

One year on: Mackintosh Library at Glasgow School of Art



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On 23 May 2014, a fire totally destroyed Glasgow School of Art's world-famous Art Nouveau library and its important historical collections. A year on from the fire, and following on from a piece in *Update* last August, **Duncan Chappell** explains what progress has been made in rebuilding the lost collections and in planning for the future.

THE first anniversary of the fire that ravaged the Mackintosh Library at Glasgow School of Art provides the opportunity to take stock and reflect on an intensive period of convalescence, and to share with others our future plans for revitalising the collections. It is now clear that around 80 per cent of our special collections survive undamaged, and for those who loved, cared for and tended the library we now look to the future with resolve and optimism.

Sharing our knowledge

Since the fire, our librarians have been busy presenting on the fire and our recovery at a series of events, workshops and conferences. Beginning with the CILIP Rare Books Conference in August last year, and then the conference 'Planning to Prevent Disaster' at the V&A Museum in September, we have been sharing our experiences of the disaster and how we dealt with its aftermath. Throughout, we have been conscious of our duty to share the lessons we have learnt with our peers, in the belief that we can help others better prepare for the unimaginable. A talk to conservation body Icon Scotland¹ can be listened to online. A Scottish Confederation of University and Research Libraries (Scurl) event hosted by the library in March helped to highlight just how important our full bibliographic records and holdings data have been, not only in identifying those items lost in the fire and their historical contexts, but also in providing the timely information required by our insurers.

We have also been busy presenting to a number of community groups, including the University of Glasgow Ladies' Union, the Alexander 'Greek' Thomson Society, and the Friends of Glasgow University Library. These talks have illustrated to us just how embedded the Mackintosh Library has been in the culture of Glasgow, and



Charles Rennie Mackintosh

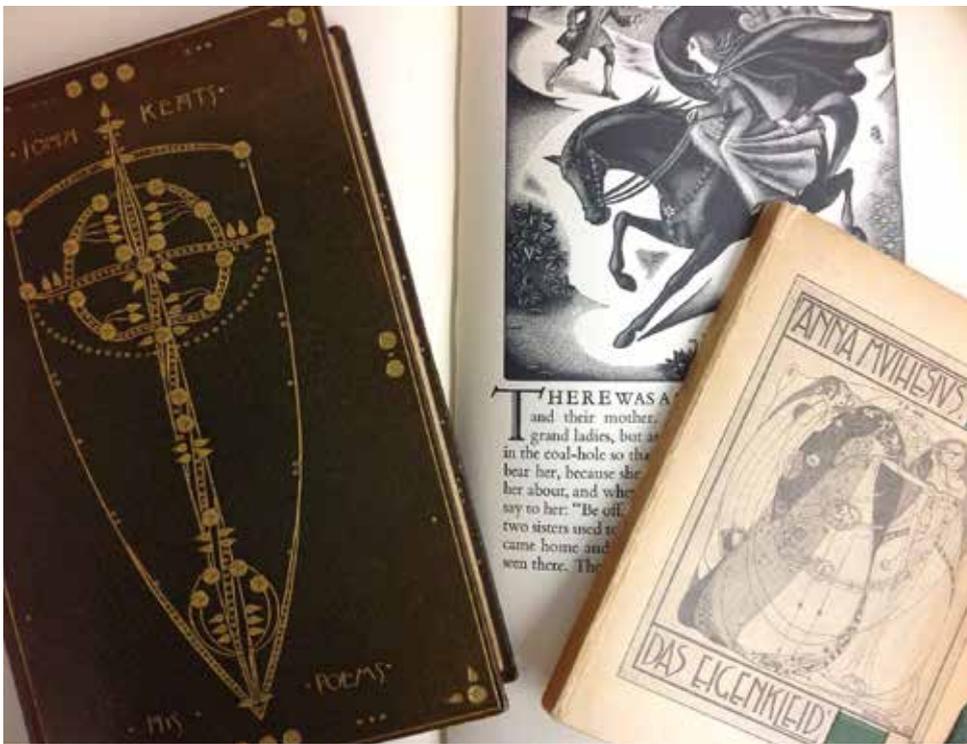
how loved it was by many. In February this year, we were able to present the resources for the study of colour that survived the fire, including our stunning selection of rare *pochoir* volumes and pattern books to the Glasgow Colour Studies Group. Outreach activities such as these provide space for our staff to orient away from disaster, at least temporarily, and enable us to publicise to others that many of our treasures remain untouched by the tragedy.

Caring for old friends

A 12-week full archaeological excavation of the library was completed in March this year, resulting in the initial salvage of 81 books. Of these around 19 can be practically conserved, including the photographic work *Sights and Scenes in Fair Japan* (ca.1910), miraculously complete in its original silk covers, and our colleagues at Harwell Document Restoration Services will soon begin this work for us. Wishing to open up our remaining special collections

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Generous donations include *Das Eigenkleid der Frau*.

to wider audiences, we have embarked on a sustained programme of digitisation with our colleagues at the Internet Archive.² Furthermore, research with documents retained in our archives has enabled us to virtually recreate the original foundation collections held in the Mackintosh Library, and a paper on the library's early history and collections is currently being prepared for publication in an academic journal.

Welcoming new friends

Since the fire, we have been very humbled by donations from institutions, individuals and community groups both nationally and internationally, and this generosity has helped us replace around 22 per cent of the volumes we had identified for priority replacement in the aftermath of the fire.

The fire claimed almost our complete collection of pre-1985 journals, many not yet available electronically, so the kind gift of more than 600 volumes from the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland was particularly welcome. The National Library of Scotland generously transferred to us second copies of 1,000 or so rare books. A grant of £2,500 from the Friends of the National Libraries enabled us to replace our lost copy of Anna Muthesius' *Das Eigenkleid der Frau* (1903), a seminal text in the development of early 20th century dress. With an original art nouveau binding designed by Frances Macdonald McNair, one of the famed Glasgow Girls group of artists, and photographs of designs by several of her contemporaries, this extremely rare volume holds particular significance for the cultural memory of the School.

Blackwell's Rare Books kindly gifted a 1933 Gregynog Press volume engraved by our alumna Agnes Miller Parker.⁴ A rare 1898 edition of *Poems by John Keats*, bound

by alumna and esteemed needlewoman Ann Macbeth, was generously gifted by the Antiquarian Booksellers' Association.⁵ The binding, set in gilt-tooled, green Morocco leather, is an exquisite example of the decorative book-bindings produced in Glasgow from the 1890s onwards, and as Macbeth is known to have taught bookbinding to our students during her career, it is a particularly fitting gift. A gift from King Edward VI High School for Girls in Birmingham⁶ from the collection of former headmistress Jean Wilks provided a number of volumes from Maggie Davidson, granddaughter of Glasgow merchant William Davidson who commissioned the house Windyhill from Charles Rennie Mackintosh in 1900. Within these volumes we have discovered moving inscriptions to the children from their 'Uncle Tosh'. Soon we shall be welcoming equally generous donations from the British Antique Dealers' Association and Society for the Arts and Crafts Movement in Surrey.

Exploring through art

Library Assistant and visual artist Theresa Moerman Ib gave an extraordinary talk⁷ in November about a very personal post-fire journey to Mackintosh's last home in Port Vendres in southern France, where she scattered ash from his building into the Mediterranean.

The library has been recreated in miniature with exquisite attention to detail by design alumna Franki Finch and can be viewed as part of the school's public tours. Meanwhile, design graduates Kat Loudon and Erin Bradley-Scott have reworked unsalvageable journals from the library into a unique artists' book titled *511170*.⁸ This article's author is currently collaborating with accomplished book artist Simon Cutts to produce an artists' book in response



The library before and after the devastation.



to volumes salvaged during the library's excavation.

Looking to the future

In the coming years we will begin the long process of cataloguing all our gifted volumes, and have plans to release our metadata to Copac to render them more easily discoverable by external researchers. New additions and discoveries feature regularly on our special collections portal⁹ and Twitter feed.¹⁰

Strategic planning for the eventual rebuild of the Mackintosh Building and its library continues apace. Head of Learning Resources Alison Stevenson convened a workshop on the future of the space in April this year, and a joint paper with the article author can be accessed through our institutional repository.¹¹ Meanwhile, the school has appointed architects Page & Park to lead restoration works, due to commence in June 2016. We look forward to the future reopening and reoccupation of the restored library with increasing optimism and pride in our staff, collections and friends far and wide. []

References

- [1 https://iconscotland.wordpress.com/2015/04/23/podcast-rescuing-rennie-mackintosh/](https://iconscotland.wordpress.com/2015/04/23/podcast-rescuing-rennie-mackintosh/)
- [2 https://archive.org/details/glasgow-school-of-art](https://archive.org/details/glasgow-school-of-art)
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- Glasgow Herald*, 15 September 2014
- Glasgow Herald*, 9 March 2015
- Glasgow Herald*, 16 April 2015
- [7 www.theresamoermanib.net/news/port-cendres-artist-talk](http://www.theresamoermanib.net/news/port-cendres-artist-talk)
- [8 www.itsnicethat.com/articles/51170-gsa-fire](http://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/51170-gsa-fire)
- [9 https://gsalibrarytreasures.wordpress.com/](https://gsalibrarytreasures.wordpress.com/)
- [10 @GSALibrary](https://twitter.com/GSALibrary)
- [11 http://radar.gsa.ac.uk/3723/](http://radar.gsa.ac.uk/3723/)

Can you help?

The library continues to welcome donations of volumes from its wants list, see: <http://bit.ly/1JTXXBt>