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RE-VISIONING GLASGOW: THE 'NEW ART' EXHIBITED AT HOME AND ABROAD 1901-1903

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This topic brings together my longstanding academic and curatorial interests both in Art Nouveau — the 'New Art' — and in the phenomenon of international exhibitions. In microcosm international exhibitions pinpoint such fascinating intersections between design, politics and commerce, reflecting a creative dialectic between local, national and international tendencies around 1900. In this paper I intend to focus on a series of interrelated exhibitions from 1901-3 that presented Glasgow's idiosyncratic version of the New Art to audiences at home and abroad. From Glasgow and Budapest, to Turin and Moscow, visually arresting displays by designers and craft-workers associated with the Glasgow School of Art were hailed for their lyrical and expressive understanding of the room as a work of art.

International Networks

Taken individually the exhibitions were very different in scale and purpose. The Glasgow International Exhibition of 1901 was a colossal affair, attracting some 11.5 million visitors, in which the fine and decorative arts were mingled with the full range of industrial, educational and historical displays, as well as amusements of course.ⁱ It was the largest such event that had been staged in Britain. Everything opened on time, and a profit was generated. Turin was a similarly ambitious event but, like the smaller scale exhibitions in Moscow and Budapest, was devoted exclusively to modern and decorative arts. More striking than the differences, however, is how these exhibitions as a group all fed off each other. Certain objects, installations and images were recycled in different contexts. Also, many of the same individuals were involved —as organisers, designers and critics. Although not exhibiting as an artist, the influential presence of Francis (Fra) Newbery, for example, was ubiquitous. Headmaster of the Glasgow School of Art since 1885, he was indefatigable in his promotion of the New Art, and clearly had a flair for organising exhibitions and theatrical events, together with an impressive range of international and press contacts.ⁱⁱ The importance of his contribution as an intermediary in the world of international exhibitions was recognised by the award of a Diploma of Honour at Turin. Equally significant was the promotional clout and entrepreneurial skills of Glasgow firms like Wylie & Lochhead or Pettigrew & Stephens which were locked into world markets and prepared to invest heavily in the New Art.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is the operation of this international network whose influence extended into the spheres of design education, museum collecting, governmental arts policy and international commerce that I'm interested in tracking.

Examination of critical responses to Glaswegian design on these occasions emphasises the degree to which journalism and design pattern books were beginning to operate in an integrated, truly European-wide framework. Exhibition reviews were crucial fodder for the spate of international art magazines established in the 1890s, many of them modelled on *The Studio*. Within this group of magazines, many of the same critics and same photographic illustrations were employed, ignoring national boundaries. In this respect writers like Hermann Muthesius (German), Alfredo Melani (Italian), Amelia Levetus (Austrian), or the Hungarians Lajos Hevesi and Frigyes Spiegel all contributed to critical debates around the Glasgow Style, not only in their native countries, but internationally.^{iv}

Glasgow – Scotland – Britain

As sites for a ritual enactment of British, Scottish and Glaswegian identities these events were complex, and expensive, pieces of international theatre that mesmerised and indoctrinated literally millions of people. At Paris 1900 the officially sanctioned view of 'Britain' embodied in Lutyens's nostalgic pavilion design had been emphatically that of 'Olde England'. In exhibitions of the next few years, however, the powerful material and

theatrical appeal of the New Art was instrumental in highlighting Scotland's contribution within the larger political entity of Britain. Above all, the image of Glasgow— and by extension that of Scotland — was redefined as modern, urbanised and artistic. This was an important means of subverting the dominant representational tradition of Scotland as part of Britain's backward and untamed Celtic fringe. The general pattern in earlier exhibitions had been for displays of Scottish fine art and industrial design to be subsumed under the label of "English" or "British". Exceptions were made for exhibits of more 'primitive', rural home industries such as Shetland knitting or tartan weaving. In a similar vein, identifiably Scottish troops of Cameronian Highlanders, complete with swirling kilts and bagpipes, were regularly wheeled out at exhibition openings around the world to mobilise a sense of Britishness.

This representational tradition was increasingly at odds with the industrial and artistic prowess of Glasgow that was beginning to challenge the hegemony of London in many areas. The assured industrial, technological and commercial displays at the city's 1901 exhibition played to Glasgow's strengths as the 'Workshop of the World', with displays of locomotives and marine engineering providing a tangible metaphor of the communications network that bound Glasgow directly into the wider world. The whole exhibition communicated intense civic pride and independent stature within an international forum. At heart of the site was an enormous new art gallery containing extensive, albeit relatively conventional displays. Many art historians have lamented Glasgow 1901 as a lost opportunity to promote innovative design, chief among them, Thomas Howarth, Mackintosh's biographer, who commented how different the story could have been had Mackintosh not lost out in the competition for the exhibition buildings to James Miller's icing-cake extravaganza.^v But equally important was the role of exhibitions in transmitting ideas, opening up business opportunities and bringing individuals together. In this respect, I would argue, the Glasgow exhibition had a significant impact on the development of the so-called Glasgow Style and its European legacy, not least as the key point of contact for the Scots presence in both Budapest and Turin, and also the for the small but significant display of work in Moscow by Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Macdonald sisters.

Mackintosh was in fact honing his installation skills in Glasgow 1901 with the design of four small exhibition stands. Two of these were for the Women's Industries section: Pettigrew & Stephen's stand (inside of which lace-makers from Brussels demonstrated their art), and that for female bookbinders from the Glasgow School of Art – a design of rectilinear latticework that he modified for Turin the following year. He was possibly also involved with the interiors of Miss Cranston's exhibition tearooms of which there is no record beyond a menu card by George Walton. Other New Art displays picked out by critics included Walton's restrained and tasteful 'little house' in which an array of his firm's products were exhibited – hand-made, fashionable goods combined in a personal and harmonious series of settings. Although living in London by this time he was still very much associated with the Glasgow School of Art.^{vi}

The most substantial Glasgow Style exhibit was the pavilion of the furnishing firm Wylie & Lochhead which represented a major investment of some £2,500 in what the firm perceived to be a growing middle class market for the New Art, both locally and further afield. (They had branches in London and Paris and agents worldwide.) Each of the four rooms in the pavilion was entrusted to a single designer - the dining room to John Ednie, the library and bedroom to George Logan, and the drawing room to E A Taylor – all of whom were associated with the Glasgow School of Art. As is so often the case with such exhibits it is difficult to quantify sales that resulted, other than a documented commission for a house in Birmingham, and sales of certain items to private and institutional customers in Hungary, Italy and Germany. It is clear from examination of subsequent trade catalogues, however, that various items launched at the exhibition were put into wider production.

Glasgow – Moscow

Signs of Glasgow's New Art may have been relatively muted and diffused in the 1901 exhibition, but it was this occasion that led directly to the appearance of Scottish work in Budapest and Moscow. The strong links between Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Vienna have been constantly reiterated, but the group of exhibitions I am discussing also reveals that the European context of the Glasgow Style was far more wide-ranging, particularly with respect to centres in Central and Eastern Europe.

It was Glasgow that hosted an extraordinary and massive manifestation of Russian culture - more extensive than that at Paris 1900, and the first time that this 'comparatively sealed up state' had been officially represented in Britain.^{vii} The exotic style, stunning colours and sheer size of the Russian section, outshone all other foreign exhibitors, leading one critic to describe the event as 'a Scotto-Russian more than a comprehensively international exhibition'.^{viii} The art critic of the *Architectural Review* saw signs of the 'malady' of *l'Art Nouveau* in the 'lurid and fantastic display' of Wylie & Lochhead's Pavilion, but this exhibit paled in comparison to the 'monstrous decorations' of the Russian booths that made everything else seem quiet. The architectural designs of Feodor Shekhtel offered a chance to view the New Art 'through Slavic

distorting glasses'.^{ix} According to one commentator, the strange painted decorations by artists of the famous Stroganov School were persistently mistaken for the work of Glasgow Style designers.^x Perceived links between the Russian and Scottish manifestations of the New Art were certainly evident in the pathologised language used by the English designer-critic Lewis Day, who accused both of 'wilfulness' and 'affectation', describing Shekhtel's designs as 'an outrageous display of eccentricity ... mad imaginings of the newest of new artists, in short, an architectural nightmare'; Mackintosh, meanwhile, made no attempt to make his obscure symbolism 'intelligible to a mere southerner'.^{xi}

When asked to explain their colossal investment of £30,000 the Russian Chief Commissioner Lodijensky did not beat about the bush: ' "Business", tersely replied his Excellency, after puffing for a second on one of those quaint Russian cigarettes.'^{xii} Projecting a strong, modern national or civic identity was no longer being viewed as mere chauvinistic eccentricity, but a recognised commercial strategy in the competition for international markets. The spectacular commodity aesthetic of western capitalism underpinned the whole exhibition phenomenon.

There were three large pavilions devoted to Forestry, Mining and Agriculture, with two of the smaller ones exhibiting displays of cereals and flour-milling. Glasgow had strong trading links with Russia, particularly in the importation of timber. About 70% of all timber exported from Archangel came to Britain, most of it through Scotland. The Russian Village, with its polychrome wooden structures built by a troop of 230 imported peasant carpenters, was a glorification of timber and timber-working which held a profound appeal for the local Scottish populace.

At a time when references to Russia in the British press focussed on student riots, anarchist activity, and border warfare with China, potential investors needed reassurance. The Russian authorities wished to counteract the western perception of their nation as industrially backward and politically unstable. The avant-garde architect Shekhtel was already identified with progressive liberation politics and the new manufacturing elites in Moscow.^{xiii} His theatrical, stage-set propaganda was ideally suited to the context of an exhibition. The single most striking feature was the use of brilliant colour that must have accentuated the contrast with the icing-cake whiteness of the main buildings by James Miller.

At the same time, George Walton's design for a fashionable branch of Kodak in Moscow was also beginning to familiarise a Russian audience with Glasgow's New Art. Then in December 1902 Shekhtel and his associates invited Mackintosh and the Macdonalds to exhibit in Moscow. (The table which Mackintosh designed specially for the exhibition is now displayed in Glasgow University's Hunterian Art Gallery, as is a cabinet shown on this occasion.)

Glasgow - Budapest

The more extensive display of Glaswegian work that took place in Budapest in 1902 was also in many ways a spin-off from Glasgow 1901. Mackintosh's exhibits at the Vienna Secession in 1900 had attracted Hungarian attention, and armed with letters of introduction from the Scottish Office the director of the Hungarian Decorative Arts Museum, Ernő Radisics, visited the Glasgow exhibition in connection with his plans for an exhibition of British Arts and Crafts to be held in the National Museum of Decorative Arts in Budapest. Until this point his organising committee at the British end had been heavily London-based, but following Radisics's visit, Fra Newbery began to commandeer the process, with the result that Glasgow material ended up dominating the final selection, much of it drawn from Glasgow 1901. The whole exhibition, including English work, was assembled and despatched to Hungary from Glasgow.

Apart from designing the catalogue cover, Walton sent a hoarding to advertise the exhibition outside the Museum (originally for Kodak's Regent Street London branch); also a bedroom setting, and the Eros panel that had been shown in Glasgow. The Wylie & Lochhead pavilion was despatched in its entirety, and given pride of place at the core of the Budapest exhibition. The exhibition was given extensive coverage in the Hungarian press although the critical reception was somewhat mixed – some saw these furnishings and interiors as too luxurious.^{xiv} There was general consensus as to the originality of the Scottish material, however, and items were purchased for the national Hungarian collections like chairs by Walton and Taylor; Macdonald embroidery, and stained glass by the firm of Guthrie & Wells. The leading Hungarian designer Miksa Róth purchased an electrolier from the Wylie & Lochhead pavilion for his own house. His interest in contemporary Scottish design at this time was also evident in several very Glasgow-looking stained glass panels produced in his studios. Critics commented on the distinctive Scottish character of the Glasgow exhibits and the fact that they could be distinguished easily from the English contribution.

This divide had been still more clearly stated at the international exhibition held in Turin that same year. Interestingly, many critics also pointed to an affinity between Hungarian and Scottish work on this occasion. Walter Crane, for example, observed in *The Magazine of Art*, 'The Hungarian quickness in adopting the

forms and methods of expression of the New Art, and their extraordinary resource and technique in most of the arts and crafts—more especially in the pottery of Izolnay [sic]—were remarkable. No less characteristic, though practically the expression of a single group or school, was the Scottish section, in the austerity and simplicity of its ensemble, not albeit unmixed in its details with certain imported elements from Japan and the East.^{xv} A similar comparison was made by Alfredo Melani in the *Studio* magazine, and echoed in the Hungarian press.^{xvi} Many photographs of Glasgow work at the exhibitions both in Budapest and Turin were published in the magazine *Magyar Iparművészet* [Hungarian Applied Arts] and in pattern books (*Mintalapok*) circulated to design and craft schools throughout Hungary by the Ministry of Culture.

Glasgow - Turin

For the first time in an international exhibition held overseas, Scotland participated as an independent entity. Despite being a financial failure, this exhibit was a landmark in projecting distinct image of Scotland as innovatory and independent, urban and sophisticated. 'Scottishness' and 'local character' were mentioned in many reviews. The three rooms of the Scottish section were tucked away in a peripheral corner of the shed-like halls, but Mackintosh's cheap and effective remodelling of this unpromising space with a series of vertical stencilled banners gave the displays an immediate visual and spatial coherence. The exhibits were sparingly hung and arranged, with the rigorously simple forms of the larger pieces of furniture offset by bursts of decorative detail.

Historians' attention has focussed on the contribution of the Four (Mackintosh, McNair and the Macdonald sisters) – in particular the Rose Boudoir and the Lady's Writing Room - but in a third room was work by over fifty other contributors, virtually all of whom were connected with the Glasgow School of Art. In this sense the displays provided a tangible statement of the innovatory educational philosophy and aesthetic principles within this institution, and presented a more comprehensive display of Glasgow's New Art than that of the previous year in Glasgow. Female contributors dominated, many of them now earning independent livelihoods from the production decorative arts, deploying a range of techniques that reflected teaching in the Technical Studios that had been established by Newbery in 1892. Unity of motif and colour in the selection helped to integrate the displays visually. Organic imagery combined with literary, medievalising themes was particularly apparent in the books, embroidery and stained glass on display, contributing to the spiritual, other-worldly feel noted by commentators.

Inevitably the Scottish displays benefited from comparison with the tired and staid appearance of the English section, much of it featuring the work of Walter Crane, which had been doing the rounds for a couple of years in an exhibition that started in Budapest.^{xvii} In a polite but devastating review of the English contribution published in the *Studio*, Newbery implicitly drew attention to the innovative aspects of the Scottish installation without having to promote his own role as its organiser.^{xviii} Having enumerated Crane's undoubted strengths, Newbery moved in for the kill: 'Here are two large galleries hung about with a collection of Crane's work, that has made a tour of some of the mid-European cities ... Where is the art in all this? What of the architecture which is the root and basis of all things artistic? What of the house for which all these objects were made, or of the room that, decorated by them, was to be further enriched of them?' The adjacent gallery organised by the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society likewise demonstrated 'an utter absence of the axiom that the care for the setting of an object should be in direct ratio to the value of the object itself.'

Bits and pieces of Glasgow design were sold, some to private clients drawn from a discriminating elite, like the critic and entrepreneur Meier Graefe, and others to decorative arts museums. Like the exhibition overall, however, the Scottish Section was a financial failure. But it had not been conceived as an exercise in design for sales. The rooms presented more of a meditation on the nature of the modern domestic environment than a series of blueprints that could be translated directly into production. The selections were intended to convey an educational and aesthetic idea – a foretaste of where the future might lead.

Conclusion

It is perhaps ironic that it should have been Turin and Budapest that provided the context for the most comprehensive and coherent expressions of the new 'Glasgow Style' rather than the 1901 exhibition held on the designers' home territory. Nevertheless in different ways all these exhibitions of 1901-3 served to underline Scotland's difference and independence from England. On a symbolic level, the displays inverted the 'core-periphery' relationship between Scotland and her dominant partner. Not for long, however. At the Saint Louis World's Fair in 1904, it was not the Glasgow Style exhibits that attracted attention so much as a full-scale recreation of Robert Burns' Cottage that reasserted a romantic view of Scotland as a colonial dependency.

Despite the ephemeral nature of these events, they were effective as gigantic public-relations machines, addressing multiple interpretative audiences at home and abroad, and spawning a huge volume of printed

ephemera like postcards - a genre boosted by exhibitions - also adverts, catalogues, photos and souvenirs. In this way exhibitions were mediated through what Benedict Anderson has termed 'print capitalism'. Also important is their permanent legacy in the form of the exhibits that passed into public and private collections around the world. In the context of civic and national museums, such objects and documentation have become part of institutionalised narratives of art and design history that inform popular perceptions of national traditions; also benchmarks for commercial and art historical attributions. Exhibitions of these exhibitions have ensured their importance as a self-perpetuating form of representation. When building up holdings of Glasgow Style material in Glasgow Museums in the early 1980s I always found it easier to raise funds for the purchase of exhibition pieces. Exhibitions breed more exhibitions. Participation in exhibitions validates the artist or designer and their works, creating a provenance that in turn reflects upon the judgement of the individual collector or museum. With the reopening of Glasgow Art Gallery & Museum in 2006 many Glasgow Style items once exhibited in Glasgow, Budapest and Turin will be redisplayed, and a recreation of the Lady's Writing Room by Herbert McNair and Frances Macdonald from Turin will form the centrepiece of an exhibition to be held in the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool and the Hunterian Art Gallery, University of Glasgow.^{xix} As historians, conservators and curators we need to be aware of the tradition in which we operate and be sensitive to the wider institutional, civic and national agendas underpinning the culture of exhibitions. The Art Nouveau network, like the exhibitions I have examined, contributes to this ongoing process, reinforcing links that operate on a personal and professional level.

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ⁱ See P. Kinchin, and J. Kinchin, *Glasgow's Great Exhibitions 1888, 1901, 1938, 1988*. Wendlebury, White Cockade Publishing, 1988.

ⁱⁱ See G. Rawson, *Francis H Newbery, Artist and Art Educationalist 1855 - 1946*. Glasgow, Foulis Press, 1996.

ⁱⁱⁱ J. Kinchin, "The Wylie and Lochhead Style." *Journal of the Decorative Arts Society* vol. 9, 1985: 4-16.

^{iv} Melani, for example, discussed the Scottish and English exhibits at Turin in both *Arte Italiana* and *The Studio*. See J. Kinchin, 'Hungary and Scotland: a Dialogue in the Decorative Arts'. *Britain and Hungary: Contacts in Architecture and Design During the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*. ed.G. Ernyey. Budapest, Hungarian University of Craft and Design, 1999. Also I. Sarmany-Parsons, "Ludwig Hevesi und die Rolle der Kunstkritik." *Acta Historiae Artium* 35, 1990-92: 1 - 28.

^v T. Howarth, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Modern Movement*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952.

^{vi} See K. Moon, *Walton, Designer and Architect*. Wendlebury, White Cockade Publishing, 1993.

^{vii} *Official Catalogue to the Glasgow International Exhibition*, Glasgow, 1901.

^{viii} *The Exhibition Illustrated*, 13 July 1901: 234.

^{ix} L. Day, *Art Journal*, 1901: 302.

^x *The Exhibition Illustrated*, 15 June 1901: 142.

^{xi} *Art Journal*, 1901: 277; 302.

^{xii} "Our Illustrated Interview. M. Lodijensky, Chief Commissioner of the Russian Section", *The Exhibition Illustrated*, 1901: 192-3.

^{xiii} W. Brumfield, *The Origins of Modernism in Russian Architecture*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991.

^{xiv} For example, J. Diner-Denes, "[The British Decorative Art Exhibition]." *Művészet* 1902: 324. F. Spiegel, "[British Decorative Art in Budapest]." *Magyar Iparművészet*, May 1902: 97.

^{xv} W. Crane, "Modern Decorative Art at Turin", *The Magazine of Art*, 1902: 4

^{xvi} A. Melani, "International Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art at Turin. The Scottish Section." *Studio* 26, 1902: 91. E.Csako, "A Torino Kiallitas [The Turin Exhibition]." *Magyar Iparművészet*, July 1902: 145 - 68.

^{xvii} P. Rose, "The Honour of Old England": the English Contribution to the Turin International Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art, 1902", *Journal of the Decorative Arts Society*, 1995: 43- 53.

^{xviii} "The International Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art at Turin: The English Section", *The Studio* 26, 1902: 251-9.

^{xix} To be accompanied by a book edited by Pamela Robertson, *Doves and Dreams. The Art of Frances Macdonald and J. Herbert McNair*, London, Lund Humphries, forthcoming November 2006.