CHARLES RENNIE MACKINTOSH

Jozef Zorko

Mackintosh in 1903

In the 1890's the British architectural scene held promise in a number of young architects, all on the thresholds of their careers, and who, with their idealism and energy were capable of turning this promise into reality. Of the dozen or so architects only one managed to achieve any international recognition. That one exception was Charles Rennie Mackintosh, who as Thomas Howarth put it, *"...has been one of the most enigmatic of the personalities contributing to the rise of Modern Architecture!"*

The life of Mackintosh is truly one capable of legend; his abrupt emergence; his immense output in little more than a decade; his isolation, collapse and flight; and finally his death in near poverty and almost total obscurity. Mackintosh was a lonely genius, his work emerging out of context and out of time as a prophesy of the new century.

Mackintosh was born in Glasgow in 1868 the son of a police superintendant. He followed the standard period of schooling and was articled to the architectural firm of John Hutchinson at the age of sixteen. That same year Mackintosh enrolled as an evening student in the Glasgow School of Art. The School made a strong impression on the young Mackintosh, due mainly to the teaching philosophy of its head, Francis H. Newbery. At the time, interest was primarily in the visual arts in Glasgow, and under the able direction of Newbery, the Glasgow school of Art became in the 1890's one of the finest in Britain.

Mackintosh entered an environment prepared not only to accept and encourage the development of creativity and individual talent, but also one which had developed the groundwork for the phenomenon of Art Nouveau. The 1880's were a time when new ideologies and changed attitudes to history and historical style were laying the foundation for what became the *modern style*. Mackintosh was taught that nature was to be his inspiration, and thus he set out to learn the principles of structure, line, form, mass, texture and colour from it.

Mackintosh's student work gave no indication of the individualism he was to exhibit later in his life. He did however win several prizes for painting and architecture as well as national prizes for the designs of a chapel and a church. It was in 1890, when Mackintosh received the Thomson Travelling Scholarship that his ideological development was to commence. (This was the same year he joined the firm of Honeyman and Keppie). The scholarship financed an Italian tour, where he recorded his visits in a diary and sketchbook. In his notes one can observe that Mackintosh's perception was not only vivid but critical also. He showed preference for works of invention, particularly Michelangelo's , and he also preferred early work, such as Romanesque, Gothic and Byzantine to the more developed Renaissance. Mackintosh's concepts of truth

and reality in building filter through in these observations and sketches.

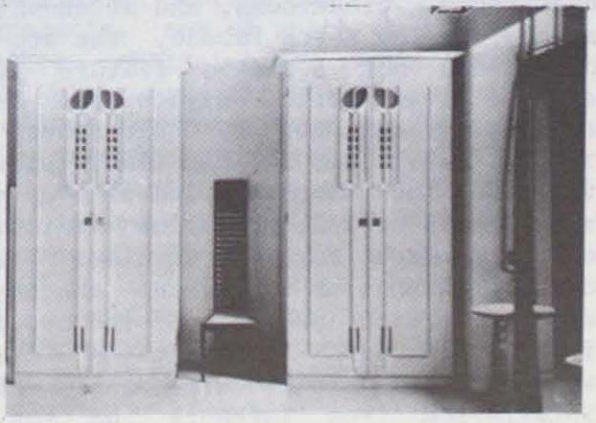
The most important written source of Mackintosh's later preferences and intentions can be found in "Scottish Baronial Architecture", a paper he wrote while still a student. In Mackintosh's view it was only proper that a Scottish architect like himself should seek inspiration from Scottish sources: the Scottish Baronial Tradition. To Mackintosh, this turreted and fortified style was the only one the Scots could call their own. Mackintosh would not however be constrained by accepting this traditional idiom; rather, it was a starting point for his own domestic designs which would conform to modern requirements. Also within his essay is the emphasis on genuineness and utility along with a firm conviction that the plan is the generator of architectural form. It was with these words that he practiced and so came the individualism that was to set him apart from his contemporaries.

Upon his return from Italy, Mackintosh resumed his work for the firm of Honeyman and Keppie, and his evening courses at the Glasgow School of Art. Within the firm Mackintosh was involved in a number of small projects, including the Glasgow Herald Building (1893-94) and the Martyr's Public School (1895). It was during these early years of Mackintosh's professional career that he started designing furniture. In 1895 he rented a small studio to carry out decorative commissions in his spare time.

Within his own studio Mackintosh was able to design several pieces of furniture for the general market, commissioned by a local firm of cabinetmakers. The furniture designs were simple and to a certain extent, severe with a rigid rectangularity relieved only by the occasional long, taut curve which so characterized his graphic work and posters. He avoided the use of varnish, prefering dark

Tea Room Chair, 1897

brown or green stains. For his furniture Mackintosh inclined to make the structural members slender, often extremely so, thus resulting in a delicacy and elegance that contrasted with the *homely robustness* characterized by the products of the English Arts and Crafts School at that time. Some of Mackintosh's most intriguing furniture designs are those of his chairs. Many of the chairs he designed can be placed in the *function follows form* class. Comfort is secondary to visual appropriateness with other furniture elements within an interior design. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the main bedroom of the Hill House, one of the two later commissions Mackintosh received for domestic houses. The chair, delicate and spidery, is painted black and is a necessary foil to the vast expanses of white woodwork and wall. The chair however, has also been described as having a seat that is too small and joints too weak to support anyone

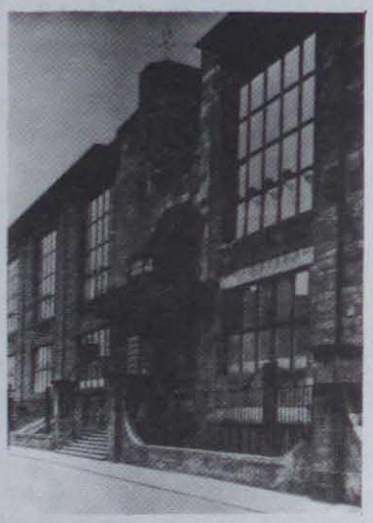


Hill House, Main Bedroom

sitting in the chair for more than a short period of time. Some of Mackintosh's more famous chairs are well illustrated in Filippo Alison's book, *Mackintosh Chairs*.

1896 was perhaps the most important year of Mackintosh's career. It was the year that the firm of Honeyman & Keppie won the limited competition for the new premises of the Glasgow School of Art. The design, which was to be done in stages was entrusted to the young Mackintosh, who was still only an assistant at the time. Under the circumstances, this was not too surprising since the firm of Honeyman & Keppie was a well established firm with a considerable amount of work, and the project was in no way an enviable one; non-prestigious, relatively small and demanding in financial terms. This new Glasgow School of Art, was to become Mackintoch's most famous and controversial design. It has been acclaimed as one of the first European buildings in the modern style.

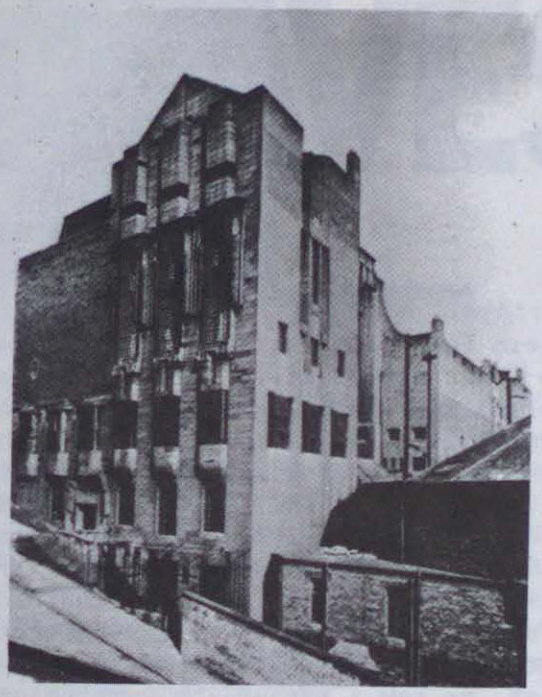
The Glasgow School of Art was to be built on a narrow, difficult and sloping site which was offered to the Governors of the School. To the Governors' request for a plain building, Mackintosh's answer is an austere statement, boldly breaking away from the then traditional methods of architectural adornment. The first part of the design was completed in 1899, the plan simple and logical, consisting basically of a series of studios connected by corridors, served by offices, classrooms, cloakrooms, and attendant spaces. On the north facade, the studio side, not a single feature is derived from period styles. It is completely dominated by bold fenestration, which was at that time, quite uncommon. The enormous windows are a result of function, to allow maximum northern light for the studios. The only ornaments on the facade are the decorative iron brackets of the upper floor windows. The brackets are wrought iron stalks with balls of intertwined iron lacework on top. They were not, however, pure ornament for they served as rests for the window cleaner's ladders. The brackets also gave some bracing to the large windows as well as providing some relief to the otherwise flat facade. Overtones of traditional Scottish architecture are apparent in the massive stonework and in the baronial tower.



North Façade, Glasgow School of Art, 1899-1907

It is the second phase of the building completed in 1907, that Mackintosh's more mature spatial genius permeates; particularly the school's library in the west wing of the building. The impression the library gives is cold, abstract and non-ornamental. As is typical of Mackintosh's work, the structure is expressed, even overexpressed. The main structural supports, such as pillars and beams are all simply large slabs of wood, left exposed, with only a smooth finish given to them. Decoration is in the form of chamfering or craft-carving while the joints are covered by flat slabs of wood. This detailing adds to the squareness of the library itself.

The west elevation, the final one designed, is by far the most dramatic. Unlike the east facade, with its arched window and curved roofs, the west side, built ten years later, introduces a totally rectilinear concept. The three tall shafts of window high above the ground were unlike any-



West Façade, Glasgow School of Art

thing in that period. The panes of glass reaching for the sky were perhaps what Mackintosh saw would become the modern day glass and steel skyscraper. Also unlike the east facade, which exists as 'bits and pieces', the west facade has a definite pattern. The completion of the Glasgow School of Art demonstrated the gradual maturing of the Mackintosh style: very unadorned and rectilinear.

It was also in 1896 that Mackintosh was introduced to Miss Catherine Cranston, a shrewd and tasteful woman who ran a well established tea-room business. At the time of their meeting Miss Cranston was preparing to renovate two new premises for catering; one on Buchanan St. the other on Argyle St., both in Glasgow. Mackintosh was given the job of executing the two interiors. These two projects gave Mackintosh the opportunity to explore the problem of interior design as well as the opportunity for decorative extravagance not normally acceptable in regular architectural commissions. The projects also laid the foundation for a relationship where Miss Cranston became Mackintosh's faithful patron.

It was in 1899 that Mackintosh received his first independent commission for a house, Windyhill. 1902 marked the second commission for a house, Hill House. In both houses Mackintosh established a continuity between the past and current environment. Both Hill House and Windyhill are heirs of the Scottish Baronial idiom, yet without possessing any one feature that has a direct precedent. All the materials used were entirely traditional, the structure being of whin stone finished with brick. Wholeness to both houses was added with Mackintosh's design of free and fixed furniture, all meticulously detailed.

Hill House, 1902

Mackintosh worked on other smaller projects, one of which includes another commission for Miss Cranston. It was by far the most famous of the willow tea-rooms done by Mackintosh. Its interior consisted of white walls, silver-painted high-backed chairs and the leaded-glass doorway combining to create an unprecedented elegance. From 1903 to 1906 Mackintosh also worked on the Scotland Street School, a most attractive building which had stringent limitations set on its cost.

It was after the completion of the

Glasgow School of Art in 1909, at the height of Mackintosh's career that he turned to drink.

Mackintosh himself was tense and hypersensitive; a man of opinion and high idealism, capable of immense energy and intense depression. He became more and more highstrung by the lack of understanding and support for his work by his peers. Similarly, Mackintosh's manner of working caused considerable friction between himself, and his clients and partners. In pursuit of perfection, Mackintosh often overlooked his clients' and firm's patience and money, while making unreasonable demands on the time and skill of his building operatives. After the Art School, Mackintosh worked on the Ingram Tea-Rooms, another commission from Miss Cranston. The motifs Mackintosh used had become completely rectangular now, with the long complex

Tea Room Chair 1910

curves of his earlier work virtually gone. At the same time Mackintosh's personal affairs were deteriorating. At the office he was becoming less and less bearable; succeeding in antagonizing clients and colleagues alike. In 1913 Mackintosh resigned in protest over an office submission to a local competition. What followed immediately was a move to London, a number of small commissions and numerous unexecuted works. During these years Mackintosh and his wife kept themselves occupied mainly with fabric designs and with water-colours.

In 1923 the Mackintoshes moved to Port Vendres where Charles Rennie devoted himself completely to water-colours for the next four years. It was in

Watercolor c.1925

these few years that Mackintosh seemed to find a new creative skill for water-colouring; painting unlike any of his previous works. It is discernable through many of his more interesting water-colours, that Mackintosh had a keen visual sensitivity which surely aided his previous architectural work, particularly in his flower studies as a student. Unlike his earlier sketches Mackintosh no longer simply recorded what he saw, rather he manipulated shapes to his own purposes. Texture and value were achieved solely through the relationship between plane and line. Similarly, the colours he used were no longer pale and monochromatic, but rich, full and vital.

In 1927 Mackintosh had cancer of the throat diagnosed. He underwent radium treatments, made a brief recovery but died some months later in a nursing home. Such was the tragic ending of the romantic tale of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, the foremost exponent of the Glasgow School. His influence on architecture in the early 20th century is debateable. Some critics such as Marriot, have said that "the whole Modernist Movement in European architecture derived from him". One of his biographers, Robert MacLeod, says that his influence is effectively nil. Mackintosh certainly did not have any of the fundamental impact on European architecture that his American contemporary Frank Lloyd Wright had. Whatever the opinions, Mackintosh's work, whether it be his decorative patterns, interiors, furniture designs or architecture, he cannot be overlooked when studying the development of the Modern Movement in Europe.