



'Dear Green Place' or 'murky simmering Tophet'? Reconciling nature, industry and modernity in Glasgow Style decoration

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INTRODUCTION

For Modernist architectural critics like P. Morton Shand it was decoration, and more specifically the decorative influence of his wife Margaret Macdonald, that had held Charles Rennie Mackintosh back. "I was glad to notice ... Mackintosh's partial adherence to that baneful 'art Nouveau' movement was realised and deplored," he wrote in 1933, going on to urge that "the abiding (the structural) qualities" of Mackintosh's work as a great pioneer be emphasised, "not what might be called his 'artistic' contributions ... this side of his work was the result of his wife's influence ... His mentality anticipated the future with amazing prevision, hers was ... a still-born, purely decorative phase of art." The legacy of construing Mackintosh as a Pioneer of International Modernism is still apparent in many studies that either present structure and decoration as separable, indeed antithetical, or that privilege the structural over the decorative aspects of his oeuvre. Nevertheless increasing attention *is* now being paid to the crucial significance of the distinctive linear style of decoration that was a hallmark of Glasgow Style products in all media – from buildings (inside and out) to graphics, textiles, metalwork and ceramics. Feminist and psychoanalytic approaches in particular have offered insights into the Symbolist dimension of the Glasgow Style. But today it is the amalgam of Nature on the one hand, and modern industrial culture on the other, that I want to explore in relation to decoration. What were the particular sources and meanings of these two strands in the context of Glasgow?

'DEAR GREEN PLACE' versus 'MURKY, SIMMERING TOPHET'

Working in Glasgow, Mackintosh and his contemporaries had to negotiate the two powerful iconographic traditions referred to in the title of this talk – 'dear green place' versus 'murky simmering tophet'. By 1900 Scottish rural culture and scenery had been more analysed, interpreted and popularised than virtually any other part of Europe. Starting with the poetry of Robert Burns, Scotland could be said to have invented folk culture. It was this literary tradition of folk culture, further developed by the novels of Walter Scott, and allied with the kind of spectacular West Highland scenery painted by Horatio McCulloch which gave Scotland a peculiar and prominent position in the European romantic imagination - Napoleon's favourite poet was the bogus Gallic poet Ossian; Scott's imagery of the landscape filtered into the paintings of Delacroix and the operas of Donizetti and Verdi. Mountainous, depopulated, the landscape had become a cipher for Scotland as a whole, and was being commodified as a source of aesthetic pleasure, a repository of primitive, rugged virtue.

If the landscape was the source of morality and aesthetic pleasure, then the photographs of Glasgow slums by Thomas Annan were used to characterise Glasgow as the epitome of vice and degradation, overcrowded, full of shocking social and economic dislocations. As Thomas Carlyle, one of Scotland's dourer prophets, put it: Was Glasgow "a green flowery world, with azure everlasting sky stretched over it, the work and government of a God, or a murky simmering Tophet, of copperas fumes, cotton-fuzz, gin riot, wrath and toil, created by a Demon, governed by a Demon?" In this popular and persistent vision of Glasgow, the seething, godless, grimy city was pitted *against* Nature.

Here then was the paradox. Most people, even in Scotland, still thought of the Scots as in the main a nation of hardy rustics, but at the same time, as Mackintosh's friend Patrick Geddes noted, "no population in the world is now so predominantly urban." So how did Glasgow designers work within these traditions – romantic celtic wilderness on the one hand, urban

nightmare on the other? How did the specific geographical, intellectual and socio-cultural context of Glasgow inform design thinking about the natural world and urban culture? Could Glasgow Style decoration restructure the perception of city and country, and the relationship between them in visual, material forms?

ART SCHOOL MASQUES – THE IDEOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF DECORATION

The many masques performed at the Glasgow School of Art can be considered as a kind of three-dimensional, mobile form of decoration, informed by a clear ideological agenda. The very name 'Glasgow' derives from the ancient Gallic – *Glaschu* – meaning 'dear green place'. For Mackintosh's generation the call was to rediscover this Dear Green Place, tapping into a primeval, mythological past – the world of St Enoch, and the story of the bird, the bell, the fish and the tree that was celebrated in the civic coat of arms, and enacted as a masque by staff and students at the Glasgow School of Art in 1905. It was about how to bring Nature into the modern world, and to reconcile Nature with the forces of modernity that were focussed on the city. The elaboration of the city arms as a decorative device in different media repeatedly reiterated the perceived connection between style and city. The river Clyde and its Gallic divinity 'Clutha' - celebrated in George Walton's glassware of this name – was central to civic identity. The river represented simultaneously the source of Glasgow's wealth and the penetration of Nature into the heart of Glasgow's industrial culture. Such a 'Celtic transformation' was certainly ideologically fraught. For William Morris it was a non-starter. He once described Glasgow as 'the Devil's Drawing Room'. In a letter to the Glasgow Socialists he doubted "the applicability of your 'old Celtic style to the joint-stock money-grubbing classes of Glasgow". I hope to show Morris was wrong, but at the same time how the Glasgow Style treatment of nature and industry was full of complexity and contradiction.

In another Art School masque, *The REvolution of Woman* (a deliberate play on the words 'revolution' and 'evolution') the designer De Courcy Leuthwaite Dewar appeared as a judge in the year 1950, representing the vision of women penetrating the ultimate male bastion of the law. Within the new order there would be sexual equality – *jus suffragii* - for which Fra Newbery, Director of the Art School, and his wife Jessie Newbery, head of the radical embroidery department, provided a role model of mutual respect and artistic collaboration. For designers like these who campaigned actively for women's suffrage, the heathery purples and mossy greens of the Glasgow Style resonated not only with the Scottish landscape, but also the colours of the Suffragette badge. This is just one example of how the preoccupation with Nature had particular sources and meanings in the context of Glasgow, although this symbolic return to origins was being enacted in centres worldwide.

The Birth and Growth of Art was a masque written and directed by Fra Newbery, and staged by Mackintosh for the opening in 1909 of the second phase of Glasgow School of Art. Significantly it was introduced by the heathen Pan, 'companion of Mighty Mother Nature', who presents Nature as the great leveller, the eternal principal linking people and place – whether rural or city born: "you and I are one, in Nature's self", he says.

The City man, whose commerce-ridden dreams
Make Sleep distraught, goes to his ledgered toil,
His wearied body longs for Nature's breast
His numbed brain hungers for her soothing touch
Primeval Senses wake from hidden depths,
And cry for freedom from a shuttered self.

The final scene, 'The Promise of the Present', was staged by the MacNairs and Annie French. Figures dressed as the Sister Arts of Architecture (carrying a bird), Painting (a rose) and Sculpture (a lily) pay their tribute to their dear Mother Nature, and receive their inspiration at her hands. Nature stands to receive their allegiance "under that mystic tree, whose fruit is the gift of the gods...the knowledge of good and evil." This iconography had

already been distilled in a design of 1893 by Margaret Macdonald's for the first School of Art Club 'At Home'; and was picked up in the decorative programme of the Art School building, as seen in the carved stone relief over the entrance, and the weather vein in the form of an architectural bird presiding over the School. There is no one reading of such symbolism, however. The symbolism was deliberate, but so was the ambiguity.

The combination of Nature, mysticism and myth was redolent of intellectual currents in Glasgow at the time. Mackintosh referenced Lethaby's book on this theme in his lecture 'On Seemliness', but equally significant was the work of another powerful Glasgow intellect, Sir James Fraser, whose *The Golden Bough*, a classic study of comparative mythology was first published in 1890.

SYTHESISING CITY AND COUNTRY , NATURE AND INDUSTRY

Also tinged with mysticism were the writings of the maverick Patrick Geddes – Scottish sociologist, polymath, biologist, town planner. For cities on the scale and complexity of Glasgow, Geddes coined the term "conurbation", a city that embraced a region, bringing together the previously polarised and distinct concepts of town and country. In a conurbation these elements formed a single organism which, to remain healthy, had to coexist in interdependent balance. Significantly Geddes's belief in the inherent "life force" of cities, and in the need to reconcile ecological, technological, social and aesthetic facets of urban living, was grounded in biology – he was Chair of Biology at Dundee. He urged designers like Mackintosh to evoke each city's regional, geographic character, and "the social personality" of the community. His acceptance of urbanism as both necessary and potentially life-enhancing fed off an optimistic, idealising strain in Scottish intellectual history since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

Not surprisingly the intellectual and cultural dominance of Glasgow transcended the immediately visible expanse of the city. The tentacles of its communications network - steamers, trains, and increasingly cars - reached into a huge hinterland spread around the Clyde where approximately forty per cent of Scotland's entire population was concentrated by 1901. Recreational exploration of countryside was becoming possible for all classes, and designers and architects would join the annual mass exodus going 'Doon the Watter'. Geddes's 'valley cut' diagrams expressed this new, synoptic view of the city. From Glasgow on a clear day the hills to the north were visible, the source of the municipal water supply that was so vital to health and amenity. The River Clyde, and its tributaries the Kelvin and Cart, connected the skeletal cranes and dark forges of the city to the rolling green scenery of the Trossachs. Organicism, synthesis and balance, features central to the concept of the conurbation, were also principles that informed "Glasgow Style" decoration, echoing Geddes's views in microcosm, blending the urban and the "natural".

Emotionally ties with the land were reinforced by the extended family links of those who had migrated to the city. Mackintosh, for example, was linked through his mother's family to the town of Ayr on the west coast, and by his father, supposedly to the Highlands. Migration from the Highlands in particular fed the expansion of the industrial sector, and the army regiments based in Glasgow. A natural drift to the city had been intensified by the severity of the agricultural depression in Scotland and the Highland Clearances. However this emotional pull was countered by a simultaneous desire on the part of the upwardly mobile to distance themselves from their rural origins. As one can see from many popular postcards, country cousins ('Teuchters') were a standard source of amusement. The last thing most middle-class Glaswegians wanted was to mobilise associations of rural living through the spaces in which they socialised or the houses, possessions and clothes they chose. Mackintosh and those who bought into the Glasgow Style were going to be Scottish without adopting tartanalia and kilts.

The regenerative, sensual and spiritual associations of Nature were important in any city, but particularly so in Glasgow - if only because the process of urbanisation and industrialisation had been so intense. The economy was booming, and on one level the stylised imagery of plants captured a sense of dynamic growth, reflecting the climate of thrusting, competitive individualism in its more exaggerated, attenuated forms. See the sprouting verticality of Salmon and Gillespie's electric fire, or the luxuriant, blooming stained glass of John Ednie. At the same time, underlying the general optimism about the continued generation of wealth was disquiet at the darker side of industrial expansion, the appalling social consequences of such rapid and unbridled growth - the unprecedented rise in crime, pollution and disease. In this context, connections with the Scottish landscape and nature - whether economic, social, emotional or recreational - formed a significant and unifying element of the middle-class mindset in Glasgow, particularly as its bourgeoisie were a precarious, volatile group lacking the old indicators of land and family connections.

On this level one can relate the decorative detail of Mackintoshes' white interiors to the middle class obsession with health and hygiene, keeping dirt and disease at bay, creating an oasis of nature in the city. For Mackintosh, entering good modern architecture was "like an escape into the mountain air from the stagnant vapours of a morass." In their home the Mackintoshes created a series of visual and tactile experiences representing different facets of an organic and spiritual transformation, a journey articulated not only spatially - ascending through the house from the darker rooms below into increasingly intimate spaces, ever more removed from the outer world - but also through the programme of decoration. Nature here is controlled and transfigured by the artistic temperament. The twiggy, half dead flower arrangement, the soaring attenuated verticals, the muted secondary colours and airy tones all reinforce the other-worldly aspects of the style.

Control and interiority were marked features of these George Logan designs for interiors that present a unified organic whole, embracing colour, decoration and atmosphere. Logan, an active member of the Salvation Army, described his work in spiritual terms, as a celebration of God's handiwork in Nature. His friend Jessie King, a minister's daughter, believed she was in touch with the 'Little People' (see the photos of her wandering around with gnomes and tree-hugging) - an identification with Nature that translated into her fantastical illustrations and designs of fairytale landscapes.

The British upper classes could enjoy a foray into raw nature with a spot of hunting shooting and fishing, and artists might go on a sketching expedition, but inhabiting the countryside all year round was an altogether different prospect. Even in summer in the West you were in danger of being plagued by black clouds of midges, or the rain and cold. While painting his famous portrait of Ruskin, Millais swore it rained nine days a week and was driven spare trying to deal with the rivulets of rain on his palette.

There were other problems too. This was an era of agricultural depression, land reform agitation and mass emigrations. The crofting system was not just small-scale farming, but a unique way of life that had been threatened by the brutal dispossessions and forced emigrations of the Clearances. Many evicted Highlanders not packed onto ships bound for Canada, America or Australia, converged on Glasgow. The "Crofting Wars", bitter confrontations between the dispossessed and landowners prompting military intervention in the 1880s, were given prominent news coverage in Scotland. The bitterness and trauma of this episode in Scottish history were not easily forgotten. One could choose to admire the empty landscape, the distinctive colours, but it was difficult in the context of Glasgow to romanticise rural life.

Depersonalised, stylised decoration derived from nature came into its own, however, in capturing a sense of dynamic growth, and the climate of thrusting individualism. Pride in the city's unrivalled feats of engineering was common to all classes. To express the social and economic personality of the city, Glasgow's industrial culture had to be celebrated and 'naturalised'. Arguably the value attached to technological progress and industrial skills was expressed metaphorically in the aggressively modern, sleek and stylised forms of much Glasgow Style furniture. Certain detailing evoked the formal language of engineering, and pleasure in the manipulation of metal upon which Glasgow's industrial wealth was founded. Streamlined, fluid forms were offset by knots of tangled decorative detail, the use of punched motifs and decorative riveting, but softened and acculturated through decorative references to Nature.

To summarise: for a variety of reasons references to Nature and landscape were important, but needed to be filtered through urban perception. Glasgow Style decoration presented nature processed for the urban palate, with all folksiness and rough edges removed. It expressed a psychological identification with the city and industrial culture, while also drawing on a wide range of organic imagery and symbolism.

NATURE, INDUSTRY AND DECORATION IN THE ART SCHOOL

Finally I'd like to briefly touch on the role of the Glasgow School of Art in effecting this reconciliation between nature, industry and decoration. Industry had been part of the School's institutional mission from the outset. Glasgow was one of twelve Schools of Art and Design established in manufacturing towns and cities around Britain in 1840-2 as part of a government initiative to improve standards of design in industry. The many types of design activity that flourished in the city shared an emphasis on drawing skills and the conceptual development of three-dimensional forms on paper. The delicate linear forms and colour washes which characterised technical drawing in the heavy industries were paralleled in the graphic style of The Four and their contemporaries. Such echoes reflected close links in the training on offer for architecture, the fine and decorative arts, engineering and industrial design, and the application of lessons from Nature in all these areas.

The curriculum was largely determined, and examined centrally by the South Kensington authorities in London. Although many were critical of what appeared to be an unduly strait-jacketed system, there was some flexibility in which stages of the South Kensington curriculum each Art School might choose to emphasise. The conventionalised abstraction of plant forms was an important feature of teaching the Glasgow School of Art, as set out within the South Kensington system. There was a particularly strong demand from the Scottish textile industry for floral patterns, in both conventional and artistic styles. At the same time, making outline studies from plants and casts was seen as a good training in expressive linear draughtsmanship for life-drawing and painting, and as a way of teaching an analytical understanding of form.

Although one of the few areas of the Scottish educational system to be run from England, the whole synthetic approach of the of South Kensington model fitted well with the cultivation of what has been described as ‘the Scottish democratic intellect’ whereby the observation, analysis and integration of impressions into some greater whole became almost second nature. Mackintosh talked of Artistic process as “a kind of instinct, a synthesis, or integration of myriads of details and circumstances of which he cannot be directly conscious”. One can see how he and others moved from botanical accuracy to increasingly conventionalised forms. For him ...”the servile imitation of nature was the work of small minded men.” Abstract formal relationships and the subordination of this imagery to specific forms and functions were more important than naturalistic representation. Rather than going “mad over some grand landscape”, as he put it, Mackintosh was just as keen to give every leaf, every blade of grass & modest clump of heather its due share of admiration. The poetry would flow naturally from ‘that perpetual research amongst all that is most latent and obscure in nature.’

Students were encouraged to "Go to Nature" directly, drawing plant-life in the School and sketching outdoors. From its establishment in the 1840s the School had always contained a conservatory for the provision of live plants. The second phase of the building had a small projecting conservatory at the top of the rear elevation. In a 1900 photograph of a studio (now the Mackintosh Room) one can see a variety of hedgerow plants on display – thistles, teasles, bull-rushes, hawthorn, ferns. From the mid 1880s there was a contract with the Botanic Gardens for the regular supply of cut specimens, and provision for students to draw there at all hours of day. There was also a collection of shells, stuffed birds, electrotype casts from nature, skeletons and numerous folios of flower drawings and prints.

Animal and human figures were submitted to the same analytical and conventionalising process as plants, thereby repositioning human figures in the wider scheme of Nature and organic process. Glasgow and Edinburgh had strong medical schools and a history of dissection and anatomical studies stretching back to William Hunter, a major figure in the Scottish 18th-century Enlightenment. Around 1900 the superintendent of the Glasgow Western Infirmary was also active in research and publishing on Roetgen ray photography.

One can see the varying degrees of abstraction in the floral decoration applied to two- and three-dimensional designs in a range of media. The ceramicist Hugo Allan, for example, eliminated direct references to ornament altogether: “to take a vase and paint a flower on it is not my idea of decoration.... I think a vase should be a complete arrangement of colour, just as a flower is.”

What is so interesting is that this nature-based decorative language could be applied with impunity to artistic, scientific, technological artefacts and activities. It could beautify books whether on the subject of botany or mechanical engineering, be applied to a school, an engineering society or a department store, a piece of china or a house. It could rise above the public-private divide, and to a certain extent above distinctions of masculine-feminine, being applied to spaces or objects on both sides of these divides. It could evoke sexuality and spirituality. The ‘Flower of Art’, to use Mackintosh’s words, offered ‘stupendous possibilities.’

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the repertoire of Glasgow Style decoration not only connected the city with other Art Nouveau centres internationally, but also played a crucial role in re-visualising the ‘Dear Green Place’ in an era of modernisation and industrialisation. The balancing act involved in synthesising decorative allusions to Scottish nature and industry, however fraught, must surely be the hallmark of a sophisticated urban culture. Through the New Art, nature and industry could be made modern, civilised, cultural – an adornment to the city.

Mackintosh was not a great wordsmith - his writings are full of plagiarism, but his rhapsodic pronouncements on Art and Nature capture the tenor of much Glasgow Style decoration, and provide a suitably rousing exhortation with which to end to this talk:

“Let every artist strive to make his flower a beautiful living thing – something that will convince the world that there may be – there are things more precious – more beautiful more lasting than life. But to do this you must offer real living – beautifully coloured flowers– flowers that grow from, but above, the green leaf – flowers that are not dead – are not dying – not artificial – real flowers springing from your own soul – not even cut flowers - You must offer the flowers of the art that is in you – the symbols of all that is noble – and beautiful – and inspiring.”