

Mackintosh in Concrete and *Making the Glasgow Style*

Given the sad restrictions on our visit, the combination of the Mackintosh House at the Hunterian Art Gallery, the 150th Birthday exhibition and the regular galleries at the Kelvingrove Art Gallery, did offer us a thorough survey of Mackintosh's furniture and the contemporary context of the Glasgow School.

The setting of the reconstructed house where Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald lived from 1896 to 1914 is extraordinary. Demolished in 1963, the principal interiors were recreated only some 100 yards away as part of the new Art Gallery which opened in 1981 but situated completely out of context in a block of concrete! Internally however the main rooms of the 1860's terraced house which they had adapted were carefully reassembled retaining his sensitivity to lighting and atmosphere.

In the dining room the dark-stained furniture and sombre stencilled walls, for all their novel design and strong orientalist feeling, continued the Victorian tradition of dark, rather masculine parlours. In complete contrast the large drawing room upstairs was much more feminine in feeling with white walls and mainly



The RFS group outside Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum. (Photo Peter Jefferies)

white-painted furniture, including formal tall-back chairs and low upholstered ones for reading in greater comfort. The bedroom followed with a similar harmonious white colour scheme.

Amongst the furniture on display, an attenuated black ladder-back chair (one of six versions that he designed) had a later strengthening bar screwed on, which for all its elegance showed that Mackintosh did not learn from the perennial weakness of design of the late 17th-century ebonised caned chairs that he must have had in his mind, nor their lack of comfort. Indeed, he generally had little regard for the craftsmanship with which his designs were carried out; his interest was in their appearance, and his range of finishes, including green and purple stains, aluminium flakes and the inclusion of glass and other materials, was amazing.

The ingenuity of Mackintosh's *avant garde* designs is nothing short of breath-taking, and the great acclaim that his work received internationally in exhibitions from 1900 hardly surprising. Neither was his replacement of the much more derivative George Walton as designer for Catherine Cranston's tea rooms, if for example you compare their interpretations of the traditional ladder-back chair. He was of course surrounded by a group of highly skilled designers and craftsmen and women, not least his wife, working in a wide range of materials in turn-of-the-century Glasgow. This breadth was shown extremely well in the Kelvingrove exhibition, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh: Making the Glasgow Style*, along with the Japanese and other influences that must have inspired them at the time, although the Scottish vernacular influences were underplayed.

How far Mackintosh's furniture can be justified in any real sense as 'regional furniture' makes for an interesting discussion, but it must surely be considered less 'mainstream' than the set of upholstered 'Roman' chairs, ebonised and with stamped brass mounts, which

were acquired for the first Hunterian Museum in 1809, two of which were shown in the Art Gallery. They were made by Cleland and Jack, the leading makers of the period in Glasgow, and are very similar to caned ‘Curricule’ chairs made by Gillows and others – the height of fashion at the time.

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