Woman', which also developed in the 1850s as the beginnings of the feminist movement, where women began to call for the proper education of girls. One of the few opportunities for women was to train in an art school in order to become a teacher, and this training was supported by manufacturers due to the pre-conception that the decorative arts were compatible with femininity.

Despite the inequality, the Glasgow School of Art advocated the same treatment of women students as men, with most classes permitting the participation of both genders. This forward-thinking attitude was embodied by the Glasgow School of Art's headmaster, Francis 'Fra' Newbery, who led from 1885-1918. Newbery was to become influential in the creation of the 'Glasgow Style', as it was his philosophy that art schools should not only produce commercially viable designers, but artists capable of expressing their own ideas. This approach affected the practice of Margaret and Frances, as well as Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928) and Herbert MacNair (1868-1955) of whom all met at the Glasgow School. These artists have been labelled 'The Four' for their homogeneous 'Glasgow Style' which enabled them to collaborate, especially Margaret and Charles Rennie Mackintosh in the construction of interior designs. All four artists would eventually marry one another; Margaret and Charles Rennie Mackintosh in 1900, and Frances and MacNair in 1899. Their 1894 Glasgow School of Art Club Exhibition in Sauchiehall Street generated controversy over the new 'Glasgow Style' which provoked the derogatory label of the 'spook school'. This public attack was aimed primarily at the work of Margaret and Frances, due to their similar stylisation of the figure into distorted, mystical proportions, which was a blatant deviation from the current academic style.

Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh, *Summer*, 1894, watercolour with pen, pencil and ink on paper, 51.5 x 21.6 cm, Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow.

http://www.huntsearch.gla.ac.uk/cgi-bin/foxweb/huntsearch_Mackintosh/DetailedResults.fwx?SearchTerm=41047&reqMethod=Link

If the art of 'The Four' was derided in Glasgow, it was enthusiastically received in Europe, particularly in Austria, by the affinity in style with the Vienna Secession. This movement had been initiated by a break with the academic style in Vienna in 1897, and included such artists as Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) and Koloman Moser (1868-1918). The Secession style advocated the decorative capabilities of design in a focus on geometric and symbolist pattern in combination with decadent imagery. The Secessionists in particular were attracted to the Mackintoshes' interior style, and as such the Viennese patron of the group, Fritz Wärndorfer (1868-1939) invited Margaret and Mackintosh to Vienna. The couple completed a commission by Wärndorfer for his music salon in Vienna, for which Margaret created twelve painted gesso panels in the 'Glasgow Style' in 1903. Their style was esteemed to such an extent that a 'Scottish Section' was delineated in the Vienna Secession Exhibition in 1900, of which Margaret contributed *The May Queen*, a work enthused with Secessionist inspired lines and curves, with typical imagery of stylised women and ornate flowers.

Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh, *The May Queen*, 1900, gesso, hessian, scrim, twine, glass beads, thread, mother of pearl and tin leaf on panel, 158.8 x 457 cm, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow.

<https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/the-may-queen-85037>

However, despite Margaret's success in Vienna, her work still generated criticism, and since her death has been largely overshadowed by the legacy of Rennie Mackintosh. Yet, Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh was a versatile artist who embraced multiple media from watercolour, graphics, and metalwork, as well as developing her style into the use of embroidery, and particularly gesso, the latter of which she produced a prolific amount from between 1900-1909. Her influences were literary, ranging from the *Odyssey* by Homer, to the plays of the Belgian Symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck. The similarities with the style of her sister attests to Margaret's spirit of collaboration; yet from 1910 her output decreased, and the latter phase of her career was marked by supporting Mackintosh in his attempts to continue his architectural projects. Her work is emotionally imaginative and ambiguous, and her emphasis on the female form conveys personal echoes to the work of Frances.

Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh, *La Mort Parfumée*, 1921, pencil, watercolour, gouache and gold paint on paper, 63 x 71.2 cm, Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow.

http://www.huntsearch.gla.ac.uk/cgi-bin/foxweb/huntsearch_Mackintosh/DetailedResults.fwx?SearchTerm=41288&reqMethod=Link&browseMode=on

Frances Macdonald's art was unpopular for being so different, as well as expressing emotive ideas about the autonomy and representation of the female form. Indeed, her figures, like her sister's, are detached and mythical, almost floating in an imaginative realm. This presentation of the female defied nineteenth century ideas of female sexuality as posited by the Pre-Raphaelites; simultaneously, Macdonald's work did not prescribe to the experimental nature of early modernism, and so her work has been obscured within art history. This has been exacerbated by the fact that her work has been given biographical explanations, with the allusion to the problems of her marriage to MacNair. Yet, her focus on the possibilities of decorative form, and the almost androgynous nature of her figures suggest concerns with the connection between femininity and the imagination.

Frances Macdonald, *Man Makes the Beads of Life But Woman Must Thread Them*, 1915, pencil and watercolour, 35.2 x 29.8 cm, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.

http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/walker/exhibitions/doves/finalwatercolours/beads_life_frances.aspx

Frances and Margaret Macdonald broke away from the Victorian constraints of femininity, enabled by their education and training at the Glasgow School of Art. They developed a

unique style that synthesised the predominant symbolist and decorative trends, in order to express their personal experience, and as such brought the worlds of design and art together.

Bibliography

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