

The Glasgow Four:

Poets of the Interior

A century ago, an “Immortal” quartet brought a new spirituality to Scottish design.

The Glasgow Four

Poets of the Interior

by Judy Polan

One sunny day in 1893, an amateur photographer captured the portrait of a group of students from the Glasgow School of Art on a countryside outing. Whimsically dubbing themselves the “The Immortals,” the friends shared youthful exuberance and, occasionally, outright silliness, but also a serious passion for innovative design.

Among the Immortals posing with mock stateliness that long-ago day were an extraordinarily gifted quartet: Charles Rennie Mackintosh (“Toshie” to his friends), Herbert McNair, and the sisters Margaret and Frances Macdonald, known as The Glasgow Four, and later, simply The Four. In 1893, the same year the photograph (opposite) was taken, these trailblazers began to collaborate on highly stylized designs for everything from furniture to book jackets, silver jewelry to hammered pewter picture frames, embroidered banners to wall sconces. Together, their creativity burned exponentially more brightly than the sum of its parts. Despite early skepticism and harsh reviews meted out by a narrow-minded British art establishment, The Four caused a sensation when they first exhibited on the continent, and ultimately revolutionized the entire vocabulary of *fin-de-siècle* decorative arts.

Setting the Scene

At the dawn of the 20th century, the grand Victorian city of Glasgow was a powerhouse, considered by some to be the “Second City of the British Empire.” Its affluent merchant class enjoyed an ever-expanding prosperity—the result of over 100 years of trade in tobacco and cotton, as well as a thriving shipbuilding industry, which by the mid-19th century was producing 75% of the world’s seagoing vessels.

The city’s reputation, however, remained one of grime, provincialism, and poverty. Local businessmen and civic leaders undertook to reinvent the city’s image through bold support of a renaissance in design and the creative arts. Together, beginning mid-century, they financed the building of Glasgow’s palatial City Chambers and other architectural masterpieces, creating a splendid municipal business district. Individually, they endowed public museums, schools, art collections, and libraries.

At the epicenter of an increasingly lively arts scene stood

the Glasgow School of Art (GSA, founded in 1853), which nurtured a dazzling eruption of creativity under director Francis (“Fra”) Newbury, appointed in 1885. An upbeat, dynamic leader and mentor to his students, Newbury was a keen supporter of the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement. His progressive teaching style defied the educational conventions of his time, embracing individual expression rather than rigid adherence to classical forms, and integrating the fine arts with industry. He had a discerning eye for talent, a highly-evolved attitude toward opportunity for women, and a singular knack for promotion.

Fast Friends, Inseparable Sisters

Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Herbert McNair met in 1889, when both were draftsmen at the distinguished Glasgow architectural firm of Honeyman and Keppie. They instantly became close friends, frequently went on architectural sketching trips together, and soon began attending



“The Immortals” in 1893. Herbert McNair and Charles Rennie Mackintosh are front and center, sporting what was then known as “artistic” clothing. Behind them (left to right in second row) are Margaret Macdonald, Katherine Cameron, Janet Aitken, Agnes Raeburn, Jessie Keppie (to whom Mackintosh was then engaged), and John Keppie. Margaret’s sister Frances, known to have a fondness for all things “spooky,” stands at the back, as if bestowing a mystical benediction upon the group. Glasgow School of Art Collection.

evening classes at the GSA. The two were often mistaken for twins. Mackintosh, a quiet, observant man, admired McNair’s unique style of furniture design, which was purely functional in shape and thoroughly personal in decoration. McNair proved to have a strong influence on Mackintosh, who eventually took this idea of combining functionality and intense personal vision to its highest expression.

In 1891, the inseparable Macdonald sisters, Margaret and Frances, entered the GSA as full-time day students. Margaret, then 26 years old, was described by friends as a serene, elegant woman with thick red-gold hair and a delightful sense of humor. Frances, 17, was very much the little sister, small and fair-complexioned, with dark curly locks. A friend described her as “twittery like a bird.” By 1893, these two “laughing, comely girls” were producing striking watercolors, mainly of elongated, wraithlike women in dreamily spiritual or fairytale settings, their figures seeming to dissolve into delicate

webs of vines and threads.

The women often passed their canvases back and forth, so that attribution to one or the other is extremely difficult. Their work was panned by most critics, labeled “spooky”, “eccentric” and “distorted.” However, J.W. Gleeson White, editor of the influential art journal *The Studio*, was impressed with their resilience and unbridled confidence in the face of criticism. In 1897, he wrote: “These young ladies are not unaccustomed to receive the first missiles which are so liberally hurled at the coterie of artists of which they are a part. Such attacks they suffer not merely stoically, but apparently with a keen sense of the humorous attitude which folk in a bad temper usually fall into.”

Two Plus Two Equals The Four

Given the divide between their daytime and evening schedules, the sisters and the two young men might never have come into contact were it not for Fra Newbury, who



Inlaid with glass beads and shells, this panel, "The White Rose and the Red Rose," is one of the finest surviving examples of Margaret Macdonald's work in gesso, a plaster-based medium that was her forte. The panel formed part of a room setting that the Mackintoshes exhibited in Turin in 1902, called "The Rose Boudoir." The rose is generally understood as a symbol of love and art in the Mackintoshes' work. Photo © Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery, University of Glasgow, Mackintosh Collection.

introduced them to each other in 1893. Ever-astute, he had noticed the resemblance in their styles and aims. Not only were they all heavily influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement, but their designs departed from its established idiom in a remarkably similar manner.

As Newbury had foreseen, his protégés immediately took to each other, both artistically and personally. The Four, as they quickly became known, shared a zeal for the decoration of three-dimensional surfaces, and a poetic, musical sensibility regarding the harmony of decor. Their vision elevated the decorative arts to a level of spirituality inspired by nature, rather than religious or historical imagery.

The Glasgow Style, which their work epitomized, combined three artistic movements of the era: Japonism, with its emphasis on serenity, subtlety, and use of organic imagery; Arts and Crafts, with its devotion to quality and craftsmanship; and Art Nouveau, with its unity of all design elements within an interior, no detail being left to chance. Mackintosh later took this last concept to the max in his designs for Kate Cranston's famous Glasgow tearooms, for which he conceived not only all the furniture, light fixtures, flatware, and mirrors, but also the lettering style on the menus—even the waitresses' uniforms and jewelry.

The quartet also benefited from a well-balanced fusion of male and female energies. Their design styles melded seamlessly, integrating bold geometric patterns with curvaceous organic motifs, all of which could readily be transferred from ceramics to embroidery, as well as to wall stenciling, hammered metal, stained glass, and furniture.

Glasgow's Rising Stars

The year 1896 was pivotal for the group, both individually and collectively. Mackintosh, who was then earning the grand sum of £20 a month as a junior architect at Honeyman and Keppie, won a competition to design a new Glasgow School of Art building. This magnificent edifice, which still functions as originally intended, has become one of the icons of 20th-century architecture. The same year, showing a moxie rare for women of their gender-bound era, Margaret and Frances opened their own studio at 128 Hope Street. They produced unconventional embroidery; low-relief panels modeled in gesso and painted in colors; leaded glass; metalwork; and book illustrations.

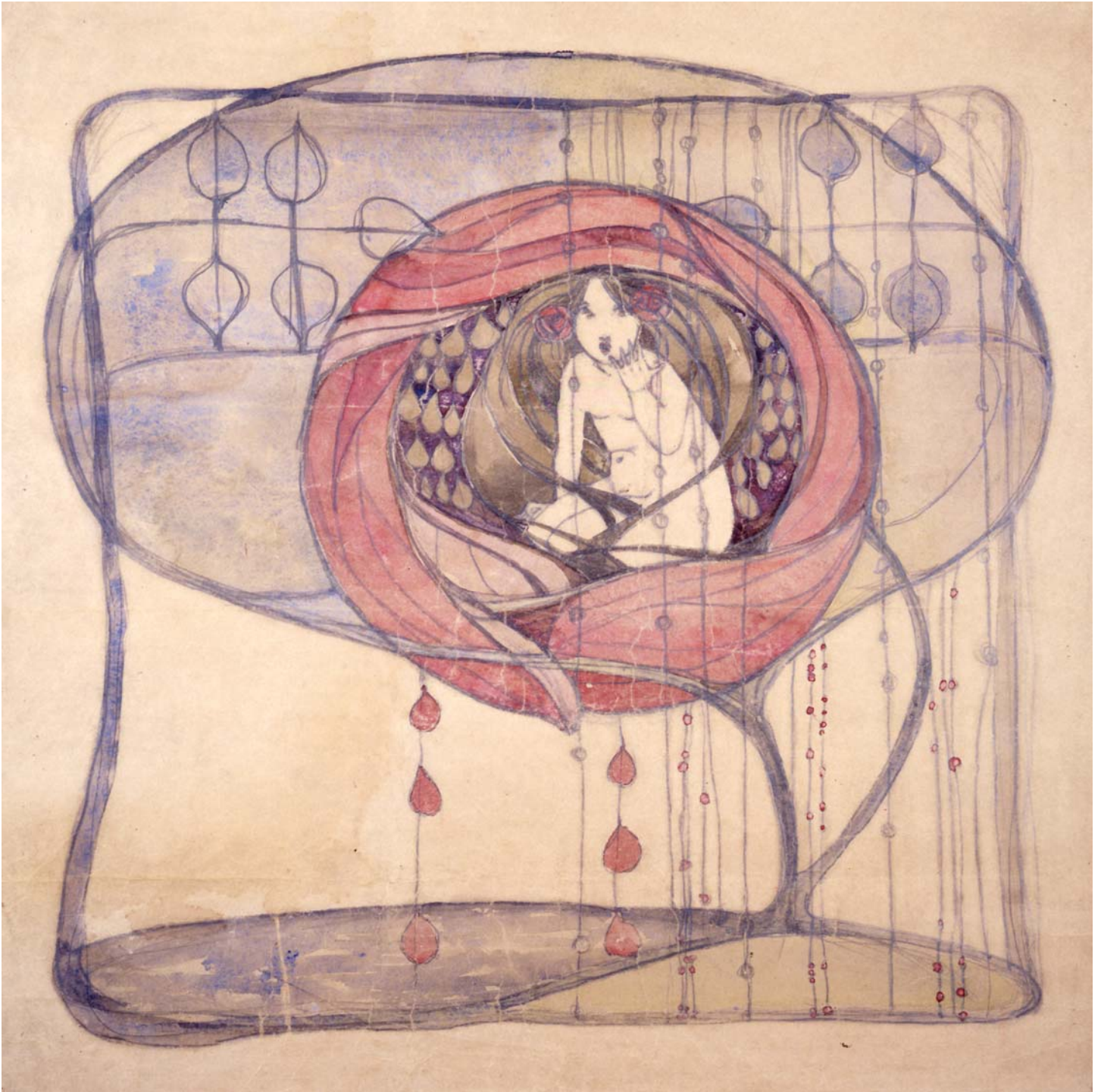
On top of these achievements, the British Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society invited The Four to present some of their designs in London, bringing unprecedented attention to their collaborative work. The Macdonald sisters exhibited two beaten metal panels, a silver clock case, and posters that had been designed together with McNair. Mackintosh displayed a settle and a watercolor.

The work was dismissively received by mainstream critics; it did not conform to what was considered “acceptable” by British Arts and Crafts traditionalists, the heirs of William Morris. It was roundly regarded as displaying too much of the polish and sensuality associated with “that strange decorative disease,” Art Nouveau.



Designed in 1895, this ink-on-paper poster is a rare example of a collaboration amongst three of The Four—the two sisters and Herbert McNair. Their stylized signatures, written vertically, appear on the left. Photo © Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery, University of Glasgow, Mackintosh Collection.





Preliminary design in pencil and watercolor for Frances Macdonald McNair's embroidered panel "Spirit of the Rose," circa 1900-1905. Frances and Margaret shared an ardent interest in symbolism and mythology, but Frances's work had a more childlike and sometimes poignant fairytale quality. Photo © Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery, University of Glasgow, Mackintosh Collection.

Exterior of Glasgow School of Art, C. R. Mackintosh's iconic masterpiece designed in 1896. Photo © The Glasgow School of Art/Eric Thorburn 2003.



The Mackintosh Room at the Glasgow School of Art, designed by C. R. Mackintosh. Originally called the Board Room, this space epitomizes Mackintosh's interior style in its refinement and its total harmony of lines, curves, and repeated geometric shapes and color themes. The chairs and windows give vertical thrust, while the change of color along a continuous horizontal line running throughout creates the "room within a room" look for which the designer is renowned. Photo © The Glasgow School of Art 1990.



Mackintosh/McNair Room for the 1900 Vienna Secession Exhibition, reconstructed by the Fine Arts Society, 1983. This “White Room”—which caused a sensation in Vienna—demonstrates the shared design sensibility of The Four during the peak period of their collaboration. It includes a wall cabinet, metalwork, and book illustrations by the McNairs, paintings by the two sisters, and furniture, beaten metal, and gesso panels by the Mackintoshes. Photo courtesy of The Fine Art Society, London.

Once again, *The Studio* stood alone in showing faith in the group, declaring, “One thing is clear, that in their own way, unmoved by ridicule or misconception, the Glasgow students have thought out a very fascinating scheme to puzzle, surprise, and please.... If the said artists do not come very prominently forward as leaders of a school of design peculiarly their own, we shall be much mistaken. The probability would be, that those who laugh at them today will be eager to eulogize them a few years hence.”

The Four took the London disappointment stolidly, their vision undeterred. Their personal lives were blossoming. Frances and Herbert McNair’s flirtatious friendship had grown into a mature love; they were married in 1899 and moved to Liverpool, where Herbert had been appointed Instructor in Design at the new School of Architecture and Applied Arts. The following year, their only child, a son named Sylvan, was born. Frances later became a teacher of embroidery at the same school, and continued to paint and draw.

Margaret and Charles, sharing a singular devotion and deep artistic bond that was to continue throughout their lives, were wed in 1900. According to a friend, they had the same “twinkle in the eye.” Mackintosh was always extravagant in his praise of Margaret, saying “I have talent; she has genius.” They remained in Glasgow.

Although the two couples now lived in different cities, 1900 was truly a banner year for The Four. Viennese banker and arts patron Fritz Warndorfer traveled to Glasgow specifically to meet them. Enthralled by the modernity of their work, he invited them to exhibit at the Eighth Vienna Secession Exhibition. Their collaborative set piece—a restrained yet elegantly composed white room—caused a sensation.

The Secession Exhibition proved to be a stellar moment in the lives of the four artists. They were, at long last, acclaimed as pioneers in modern decoration. They befriended luminaries of the Secession movement, including Gustav Klimt and Josef Hoffmann. They were the toast of Vienna.

This triumph was followed by wild success at Turin’s International Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art in 1902. Amidst the lavish excesses of continental Art Nouveau, the subtlety and streamlined grace displayed by the Mackintoshes’ award-winning “Rose Boudoir” and the McNairs’ writing room were striking. Invitations to exhibit at Dresden, Moscow, Budapest, and Berlin soon followed.

More Lasting than Life

The ascendancy of The Four started to wane almost as quickly as it had reached its crescendo. After 1902, the two

VISITING GLASGOW

Glasgow abounds in Mackintosh sites; see the Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society home page (www.CRMSociety.com) for attractions and suggested itineraries. Here are two sites of special interest.

Glasgow School of Art

167 Renfrew Street. Tel: (0)141-353-4526.
Web: www.gsa.ac.uk. Open Mon-Sat by tour only; call for times. Subway: Cowcaddens.

Mackintosh's masterpiece still functions as an art school, so the only interior access is by guided tour (Two per day; about 1 hour). On view are Mackintosh creations—architectural plans, paintings, stained glass, lighting fixtures, and furniture. Superb gift shop with wide range of Mackintosh items not available elsewhere.

Hunterian Art Gallery

82 Hillhead Street, University of Glasgow
Tel: (0)141-330-5431.
Web: www.hunterian.gla.ac.uk.
Open Mon-Sat. Subway: Hillhead.

In addition to a renowned collection of Whistler paintings, this art museum incorporates Mackintosh House, a meticulous recreation of C. R. and Margaret's Glasgow home. Visit on a sunny day to get the full effect of the lighting design and stained glass accents. Museum free; charge for entry to Mackintosh House.

couples began to drift apart. The McNairs were busy in Liverpool, teaching, raising their son, and doing occasional domestic design and jewelry commissions. Little of their work survives. Frances died in 1921 at the age of 47; her death was rumored to be a suicide. A devastated Herbert vowed never to paint again. He destroyed a trunkful of his own and Frances's drawings, and sank into a pit of despair and alcoholism. He had long since given up on expecting any architectural work to come his way, and took on a variety of odd jobs, including a brief stint as a postman. His son Sylvan eventually emigrated to South Africa. The last survivor of The Four, Herbert, died in 1955 at the age of 87.

In Glasgow, the Mackintoshes continued their intense and spirited partnership, collaborating as equals on furniture, light fixtures, hammered metal panels, gesso work, and textiles. The pair produced their most celebrated work

during an amazingly brief time span. This fertile period includes their 1901 design for the House for an Art Lover (built by the city of Glasgow 89 years later), a structure whose white-on-white interior, accented with purple and magenta detail, appears to glow with a light from within. The following year they produced the enchanting Hill House (designed for publisher Walter Blackie, and considered to be their most important and fully realized domestic commission) and, in 1903, the stunning Willow Tea Rooms on Sauchiehall Street. It was during this period that Mackintosh achieved his most successful fusion of interior decoration, use of natural and artificial lighting, furniture design, and overall architectural form.

Success was fleeting, however, and the iconic status C.R. Mackintosh holds today was by no means assured within his own lifetime. His obsessive pursuit of perfection drove away many potential clients; the number of his commissions steadily dropped. Only Kate Cranston, the tea-room entrepreneur, remained loyal to him to the end.

In 1923 he and Margaret moved to the south of France, where he began concentrating on watercolor landscapes and flower studies. In letters, he expressed his ongoing ability "to find much delight in the small things of the natural world."

C.R. Mackintosh, forever pained by the rejection of his countrymen, died of cancer at 60 in 1928. Despite his obscurity at the time of his death, *The Times* of London acknowledged that "the whole modernist movement in European architecture looks to him as one of its chief originators." Today he is hailed as a prophetic genius of 20th-century design. Margaret, who was never really well after her husband's passing, survived him by only 5 years. Upon her death, their entire estate—including the contents of their studio, all their furniture, and a collection of landscape paintings that CRM had hoped to exhibit—was appraised at £88.16s (equivalent to about \$5,000 at this writing).

Despite their brief pre-eminence, the legacy of the Mackintoshes, along with that of the McNairs, remains an inestimable treasure. It has attained the immortality to which these lifelong friends had fancifully alluded when their spirits bonded, over 100 years ago. Their work continues to embody the ideal by which Mackintosh lived, which he first articulated in 1902.

"Art is the flower, life is the green leaf. Let every artist strive to make his flower a beautiful thing; something that will convince the world that there may be—there are—things more precious—more beautiful—more lasting than life."

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White-painted oak bookcase designed by the Mackintoshes for the drawing room of their Mains Street flat, their first home as a married couple. The leaded-glass doors of the two end cabinets are considered to be among the most elegant and poetic furniture designs that the couple ever produced. Margaret contributed the large discs of opaque white glass, with organic overlays of flower stems and blossoms. The fusion of male and female sensibilities (i.e., strong verticals and horizontals, detailed with sinuous curves) is a notable feature of the Glasgow style. Photo © Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery, University of Glasgow, Mackintosh Collection.