

Bruxelles – 5. 10. 2010

Peter Trowles, Mackintosh Curator
The Glasgow School of Art
167 Renfrew Street,
Glasgow G3 6RQ, SCOTLAND
p.trowles@gsa.ac.uk

THE MACKINTOSH PHENOMENON: THE RISE OF CHARLES RENNIE MACKINTOSH AS CULTURAL ICON, CULTURAL SUPERSTAR!

It is perhaps hard to believe but there was a time not that long ago when Charles Rennie Mackintosh's name and reputation was barely known to all but a small and loyal band of academics and historians.

Although Mackintosh's most important architectural commission, the Glasgow School of Art, was completed in 1909, the first photograph of the School to be published in any book or journal appeared some fifteen years after the building's completion and just four years before Mackintosh's own untimely death in December 1928.

So it was not at all surprising perhaps that apart from one or two sympathetic obituaries that appeared in both the Glasgow and London press, Mackintosh's death was pretty much ignored. After all, it was Mackintosh's contribution to the world of European architecture and design at the very end of the 19th century and into the early years of the 20th century that drew critical claim. By the late 1920s, Mackintosh's design career was very much at an end and a new, younger generation had taken over.!!!



**1. Charles Rennie Mackintosh memorial exhibition,
McLellan Galleries, Glasgow 1933.**

When Mackintosh's wife Margaret Macdonald died five year later in 1933, a group of family friends and colleagues came together in Glasgow to stage a memorial exhibition in honour of the two artists. Artistically, the exhibition at the city's McLellan Galleries lacked a certain charm with over 180 works crammed together in a small number of galleries, displayed in a style reminiscent of a viewing at an auction house prior to a sale. It was chiefly a local event for local people.

Bruxelles – 5. 10. 2010

So what have been the key influences that have propelled Mackintosh's name and reputation over the past 70 years to the unprecedented level of recognition that it now has today?

Two factors spring to mind. Firstly, there has been a growing re-awakening of interest in art, design and architecture from the beginning of the 20th century – and one of the reasons why the Réseau Art Nouveau Network was first set up in 1999. In addition, it's generally recognised that had this been attempted in the 1970s or 1980s then it would probably have failed but most of these styles do eventually come back into fashion; they become retro and trendy and suddenly appeal to an altogether new and different and frequently younger audience.

The second and perhaps more important factor in the rise to prominence of Mackintosh and his work is the substantial rebirth of Glasgow as a cultural capital, and particularly since the 1980s.

When in 1952 Dr Thomas Howarth published his doctorate thesis on Mackintosh the first ever book on the subject, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Modern Movement*, very few people in Glasgow had any idea as to who Mackintosh was. And those that did know him by name probably had no idea of his reputation across mainland Europe some 50 years earlier.

Even the Glasgow School of Art was little better, for it was only in 1961 over 50 years after the School was completed, that it published its first ever book on the history of the building. Although fully illustrated, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Glasgow School of Art* consisted of just 24 pages, hardly a substantial work. Interestingly, however, this small publication included a brief biography of Mackintosh in three additional languages - French, German and Italian. This was surely an acknowledgement that Mackintosh's importance was already being recognised across much of mainland Europe.



2. Sources du XX^e Siècle, Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris 1960

Two later volumes published again by the School in the mid-1960s focused on Mackintosh furniture in the possession of School and on the decorative metalwork used throughout the building. These were undoubtedly published in response to an apparent demand from the public and by the late 1960s, early 1970s other academic titles had followed.

Bruxelles – 5. 10. 2010

As early as 1960, Mackintosh's work was heavily featured in an exhibition organised by the Council of Europe in Paris. Then in the summer of 1968, the largest ever exhibition of Mackintosh's work to date opened in Scotland – only in Edinburgh, some 80km away from Glasgow! This exhibition formed part of Edinburgh's international summer festival. It was a popular exhibition that then toured to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London before moving to both Darmstadt and Vienna. Good for Mackintosh perhaps but why it failed to showcase in Glasgow, his native city, has never been truly identified; surely a missed opportunity?

Around this time, an agreement was also signed between Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow University and major manufacturer of reproduction furniture, the first real opportunity to examine the potential commercialization of Mackintosh's design work. And was this furniture company based in Glasgow, Edinburgh or elsewhere in Scotland? Not surprisingly, no; it was an Italian company called Cassina based in Milan who already saw the benefits of showcasing Mackintosh's work alongside that of Frank Lloyd Wright, Antoni Gaudi, Gerrit Rietveld and even Le Corbusier as part of their *I Maestri* range.

Back in Scotland, the 1960s and 1970s and not been kind to Glasgow. Too reliant on the old heavy industries of ship building and engineering, their demise created enormous social problems with high unemployment, poor housing and poverty blighting the landscape. Glasgow was not a tourist destination.



3. Charing Cross, Glasgow, c.1900

British Empire. It had fine Victorian architecture and its sumptuous museums had some of the best art collections outside of London. So rather than letting this fine cultural wealth languish in the shadows, Glasgow finally set about promoting its celebrated past as a

But it was their near neighbour Edinburgh and their on-going cultural success that finally persuaded Glasgow's politicians to get around to doing something positive themselves - to rectify the imbalance between Scotland's largest two cities. Glasgow's political elite remembered that back in 1900 Glasgow was a rich, prosperous and vibrant city, with over a million people, the 6th largest in Europe, and the so-called 2nd city of the

Bruxelles – 5. 10. 2010

means of hopefully regenerating its down-at-heel present and more importantly regenerating its future.

1983 was a breakthrough year with the launch of Glasgow's *Miles Better* marketing campaign. This was seen as an opportunity to promote Glasgow as a new tourist destination and as potential location for new, modern businesses, using the then popular cartoon figure of *Mr. Happy* as an instantly recognizable 'brand' icon. This marketing campaign is now regarded as one of the earliest and most successful attempts to rebrand a city anywhere in the world and received a number of domestic and international awards. The campaign focused on the cultural richness of Glasgow, its architecture, museums and galleries, and its natural 'green' environment with more parkland per head of population than any other city in Europe). The result - a significant change in the way that Glasgow was perceived by the outside world.

More importantly perhaps, there was with the opening of the Burrell Collection, in a new dedicated museum in a city centre park. Collected by the wealthy industrialist, Sir William Burrell, his extensive collection of medieval art including stained glass, tapestries and furniture, art and artifacts from the Far East, and Impressionist paintings and sculptures by Degas, Monet and Cezanne were amongst the very best examples held anywhere. When the Burrell Collection first opened its doors the world's art press descended on Glasgow. Their reviews were unanimous - Glasgow had a new, world class museum and one to be proud of.



**4. Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Japan Art and Culture Association
Tokyo 1985**

This recognition of Glasgow as the 'new place to be' was also to benefit Mackintosh. During the mid 1980s a number of important exhibitions took place where Mackintosh's work was shown on an international stage, with much of this interest coming from Japan. European art and design from the likes of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the French

Impressionists, William Morris and British Arts and Crafts was much sought after and through educational links it already had in place, Glasgow School of Art delivered two substantial Mackintosh exhibitions to galleries in Japan in the mid 1980s and these proved extremely popular.

Bruxelles – 5. 10. 2010

In winning the accolade of European City of Culture in 1990 Glasgow finally recognized the true value of culture and cultural tourism as means of economic regeneration. With Mackintosh attracting a growing army of enthusiasts at home and importantly abroad it seemed only logical for the various Mackintosh attractions that already existed across Glasgow to work more closely together. Awareness of Mackintosh would inevitably strengthen Glasgow's reputation as an upcoming and vibrant city and as more people travelled Glasgow for the first time, a high percentage of these visitors would ultimately be introduced to Mackintosh too. It was a win-win situation.

Throughout the Year of Culture in 1990, Glasgow hosted a number of specific Mackintosh events – exhibitions, workshops and a major international conference but the most significant return was in the amount of general media coverage obtained, and with every journalist posting a positive news story there was an opportunity to highlight Mackintosh as Glasgow's new cultural icon.

In the years immediately after 1990 there were further exhibition opportunities to showcase Mackintosh and his contemporaries in cities as diverse as Amsterdam, Krakow

and even Bogota and Singapore and with each event the chance of selling the idea of modern-day Glasgow too.



5. Charles Rennie Mackintosh, McLellan Galleries, Glasgow

toured to the USA, showcasing at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the Art Institute in Chicago and the County Museum in Los Angeles. Mackintosh had finally made it big.

In 1996, and some would say twenty years too late, Glasgow finally hosted the largest ever Mackintosh exhibition to date; a collaborative project between Glasgow Museums, Glasgow University and the Glasgow School of Art and in the same gallery that had hosted the memorial exhibition some 60 years earlier. This time, the show featured over 300 works and with people queuing round the block, it attracted some 220,000 visitors in just four months – not bad for a city with a population of just over 600,000. It was an unparalleled success and this continued when the show

Bruxelles – 5. 10. 2010



6. Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Hida-Taka-yama Museum of Art, Japan 1998

For the Glasgow School of Art this exhibition provided one further an opportunity and this was to showcase a small selection of its own Mackintosh exhibits to a single venue in Japan - the newly opened Hida-Takayama Museum of Art. In return for this Japanese venture the School was presented with a €100,000 scholarship from the museum in lieu of an exhibition fee and this scholarship has provided for Japanese artists to study at the Glasgow School of Art long after the exhibition itself had closed.

For many years now the various Mackintosh institutions and partner organisations across Glasgow have worked closely together under the heading of the *Mackintosh Heritage Group*, capitalising on their shared experiences and

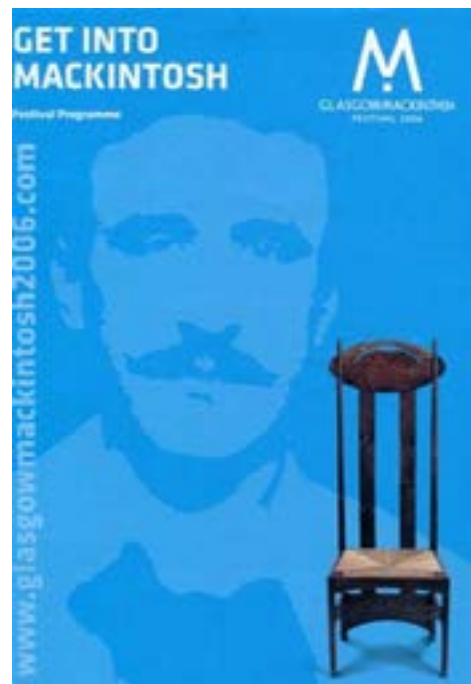
expertise and often pooling limited financial resources.

Following a fact finding visit to Barcelona in 2003, the Mackintosh Heritage Group with the support of Scottish Enterprise (Scotland's main economic, enterprise, innovation and investment agency), developed its first ever strategic plan with a city-wide Mackintosh Festival in 2006 being the highlight.

This was a six month programme of events (exhibitions, lectures, workshops, children's activities, and even music and drama) that delivered significant results in raising awareness of Mackintosh. It was hugely successful, generated almost 640,000 visits to Festival events across the city and had an economic impact to Glasgow of just over €6 million.

A further visit to Chicago in 2007 provided valuable opportunities to study at first-hand how Chicago promoted its own architectural and design heritage, including that of Frank Lloyd Wright.

Interestingly, Glasgow City Marketing Bureau's on-going campaign '*Glasgow: Scotland with style*' positions Mackintosh as a unique selling point for the city. Tourism is now central to Glasgow's economic growth. In 2008 Glasgow attracted over 2.8 million visitors, generated



7. Get into Mackintosh festival programme, Glasgow 2006

Bruxelles – 5. 10. 2010

€70 million into the local economy and provided around 31,000 tourism-related jobs. Today, Glasgow's Mackintosh heritage provides one of the city's unique, distinctive and internationally-acclaimed selling points and has been identified in a new strategy as having the potential to be a key driver of new visitors.



8. Mackintosh 100 events programme, Glasgow 2009

In 2009, as part of a much larger, Scotland-wide festival of events entitled *Homecoming*, the Mackintosh Heritage Group, delivered its own mini programme of events, entitled *Mackintosh 100*, to celebrate the centenary of the opening of the building of the Glasgow School of Art back in 1909. Working with a host of cultural and business partners beyond the core membership of the Mackintosh Heritage Group itself, *Mackintosh 100* proved another successful draw. It attracted significantly higher numbers of visitors than in a normal year and importantly generated much needed revenue for many of the smaller Mackintosh venues themselves.

When Mackintosh died in December 1928 his entire estate (including a large number of drawings and paintings) was valued at less than €100. Now, just 70 years later an independent report has estimated that, between 2008 and 2012, Mackintosh activities, if planned strategically, could potentially generate almost €27 million of additional tourist expenditure to Glasgow's economy.

Although Mackintosh's artistic importance is now widely recognised he also remains a sound financial investment for the future and with a number of Hollywood celebrities in the market for buying his work at auction, Mackintosh's reputation as both cultural icon and cultural superstar looks assured.

Selected bibliography

- Howarth, T. (1952) *Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Modern Movement* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul).
- Bliss, D. P. (1961) *Charles Rennie Mackintosh and The Glasgow School of Art*, Glasgow: Glasgow School of Art).
- Barnes, H.J. (1968) *Some Examples of Furniture by Charles Rennie Mackintosh in the Glasgow School of Art Collection*, (Glasgow : Glasgow School of Art).
- Barnes, H.J. (1968) *Some Examples of Ironwork and Metalwork by Charles Rennie Mackintosh in the Glasgow School of Art Collection*, (Glasgow : Glasgow School of Art).
- McLaren Young, D. (1968) *A. Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928): architecture, design and painting*, (Edinburgh : Edinburgh Festival Society, Ltd.).

Bruxelles – 5. 10. 2010

- Kaplan, W. (ed.): (1996) *Charles Rennie Mackintosh* (London: Abbeyville Press in association with Glasgow Museums).
- *Charles Rennie Mackintosh* (1998), (Hida-Takayama: Hida-Takayama Museum of Art).