



A Vision Realized

Mackintosh's "House for an Art Lover"

By Judy Polan

First-time visitors to Glasgow's spectacular House for an Art Lover have been known to be rendered speechless. Some even become a bit tearful upon entering the building and encountering the dazzling beauty of its luminous white-on-white Music Room. On a sunny day, with light streaming through its bowed balcony doors—creating geometric patterns on the soft carpeting, shimmering across fairytale window banners, and illuminating its pink and purple stained glass door panels—it is indeed a sight to behold.

Glasgow boasts many famed sites devoted to the work of architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh, but even in 2006, the year of the city-wide Mackintosh Festival, the House for an Art Lover outshines them all. Though the House is now acclaimed as one of Mackintosh's greatest achievements, it might have remained locked on paper forever, a winning scheme without a physically realized structure. How a small band of believers brought it to life—nearly a century after it was originally designed—is a story of serendipity, skill, persistence, civic pride, and imagination.

A Design for a New Age

The House for an Art Lover was conceived in 1901 when the prestigious German art magazine *Zeitschrift für Innendekoration* initiated an international design competition. Its trendsetting publisher Alexander Koch explicitly dared architects to develop adventurous, tony, and innovative ideas in the creation of a "Haus eines Kunstfreundes"—a House for an Art Lover. Specifications included the provisos that it be designed for a parkland setting, make the best possible use of space, and "reflect the spirit of the new age."

For visionary Scottish architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh, the challenge to design "a grand house in a thoroughly modern style"—with no vexing clients to satisfy, and no budgetary constraints—was an irresistible one. In 1901, collaborating closely with his new wife and soul mate, decorative artist Margaret MacDonald, he entered the contest.

One can imagine the relish with which Mackintosh and MacDonald undertook this effort—to create, for an imaginary connoisseur of the arts, a home simultaneously stunning yet inviting, stimulating yet restful, spiritually elevating yet domestic and practical.

The competition drew 36 entries. The Mackintoshes' design package was submitted under the whimsically-chosen title "Der Vogel" (The Bird). It was at first disqualified, as various interior perspectives were not delivered on time; the drawings were deemed incomplete. Upon resubmission, however, "Der Vogel" was honored with a special prize

"REASON INFORMED BY EMOTION ... EXPRESSED IN BEAUTY ... ELEVATED BY EARNESTNESS ... LIGHTENED BY HUMOUR ... THAT IS THE IDEAL THAT SHOULD GUIDE ALL ARTISTS."

— Charles Rennie Mackintosh from his essay, "Seemliness," 1902

because the designers' ideas were recognized as so startlingly original. Their dazzling modernity and superior draughtsmanship simply could not be ignored. The judges applauded the unsurpassed excellence of "their pronounced personal quality, their novel and austere form, and their uniform configuration of interior and exterior."

The award came with a much-needed cash prize of 600 German marks, and meant that the Mackintoshes' drawings would be published as a series of large-format portfolios in

several of Koch's magazines, in both Europe and the US. Also published were "Dulce Domum," (Sweet Home) the design of second-prize winner M. H. Baillie Scott, and that of third-prize recipient Leopold Bauer, entitled "Und" (And). There was no official first prize winner.

The international publication of their portfolio accentuated a euphoric period in the newlyweds' lives, a period that had begun with their wild success at the Vienna Secession Exhibition of 1900. There, they reportedly had been feted

The House for an Art Lover, Glasgow (opposite), designed by C. R. Mackintosh and Margaret MacDonald Mackintosh. Inside and out, the structure is a carefully balanced symphony of opposites: masculine and feminine, tradition and innovation, the symbolic and the practical, the sensual and the chaste. Designed in 1901—the last year of the Victorian era—it is sleek and uncluttered, thoroughly modern in spirit. Photo courtesy of Michael Schonbach.

Margaret MacDonald and Charles Rennie Mackintosh. The couple met as students at the Glasgow School of Art, and wed in 1900. They brought to the House for an Art Lover project a combined expertise in architectural form and interior design as well as their shared aesthetics of serenity, balance, and visual rhythm. Photos courtesy of The Annan Gallery, Glasgow.



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and “drawn in a car through rose-strewn streets” by students and devotees electrified by their creative new approach to interior design and decoration.

Hermann Muthesius, a renowned architect and arbiter of the European art scene at the time, was clearly wowed by the Mackintoshes’ design for the House for an Art Lover. He wrote in a 1901 article, “It exhibits an absolutely original character, unlike anything else known. In it we shall not find a trace of conventional forms of architecture, to which the artist was quite indifferent.” Muthesius later wrote of Mackintosh, “He is involved in a struggle to hold up the banner of Beauty, in a dense jungle of ugliness.”

The Dream House

Mackintosh and MacDonald brought to their conceptualization of the House for an Art Lover every ounce of their conviction that architecture is the supreme discipline,

uniquely bringing together all of the other arts. And where better to articulate this “manifesto” than in a house to be designed explicitly for a lover of these glories—a connoisseur of music, the visual arts, literature, and lively conversation? The challenge to envision such a house gave the couple a unique opportunity to express their increasingly spiritual view of architecture and design, and to honor each of the arts in turn through the creation of inspiring purpose-built spaces. From a distance, the home’s exterior appears rather severe—a rectangle with two dominant long façades, facing north and south. The potential starkness of its white surface, made of good Scottish harling (a mixture of mortar and beach pebbles), is moderated by a careful placement of intricately-carved figures in relief. Their stately bearing and elaborate ornamentation proclaim the home’s position as the domain of a person of “taste, wealth, and influence.” A motif, which is rhythmically

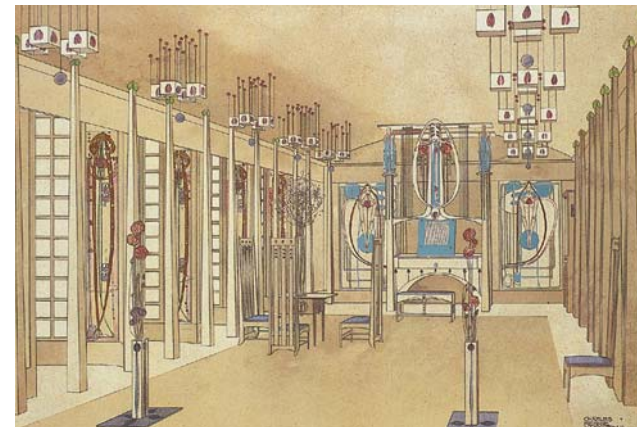
The Music Room as originally designed by Mackintosh and MacDonald in 1901 (below, left top).

The Music Room, as realized in the 1990s (below, left bottom), is the luminous *pièce de résistance* of the house. The piano at the far end is built into a dizzily-decorative white casing adorned with pink roses and lavender hearts and teardrops. Metal light fixtures hover throughout the space, suspended magically on thin wires that hang from tiny magenta glass beads.

Sunlight streams through the Music Room’s bowed balcony doors, illuminating an array of embroidered and appliquéd banners (below right). Photo courtesy of Michael Schonbach.



Stained-glass panels in the Music Room doors feature the signature Mackintosh Rose, a recurring theme throughout the house.



repeated throughout the home’s interior, is revealed in these sculptural images—that of a forest clearing under the watchful eye of ethereal female guardians.

Upon entering the house, the visitor is immediately struck by the multitude of intentional contrasts. The entryway is predominantly vertical, paneled in dark pine, yet it evinces a spacious mood with its soft white carpeting, radiant lighting, and gently curving staircase banister.

A set of black doors, with bright stained glass insets, invites guests from the ground floor hallway into the house’s *pièce de résistance*—the incandescently-glowing music room. It is here, in their celebration of music as perhaps the highest of all art forms, that Mackintosh’s and Macdonald’s unique personal styles are most harmoniously and joyously attuned. Mackintosh’s iconic straight-backed chairs and rectilinear tables are arranged along the length of the south-facing bowed-glass doors, which are framed by ceiling-to-floor, sinuously-embroidered and appliquéd banners—more ethereal guardians in a fanciful forest clearing.

The dining room captures yet another dimension of the couple’s shared aesthetic. At first glance a dark and masculine room, it is highlighted by 24 of Margaret’s captivating gessoes, which unfold on either side of the room’s entrance, telling the story of “The Life of the Rose.”

An oval-shaped room, meant to be a serene retreat for the ladies, completes the interior design for the ground floor. It honors the art of conversation, one which was highly regarded at the time of the home’s design.

1988: Dream Becomes Reality

The Mackintoshes’ dream house remained just that for decades; though much publicized on paper, it remained unbuilt. Then, in February of 1988, civil engineer and longtime Mackintosh admirer Graham Roxburgh found himself stuck in his car, trapped in a snowbank on the Drummochtar Pass in the Scottish Highlands. He and his stepdaughter chatted to pass the time while awaiting the tow truck. She mentioned that she needed a new challenge in her life, to which Roxburgh startlingly replied, “Well, we could build the House for an Art Lover!”

Roxburgh, an expert in structural engineering and architectural renovation, had owned a set of the published portfolio drawings of the house for over 20 years. He would take them out of a desk drawer from time to time, imagining that he would “someday make the house a reality.”

The year 1988 would prove to be the right time to revisit his dream. The city of Glasgow, to the amazement of many, had just won the highly-coveted designation “European City of Culture for 1990.” In preparation for that banner year, façades of the city’s magnificent Victorian buildings were about to undergo a major spiff-up, with the blackening remnants of a century’s soot to be steam-cleaned away. A mood of optimism pervaded Glasgow for the first time in decades; the City Council was eager to capitalize on the opportunity to create a fresh, vital image for the city. And two years might be just enough time to get the House for an Art Lover project off the ground.

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VISITING GLASGOW IN 2006

Glasgow abounds in Mackintosh sites—and is saluting its most prominent architect during Glasgow Mackintosh Festival 2006. September is the apex of the festival, but special events continue throughout the year; check www.GlasgowMackintosh2006.com or www.SeeGlasgow.com.

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The House for an Art Lover is celebrating the 10th anniversary of its opening with musical performances, dinner galas, and art exhibitions. Open April through September, Mon – Wed 10-4 & Thurs – Sun 10-1, and October through March, Sat – Sun 10-1. The Art Lovers' Café is open every day, 10-5. It's always best to call ahead—the house or café might be closed for a special activity. To learn more about the House for an Art Lover, including how to reserve the House for a wedding, party, or corporate event, call, email, or visit the website.

Roxburgh approached Professor Andrew MacMillan, then Director of the School of Architecture at the Glasgow School of Art, at a Mackintosh Society meeting several months later. “He wanted to inquire,” says MacMillan, “whether I thought the idea of building the House for an Art Lover mad; and did I know any architect who might help him investigate its possibility.”

MacMillan's immediate reply was no and yes. “No, it wasn't mad—absurd maybe, but interesting—and yes, myself.”

Roxburgh already had a site in mind. In another serendipitous moment that occurred not long after his snowbank encounter, he had been jogging past Bellahouston Park, where he noticed the ruins of Ibroxhill House, an old mansion which had burned down in 1913. He thought the location of that long-gone home to be the perfect spot for the House for an Art Lover, fulfilling the “parkland setting” specification of the 1901 competition. When MacMillan came to see it, he too was immediately convinced. “It was a splendid site, and clever. Approached from the west, its situation bore a remarkable resemblance to the perspective of the house in the portfolio.”

Once the site had been chosen, and the drawings had been pored over by architects, an actual floor plan was drawn up. (The original competition, while requiring

The Main Hall is a study in contrasts: light against dark, straight lines against curves and open space. Visible through the door is the dining room.



The Dining Room. Mackintosh's classic oak chairs and a solidly-built table sit beside a built-in sideboard, on a restrained area carpet. The fireplace wall is stenciled in roses. Purple and green glass light fixtures, like celestial bubbles, float overhead.



meticulously drawn designs for the rooms, had not called for accompanying blueprints.) Initial funding was granted by the Glasgow City Council and a variety of other public and private donors, including Roxburgh himself.

A small army of highly-skilled craftspeople came together, representing the plethora of art forms involved in both the exterior and interior of the house: stone and wood carving; fine metalwork and blacksmithing; ceramics; printed, painted, and embroidered textiles; stained glass; furniture and other intricate woodworking; stenciling; and gesso paneling. A multitude of handicraft techniques was required to create the effects suggested by the portfolio—“suggested” being the operative word, as the drawings were scant on precise detail or practical information that a craftsperson would need.

Gesso artists Dai and Jenny Vaughan exemplify the esprit and commitment this corps of decorative artisans brought to their work for the House. They spent several years carefully researching Margaret MacDonald's techniques, a task made exceptionally difficult because, as Dai says, “she never kept any notes, or wrote down any recipes or methods at all ... nothing.”

The couple became increasingly aware that, in addition to authentically executing Margaret's designs, it was also critical

to honor the intention behind them. “It soon became clear to Jenny and myself,” Dai wrote, “that there were two very different, and yet complementary, sides to this commission. First there was the medium, then there was the message ... the physical and the metaphysical.” This indeed was the consummate task of all the fine craftspeople involved in realizing the House—to do justice to both the spirit and substance the of the original designers.

Construction of the building began in 1989 and continued for two years, then was halted because of insufficient funding. Skeptics claimed the house was destined to become a “white elephant,” a waste of taxpayers' hard-earned pounds. However, the project had a new beginning three years later, when, as Andrew MacMillan says, “a miracle happened.” Dugald Cameron, then Director of the Glasgow School of Art, decided that the House “would make a magnificent Post Graduate School for us!” Through negotiations with the City, the Region, the Glasgow Development Agency, and various bodies that had previously come together to fund the enterprise, the opportunity to forge on arose.

The House for an Art Lover was completed in 1996. Ten years later—almost 100 years after it was initially conceived—it



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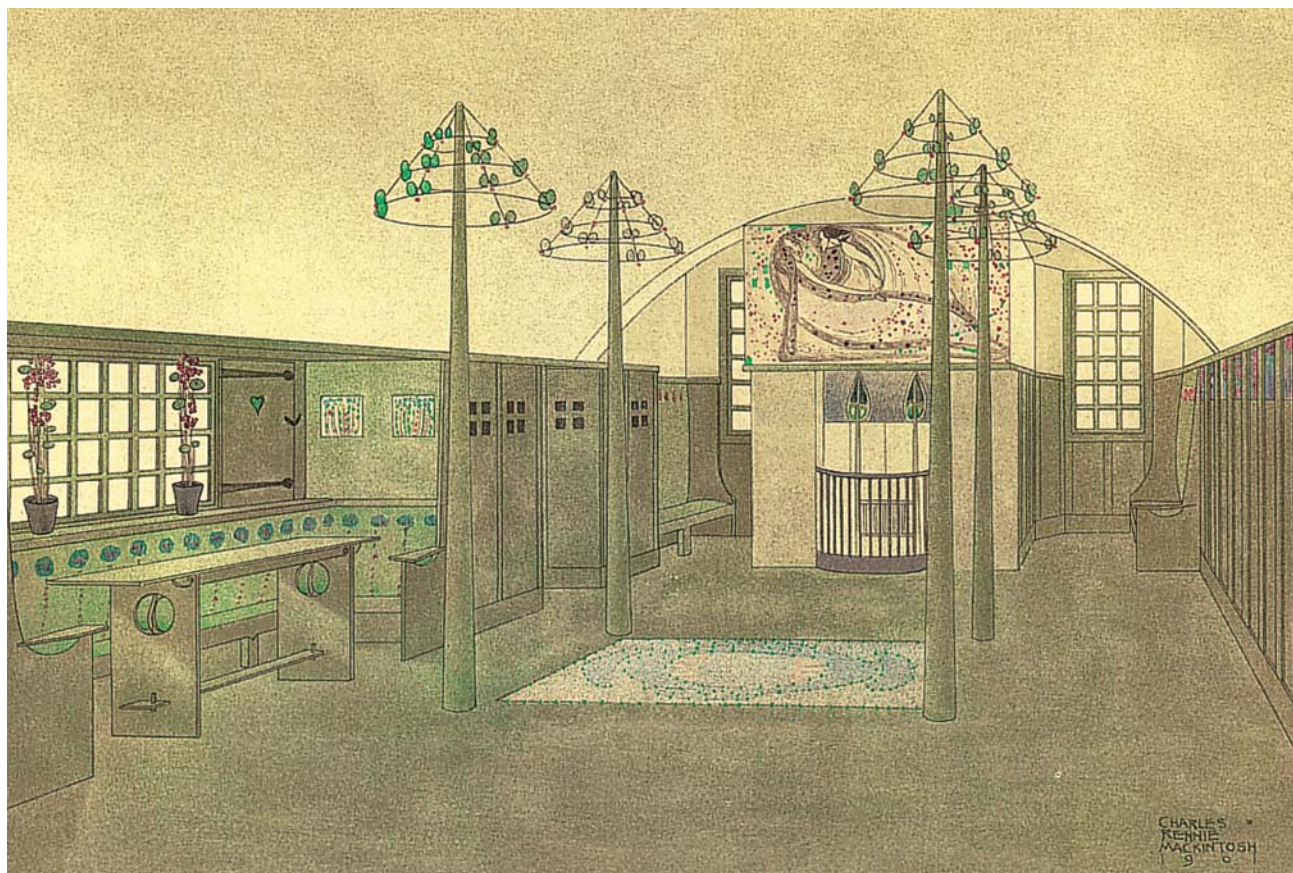
In the Oval Room, an elegantly serene retreat for ladies' conversation, window seats nestle into the arc of the window to accommodate an extra-private chat. A single metal and glass light fixture, echoing the shape of the room, is suspended above the simple white table.

A number of proposed room designs from the original portfolio were not built, including this spacious and fanciful children's playroom. With its center framed by a quartet of freestanding, illumined trees, this decorative scheme defies the popular notion that the couple's designs were implicitly uninviting to the younger set.

is the city of Glasgow's most successful publicly-funded arts venue, drawing students, tourists, and conference-goers from all over the world. Sure to be one of the showpieces of the city's Mackintosh Festival 2006, the House for an Art Lover remains an enduring monument to the joint inspiration of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and his beloved wife Margaret, and an abundant gift to generations of art lovers to come.

Judy Polan is an award-winning writer and musician who spent her midlife crisis studying decorative arts at the University of Glasgow. Her humorous essays are heard on Northeast Public Radio, and her article "The Glasgow Four" was published in the August 2005 issue of *Style 1900*. Judy welcomes e-mail via her website, www.JudyPolan.com.

Unless noted, photographs are courtesy of the House for an Art Lover, Glasgow. Portraits of Margaret MacDonald and Charles Rennie Mackintosh are provided by The Annan Gallery, a fifth-generation family business selling Scottish paintings and The Annan Collection of Old Glasgow and Charles Rennie Mackintosh Photographs. (The Annan Gallery, 164 Woodlands Rd., Glasgow. Tel from US: 011-44-141-332-0028; www.AnnanGallery.co.uk.)



"The Scent of the Rose" and "The Mystic Marriage." These gesso panels, from a series of 24 that encircle the dining room, were designed by Margaret MacDonald and brought to life nearly a century later by artists Dai and Jenny Vaughan. Working without any written instructions or "recipes" for techniques, the Vaughans piped layers of gesso onto the panels, applied color, and set in stones such as amethyst and turquoise. Photos courtesy of Vaughan Art-Works, Glasgow.

Imagining "The Life of the Rose"

Multitalented artists Dai and Jenny Vaughan, who created the series of gesso panels called "The Life of the Rose" for the House for an Art Lover, recognize that they were tremendously privileged to do so. They admit, though, that it was a project into which they initially had to be dragged kicking and screaming.

"Vaughan Art-Works was offered the job by Graham Roxburgh in late 1989," says Dai. "We had gotten to know him when he was a structural engineer for the city. He had to somehow—without sky-hooks—realize our competition-winning designs for a special Christmas lights display, celebrating Glasgow's being voted the 1990 European City of Culture."

After the Christmas lights job, the Vaughans were ready for a break. They turned down the HAL commission three times. But after what he jokingly refers to as a "shouting and swearing match" with Roxburgh, Dai agreed to at least take a

look at the house, to see what his friend was up to. Now the couple is thrilled about their involvement in the project.

"Our work at HAL does seem set to last. As artists working in public art, the vast amount of our work is sooner or later covered over—murals in bars and restaurants are the most vulnerable to this treatment. Even the Christmas lights—which we have created all over the world, which have all been so popular for so many years—will eventually end up on the scrap heap. But the HAL work is still there, and looks like it will be there for quite a while."

To learn more about Dai and Jenny Vaughan's work, visit www.art-works.co.uk and www.jennyvaughan.co.uk. Dai Vaughan has recently partnered with a company that makes Mackintosh furniture reproductions and even whole room settings, including gessoes, carpets, and light fixtures; for more information, visit www.MackintoshCollection.com.