

Your details delight us endlessly with their endless variations –

Liz Lochhead, from *Three Stanzas for Charles Rennie Mackintosh*

*lau* – natural light, from the Orcadian

If the reader would, in keeping with the multi-artform *Gesamtkunstwerk* approach of many Art Nouveau designers, like to read this work with music, the author suggests Lau's *Horizontigo*, from the album *Arc Light* – and in the listening, to think of Mackintosh and Macdonald's lines, many of which were horizontal.

Art Nouveau Across Europe\_Assignment 2 – by Kathryn Allan

***Choose a single object, building or painting from within the period 1890-1915 and use an analysis of it to answer the following questions.***

*How does the piece you chose relate to Art Nouveau's search for a new style for a new age?*

*What attitudes to the use of materials and the manufacturing process can be traced?*

*In what ways does this piece reflect the artist/designer's beliefs about the form that art or design should take in the modern world?*

**Design for a House for an Art Lover: the music room with panels by Margaret Macdonald, 1901 <https://gsaarchives.net/catalogue/index.php/mc-g-29a>**

Lithograph, coloured inks on paper  
527 x 393mm (unmounted and unframed)

### **The Clyde then the Calder**

Like with any person we feel fated to meet, I look at you and wonder where you've been. Maybe your route was aquatic, for you carry the scars of water damage, the linen on which you live marked faintly with liquid traces. Did you swim south, the Clyde then the Calder? You and I have both been Glasgow girls: you, debuting on paper at the turn of the century; me, a century's span later, walking your Renfrew Street. Then, on a chill November day in 2022, I visit Hebden Bridge for the first time and there you are, laid quietly over a folded chair behind a shop counter, not for sale, your dark, whiplash lines visible through the reverse of your material, telling me *I'm of Glasgow, I'm Art Nouveau*. I pay for the second-hand O'Keeffe book and ask, 'Is that Mackintosh?'

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*How does the piece you chose relate to Art Nouveau's search for a new style for a new age?*

In 1901, Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald entered a competition to design *Haus eines Kunstfreundes* – House for an Art Lover. The pair were disqualified,<sup>1</sup> as Mackintosh's 'interior renderings were not finished in time for the competition deadline.' (Dunster and Bernard, 1984, p.93). The drawings, lithographs of which are in the collection of The Glasgow School of Art, include a design for a music room – a scheme including, along its south wall, 12 identical fabric panels designed by Macdonald featuring an Art Nouveau woman. Unrealised

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<sup>1</sup> Disqualified, but prize-winning: 'when they [the drawings] arrived he was awarded a special purchase prize of 600 marks by the publishers (<https://gsaarchives.net/catalogue/index.php/mc-g-29a>, 2023)

until the 1990s, what does the design – specifically Macdonald’s fabric panel design for the music room – tell us?

A year after the critically acclaimed and influential display of the ‘Scottish Room’ in the VIIIth Vienna Secession Exhibition featured similar iterations of elongated women on cloth, Macdonald’s 1901 panel design presents a female figure at once floral and geometric. Six concentric, black arches – halo-like – either side of the face and infilled with ochre describe the woman’s hair. We see this hirsute tool used effectively just a few years before, when Art Nouveau designer Mucha employs Bernhardt’s ‘flowing locks as the central decorative motif, enabling him to indulge in sinuous lines and curves’ (Escritt, 2000, p.97), and in that sense we see Macdonald doing something similar – playing, indulging, and giving us a *debut de siècle* woman. A graphic visage – Redon-esque downcast eyes and a straight mouth described in few lines – rests its chin on a stylised rose, flanked by two pairs of four vertical black lines that plunge the length of the design indicating an oxymoronic disembodied body and concluding off-centre in a typically Art Nouveau vegetal flourish at the panel’s end. Along the way, circles and lozenges in periwinkle blue and pale green, outlined here, alone there, speak of the period’s preoccupation with the natural world.

It [the competition entry] was conceived with The Four’s trademark white backdrop, its long side windows accentuated by a series of twelve identical fabric hangings, each containing a solitary female figure, her hair running the length of her body, her disembodied frame demarcated by linear vertical lines punctuated in small roundels. Their design didn’t win the competition, but it won the Mackintoshes plaudits and increased international interest. (Hunter, 2020, p.241)

In the music room, Macdonald is Symbolist artist *and* designer, keeping pace with contemporaneous fine art. Escritt tells of ‘Macdonald’s interest in the delicacy of Symbolism’ (Escritt, 2000, p.187), explaining, for example, the use of the stylised rose as ‘a symbol that had been overtly linked with female sexuality’ (ibid, p.185), and we see Macdonald’s work recognised at the time for its ‘spiritual clarity’ (Dekorative Kunst, 1905, cited in Burkhauser, ed., 1997, p.113) If we think of Macdonald’s woman here as a development of her earlier work, we have something contemporary *and* new. Robertson remarks –

...their [the Macdonald sisters’] productions were often of considerable originality. Gaunt human forms and stylised plants appeared in a variety of media – watercolour, metalwork and graphics – in a style which had little historical derivation. (Robertson cited in Burkhauser, ed., 1997, p.110)

The panel is, I propose, a four-fold searching for a new style: a literal, material searching of surface as Macdonald's lines sweep the expanse of the design, pencil across paper, stencil across fabric; a metaphorical searching with the female figure and her symbols standing in for higher meaning; a physical searching for the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (here, architecture and furnishings as one scheme);<sup>2</sup> and design as analogous to the wider societal searching for a new, twentieth century style.

*What attitudes to the use of materials and the manufacturing process can be traced?*

Mackintosh and Macdonald's design for *Haus eines Kunstfreundes* was unrealised until the mid-1990s when, to Escritt's seeming puzzlement,<sup>3</sup> House for an Art Lover was built in Bellahouston Park in Glasgow. The intention of the 1901 competition was never the translation of the two-dimensional into the three-dimensional – Schweiger explains, 'The idea was to offer artists the opportunity to design their dream house without the obligation of realizing the projects. The designs were to present a thoroughly modern house and to illustrate a theme.' (Schweiger, 2006, p.56) – but this later real-life rendering can help us to understand something of the designers' attitudes to materials and manufacturing.

If one accepts that the architect's primary design is of mass, space, light and colour, then there now exists a full-scale realisation of Mackintosh's astounding scheme. The participants have all been conscientious students of his work and have given of their best to reflect his original design and the decorative embellishments of Margaret. (Roxburgh, 2006, p.51)

Macdonald's music room panels were made for House for an Art Lover by textile artist Joanna Kinnersley-Taylor, who, in translating the 1901 design into realised object, referenced Macdonald's 1903 fabric panels for the rear Dining Room of the Willow Tea Rooms. The 1903 panels had been made from linen and combined stencilling and pencil. In an email to the author, Kinnersley-Taylor explains, 'The key difference from Macdonald's design is the use of the black outline – hers was done in soft pencil directly onto the linen and I tried to emulate this by using a *Black Prince* pencil'. (Kinnersley-Taylor, November 2023)

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<sup>2</sup> In *Glasgow Girls: Women in Art and Design 1880-1920*, Robertson remarks of Mackintosh's work with his wife, 'He worked with no other designer'. (Robertson, P. cited in Burkhauser, J. ed. 1997, p. 115). A husband-and-wife *Gesamtkunstwerk*, perhaps?

<sup>3</sup> 'Finally, and more bizarrely, the mid-1990s saw the eventual realization of a project to create Mackintosh's 'House for an Art Lover'. (Escritt, 2000, p.423) Personally, I don't see the bizarre. Rather, I welcome the preservation of Mackintosh and Macdonald's designs in their, to borrow Professor Toby Jones' words from his foreword to Roxburgh's *Building the Dream*, 'four-dimensional reality', albeit with almost a century between paper and object.

Macdonald's use of these humble materials – linen, stencil, pencil – speaks, I think, of both a democratic attitude to materials and an inventive ability to create meaningful art from slim means.<sup>4</sup> We also know that after the 1890s Macdonald's creative attention was more fabric-focused, turning 'to gesso and embroidery. These media with their greater potential for including a wider range of materials and colour compared to metalwork better suited her developing decorative style'. (Robertson cited in Burkhauser, ed. 1997, p. 112)

Macdonald's music room panels also tell of a designer with acute material sensitivity, in harmony as she is with her collaborator: Mackintosh's rationalism – his wooden geometry, the balance of his austere metal – softened, tempered, by Macdonald's fabric. Linen – a cloth made from the fibres of the flax plant – has a translucency despite its strength, and it is in this delicacy that Macdonald is able to give us more tender and haptically tempting moments within the scheme.

The links to Clyde-based manufacturing evident in the House for an Art Lover designs are also worthy of note –

There was a horizontal linear emphasis in the design, which was carried into the rooms inside, joined by extensive corridors. The design of the Art Lover's House was said to indulge Mackintosh's fantasy of recreating an ocean liner on land, a legacy of the powerful ship-building industry in Glasgow at the time. (Sullivan, 1997, p.68)

*In what ways does this piece reflect the artist/designer's beliefs about the form that art or design should take in the modern world?*

As Sullivan tells us of the competition brief, 'The house was to be modern, incorporating the art within the interior, rather than in a separate gallery.' (Sullivan, 1997, p.67) As per Mackintosh and Macdonald's other-worldly home in Glasgow, where, to the ascending visitor, expanses of light revealed themselves in ever-whitening rooms – astral, almost – we see in the House for an Art Lover music room design a similar orchestration of space and light, of architecture and furnishing in concert, with the verticality of Macdonald's panel emphasising the verticality elsewhere and the panel's curves and arcs providing visual relief from the straight lines nearby –

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<sup>4</sup> On material sparseness, I find the report of Macdonald's possessions that remained after her death particularly affecting – 'There were the contents of her work basket: a few yards of metallic thread wrapped around a twist of paper; two bundles of cream and white braid; small scraps of velvet in apricot, purple, pale pink, cream, rose; a fold of organza and another of black voile flecked with cream; and a length of violet ribbon edged in black. That was all, less than a metre of fabric all told and assorted thread and braid.' (Hunter, 2020, pp.247-248)

A series of identical upright panels, either stencilled or embroidered, showing a stylised figure, was created for the window bays, their design closely related to the architecture and the interior decorative scheme. The panels hung against the wall from rail height to the skirting. The elongated upright form of the figures continued the predominant vertical emphasis of Mackintosh's furnishings and fittings while the curvilinear details offset the rigid geometry of the square windowpanes and reiterated the curves of the window bays, ceiling, piano, and flanking panels. The colours followed the silver, pink, green and purple of the overall scheme. (Robertson cited in Burkhauser, ed. 1997, p. 115)

The visual-as-relief is apparent not only *within* Mackintosh and Macdonald's rooms, but entire schemes seem also to be refuge from the industrial modernity of the outside world –

It is far away in that mist-encircled, grim city of the north...we find a little white home, full of quaint and beautiful things and a little white studio. (Anonymous commentator, cited in Escritt, 2000, p.174)

Yet in his work Mackintosh was aiming for novelty – ‘for a new architecture in which light, space and proportion were key’ (YouTube, 2023). Here, in the music room, we see Macdonald's panel being critical to the realisation of his modernity: that her panels were placed next to the room's windows draws attention to the light; the panels' guardian-like imagery in combination with their placement on the cusp of inside-outside in liminal space creates a dialogue between interior *and* exterior; and their elongation echoes the slender characteristics of the architecture, light fittings and furniture – or ‘sculpture’, as Crawford describes it – ‘He designed furniture which we praise as sculpture’ (Crawford, 2002, p.205).

That is not to say Mackintosh and Macdonald's work was wholly rejecting of what went before. Cumming explains –

Turn-of-the-century Glasgow design was something quite unique: straddling both the Arts and Crafts and Modernist movements, it embraced past values and innovation simultaneously, and its practitioners developed that ‘sum of tradition’ (to borrow Jessie Newbery's phrase) with immense intuition and panache. (Cumming cited in de Leeuw *et al.*, 1993, p.112)

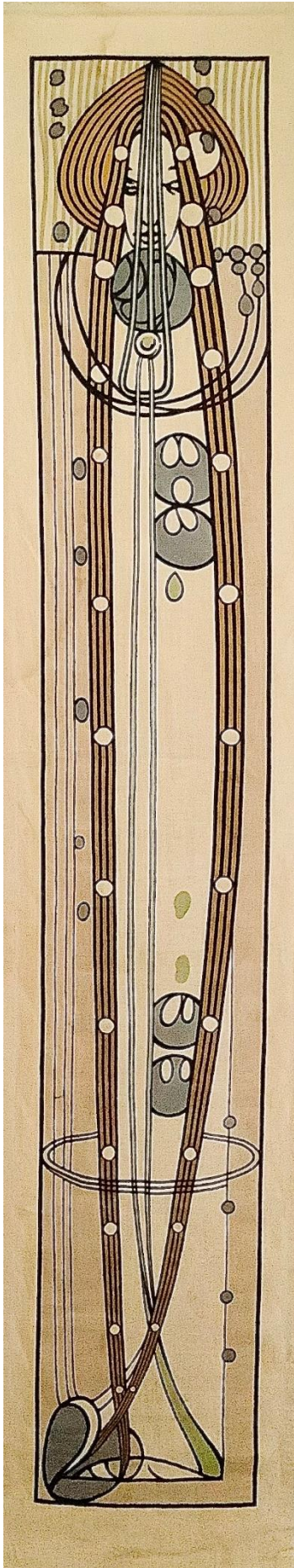
Panache, on paper – a person, in pencil.

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Like with any person we feel fated to meet, I look at you and wonder where you've been. But I know where you are: you are here, via the Clyde then the Calder.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> After research, which included consulting Alison Harley and Joanna Kinnersley-Taylor, two of the textile artists employed to re-create the textile panels for the House for an Art Lover music room, and Jimmy Cosgrove, former Head of Printed Textiles at The Glasgow School of Art, it seems that the Margaret Macdonald panel found in Hebden Bridge in 2022 was created as a retail product for GSA Enterprises, likely in the mid-1990s. It is thought to have been printed on Irish linen by Ken Grierson in his *Hidden Road/Beaten Path* studio in Castle Douglas. To be of a suitable height for a domestic interior, its size was recalculated from the 1901 design by an architect. It was photocopied actual size, re-scaled up to the correct size for the music room and given to The Glasgow School of Art's Printed Textiles staff as a starting point for their realisation of Macdonald's design for the music room panels in Bellahouston Park's House for an Art Lover.



*I saw you that day, O'Keeffe book in hand*

*I made my dark, whiplash lines pulse through my material*

*Reached out across time with Art Nouveau tendrils*

*I wondered where you'd been*

*But I knew you'd been in Glasgow*

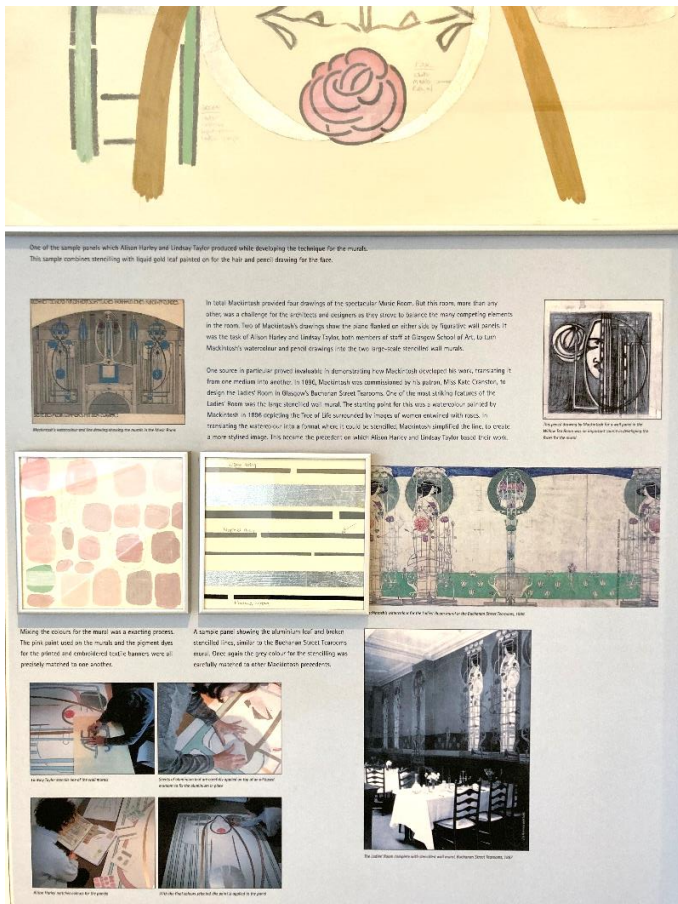
Margaret Macdonald's design for the music room window panel, House for an Art Lover

Thought to be printed on Irish linen in Ken Grierson's studio, Castle Douglas, c. mid-1990s – found, by chance, in Hebden Bridge, 2022

207cm x 40cm



# Information boards in House for an Art Lover detailing the processes involved in realising Margaret Macdonald's designs



**Below:** A photograph sent by Joanna Kinnersley-Taylor to the author showing The Glasgow School of Art's Print Room in 1994. Several Macdonald panels mid-way through printing can be seen – to the author these appear to be the same as Macdonald's panels in the 'Scottish Section' of the 1902 *First International Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art* in Turin. These copies were perhaps being made also as part of a GSA commercial enterprise. ©Joanna Kinnersley-Taylor



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