

Keynote Speech Strand 4

Critical Values: The Career of Charles Rennie Mackintosh 1900-2015

Professor Pamela Robertson

It is a great pleasure to be back in Barcelona for this exciting Congress. I am grateful to the organisers, in particular Lluís Bosch and Mireia Freixa, for the invitation to speak to you today on Mackintosh, and to all those whose hard work has delivered such a successful and stimulating event.

The strand this afternoon is research, specifically research in progress. This session invites us to reflect, for a moment, on critical values and critical fortunes. How are reputations and understandings formed? What value systems are they based on? How do they shift, and why? What are the future directions for us as curators, scholars, teachers?

What I aim to present briefly today is threefold: an overview of the critical literature and research surrounding the career of Charles Rennie Mackintosh from around 1900 to 2015 (Fig. 1) – in the hope that this case study will provide some parallels with your individual experiences as researchers, whether working with male and/or female subjects; some reflections on the recently launched *Mackintosh Architecture* research website; and finally some general remarks on future directions for research.

What emerges is the significance of context and individuals; the catalyst of curators and exhibitions; the gradual transference of Mackintosh's artistic legacy into the public domain; and, for Mackintosh at least, the central role of one institution, the University of Glasgow.

In 1996, Alan Crawford divided Mackintosh's 'life after death' into three phases which comprised Mackintosh and the Architects, the Enthusiasts, and the Market.¹ The trajectory of the scholarly presentation of Mackintosh's work can, I believe, be divided into five broad phases, though of course at times these overlap:

1. **Lifetime** The Critics
2. **1928–1960** Architectural Historians and Modernism
3. **1960–1980** Collection Research
4. **1980–1995** Contextual and Interpretive
5. **1995–2015** Internationalisation

1. **Lifetime: The Critics**

Lifetime coverage is largely confined to reviews of specific, current work – an exhibition installation for example, or a newly completed building. It divides between commentary in the professional press on the architecture, and reviews of Mackintosh's applied art designs – his work as a watercolour painter remained essentially private until after his death. No lifetime biographical accounts, or considered inter-disciplinary assessments, have been traced. And the significant coverage dates to a remarkably narrow time frame of just eight years, from 1897. Both of these facts are all the more remarkable when set against Mackintosh's alleged international influence during his lifetime, and against the extensive literature of today.

I'll draw attention to three key outputs.

First, the earliest: three articles by Gleeson White in the *Studio*, published between 1897 and 1898. These are a landmark as the first mainstream coverage of the new Glasgow School. It was an exhibition in London – the 5th exhibition of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, which brought the magazine editor to Glasgow to see the work of the young unknowns whose designs had so struck their London audience.

¹ Alan CRAWFORD: "The Mackintosh Phenomenon", in Wendy KAPLAN (Ed.): *Charles Rennie Mackintosh*, Glasgow: Glasgow Museums; New York, Abbéville, 1996, p. 321-346.

White's well-illustrated articles featured the work of the Macdonald sisters, Jessie Newbery, Mackintosh, Herbert McNair, and Talwin Morris. His even-handed at times paternalistic voice cautioned, “eccentricity is often enough, we fear, the first title given to efforts, which, later on are accepted as proofs of serious advance.”² How true his words have proven to be, but eccentricity was a term which was to haunt Mackintosh's lifetime criticism. The articles had value, not just for the *Studio* and its positioning as the journal of progressive design, but also as the vehicle which introduced the Group of Four to the Continent.

Next, if we look at coverage of Mackintosh's architecture, we see that, what there was, was largely scattered through the pages of leading architectural journals and the local press, in reports of competitions, reviews of exhibitions, and the occasional note of a newly completed building. Perhaps Mackintosh was deliberately ignored or marginalized, or perhaps it reflects again the priorities of a London-centred press – there was only one architectural magazine produced in Scotland during the Mackintosh period – the Glasgow-based journal *Building Industries*.³

Reviews would typically comment as much on Mackintosh's distinctive drawing style as on the buildings themselves, as instanced in a newspaper review of one of his perspectives for Windyhill: “a mannered pen drawing of a house that shows only roofing and rough-cast, purely negative in its architecture, assertive only in its very affected simplicity.”⁴

The one national publication that showed an early and sustained interest in Mackintosh was the *British Architect*. Originally based in the North of England in Manchester, it concerned itself more than other London journals with what was happening in the North of England and in Scotland, and covered Mackintosh's work from the student days of the early 1890s until late 1904 with a review of the *House for an Art Lover* portfolio

² Gleeson WHITE: “Some Glasgow Designers and Their Work. Part 1”, *Studio*, 11, 1897, p. 88.

³ For more on the critical reception of Mackintosh's architecture see Joseph Sharples, “Critical Reception”, in Pamela Robertson, Joseph Sharples, Nicky Imrie, *Mackintosh Architecture: Context, Making and Meaning*, www.mackintosh-architecture.gla.ac.uk, 2014, to which I am indebted for the content of this section.

⁴ *Glasgow Herald*, 22 April 1901, p. 9.

(Fig. 2). The review encapsulated the difficulties for reviewers. It praised the “plain square masses of wall with capital proportions of solids and voids ... untroubled by mouldings, cornices, architraves ...”, but went on to express misgivings about the emphasis on decorative rather than architectural qualities, and about the extreme stylization of the drawings.⁵ Other journals wrestled more conspicuously with the originality versus eccentricity debate, often finding it easiest to conclude in the negative. The debate was to continue well into the 20th century.

And finally Muthesius, with whom the lifetime coverage of Mackintosh largely concludes. The most substantial writings on Mackintosh’s architecture and design work in his lifetime appeared not in English but in German language periodicals and were largely the work of Hermann Muthesius, architect, writer and German cultural attaché in London. Mackintosh was, for Muthesius, an outstanding exemplar of an innovative and distinctive national i.e. Scottish designer, answering Muthesius's search for models to stimulate good, modern design in his native Germany. This campaign was very much a contemporary crusade, harnessed by Muthesius in his magisterial if inaccurately titled “*Das Englische Haus*” of 1904–5, which illustrated Windyhill and the Mackintoshes' flat at 120 Mains Street, Glasgow.⁶

For seriousness and depth, supported by good illustrations, there is nothing in British journals to compare with Hermann Muthesius's 1902 article on the “Glasgow Art Movement” in *Dekorative Kunst*, while his preface to Mackintosh's “House for an Art Lover” portfolio, one of the most important disseminators of Mackintosh's aesthetic ambitions, contains an illuminating account of his 'art principles'.⁷ With a foreigner's insight, Muthesius recognised that Mackintosh's austerity had a special regional and national significance, noting that the “bleak rough-cast exterior” of Windyhill was “in

⁵ “A New Folio on Houses”, *British Architect*, 62, 16 September 1904, p. 201.

⁶ Hermann MUTHESIUS, abridgement of the 2nd edn of “*Das englische Haus*”, Berlin, 1904-5, 2nd edn, Berlin 1908-11, ed. Dennis SHARP and trans. Janet SELIGMANN, London, Crosby, Lockwood Staples, 1979.

⁷ Hermann MUTHESIUS, “Die Glasgower Kunstbewegung: Charles R. Mackintosh und Margaret Macdonald-Mackintosh”, *Dekorative Kunst*, 5, March 1902, p. 193-221; Hermann MUTHESIUS, “Mackintosh's Kunst-Prinzip”, in *Meister der Innen-Kunst: Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Glasgow: Haus eine Kunstfreundes*, Darmstadt, Alexander Koch, 1902.

sympathy with the character of the location”.⁸ He saw how small, concentrated areas of ornament were complementary to this general plainness but also served to “emphasise as keenly as possible the desired effect of ... tension, silence, mystery and grandeur”; highly-charged poetic language of a kind not found at all in the emotionally reserved British press.⁹ Unlike those British critics who disliked what they called its “eccentricity”, Muthesius was attracted to just this quality of individuality and imagination in Mackintosh's work, “divergent from everything that is familiar”.¹⁰

The last substantive responses to Mackintosh’s work were enthusiastic articles by the Italian, Fernando Agnoletti on The Hill House in *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* and the Willow Tea Rooms in *Dekorative Kunst* in which he praised the architect's pursuit of beauty, based on unity, harmony and rhythm.¹¹ Both Agnoletti and Muthesius were friends of the Mackintoshes, and their writing was based on sympathetic understanding, and informed by personal knowledge of the architect and his work.

This remarkably brief timeframe from 1897 to 1905 should, of course, also be seen as reflective of changing taste, Mackintosh’s diminishing output, and his undoubted reluctance to self-promote. By the time of his death in 1928, Mackintosh's last significant architectural design, the second phase of the Glasgow School of Art, had been completed nearly 20 years previously. Mackintosh appeared for many, if at all, as a regional architect and designer, and peripheral.

2. 1928–1960 Architectural Historians and Modernism

⁸ H. MUTHESIUS, “Die Glasgower ...”, p. 193-221, p. 214-15.

⁹ H. MUTHESIUS, “Mackintosh's ...”, p. 2.

¹⁰ H. MUTHESIUS, “Mackintosh's ...”, p. 2.

¹¹ Fernando AGNOLETTI, “The Hill House Helensburgh”, *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*, 15, 1904-5, p. 337-59; Fernando AGNOLETTI, “Ein Mackintosh Teehaus in Glasgow”, *Dekorative Kunst*, 12, April 1905, p. 257-75.

We come next to what I would call the era of the Architectural Historians and the first biographies, dominated by the German émigré, Nikolaus Pevsner, and the English academic, Thomas Howarth.¹²

Both Pevsner's *Pioneers* of 1936 and Howarth's 1952 biography situated Mackintosh in the context of the then progressive Modern Movement. But there is a telling shift in Pevsner's 1950 biography to acknowledge, as Muthesius had done, the value of the decorative: "In order to understand Mackintosh it is essential to grasp the fusion in his art of puritanism with sensuality. The enchanting curves of Art Nouveau have the same importance as the austere verticals of the incipient Modern Movement."¹³ Subsequent scholars were slow to pick up on this more complex, multi-layered Mackintosh, to accept the feminine within the masculine.

Howarth's monograph was a landmark as the first substantial biography of Mackintosh. It was fortuitous timing: the coincidence of an ambitious and meticulous PhD student with the opportunity for direct access to family, friends and clients – critical in the absence of any significant personal archival material – and contact that no subsequent scholar has been able to share. Howarth saw Mackintosh as "a lonely genius struggling to break the bonds that tied architecture to convention and the past, and his work as rooted in Scottish traditions yet anticipating 20th-century functionalism."¹⁴ – a romantic notion that still endures.

Within this period a landmark exhibition was held – a Memorial Exhibition organized in Glasgow after the death of Mackintosh's widow, Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh, and drawn from the couple's artistic estate. This was the first to bring together all aspects of the Mackintoshes' work. Previously, Mackintosh's designs had been mainly seen in the context of room settings exhibited in his lifetime in Vienna, Turin, Moscow, Dresden and elsewhere. Held in Glasgow, the Memorial Exhibition attracted little critical

¹² Nikolaus PEVSNER, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement: From William Morris to Walter Gropius*, London, Faber and Faber, 1936; Thomas HOWARTH: *Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Modern Movement*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952.

¹³ N. PEVSNER, *C. R. Mackintosh*, p. 31-2, quoted in A. CRAWFORD, *Charles ...*, p. 196.

¹⁴ A. CRAWFORD, *Charles ...*, p. 196.

attention beyond the local press. But the Glasgow audience was especially struck by the watercolours painted in the South of France in the 1920s – a revelation for the city which he had left in 1914.

Exhibitions have played a pivotal role in the trajectory of Mackintosh research. How often in fact is a reputation kick-started by an exhibition, usually mounted to mark an anniversary. Their reach far surpasses that of publications, drawing tens of thousands of visitors often many more, with accompanying catalogues. Compare this to scholarly print runs of a few thousand. This exposure is magnified by press and media coverage. Above all exhibitions provide visitors with unique contact with the actual, extraordinary objects. Indeed, a useful piece of research waits to be done on the relationship between exhibitions, research, and reputation.

It should be added however that though the Memorial exhibition was mounted to mark the careers of both Mackintosh and his artist wife, Margaret Macdonald, any such impact for her work had to wait 50 years.

One other key event during this period was the subsequent transfer of ownership of the Mackintoshes' Estate in 1947 to the University of Glasgow by the Mackintoshes' nephew – this constituted the unsold residue of the Memorial exhibition, laying the foundation of the major research collection of Mackintoshes' work, which would now be in public ownership and accessible to scholars such as Howarth.

3. 1960–1980 Collection Research

Central to this next phase is the major retrospective exhibition organized by Professor Andrew McLaren Young and the Scottish Arts Council in 1968 to mark the 150th anniversary of Mackintosh's birth (Fig. 3). A scholarly version of the 1933 exhibition, it presented over 350 items, including elements of room settings, an innovative intervention for the time. The exhibition, accompanied by a catalogue with detailed catalogue entries, was shown at the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh, and crucially toured to the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, with a smaller version travelling to

Darmstadt and Zurich. It was the first substantive presentation of Mackintosh's full oeuvre.

This landmark exhibition was followed by a series of well-researched publications, no doubt triggered by the exhibition. They were based on examination of the original works and documented aspects of Mackintosh's output, with illustrations, descriptive notes, and chronologies: architectural sketches; flower drawings; furniture and metalwork at the Glasgow School of Art, and triumphantly in 1979 Roger Billcliffe's authoritative catalogue of Mackintosh's furniture, furniture drawings and interior designs.¹⁵ The body of evidence was being mapped out. Curatorial research was opening up Mackintosh's legacy for wider consideration in this pre-online era.

4. 1980–1995 Contextual and Interpretive

This groundwork led to questions about the wider context for Mackintosh, and a series of publications, usually in line with exhibitions, specifically about the Glasgow context, and the Glasgow Style, beginning with an illustrated narrative by Gerald and Celia Lerner in 1979 and followed by Glasgow Museums' eponymous exhibition and publication in 1984.¹⁶

Most significant was the new attention being given to Glasgow's women artists, starting with the pioneering 1983 *Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh* retrospective at the University of Glasgow – mounted to mark the 50th anniversary of her death in 1933 (and of the *Mackintosh Memorial Exhibition*) and continuing with the revelatory *Glasgow Girls: Women in Art and Design 1880–1928*, at the city's Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery in 1990. Both were accompanied by publications which remain of value today. This pioneering work continued with the research and publications of Canadian scholar Janice Helland in the 1990s.¹⁷ Collectively this work

¹⁵ Roger BILLCLIFFE: *Charles Rennie Mackintosh: The Complete Furniture, Furniture Drawings and Interior Designs*, London, John Murray, 1979.

¹⁶ Gerald and Celia LARNER: *The Glasgow Style*, London, Astragal Books, 1980; Brian BLENCH, *The Glasgow Style* (exhibition catalogue, Glasgow Museums, Glasgow 1984), Glasgow, Glasgow Museums, 1984.

¹⁷ Janice HELLAND: *The Studios of Frances and Margaret Macdonald*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1996.

sought to take the women out of the shadows, and have them valued in their own right. It is interesting to note however that, to date and with only a few exceptions, Mackintosh's male contemporaries, both designers and architects, have not received the same critical attention.

Alongside feminist readings, new interpretations seeking to identify and decode symbolist meaning were published in Timothy Neat's speculative *Part Seen, Part Imagined*, while David Brett wrote eloquently of the inherent sensuality of Mackintosh's designs.¹⁸

The period concluded with the most balanced and thoughtful of Mackintosh's biographies, that by Alan Crawford. Crawford combined meticulous research with a questioning of long-held assumptions, to deliver an evidence-based and nuanced narrative, a realigning of Mackintosh's achievements and influence, and the most complete consideration to date of his relationship, creative and personal, with Margaret Macdonald.¹⁹

1995–2015 Internationalism

In what I present as the final phase, which takes us to the here and now, Mackintosh studies have gone global, initially through exhibitions such as the 1996 retrospective, the successor to 1933 and 1968. This high prestige, prize-winning exhibition, the most ambitious to date, was organized by Glasgow Museums in partnership with the University of Glasgow and the Glasgow School of Art. It toured to The Metropolitan Museum, New York, the Art Institute of Chicago and Los Angeles County Museum. Japan, unsurprisingly, was ahead of the curve, with exhibitions in 1979, 1985 and 2000.²⁰

¹⁸ Timothy NEAT: *Part Seen, Part Imagined: Meaning and Symbolism in the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald*, Edinburgh, Canongate, 1994; David BRETT, *C. R. Mackintosh: The Poetics of Workmanship*, London, Reaktion Books, 1992.

¹⁹ A. CRAWFORD, *Charles ...*, 1995.

²⁰ 1979 Seibu Museum; 1985 *Japan, Isetan Museum* (Tokyo), Citizen's Hall (Sendai), Daimaru *Museum* (Osaka); 2000 Japan, Suntory Museum, Isetan Museum of Art, Mie Prefectural Art Museum.

The most recent export of Mackintosh was to Moscow's Kremlin Museum. And just last month The Hunterian received a request from an academic to translate Mackintosh's architectural writings into Turkish – a whole new audience awaits in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. But we must not be seduced by such success. Mackintosh's value as a global ambassador for tourism in Glasgow is at risk of blurring the imperative for new scholarship.

And of course there is the virtual audience through, for example, the Réseau Art Nouveau set up in 1999 and online access to the three principal Mackintosh collections at the University, the Glasgow School of Art, and Glasgow Museums.

Of crucial importance to Mackintosh scholarship has been the fact that the principal collection of Mackintosh's work is owned by the University of Glasgow, which has an art gallery with a temporary exhibition programme and The Mackintosh House interiors, and for which research is a high priority. Of the outputs listed above, the majority have been delivered by the University, with major contributions by University staff, Professor Andrew McLaren Young, Roger Billcliffe and Professor Pamela Robertson. These have included pioneering exhibitions, festivals and events, and catalogues raisonnés of the wide range of work by Mackintosh and the Group of Four.

The most recent of the University's contributions has been the completion of the major research project, *Mackintosh Architecture; Context, Making and Meaning*.²¹ This project was funded through a major research grant from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council and additional support from The Monument Trust, The Pilgrim Trust, and the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, and collaborative input from Historic Scotland and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. It aimed to provide the first authoritative catalogue raisonné of Mackintosh's architecture. I spoke about this as a "Research in Progress" at the 2013 Coup de Fouet Congress. Since then the site – www.mackintosh-architecture.gla.ac.uk – has been launched with an exhibition at The Hunterian (2014–15), subsequently shown

²¹ Pamela Robertson, Joseph Sharples, Nicky Imrie, *Mackintosh Architecture: Context, Making and Meaning*, www.mackintosh-architecture.gla.ac.uk, 2014.

at the Royal Institute of British Architects, London, where it closed in May 2015, with record-breaking attendance.

The project began in 2010, and was underpinned by rigorous, evidence-based research, centred on the surviving office record books, architectural drawings, and the buildings themselves. It aimed, as the project title implies, to provide not just a record of the architecture, but to set that in the wider context of *People*: office colleagues, clients, contractors, suppliers; *Making*: materials, technology, process and construction; and *Meaning*: including an investigation of lifetime source material for evidence of the symbolic content identified and celebrated by subsequent writers.

At the heart of the website is the Catalogue which contains over 350 project entries for work by Mackintosh and work produced by the practice of John Honeyman & Keppie, subsequently Honeyman, Keppie & Mackintosh, during the Mackintosh years, 1889–1913. These entries are broken down into Introduction, Chronology, Description, Drawings, People, Job Book, Archives, Images and Bibliography. The entries are supported by a Timeline, Glossary, Interactive Map and other features. Interpretive and analytical material is provided in nine essays. This extensive resource contains over 870,000 words, 3,200 images, 1,200 original drawings, and 380 biographies.

The site enables enhanced understanding of Mackintosh's architecture, and has led to new attributions and revisions of existing attributions. It has identified opportunities for future research, for example, the international critical reception of Mackintosh and the Group of Four; networks between clients, contractors and suppliers; or the making of great late 19th-century cities. Already the site has proved of value for ongoing conservation and restoration work at the Glasgow Art Club, the Glasgow School of Art, The Hill House and the Willow Tea Rooms. It provides a model for future related projects seeking a holistic approach to an oeuvre. Perhaps most urgently, it has underlined the fragility of the surviving, numerically small Mackintosh heritage. Some 60 built projects in Glasgow involved Mackintosh design input. This total includes four tombstones and 20 buildings with a Mackintosh component now altered or removed, which leaves a legacy of less than 40. Its vulnerability is evidenced by the current

construction of a new housing development of 75 flats and 19 townhouses within a few metres of Mackintosh's Queen Margaret College of 1894–5 (Fig. 4).

The Future?

What of the future for Mackintosh research? 2018 provides another milestone date – the 150th anniversary of Mackintosh's birth. City-wide discussions are currently underway for a celebratory programme that year. Valuable research is being undertaken by Alison Brown into the technical art studios at the Glasgow School of Art, which will contribute to an exhibition by Glasgow Life that year. Other initiatives for 2018 include the reopening of the restored Glasgow School of Art and Willow Tea Rooms, while the V&A Museum of Design, Dundee, will open in 2018 and showcase Mackintosh's remarkable Oak Room interior of 1907 from Miss Cranston's tea rooms in Ingram Street, Glasgow. All of these initiatives will add to the existing body of knowledge. Other online resources should be developed to add to that on the Architecture, enabling us to see Mackintosh's achievement across disciplines. Meanwhile new audiences and new perspectives will emerge as new global audiences are introduced to his work.

And more broadly, what of the future for research in general? In my opinion there are increasing and exciting opportunities for enhanced understanding through ongoing advances in technical art history which will enable us to understand more of process and of making. Fine art studies are probably at the forefront of this, but there is much to be learned about the production of buildings and objects. This is of value in and of itself, as part of social and economic history, and as an enrichment to academic understanding and appraisal of a maker's achievements. There are opportunities too for greater interdisciplinary working, with the wider humanities, with literature, music, drama, dance, social history, economics, politics, to name but a few.

The digital revolution has opened up extraordinary potential in the sphere of digital visualization, of reconstruction, and deconstruction. Pioneering techniques are being used across a range of disciplines from medicine to archaeology, as impressively seen for example at the Glasgow School of Art's innovative Digital Design Studio.

Online is the greatest opportunity and challenge. The advantages of online are well known: for capacity, dynamism, free access, and global reach. There remain however unresolved issues for online resources, primarily to do with quality, which it is surely our responsibility to address. There is a need for rigorous peer review, to ensure appropriate standards and to give online the academic status it currently often lacks; technical advances to ensure that the quality of images viewed online is consistent and matches that of high-quality publications; technical advances to improve the production of downloaded material; protocols for minimum standards of functionality and design; and guidance for effective site maintenance and archiving.

Online provides exciting opportunities for increased international collaborations, such as the Coup de Fouet Congress; removes the need for endless days in archives searching for the source for a quotation; and opens up the potential to use powerful tools such as crowd sourcing. But we have to be wary of attention deficit, and we must not abandon first-hand study of the primary sources.

Online suits Big Data, resource-based publications, such as *Mackintosh Architecture*, which are consulted by the user, rather than read from Chapter One. But there is still a place for the volume – the linear narrative whether the biography, or the theoretical argument; or simply the beautifully produced text which is a satisfying work of art in its own right. How interesting it would be to return to this subject in ten or even five years time, whether in person or in an enhanced virtual reality.