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New York Times (1923-Current file); Nov 17, 1968; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. D27

Architecture

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A HUNDRED years, or even 50 years, becomes a landmark and a time for looking back, and what we look back at now are the roots of the modern movement in architecture and design. We are examining history, with the beginnings of some kind of a perspective about it, which means that we are embarking on voyages of rediscovery.

There is nothing like a retrospective exhibition to create that sense of rediscovery and re-evaluation. First, the 50th anniversary of the Bauhaus came as a surprise to those either old enough to be shocked by the flight of a half-century or young enough to think of the beginnings of the Bauhaus as shrouded in the mists of time. That show, which was inaugurated in Germany this summer, has just closed at Burlington House. Hard on its heels, an exhibition organized by the Scottish Arts Council to celebrate the centenary of the Scottish architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928), and shown first at the Edinburgh Festival, has opened this week at the Victoria and Albert Museum, to run to Dec. 29.

To those who have simply taken Nikolaus Pevsner's word and the pictures beginning to fade in the classroom art histories that Mackintosh was a genius to be reckoned with, this exhibition is indeed a revelation. It is the first retrospective of his work outside Scotland. The show consists largely of recreations of those famous interiors of 1900 to 1917 that startled turn-of-the-century professionals. These "rooms" use original furnishings and accessories, so that the effect is fresh and immediate and the impact tremendous. We are undoubtedly in for a Mackintosh revival, if in nothing more than shades of mauve floating in a sea of sculptured white.

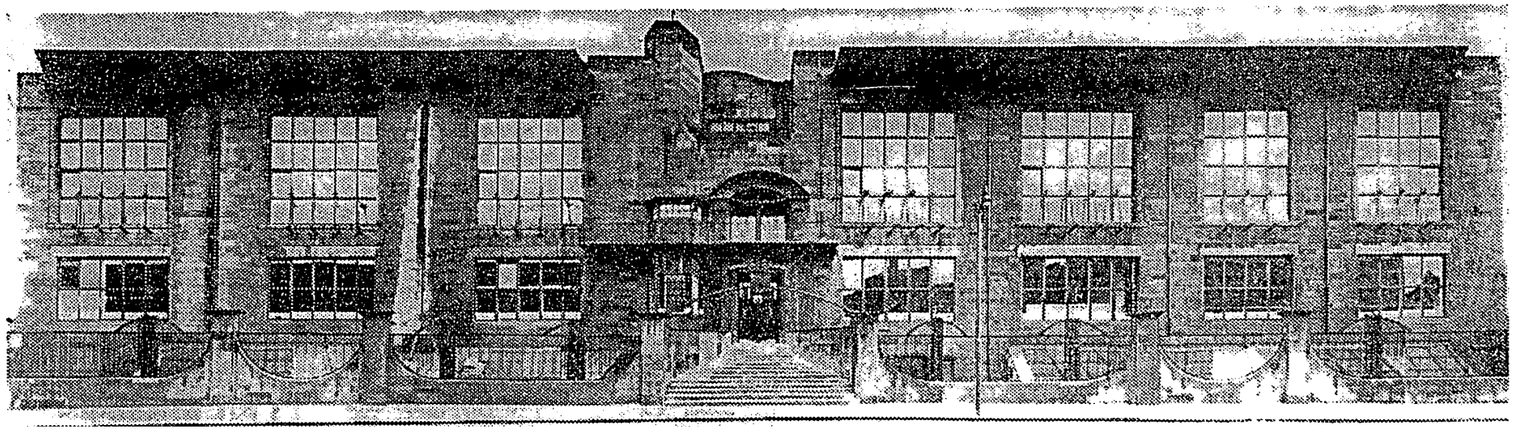
Re-evaluation is hardly necessary. This is merely stunning affirmation that Mackintosh was one of the major innovative talents of modern times, with a deep and definitive influence on the forms of architecture and design that set the scene of the contemporary world.

The evidence has long been clear. Charles Rennie Mackintosh was the leader of the "Glasgow School," a small group of sensitive men and women who renounced the decorative excesses of long-entrenched Victorian taste. This movement was one of several short but significant revolts that recurred from the time of William Morris well into the 20th century, to leave their mark on history and taste.

The contrasts could not be more splendidly revealed than they are in the permanent upstairs collection at the V and A. The Victorian room, with a huge ceramic centerpiece of unclear, elaborate function covered with roses, held by straining cupids and topped by writhing gold snakes, leads directly to the William Morris room and the ascetic works of Voysey and Mackintosh.

The moment of Art Nouveau paralleled the Glasgow School. There are connections — beautiful ones — between Mackintosh and those seductive forms, but he used them rarely and with exquisite sensitivity in a far stricter geometry. It is a geometry of intensely personal style and skill, brilliantly prefiguring movements as decorative as the modernistic and as basic as the Bauhaus.

Andrew McLaren Young, director of the exhibition and author of the catalogue, notes that Mackintosh "did not reject the need for decoration. But for him decoration was new clothing for new ideas: new ideas on the role of function and the geometry of architectural space."



North facade of the Glasgow School of Art, designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh, 1897-9 and 1907-9.
"New ideas on the role of function and the geometry of architectural space"

Mies van der Rohe has described Mackintosh as a "purifier." He was that, and to be in his presence in this show makes one realize that purity need not be sterility. It can be a flowering, rather than a repression of the senses. He makes one feel color more because he uses it with such supremely refined intensity: white becomes a mass of nuances, violet glows through a teardrop in a silver lamp or melts against mirror or glass in traceries of lead, red is a declamation in a black, white and yellow wall. This is something that cannot be experienced in the scholarly journals.

His influence went directly from Glasgow to Vienna, where the architects of the secession admired him extravagantly and invited him to participate in the Exhibition of 1900. Josef Hofmann became his friend; Olbrich and Behrens were indebted to him; the line extends to Wagner and Loos, to the Bauhaus and Gropius and Mies, to everything that we call modern today.

A lot has been lost along the way. One has gotten awfully tired of Bauhaus blue, of the tubular clichés, of the safe design formulas. Only now is a less puritanical and intellectualized sensuosity coming back into architecture and design with a younger generation involved with the full spectrum of color and dimensional experience. These are often hard and chic optical exercises, even esthetic throwaways; Mackintosh was involved in a reformation that was also a gentle exploration of beauty and a probing analysis of architectonic surfaces and space.

He is sometimes paired, or paralleled, with Frank Lloyd Wright, but, beyond the climate of the time which led men of genius to strip beauty bare, their talents are individual and unlike. In 1896, when his Glasgow Art School was designed, it was, in many ways, ahead of Wright.

One begins to call the art school a great proto-modern building, but it was proto-nothing; with its expressive functional modernity enriched by the spatial definition of the remarkable decoration, and a touch of sound Scottish traditionalism, this is a great building in quite absolute terms, by any measurement of time or style. The drawings for it are in the show, with enlarged photographs and some sample furnishings, including a well-worn reading stand with a sign warning users not to take the periodicals out of the room.

There are watercolors, flower drawings, textile designs, posters and an assortment of objects, such as the unsurpassed silver flatware that museums vie for, and other work of the Glasgow School, including that of Margaret Macdonald, Mackintosh's wife. But it would all be a ripple on the surface of art history if it were not for the strict, lyrical power of this one man. His almost equally celebrated fellow-reformer, Voysey, is a craftsman next to him. Mackintosh worked for an elite few, but something of the changes he inaugurated pervades every life today.

Whether it is the art school, the domestic interiors or the series of tearooms for Miss Cranston, the designs are as curiously affecting now as they must have been when they first appeared. This has been expressed with particular effect by Ahlers-Hestermann, quoted by Pevsner:

"These rooms were like dreams . . . white and serious looking, as if they were young girls ready to go to their first Holy Communion. Here was mysticism and asceticism, but with much of a sense of heliotrope, with well-manicured hands and a delicate sensuousness . . . two straight chairs with backs as tall as a man stood on a white carpet and look silently and spectrally at each other across a little table."