ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Chairs Not Meant for Sitting

The chairs of Charles Rennie Mackintosh are spectral. They are presences. They upstage people. They have more strength and identity than anyone in a room. At the Museum of Modern Art exhibition, they are lined up, dramatically backlit on platforms, with an impact so far beyond the simple statement of "chair" that they are curiously exhilarating and unsettling.

That is exactly as it should be. These chairs are overwhelming both as art objects and as indicators of a talent of such absolute pitch that each line and curve is a revelation of grace and reason. Emilio Ambasz, who has directed and installed the show, uses drawings and photographs of Mackintosh's buildings and interiors to make the point quite clear. There is no way to overstate the quality of a Mackintosh design.

What the chairs are not able to indicate in their isolation is how their startling and sensuous forms and motifs were the focus and full expression of the rooms in which they were set—rooms unique in the history of art. Nor can they indicate, in turn, how these interiors were tied to the buildings that Mackintosh designed in the period between the 1890's and the first World War—that time of esthetic transition and revolution.

Actually, very little of that work remains. The Glasgow Art School (1897-1909) is a landmark of proto-modern architecture. Some houses still stand. One of Miss Cranston's celebrated tearooms (1897-1912) is functioning, in part, in Glasgow; others have been demolished; and one, dismantled and saved, has been promised reconstruction by the Glasgow Corporation.

Some of the originals of the 20 chairs in the museum's lineup still exist—one can be seen in the next gallery in the museum's permanent collection—but all on view in the show are careful reproductions. These "re-creations" have been lovingly crafted under the direction of Professor Filippo Alison of the University of Naples; three are in production by Cassina of Milan, with royalties to the University of Glasgow. These three are available in New York to anyone who happens to have a spare $1,000 to $1,600.

The work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928) transcends what has come to be known as "Scottish Art Nouveau" or "the Glasgow style" of the turn of the century. The creative activity that centered around the Glasgow School of Art at that time, led by such architects as Voysey and Mackintosh, involved all of the arts of design. Mackintosh's wife, Margaret MacDonald, was a superb practitioner of Art Nouveau. But his own work went significantly beyond any established style.

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His influence was enormous. Exhibitions at the Vienna Secession in 1900, in Turin in 1902 and in other European cities established his reputation on the Continent. He was much admired by Hoffmann and Behrens and the architects of De Stijl. His work was surely known to Frank Lloyd Wright. The Glasgow Art School is one of those buildings after which architecture is never the same.

His work combined rigor and poetry to an extraordinary degree. Mies van der Rohe called Mackintosh a "purifier of architecture." He seemed to give both structure and decoration new meaning. According to Andrew McLaren Young, "the decoration was clothing for new ideas—new ideas on the role of function and the geometry of architectural space." Nikolaus Pevsner calls his art a "fusion of puritanism with sensuality." But there is nothing ambiguous about his attitude toward structure and ornament; both are thoroughly understood as mutually reinforcing in art's richest tradition, a process lost to the later Modern Movement.

These chairs are not for sitting. Their purpose is to state structure lyrically; struts, slats and supports become esthetic absolutes. Non-structural elements—backs and headrests—are enhanced by exquisite ornament. They were meant to stand against a wall in breathtakingly precise relationships to the spaces of a room, or to act as space dividers—far more important than conforming to human physiology. Their lines and motifs were devised to complement other elements in the setting. The whole interior composition was an orchestration of geometric and decorative parts.

Thus a sky-high ladderback was meant to fill a space between two closets, and the squares at its top repeated squares in the closet doors and squares in the pattern of a rug. In the tearooms, exaggerated height gave privacy and stated boundaries. A latticed, overscaled, curved cashier's chair was a cage against the room. But each chair is superb by itself. The parts are delicately related with the intensity and finesse of abstract art—which, in a sense, they are.

"Chairs by Charles Rennie Mackintosh" at The Museum of Modern Art, through Jan. 12. Open 11 A.M. to 6 P.M. Mondays through Saturdays, until 9 P.M. Thursdays and noon to 6 P.M. Sundays.

Mackintosh's color is as important as his forms. The floating clarity of pure white interiors, the dramatic impact of black-based schemes shot with mauve and silver, the incredibly romantic range of the grays, pinks and violets of his personal palette, must have supplied a *frisson* in grim, gray Glasgow. He could make lavendar a piercing climax to a milk-white room. Violet light glowed through a climactic prism of glass. A spot of red became a crashing chord in a wall of geometric black, white and gold. (Unfortunately, this color cannot be experienced in the present show.) How much we have lost with the Modern Movement's resolutely limited range of primary colors, its denial of the ambiguous or strange, its betrayal of the capacities of the senses through reduction and oversimplification.

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But beyond color, Mackintosh understood space. Pevsner notes that "neither Frank Lloyd Wright nor Le Corbusier brought internal space more boldly to life." The magic spell of the spaces and artifacts of a Mackintosh room has been described impeccably by Friedrich Ahlers-Hestermann:

"These rooms were like dreams: everywhere there are small panels, gray silks, the slenderest vertical shafts of wood, small rectangular sideboards . . . that look as innocent and serious as young girls about to receive Holy Communion—and altogether unreal. Here were mysticism and estheticism . . . with a strong scent of heliotrope, and a feel of well-cared-for hands, and of delicate sensuality. Two upright chairs with backs as tall as a man stood on a white carpet, looking at each other over a slender table, silently, like ghosts."

Today, Mackintosh has a new importance for those who seek enrichment of life and art. "He was," says Emilio Ambasz, "the unique figure who reconciled the seductive ornamental powers of Art Nouveau with the Modern Movement's redemptive passion." The word genius is appropriate.