

Jessie M. King

DESIGNER OF
DREAMSCAPES

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By Judy Polan

Prolific, flamboyant, and unconventional, Jessie M. King brought a mystical whimsy to Scottish design.



Jessie M. King as a young woman, ca. 1905. Considered to be the greatest Scottish illustrator of the 20th century, King excelled in all aspects of design work. Poet and playwright Gordon Bottomley once wrote to her, “You are a jeweller, a silversmith, a gardener good at both flowers and nectarines, a mistress mariner on pearly seas in fairy lands unborn ... There are no other artists with a natural gift more original than your own ... I wonder where you came from!” *Courtesy of Glasgow Museums Photo Library, Glasgow.*

Stunningly prolific artist Jessie M. King (1875-1949)—landscape painter, muralist, jeweler, ceramist, metalworker, and designer of fabrics, wallpaper, costumes, and book jackets—is widely regarded as the greatest Scottish illustrator of the 20th century. Her diaphanous pen-and-ink drawings, the output of a career that lasted over 50 years, decorated more than 100 books and magazines published all across Western Europe. Possessed of a singular imagination, but shaped by influences ranging from ancient Celtic symbolism to Orientalism to Renaissance and Pre-Raphaelite art, she created visions that seem to float between fantasy and reality, into an eternal language of dreams.

Regarded as a notable eccentric of her era, King was proud of her reputation for being “kenspeckle” (conspicuous). She habitually dressed in long flowing skirts and capes, wide-brimmed hats, black stockings darned with patches of brightly colored wool, and buckled shoes. She delighted in fostering rumors that she was a supernatural person—maybe a fairy godmother, probably a psychic, possibly even a witch. She was full of laughter, sparkle, and chutzpah.

An Undaunted Spirit

Jessie Marion King was born in 1875, the daughter of the Reverend James W. King and his very proper wife, Mary Ann. The family lived on the outskirts of Bearsden, a fashionable middle-class community a twenty-minute train ride from Glasgow.

Jessie spent her childhood in a fairytale environment, living in a white brick cottage surrounded by a garden, hedges, orchards, and a copse of old beech trees. (These trees would later appear as the home of wood-sprites in many of her drawings.) Her upbringing was orderly and disciplined, neither pampered nor deprived; she was saved from the excesses of her parents’ austere perspective by the arrival of nursemaid Mary McNab (“Maimie”), who was to become a lifelong ally and mentor.

Jessie was always good with her hands, and enjoyed sawing and dovetailing wood. She started keeping rabbits when she was 10, and set about to build them a large new hutch when, as she later commented, she became alarmed “by their arithmetical qualities.” The Kings’ gardener admired the little girl’s astonishing skill as a carpenter, and asserted “Aye, ye should ha’ been a laddie.”

Her greatest joy, however, was drawing. Her parents took some pride in her talent as an “accomplishment” that could be packaged with other desirable



wifely qualities when she came of marrying age. But for Jessie, drawing was a driving passion, a calling that she wanted to make her actual life's work. Intuitively understanding that her parents would frown upon what they regarded as mere frivolity, she began hiding her artwork in the hedges as she walked home from school, retrieving it later when she felt that it was safe.

She did find encouragement, however, from some of her schoolteachers, around whom she did not have to squelch her enthusiasm for the artistic life. They understood that her yearnings were neither frivolous nor quixotic, and spurred her on to take her heart's desire seriously by applying to art school. In 1892, with the grudging permission of her parents, Jessie registered as a full-time day student at the Glasgow School of Art (GSA).

Becoming a Glasgow Girl

In keeping with the fortunate aura that seemed to surround her life, the independent, willful young Jessie landed in exactly the right place, at just the right time. Glasgow in the 1890s was a kinetic city on the rise. Jessie reveled in its splendid shops and arcades, cafes and elegant tearooms, theatres and picture galleries. She plunged headlong into the urban lifestyle, taking full advantage of the many artistic opportunities available to her, and marveling at the city's wondrous modern conveniences such as gas lighting and horse-drawn trams.

She quickly forged friendships—some of them to last throughout her life—with the group of young Glasgow artists who dubbed themselves “the roaring crowd.” These included Margaret and Frances MacDonald and Charles Rennie Mackintosh, as well as a coterie of young women artists who eventually came to be known as the Glasgow Girls. This group of designers pioneered original concepts in the decoration of three-dimensional surfaces, rejected what Jessie called the “self-denying stance of femininity,” and knew how to have a mighty good time while they were at it.

King always loved children, and maintained a child's-eye view of the world throughout her life. This oil painting, *The Frog Prince*, was part of a nursery design she exhibited in Paris in 1913. *Courtesy of Glasgow Museums Photo Library, Glasgow.*

This enameled-silver trinket box (ca. 1906), designed by King for the celebrated retailer Liberty's of London, reveals her fanciful touch. *Courtesy of Glasgow Museums Photo Library, Glasgow.*





Growing up, King had to hide her passion for drawing from her straight-laced parents, but her schoolteachers supported her aspirations. Later, her meticulous and imaginative style brought her fame with magical book illustrations such as this one, from a 1906 edition of Edmund Spenser's poems. *Courtesy of the Stewartry Museum, Kirkcudbright.*

No longer the lone oddball, Jessie became part of a circle of wildly talented kindred spirits. They all dressed in highly individual fashion, the young women tossing out what they, along with others in the artistic dress movement, labeled “the deplorable corset”—a garment they viewed as an insidious male invention intended to restrict their full participation in life.

Auspiciously, the visionary Francis (“Fra”) Newbury had recently been appointed director of the Glasgow School of Art. A beloved and energetic leader, Newbury genuinely valued the contributions of women artists, and elevated the prominence of the so-called “feminine arts”—like embroidery, textile design, and ceramic decoration—in the GSA’s curriculum. He immediately recognized the breadth of Jessie’s abilities and her long-suppressed potential.

Under Newbury’s enlightened tutelage, Jessie’s instinctive

talents were refined, blossoming in the school’s atmosphere of support and exuberance. Newbury believed fervently that “while functional perfection has its own beauty, lesser things can be made greater by beauty of ornamentation.” He encouraged Jessie to expand her strength in line drawing from pure illustration into design for metalwork, pottery, book covers, and beyond.

Soon, Jessie’s originality won her a scholarship to study in France and Italy, where she saw paintings by Botticelli and other early masters admired by the Pre-Raphaelites that would remain an inspiration throughout her career. She performed splendidly during the 1896-97 school year, winning the important Queen’s Prize for her work on the Principles of Ornament, a National Book Prize for three designs based on Kipling’s *Jungle Book*, and small stipends toward further study of drapery and interior decoration. She was granted a full scholarship for the following year at GSA.

In 1898, Jessie received a silver medal in a nation-wide competition for her “remarkably mature” illustrations of Sir Edwin Arnold’s epic poem *Light of Asia*. This achievement, noted in the highly influential British arts journal *The Studio*, brought increased attention to Jessie M. King’s work. Her career as a real artist had just begun to soar.

Widening Acclaim and Marriage

When King completed her course of study in 1899, Fra Newbury offered her a teaching post in the GSA’s Department of Book Decoration and Design. He was looking toward expansion of the school’s facilities—highlighted by a new building designed by C.R. Mackintosh—and was not about to let go of one of his most promising protégés.

King embraced the teaching job, but as a part-time position. She had simultaneously been offered a tempting and lucrative commission by a Berlin department store owner, who wanted her to devise “a range of items in the new Scottish style.” Though book illustration and jacket design continued to dominate her work, she dove into a dizzying array of projects—designs for wallpaper, jewelry, ceramics, posters, fabrics, murals, metalwork, bookplates, mirrors, stained glass, and theatrical costume.

In 1902, Mackintosh invited her to submit book illustrations and watercolors for display in the Scottish Pavilion at the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art in Turin, Italy. The Turin Exhibition was the blockbuster arts event of the year, and its importance to the careers of many of the Glasgow artists was inestimable. Continental art magazines were lavish in their praise of Fra Newbury’s achievement, and *The Studio* proudly wrote that “Scottish art workers, brilliant in their young strength, can now take their rightful place among the leaders of the decorative art movement in Europe.” King received a gold medal for her book cover for *L’Evangile de l’Enfance*; with this award her preeminence in book design was established internationally.

Among the other young Scots exhibiting in Turin was cabinetmaker and stained glass artist Ernest Archibald (E.A.) Taylor. Part of the tight-knit circle of friends who were first



At the Glasgow School of Art, Jessie's mentor Francis Newbury encouraged her to expand into metalwork and other media. Like the trinket box pictured on page 51, this enameled cloak clasp and buttonhook (both ca. 1906) were designed by King and made by W.H. Haseler of Birmingham as part of Liberty's elegant Cymric silver line. King received the coveted commission shortly after her graduation from the Glasgow School of Art, and just before achieving international success at the Turin Exhibition of 1902. *Courtesy of Glasgow Museums Photo Library, Glasgow.*

Detail, *Princess of the Red Rose* (ca. 1902). Atop one panel of an extravagantly decorated room-divider, King combined her talent for pen and ink illustration with her skill in handcrafted wood, metal, and stained glass. *Courtesy of Glasgow Museums Photo Library, Glasgow.*



students and then longtime teachers at the GSA, Taylor had rented a studio adjacent to King's on Bath Street. He was clearly smitten with the starry-eyed Jessie, describing her as possessing "a beautiful melody of soul ... she is the poet's artist, dipping down behind the veil to discover poetry in the actual, and an ideal in the real."

The two artists found that they shared a metaphysical approach to their art. Jessie always emphasized the "magico-mystical base" to her designs, saying she "vividly saw [my] drawings with an inner eye, before ever setting pen to paper." Taylor wrote that he hoped "the modern artist would never forget the necessity of spirituality in his work."

Fra Newbury was always the eager matchmaker; he had introduced Margaret Macdonald to C.R. Mackintosh and Frances MacDonald to Herbert McNair, thereby producing two of the legendary couples of Scottish design. He devised projects on which King and Taylor could collaborate, such as a medieval pageant in 1903, for which E.A. created imaginative sets and Jessie designed spectacular costumes. The two loved this exhilarating work, and collaborated on a number of citywide and national extravaganzas over the next several years.



In 1907, feeling that she could no longer do justice to both her teaching and her numerous commissions, King left the Glasgow School of Art. She became active in the Glasgow Society of Lady Artists, and expanded her repertoire by designing benefit program covers and tearoom menu cards. Meanwhile, Taylor became chief designer at The Crafts, a high-end furniture workshop, and continued to lecture widely.

By 1908, however, after much independent travel in Europe and Asia and many solo exhibitions, sketching trips, and speaking engagements, the two decided it was time to commit to a life together. They married at the cottage of Mary McNab, Jessie's beloved childhood nanny. True to form, the bride sewed her own idiosyncratic silk wedding gown, decorated with 365 pearl buttons to symbolize her spiritual bond with her husband every day of the year. McNab agreed to come on board as the couple's housekeeper, cook, and general life organizer, and soon became nursemaid to their only child, Merle Elspeth, born in 1909.

Life as Art: Paris and Green Gate Close

At 35, Jessie M. King was busier than ever. Marriage and motherhood exerted no apparent impact on the pace of her artistic output or on her peripatetic lifestyle. In 1910, she and her new husband were off to Paris, where E.A. had been appointed professor at the Studio School of Drawing and Painting. The couple opened an art school and gallery called the Shealing (Scots for "sheltering") Atelier, where they taught English-speaking students eager to experience the liberating ambience of the Parisian arts scene.

King and Taylor lived and worked in Paris until 1913. With tensions rising in Europe prior to the outbreak of World War I, they returned to Scotland, settling in the renowned artistic



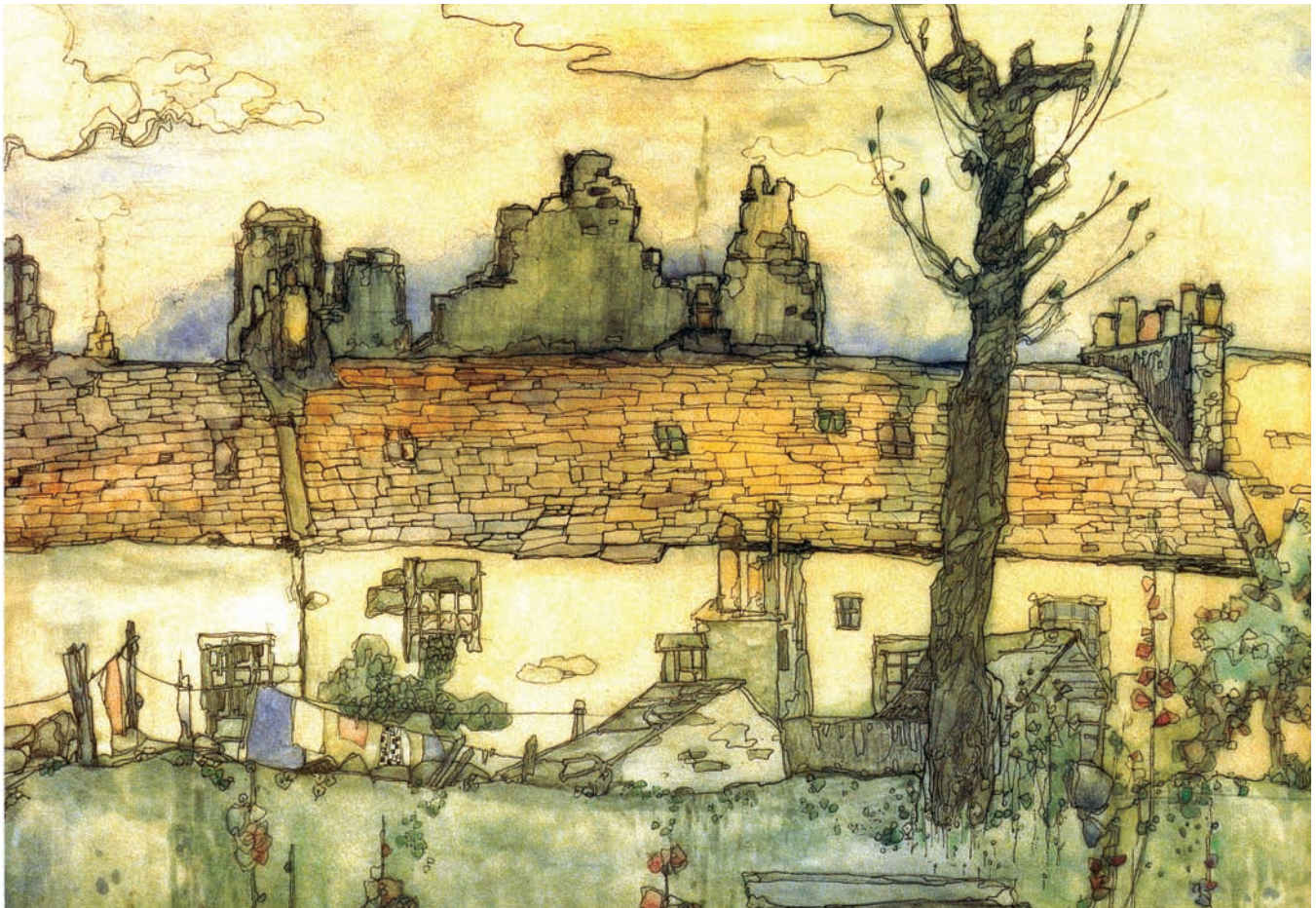
Jessie M. King's skilful handling of lettering and fine detail were ideal for bookplate designs, a specialty of hers between 1902 and 1910. Some designs were generic, meant to be sold in shops; others, like the one above, were privately commissioned and incorporated the client's personality, interests, or occupation into the design. *Courtesy of High St. Gallery, Kirkcudbright.*

A model wears a silk batik dress by Jessie M. King—King—who loved to dress eccentrically herself—was always drawn to theatrical costume. While teaching in Paris, she began to experiment with batik, a wax-resist technique applied to fabric and clothing. She eventually wrote a book on the subject, single-handedly bringing batik into the British arts vocabulary. *Courtesy of the Stewartry Museum, Kirkcudbright.*

The watercolor, shown opposite, entitled *High Corrie, Arran*, reflects two important developments in Jessie M. King's life. During their Paris years in the early 1910s, King and her husband ran a summer sketching school on the romantic Scottish island of Arran, where they had honeymooned. Simultaneously, Jessie became so smitten by the vibrant fashion designs of Leon Bakst, costume designer for the Ballets Russes, that her own style began to transform itself from linear fantasy to brightly colored washes that she impishly dubbed "strong drink." *Courtesy of High St. Gallery, Kirkcudbright.*

Like *The Frog Prince*, the dollhouse of painted wood, shown opposite, was created by King for a nursery exhibition held in Paris in 1913. Her display comprised a complete room setting with furniture, a wall frieze and a stained-glass window. *V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum.*





Pictured at top: Jessie M. King's watercolor of Castle Gardens, Kirkcudbright—the beloved landscape of her final days. *Courtesy of the Stewartry Museum, Kirkcudbright.*

King taught ceramic decoration at the Glasgow School of Art immediately after graduating, and continued working in the medium throughout her artistic life. She produced this hand-painted plate with foxgloves in the 1930s. Ever the entrepreneur, she sold her ceramics in several Kirkcudbright tearooms—rooms whose interiors she had designed herself. *Courtesy of Glasgow Museums Photo Library, Glasgow.*

community of Kirkcudbright. There King established the Green Gate Close, an important center for women artists, some of whom lived there year-round and some of whom came—in the words of a contemporary writer—“as birds of passage with the spring and summer.”

In Kirkcudbright, King seemed to explode with creativity. She was a driving force at the Close, teaching batik, sketching, and ceramics. She maintained two studios on the property—one for her ceramic work, and another, on a rooftop, for the landscape paintings she had begun to produce in vivid oils or watercolors. She continued her career as an illustrator, sold scarf designs to Liberty's, and occasionally collaborated with her husband on interior design and furniture. She also continued to design toys and children's furniture decorated with rabbits.

Epilogue: A Life Well-Lived

Even toward the end of her life, Jessie M. King's days overflowed with new artistic exploration, speaking engagements, collaborations, and commissions. She never lost her childlike wonderment at all things enchanted and fair, or founded in her deeply-held belief that a strong arts education provides the best foundation for all of life's creative endeavors.

King died in August of 1949, at Kirkcudbright. Her legacy comprises not only the enchanted universe created

in her work, but also the example she set by the way she lived her life. Born into a restrictive, gender-bound Victorian society, she plunged exuberantly into all of her endeavors on her own terms, achieved unbounded professional success, and perpetually remained a joyful seeker. Jessie M. King, who wrote passionately about “the vital importance of fostering one’s own creative vision throughout one’s life,” was indeed the quintessentially modern woman.

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TO LEARN MORE

Quotations from and about Jessie M. King, as well as other facts used in this article, are taken from the following sources:

The Enchanted World of Jessie M. King, by Colin White (Edinburgh: Canongate Publishing Ltd, 1989).

Glasgow Girls: Women in Art and Design, 1880-1920, edited by Jude Burkhauser (Edinburgh: Canongate Publishing Ltd, 1990).

Art Nouveau from Mackintosh to Liberty: The Birth of a Style by Victor Arwas (London: Andreas Papadakis Publishers, 2000).

COLLECTING KING

Books with covers or illustrations by King are perhaps the most accessible collectibles; while prices vary with rarity and condition, expect to pay \$500 - \$3000 for a very good first edition with color plates. Bruce Barnett and David Block of The Book Block in Lake Forest, IL and Greenwich, CT usually have an assortment on hand (www.TheBookBlock.com; call toll-free 866-211-6134).

Kirkcudbright’s High Street Gallery stocks paintings, craft, and other work by Kirkcudbright artists past and present. The King bookplate pictured above is listed at £350 (about \$630), *High Corrie, Arran* at £3100 (about \$5580). (High Street Gallery, 84 High Street, Kirkcudbright, Scotland; from U.S. 011-44-1557-331660; www.HighStGallery.co.uk).

WHERE TO SEE KING’S WORK

Kelvingrove Art Gallery & Museum

Argyle Street, Glasgow, Scotland
(from U.S.) 011-44-141-276-9599
www.GlasgowMuseums.com

Recently reopened after a £30 million, three-year refurbishment, the Kelvingrove is a must-see for those interested in Scottish School design; the extensive Jessie M. King Collection includes *The Frog Prince*, silver, ceramics, artwork, batiks, and much else. Only a subset can be displayed at any one time; the remainder can be viewed by pre-arrangement at the museum’s new publicly-accessible

storage facility in south Glasgow. Individual researchers, or groups interested in a tour of the facility tailored to their interests, should write at least 3 weeks in advance to Alison Brown, Curator, European Decorative Art, Glasgow Museums, Glasgow City Council, Scotland Street School Museum, 225 Scotland Street, Glasgow G5 8QB, United Kingdom (Alison.Brown@cls.glasgow.gov.uk).

Tolbooth Art Centre

High Street, Kirkcudbright, Scotland
(from U.S.) 011-44-1557-331556
www.Dumgal.gov.uk/Dumgal/places.aspx?id=230
Displays and audio-visual shows (including one devoted to King) introduce visitors to the artists who called Kirkcudbright home.

The Stewartry Museum

St Mary Street, Kirkcudbright, Scotland
(from U.S.) 011-44-1557-331643
www.Dumgal.gov.uk/Dumgal/places.aspx?id=146
Housed in a charming 1893 building, the Stewartry Museum documents the human and natural history of Kirkcudbrightshire, including the work of artists like King.

Broughton House & Garden

12 High Street, Kirkcudbright, Scotland
(from U.S.) 011-44-1557-330437
www.NTS.org.uk
While not directly related to King, Broughton House was the home and studio of her contemporary, “Glasgow Boy” artist E.A. Hornel. Now headquarters to the National Trust for Scotland, Broughton House displays Hornel’s library and collections of furniture, ceramics, and textiles, as well as paintings by him and his fellow artists.

The Victoria and Albert Museum

Cromwell Road, South Kensington, London
(from U.S.) 011-44-20-7942-2000
www.VAM.ac.uk
King’s 1913 dollhouse is on display in the British Galleries, where the Scottish School is presented in context with other aspects of Victorian/Edwardian design.