

‘*Das Künstlerpaar: Mackintosh, Macdonald & The Rose Boudoir*’

*Tosbie and Margaret. They were very close indeed. You never saw one without the other.*

*They always did absolutely everything together, hand in glove throughout their lives.*

**- Lady Alice Barnes, talking to Alistair Moffat, 1986<sup>1</sup>**

After a century of scholarship we are still intrigued, and somewhat perplexed, by Mackintosh’s working relationship with his wife and artistic partner Margaret Macdonald. No one denies that Macdonald played a critical role in Mackintosh’s world, but to what extent her influence was felt in his work is still a matter of debate. Lack of documentary evidence, as well as the shifting poles of scholarship from early 20<sup>th</sup> century patriarchal to more recent feminist outlooks, has muddied this subject even further. Modernist critics like P. Morton Shand were derisive of Mackintosh’s more decorative interiors, and famously blamed Macdonald for a perceived lapse into ‘feminine’ style. Shand’s disdain was clear when he wrote to William Davidson in 1933: ‘Outside of her circle of loyal friends in Glasgow and Chelsea her work is either unknown, or long since forgotten; and the future is scarcely likely to see her rather thin talent restored to a place of honour.’<sup>2</sup> More recent scholarship has sought to recognise Macdonald’s influence as deserving of authorial credit; or conversely, to show that she wasn’t qualitatively capable enough to produce the designs for which she has been attributed in some of the interiors.<sup>3</sup>

A reader would be reasonable to ask: why does this debate matter? Can we not just accept that they *did* work together, and that we might never know exactly how their collaboration worked? And it would be a valid point, yet we are still compelled by the mystery. This short essay doesn’t offer any validity to either side, but rather presents a glance at the scant evidence of their partnership, then a closer look at a particular interior, *The Rose Boudoir* [figure 1], in order to gain a bit more insight into this Mackintosh-Macdonald quandary.

To begin, though, let’s recap what little we do know. In a rare and often repeated example, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of July 1900, mere months before the pair married, Mackintosh wrote to his friend, the German architect and author Hermann Muthesius, about the Ingram Street Lunch and Tea

---

<sup>1</sup> Alistair Moffat, “Lady Alice Barnes, talking to Alistair Moffat, 1986”, *Remembering Charles Rennie Mackintosh* (Lanark: Colin Baxter Photography Ltd. 1989), 103.

<sup>2</sup> P. Morton Shand in a letter to William Davidson, dated 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1933, Hunterian Art Gallery Archives, University of Glasgow.

<sup>3</sup> See Janice Helland, “Collaboration Amongst the Four,” in *Charles Rennie Mackintosh (Catalogue of the Exhibition)*, ed. Wendy Kaplan (London: Abbeville Press in association with Glasgow Museums, 1996); see also: Roger Billcliffe, “Mackintosh Furniture... Revisited,” *Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History* 12 (2007): 7–14.

Rooms commission: ‘Just now, we are working on two large panels for the frieze... Miss Margaret Macdonald is doing one and I am doing the other. We are working them together and that makes the work very pleasant.’<sup>4</sup> What does this mean? Did they move back and forth between them, sharing ideas, hints, adding touches to each other’s work? What does ‘together’ signify for these two? Muthesius, with intimate understanding of his friends, dubbed them the *künstlerpaar* – the art couple.

The only other verifiable evidence of Mackintosh’s own words on his working relationship with Macdonald are found in the remaining letters that he wrote to her during his stay in France in 1927 (hers are unfortunately lost): ‘You must remember that in all my architectural efforts you have been half if not threequarters [*sic*] in them...’<sup>5</sup> The context for this oft-quoted remark is often omitted: he was writing Macdonald to ask her if she would give a short interview to Christian Barman of *The Architect’s Journal* before his pending trip to Glasgow, and he was assuring her that she was fully capable of discussing his architectural designs. This is perhaps questionable evidence that Macdonald was a collaborator in these efforts, but it would seem to indicate, at least in Mackintosh’s eyes, that she was quite a significant source of influence, if not an outright artistic partner.

Mackintosh’s letters are evidence of his abiding affection for Macdonald even in the waning years of his life, but little else of their practice together is revealed there. And so we are left to scrutinise their work to try and determine how their artistic partnership worked. We can perhaps agree it was born out of creative camaraderie, aesthetic sympathies, and the imaginative pleasure that flowed naturally from their artistic educations, stylistic development and their close personal relationship. They worked together not out of necessity: Glasgow had a rich offering of artisans, and Mackintosh employed them to construct his buildings, create his furniture, and paint the walls of his decorative interiors. The Mackintoshes worked together because they desired to do so, and as a consequence, we might be unsurprised that one of the themes underpinning much of their collaborative work is romantic love.

This theme is intermingled with the bolder philosophical subjects of life and death cycles, which can be found repeatedly in the Symbolist narratives they crafted together, particularly in the

---

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Mackintosh to Hermann Muthesius, 12 July 1900, p. 1. Werkbundarchiv, Museum der Dinge, Berlin.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Mackintosh to Margaret Macdonald, 16 May 1927. Reprinted in Pamela Robertson, ed. *The Chronycle: The Letters of Charles Rennie Mackintosh to Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh, 1927* (Glasgow: Hunterian Art Gallery, University of Glasgow, 2001), 56.

spaces for which Macdonald contributed art and design. At the Ingram Street Tearoom, *The May Queen* and *The Wassail* sat opposite each other representing summer and winter respectively, the death and rebirth of the seasons. The *Salon de Luxe* at The Willow Tea Rooms offered a programme based on Rossetti's 'Willowwood' sonnets of love lost, death, the afterlife, and letting go. Slumbering princesses (in rest or in death?) find their way into other of Macdonald's art; and signs of nature blooming and fading abound in Mackintosh's architecture. And in both their work, woman (and sometimes man) are conflated with plants and trees to present the fecundity of the natural world, to which we are all connected.

In examining these recurring motifs, *A Rose Boudoir* deserves closer scrutiny. Perhaps more than any other, this room is exemplary of the allegorical interest in romantic love. Created for the 1902 International Exhibition of Modern Art in Turin, it is perhaps its ephemeral nature that deeper interpretation of this space has been overlooked. It exists for us only in a few grainy black and white photos, and its component parts – a slightly eclectic mix curated by Mackintosh – have long been dispersed.<sup>6</sup> But for six months these pieces comprised a boudoir – a lady's sitting room where she might receive intimate friends and relations. It was a shallow, wide space, coloured in pinks and lavenders against a creamy white background. The lighting, which Mackintosh cleverly hung at the height of the display (to detract from the high ceiling of the exhibition hall), cast a soft glow around a pastel interior decorated with art, items of furniture, ceramics, and textiles by both artists. At left and right were Macdonald's gesso panels *The White Rose and the Red Rose* [figure 2 – Glasgow version] and *The Heart of the Rose*, [figure 3– Glasgow version] facing each other across the expanse.<sup>7</sup> In the centre left of the room were two white high-backed chairs and oval table topped with an elaborate round bowl of flowers designed by Macdonald. Just behind this and to the right sat a writing cabinet [fig 4 – if there is space?], designed by Mackintosh, with three more small panels by Macdonald set into it. While the rose theme was carried out through the entire decor in style or subject, it was these three key objects—the gessos, and writing cabinet—which related an allegorical tale of the union between pure and passionate love.

---

<sup>6</sup> While much of the furniture is in the Hunterian collection, the writing cabinet is now in the collection of the MAK in Vienna; and readers will remember that ten years ago, on 30 April 2008, these two larger gessos went to auction. Originally owned by Fritz Wärndorfer, patron of the Vienna Secessionists, they seemed to have gone with him when he left Austria for Chicago in 1914, and were until this auction in the Taffner private collection in New York. *The White Rose and the Red Rose* sold at Christies for a record £1.7 million pounds. At the same auction, *The Heart of the Rose* was sold for a comparatively meagre sum of just under £500,000, less than a third of its partners price. And after 106 years of hanging as a pair, these panels now reside to two different private collections.

<sup>7</sup> The panels illustrated here are not the ones seen in Turin, but rather the other versions in Glasgow collections, discussed further in this essay. Space does not allow for all four to be represented, however the Turin versions can be seen online at christies.com.

The characters' story unfolds book-like from left to right. At left hung *The White Rose and the Red Rose*. The 'White Rose' stands at centre, and behind her the 'Red Rose' leans in gently, whispering in her ear. The second panel is *The Dreaming Rose*, found in the left-hand door of the writing desk [figure 5– if there is space?]. Here we find the 'White Rose' sleeping, visions of infants hovering decoratively on either side of her head, her blooming form tinged in the red of Passionate Love. Inside the cabinet is a small silver panel, *The Spirit of Love* [figure 6– if there is space?]. We see just half of a face with a red rosebud lying gently next to it. The developing child sleeps peacefully under a blanket, the cabinet itself an anthropomorphic metaphor for its mother's womb. In the right cabinet door is *The Awakened Rose* [figure 7– if there is space?]. The 'White Rose' is in full bloom, her body round as she carries a child within. Finally, in *The Heart of the Rose* the 'White Rose' stands holding a newborn infant, swaddled in a red blanket formed as a rose. The 'Red Rose' stands quietly to her right, and they gaze down serenely at the child, the joyous conclusion of the union.

What has been lost to the ephemeral nature of the space might have been recognisable to those attending the exhibition. But even then, it might have been more likely that, like in Symbolist painting, these interiors merely came together to suggest thematic notions, rather than any sustained contemplation of unfolding narratives – especially given that the inspiration for these motifs may have been deeply personal. The gessoes have come to be known as singular works, rather than sisters, appreciated for their individual beauty, but also suffering from misinterpretation—particularly in the case of *The Heart of the Rose*, which some have taken as representing Macdonald's unfulfilled desire for a child. The distance from the narrative that comes together in *The Rose Boudoir* underscores this reading. For although the story of *The Rose Boudoir* might have a similar interpretation, as a unified work it also allows for perhaps bolder readings: should we consider the symbolism of the white and red rose in British tradition, the union of England and Scotland (and Macdonald was English by birth); or might we even consider that this could be a Symbolist presentation of the Annunciation story, for there is precedent in depicting Christian narratives in the work of the Macdonald sisters. Or perhaps even simply the fecundity of a creative union, the rose representing that artistic spark found between the *künstlerpaar*. Like other interiors of Mackintosh's design, we must consider that this space was curated to be a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and the placement of these panels in such an order as to be read was not accidental.

But these gesso panels, are also important for the technical information they reveal about the Mackintosh's creative practice. When Mackintosh sent these works to Turin, he indicated on the manifest that 'duplicates only' were available for sale. And of course most readers will know there are in fact two versions of each of these panels. While the Turin set were made in warm red tones, the other two versions, both in Glasgow, had the same design but with different palette and surface detail. The Glasgow *The White Rose and the Red Rose* [figure 2] hung above the mantle in the Mackintoshes' home, and can now be seen in the Mackintosh House at the Hunterian Art Gallery; and the Glasgow *The Heart of the Rose* [figure 3] was placed in a mantle above the fireplace that Wylie Hill, a relative of Jessie Newbery, commissioned from Mackintosh for his home in Lilybank Terrace, Glasgow, in 1902. This version is now on display at the Glasgow School of Art, and has recently had some noteworthy conservation work as part of the GSA Collection Recovery Project. Previously it was assumed that these versions were created from a cartoon or template, each hand made, but it was difficult to tell which set came first, or even if they were made simultaneously. But in fact recent conservation by Graciela Ainsworth Conservation Studio in Edinburgh has shown that the GSA panel is in fact not a gesso as we have come to understand Macdonald's technique, but rather a traditional plaster cast that has been painted. Although Ainsworth's team found this as the result of technical analysis, this fact can be readily observed by comparing identical surface cracks in each version, which proves that a mould was made from the first panel – in this case the Turin one.<sup>8</sup> This may seem like a minor technical point, but when considered alongside Mackintosh's note that duplicates could be ordered, it reminds us that Mackintosh carefully curated this space to show both that he and Macdonald could be commissioned to do entire rooms, but were also very happy to have individual pieces sold on their own merit.

*The Rose Boudoir*, as a collection of objects and as a curated space, exemplifies the difficulties in understanding the Mackintosh-Macdonald partnership, but perhaps opens more questions than it answers. Was this merely a sort of pick-a-mix of items of their singular or collaborative creation? Was it easy to curate such a unified space because of the likeminded repetition of themes? Did Macdonald have her say in the selection, and were the gessoes and cabinet, very clearly made as a group due to their combined narrative, something that the two conceived of together? And of course these point to even larger questions. Might we consider that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* philosophy was not just present in the work they co-created, gesso panels and

---

<sup>8</sup> Many thanks to Graciela Ainsworth for her research insights, which will be published in greater detail in future.

interiors poetically and significantly entwined, but manifested in their very lives as two singular artists working in concert?

Perhaps on this significant anniversary date, we ‘scholars’ might simply consider what most readers already accept: we are seduced by the designs of a creative couple that were passionately in love with each other. We might acknowledge that love was their core their inspiration: that the beauty, the sensuality, and the eroticism of these works may just signify that these two vibrant artists were besotted—their interiors elegant, ethereal, and symbolic mediators of their artistic partnership. They were affected by each other. And now we are drawn to the effect of their affection.

*Dr Robyne Calvert is the Mackintosh Research Fellow at the Glasgow School of Art.*

#### CAPTIONS

1. Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh, *The Rose Boudoir*, International Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art, Turin 1902 (Photo: *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* no. 10, 1902, p. 589).
  2. Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh, *The White Rose & the Red Rose*, 1902. Painted gesso on hessian, set with glass beads and shell, 99 x 101.5 cm. The Hunterian, University of Glasgow 2018.
  3. Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh, *The Heart of the Rose*, 1902. Painted plaster panel, 96.8 x 94 cm. The Glasgow School of Art 2018.
- If there is space:
4. Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh, *Writing Cabinet*, 1902. Ebonised wood with inlaid panels of metal and painted gesso, 148 x 124 x 30 cm. MAK – Austrian Museum of Applied Arts / Contemporary Art (MAK), Vienna. Photo © MAK
  5. Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh, *The Dreaming Rose*, 1902. Painted gesso panel, 34 x 34 cm. Museum für angewandte Kunst (MAK), Vienna.
  6. Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh, *The Spirit of Love*, 1902. Painted and silvered panel, 34 x 34 cm. Museum für angewandte Kunst (MAK), Vienna.

7. Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh, *The Awakened Rose*, 1902. Painted gesso panel, 34 x 34 cm.

MAK – Austrian Museum of Applied Arts / Contemporary Art (MAK), Vienna. Photo ©

MAK