

Trapped Women: Two Sister Designers

The large, white, airy and austere room with its severely elegant chairs and tables and attenuated, weeping ladies transfixed in pale olive or light mauve-colored gesso panels around its walls, is now full. Tea cups chink against saucers, silk-clad wrists are held at a delicate angle, feather-plumed hats bob up and down, white lawn and lace-covered bosoms heave sighs of contentment, cheeks flush, tongues loosen, and the buzz of women's talk rises a quaver or two above the level thought acceptable if this room, a tearoom, had been found in London. But the like of this room, and others designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh, architect, and his wife, Margaret Macdonald, a decorative designer, was not to be found in London nor in any other smart city in turn-of-the-century Britain, but in Glasgow, dirty, robust, tough and far-from-genteel Glasgow, the industrial capital of Scotland.

In the late 1890s in the heart of this city's sober business district a few strikingly different and simple tearoom facades appeared. Their exteriors, interiors, furniture and fittings displayed unconventional solutions, ethereal elegance and flights of imaginative thinking not seen before in the arts of this city. Glasgow was in the throes of an artistic renewal.

Margaret Macdonald (1865–1933), who contributed designs to the tearooms, and her sister Frances Macdonald (1874–1921) were two of a number of women artists who, for a short while, helped make the arts alive in Glasgow. What follows is a brief account of their lives, set against the background of Glasgow, and a discussion of a few of the objects the sisters designed and made.

The liveliness of the arts in this industrial capital (Europe's sixth largest city) grew in part from its sound economic base. In the previous half-century the heavy industries of the area, mining and shipbuilding for example, enjoyed boom growth.¹ And some of the profits, often via the increased income and leisure time of Glasgow's upper and middle classes, found their way into the support and patronage of local arts. How pleasant to sit in a new tearoom designed by Scottish artists of national prominence, with works by local and internationally known painters hung about on the walls, to sit there and eat a quick lunch or to linger leisurely over afternoon tea. How very natural to stroll from the tearoom, seek out the painters or the craftsmen or women in nearby studios, chat with them about their work and sometimes, proudly, bear home a painting, a watercolor, or even a beaten metal

panel by one of the Macdonald sisters.

In those days it was safe to bet your last brass farthing that any artist whose work turned your head had been a student at the Glasgow School of Art. Founded in 1840, the school grew out of the firm conviction that well-trained artists and designers could promote both the nation's esteem and trade. Its founders had both insight and acumen. Under the bustling leadership of the school's young headmaster, Francis Newbery, and his wife, Jessie, students in the 1880s and 1890s received excellent training and energetic promotion.² Newbery's students were also fortunate in that their emerging maturity and talents coincided with their city's peak industrial, intellectual and artistic growth.

Francis and Jessie Newbery fostered the talents of four students in particular: the Macdonald sisters and two young men, Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Herbert MacNair, interior and furniture designers. The sisters were day students and the men were evening students; Newbery, in a critique of their works, told the four about the similarity of their styles, and suggested they meet.³ In about 1895 the sisters and their two friends formed a group, calling themselves simply "The Four."

Figures 2 and 3



Margaret and Frances MacDonald Josephine Gear

Before they met Charles and Herbert, the sisters had already established themselves as designers and craftswomen, showing great versatility in the range of objects they made and the materials with which they worked: embroidered hangings and covers, gesso panels, leaded glass panels, clocks, posters, water colors, book illustrations, and their specialty, repoussé metal panels. Margaret and Frances Macdonald worked well as a team. Not only did they cooperate on ideas and drawing, but they often bent over the same metal panel to work side by side. They enjoyed life. They shared a studio and held salons for all the leading writers and artists of Glasgow. The sisters were more than able to hold their own. During the short years of "The Four's" life, from about 1895 to 1899, the two women continued to work very closely together. "The Four" exhibited together and exchanged ideas and designs. The men, for example, designed furniture in which the sisters' decorative gesso panels were inset. The sisters evidently found the collective working arrangement to their advantage: during these years they produced their most original and vigorous designs.

In 1899 Frances married MacNair and the two moved to Liverpool where he had a teaching post. The next year Margaret mar-

ried Mackintosh. The MacNairs' move to Liverpool brought the sisters' working arrangement and the collaboration of "The Four" to an end. After 1899, the four artists produced independently or collaborated with their marriage partner on design projects. Although groups of artists were quite common in those decades (members of the various small English arts and crafts organizations around William Morris, Arthur Mackmurdo and Walter Crane worked and exhibited together), no two artists during this period seemed to work and live in such close harmony as the two sisters. Their life and work together in the Glasgow studio gave a certain intensity to their work, an intensity which was lost after they separated in 1899.

The strand of another independent, spirited and middle-class woman, Catherine Cranston, is yet to be woven into the story. Catherine became a principal patron of Charles and Margaret Macdonald.⁴ As the creator and owner of the tearooms she commissioned husband and wife to design the rooms' every aspect, from their structure and decoration to designs for posters and menu cards. In the tearooms the arts and crafts mingled freely and complemented each other.

Better yet, Catherine Cranston's women customers found the environment supportive. The tearooms created a social phenomenon by becoming "virtually the first places of their kind where even the richest and most elegant of Edwardian female society might properly meet without chaperons."⁵

Unlike the tearoom clientele, Margaret and Frances lived free from the shadows of chaperons. By the standards of their day they were liberated. Details of their lives before marriage are poorly documented, so it is difficult to locate the source of their independence. Since independence and creativity are so strongly linked, however, and of great interest in the biographies of women artists, I shall undertake a reconstruction of their early lives.

In the late 1880s Margaret and Frances Macdonald returned from England with their father. It is probable that the sisters, raised in England, at first felt foreign in Glasgow. Events that uproot or bring great changes to lives are often those encouraging a sense of self and a desire to do something with one's life. Possibly the move to Glasgow acted as a stimulus to the sisters. At any rate, Margaret and Frances knew who they were, knew what they wanted to do and, soon after their arrival in Glasgow, first

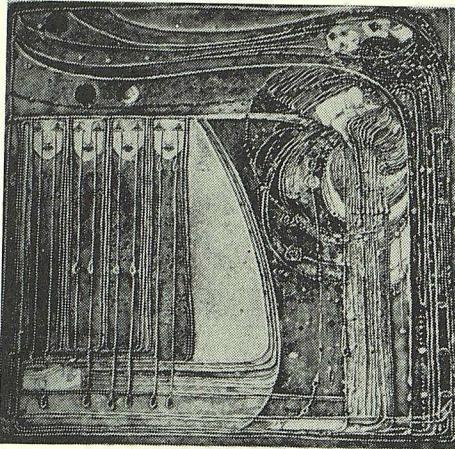


Figure 4

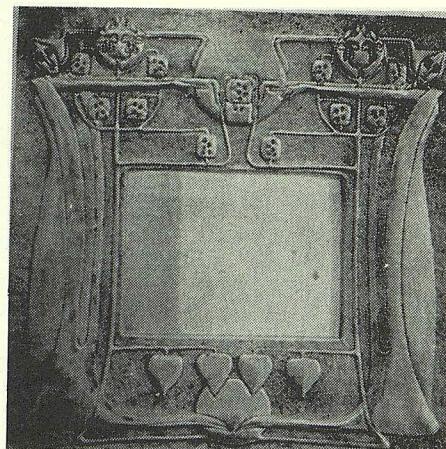


Figure 5

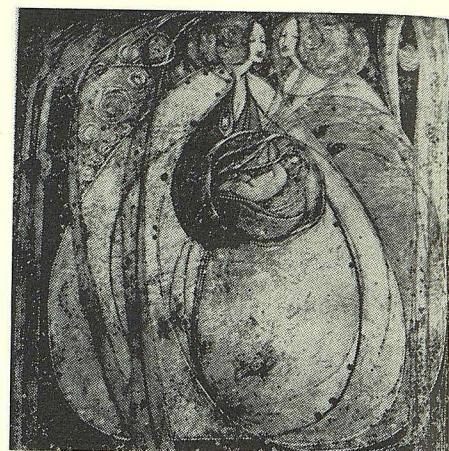


Figure 6

Margaret, then Frances entered the School of Art.

Once in the school, the sisters found support for their ideas in the presence of other like-minded women, such as Jessie Newbery and their contemporaries, Jessie King, craftswoman and book illustrator, and Jane Fonie, an interior designer. A tradition of active women had been established at the school in 1882 when a group of former students founded the Glasgow Society of Lady Artists' Club, the oldest women's club in Britain.⁶

The sisters acquired backbone at the school. They were trained in drawing from the model, drawing freehand, anatomical and botanical drawing, as well as ornamental design. The school encouraged them to develop their own distinctive styles at an early stage. Soon their unrefined and untamed energies led to bizarre shapes, to angular and cutting edges to their female forms.

Shortly after leaving the school the sisters' reputations traveled as far as London. In 1896, the London Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society invited "The Four" to send furniture, craftwork and posters in the "modern style" to that year's exhibition. The sisters sent four pieces, two of which they had worked on together: a clock of beaten silver with beaten brass weights and an aluminum pendulum, a muffin stand, a beaten aluminum panel, *The Star of Bethlehem*, by Francis and *The Annunciation* by Margaret.⁷

The themes of these early figurative pieces express the sisters' two constant iconographic interests, women and babies. Frequently the woman/Virgin appears trapped and isolated within their work. And, though Christian subject matter did not recur as often in the later pieces, apparently the intensity of their religious convictions never dimmed. What a pagan and savage interpretation they gave to their Virgin and Child images. London eyes boggled.

In the mid-1890s the English arts and crafts movement was dominated by William Morris's most faithful disciple, Walter

Crane. His designs pleased everyone, but then they were too innocuous to do otherwise. The polite London art crowd moving from a Crane to a Macdonald cried out, "The Spook School!"⁸

We can see why. Look at a mirror frame (Figure 5) made by Frances in 1896-1897. Two excruciatingly thin female figures with ghoulish eyes point accusingly at each other over the seed cases of the Honesty plant. The seed pods look like death's heads. And how spooky is the round copper sconce made by both sisters in 1896-1897 (Figure 1). Imagine it nailed to the wall of a darkened room and lit by the fluttering light of candles in its holders. Visualize how the eyes in the round copper plate, and in its supports, might enlarge and shrink in the jumping shadows of candlelight. Now look at the two female figures, with scraggy, flattened forms and hanging breasts imprisoned within the rectangular panels of a pair of beaten brass candle sconces (Figures 2 and 3), designed by the two sisters in the same years. Strange details give the figures in these sconces an apocryphal air: attached to one figure is an orb, supporting a baby suckling at the breast; on the other a crescent moon superimposes its cruel edges and, in the outspread hands of the same figure, vivid marks, more like stigmata than wrinkles, are slashed in the open palms. The air of suffering and martyrdom in these figures is so marked that I find myself speculating whether the sisters, consciously or unconsciously, made associations between these two female figures and the sacrificial roles lived out by the majority of women they knew. But not themselves; at this point they were still free.

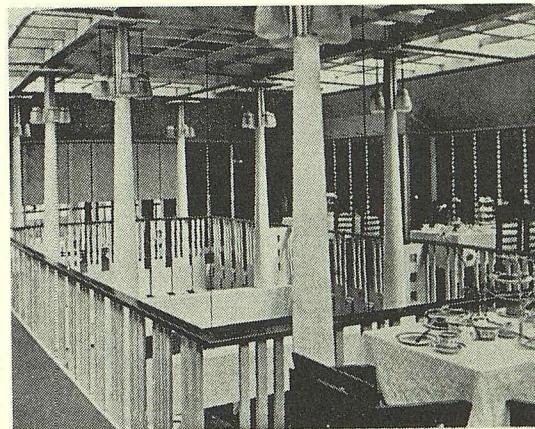
The sisters might have felt dashed by the epithet "The Spook School" since the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society never asked them or "The Four" to exhibit again. However, Gleeson White, editor of the influential arts magazine *The Studio*, responded enthusiastically to the originality of their designs and visited Glasgow to find out more about the arts and crafts movement there. After his visit, *The Studio* published

a two-part article on the Glasgow artists with part one almost entirely devoted to the Macdonald sisters' works.⁹

Gleeson White was impressed that the sisters not only designed all the pieces he saw but, apart from some joinery work, they handled, beat and wrought even the large and heavy pieces themselves, including two floor-standing clocks. Neither sister was covetous of her individual contribution to the pieces they jointly designed and executed. They refused to be drawn into games of identification.

After looking at their early emaciated figures, the inflated look the sisters' works acquire in the early 1900s comes as a surprise. Reproduced here is a panel Margaret designed in colored plaster for the Rose Boudoir (Figure 6), shown at the International Exhibition, Turin, 1902. Some of Frances's figures acquire a similar full-blown look in these years. In the early 1900s the sisters changed their models; the influence of Japanese prints and works by the pre-Raphaelites superseded the earlier sources of Celtic art, Aubrey Beardsley and Jan Toorop.¹⁰ In the 1900s an inventive note appeared in Margaret's use of junk materials: colored glass, rope and plaster. The materials cost little and gave a rich, jeweled effect. But the rawness, the evil, the spirits that had made their early metal pieces fairly rattle, had gone. No amount of fancy curvilinear lines or innovative mixing of media could atone for this. Do success and marriage account for this transformation of the sisters' works?

No matter the causes, each new development the sisters and their husbands brought forth was eagerly seized upon by their audience on the Continent. In 1900 they were invited to furnish and decorate an entire room at the eighth Secessionist Exhibition in Vienna. In 1902, along with other Glasgow artists, they exhibited works in the Scottish section of the International Exhibition of Decorative Art in Turin. Everything the four artists sent to the two exhibitions sold. Between 1899 and 1905, articles, reviews and illustrations of their works appeared



Gallery of Willow Tearoom, Glasgow.

frequently in influential journals such as *Dekorative Kunst* and *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration; Ver Sacrum*, the official publication of the Vienna Secession, devoted an issue to them.

Suddenly, in 1905, curiosity about the four artists declined on the Continent. Even in Scotland the number of commissions began to drop; England never revived the brief interest it had displayed in 1896. Though Charles and Margaret had a highly successful exhibition in St. Petersburg in 1913, where everything but the carpet sold, and though one other show was planned for Paris in 1914, the successes of their first heady decade were never repeated.

It becomes impossible to find published reproductions of the sisters' works after 1905. One of the last I found is a gesso panel made by Margaret in 1905 (Figure 4). Undeniably, this is the most powerfully modeled piece yet seen, but the subject shows a dangerous stagnation. It is no more than a summation of themes explored earlier by the sisters. For whom were those plaster tears meant to fall? Catherine Cranston's tearoom clientele? Or Margaret and her sister? Did Margaret begin to feel she was cast in a mold much as her rope and glass ladies? Did she mourn her lost independence? Were her spirits and her creativity slipping away? I believe so, and I am saddened.

I am against passive readings of history. People, their deeds, as well as those they avoided doing, affect us mightily. The Macdonald sisters capitulated.¹¹ They allowed their strident voices of the 1890s to fade into soothing murmurs and echoes of what once they were. How dared they! [They make it harder for us to shape ourselves into the creative and independent beings we would like to be. We need all the positive models we can get our hands on, and here are two more negative ones.]

Did this change in their art reflect the constraints of their times? Yes. It was difficult for women in turn-of-the-century Glasgow to train and practice as architects, as the Macdonalds' husbands did. Both sis-

ters would have benefited from the training and practice of this profession. The status of crafts, despite the sincere activities of William Morris who tried to unite the arts and the crafts (and all the activities and organizations that this engendered) remained very much a poor relative of their rich aunt, Fine Art. Margaret and Frances worked at their drawing boards and hammered out their metal panels. They probably wondered what the studio people were up to. Fine artists (among them women) painted decadent images of women—think of Beardsley's art. Could Margaret and Frances humbly working in the lower echelons of the crafts not pick up those cues? As craftswomen working in a stratified society, it might not have occurred to them to push their early independent spirits farther than they did.

The Macdonald sisters' best years were all too short. Their career spanned the period of the realliance between the arts and the crafts and its subsequent deterioration. Neither Glasgow's renaissance of the arts nor women's independence survived two decades. The cycles of local movements were taken up within the larger motions grinding inside the machinery of Western capitalist society in the years preceding World War I. When the confidence, energy and profits of the middle and upper classes decreased in those years, the effect was soon seen in the arts. In the depression of the 1930s, one of the last of Glasgow's tearooms,¹² its wood, brick, colored glass, rope, pale mauve and green gesso ladies, crumbled under the hammers of demolition workers.

¹¹The first five cities were London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna and St. Petersburg. Glasgow's other heavy industries were engineering, textiles, chemicals, printing and papermaking. C.A. Oakley, *The Second City* (Glasgow and London: Blackie, 1975).

¹²In 1895, at the request of *L'Oeuvre Artistique*, Francis Newbery sent three cases of his students' work to the Arts and Crafts Exhibition in Liege. T. Howarth, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Modern Movement* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Ltd., 1952), p. 37.

³Information told to Howarth by Herbert MacNair, p. 25.

⁴Her brother, Stuart Cranston, was also in the tearoom business. Catherine Cranston appears to have been the important patron of Mackintosh and Macdonald. The tearooms' busiest hours were 11:00 to noon, 4:00 to 5:00 p.m. Smoke-rooms were set aside for the men. Margaret Macdonald's contributions to the tearooms were not as important as her husband's were. Therefore, the tearooms are not discussed further. See Howarth on Mackintosh's tearoom designs.

⁵H. Jefferson Barnes, *Furniture by Charles Rennie Mackintosh*, (Glasgow: Glasgow School of Art, 1969).

⁶*The Glasgow Boys, Part Two: The History of the Group and Illustrations* (Edinburgh: The Scottish Arts Council, 1971), p. 77.

⁷Catalogue of the Fifth Exhibition, 1896 (London: Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, 1896), exhibit nos: 285, 475, 508, 511.

⁸The sisters' work was reviewed in *The Studio*, IX, December, 1896, pp. 202–203.

⁹*The Studio*, XI, July, 1897, pp. 86–100.

¹⁰Ford Madox Brown's *Take Your Son Sir*, 1856–1857, Tate Gallery, is the source of compositional inspiration for Margaret's piece, as R. Schultze, *Art Nouveau* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1962), p. 240, among others, has pointed out.

¹¹Mentioning the care Margaret took of her husband (he became an alcoholic), Robert Macleod writes how "patiently and devotedly" she had borne "the years of trial and disappointment." *Charles Rennie Mackintosh* (Feltham, Middlesex: Country Life, 1968), p. 150.

¹²Oakley (p. 185) states that none of the tearooms have survived intact, though part of the famous Willow Tearoom was doing service, quite recently, as Daly's Bridal Boutique.

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