M201 Scottish section for the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art, Turin

Introduction

Mackintosh was invited by Francis H. (‘Fra’) Newbery, director of the Glasgow School of Art and organiser of the Scottish Section of the exhibition, to draw up an overall design scheme for the suite of three spaces allocated inside the exhibition building by Italian architect Raimondo D’Aronco. Mackintosh also designed display cases for the applied art. One of the three spaces was dedicated to the work of Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald; in one half of this they installed ‘The Rose Boudoir’.

Authorship: Contemporary sources describe Mackintosh as designer of the ‘Scottish Section’ and, with Macdonald, of the Rose Boudoir.

Status: Temporary

Chronology

1899–1900

Winter: Architects of the Circolo Artistico di Torino and other local artists and critics propose an exhibition of applied and industrial arts in the city. The date is fixed to coincide with the Esposizione Quadriennale di Belle Arti (Quadrennial Exhibition of Fine Arts) which the Societa Promotrice di Belle Arti (Society for the Promotion of Fine Arts) will mount in 1902 in Turin. 1

1901

May: The exhibition, under the patronage of the King, is announced in the Italian journal Arte e Storia. Members of the organising committee are named. 2

September: A member of the executive committee travels to Glasgow to meet Francis H. (‘Fra’) Newbery, who is subsequently appointed delegate in charge of the Scottish Section. Fernando Agnoletti is appointed secretary and Mackintosh designer. 3

October: A majority of the contributors and submissions to the Scottish Section have been finalised by Newbery. 4

1902

February: The Glasgow Herald reports on preparations for the exhibition and the Glaswegian and Scottish contributors. The construction of Mackintosh’s scheme is in active progress’ in Turin. 5

16 April: Mackintosh writes to Hermann Muthesius that ‘we are leaving on Friday for London on our way to Turin. We would both very much like to come and see you and Mrs Muthesius and the boys.’ 6

29 April: Austrian art patron Fritz Waerndorfer reports to his friend Josef Hoffmann his latest correspondence with Mackintosh regarding work on Mackintosh’s music room at Waerndorfer’s home in Karl Ludwig Strasse, Vienna. He conveys Mackintosh’s good wishes from Turin, where he awaits Hoffmann’s arrival, and Mackintosh’s comments on the exhibition buildings. 7

10 May: Exhibition opens. 8

11 November: Exhibition closes. 9

1903

April: Newbery writes to the exhibition executive committee enclosing the final balance sheet for the Scottish Section. 10

Description

Background

The First International Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art was held in Turin from May to November 1902. The ‘Scottish Section’, a suite of three rooms, including display cases, was designed by Mackintosh. In addition, one of these three rooms was dedicated to his and Margaret Macdonald’s work; in one half of the space they created the room setting ‘The Rose Boudoir’.
The exhibition was organised by artists and architects of the Circolo Artistico di Torino and local public officials concerned with stimulating a renewal of Italian architecture and decorative arts. A journal, L'Arte decorativa moderna, was established alongside it to chart the development of new ideas. The exhibition was held in specially constructed, temporary buildings in the Parco di Valentino on the W. bank of the Po, the site of several late 19th-century exhibitions. The exhibition conditions required that exhibits correspond to three principal themes: ‘the decorative elements of the modern house’; ‘the modern room in its entirety’; and ‘the house as a whole in its relationship to the street’. The latter was later abandoned for reasons of economy.  

Mackintosh became involved in the exhibition through Francis H. (Fra) Newbery. In September 1901, Newbery was visited by a member of the executive committee and was appointed organiser of the exhibition's Scottish Section. Subsequently, Fernando Agnoletti, lecturer in Italian at the University of Glasgow and a knowledgeable supporter of Glasgow artists, was appointed secretary, and Mackintosh designer. 2 Mackintosh had already proved an accomplished exhibition designer in Vienna in 1900, where he created the backdrop for the work of The Four. 3

With Newbery in charge of selection, and given the very short time scale, it is not surprising that of the more than 50 artists and designers represented in the Scottish Section, most were either staff, or past or present students of the Glasgow School of Art. Besides the Mackintoshes, James Herbert McNair and Frances Macdonald, these included designers of the Glasgow furnishing company Wylie & Lochhead (John Ednie, David Gow, George Logan and E. A. Taylor); Jessie Newbery, Ann MacBeth and their embroidery students; Talwin Morris; Jessie Keppie; Margaret Rowat; and Donald M. Stoddart. Aberdonian architect and designer James Cronum Watt was one of the few non-Glaswegians. 4

The Glasgow designers' participation was reported in the Glasgow Herald, which published details of the Scottish and English organisers, and Mackintosh's involvement. In May, his decorative scheme was said to be 'in active progress in Turin'. 5 The article reported that 'the majority of the Continental nations who are contributing have received subsidies from their respective Governments'. The Scottish and English sections did not receive state financial support; instead both were awarded special grants directly from the exhibition organising committee. The Scots' grant of just over £130 covered packing and transit of exhibits to and from Turin, and related expenses. Newbery, Mackintosh and others who visited Turin paid their own way. 6

Newbery and Mackintosh travelled to Turin in late April to supervise the unpacking of the cases and assemble the Scottish exhibits in advance of the opening on 10 May. They travelled first to London, where Mackintosh hoped to visit Hermann Muthesius. 7

A glimpse into Mackintosh's social life in Turin comes in a letter from Austrian architect Joseph Maria Olbrich to his fiancée, Claire Morawe. On 1 May, Olbrich dined with Hans Berlepsch-Vanadas (organiser of the German section to which Olbrich had contributed), Walter Crane (organiser of the English section) and Mackintosh, among others. Later they were joined by Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig of Hesse, patron of the Darmstadt Artists' Colony. 8

Design

The majority of the exhibition buildings in the Parco di Valentino were designed by Raimondo D'Aronco, chief architect to the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire in Constantinople (Istanbul). The form and colourful decoration of D'Aronco's buildings drew heavily on recent Viennese and German architecture, and Olbrich's work in particular, and attracted a great deal of criticism. Mackintosh himself was reported to have commented that 'the exhibition building is the most scurrilous theft from Olbrich in Darmstadt'. 9

The official exhibition map shows the principal building located at the S.W. of the park. Its focal point was a domed rotunda, which formed the main hall and entrance, and from which a series of subdivided long galleries radiated to the S. and W. These 'spokes' were connected and infilled with additional galleries and rooms, with a cruciform building attached at the far S.W. A pre-existing art gallery was incorporated on the E. side of the broad central gallery which celebrated Italian design. 10

The Scottish Section, smaller than many other countries' displays, was located at the S.E. corner of the older building, some distance from the rotunda and adjacent to its E. entrance. The allocated galleries were described as 'large, lofty and barn-like', with window sills seven or eight feet (c. 2.3 m) above the floor level. 11

As in Vienna a year and a half earlier, Mackintosh's intervention was primarily decorative rather than structural, creating display spaces and room settings rather than rooms in their entirety. The spartan simplicity of the Scottish Section was noted in many exhibition reviews. On entering from the direction of the rotunda, the first room contained on the left (E.) a display of the Mackintoshes’ work, including the House for an Art Lover portfolio, and on the right their Rose Boudoir. The McNairs' Writing Room followed, with a display of embroidery opposite. The third and largest room housed a general display of applied art arranged around the walls and in Mackintosh-designed display cases. 12

In all three rooms Mackintosh fitted white-painted woodwork, which further contained and subdivided the existing spaces. He applied picture rails approximately seven feet (2.13 m) above the floor, and above this level painted the walls and ceilings white. He covered the large windows with light fabric to diffuse the sunlight. Vertical batons divided walls into sections framing specific artworks. Short wooden screens matching the height of the picture rails were inserted at the sides of the two room settings. Those in the Mackintoshes’ room consisted of solid panels inlaid with stained glass; in the McNairs’ room they had an open, geometric structure. Bare electric lightbulbs on long wires were fitted throughout the Scottish Section and hung to the line of the picture rails. According to the Studio, these were not lit, but served to emphasise the upper spatial boundary. Long, narrow banners stencilled with attenuated female forms and roses were hung at the thresholds between the rooms.
The Mackintoshes' room setting in 'silver, white and rose' also included square column-like masts on the W. wall embellished with light fittings, and additional wall light fittings with elaborate reflectors. The McNairs' 'white and grey gold' room included a pink and green frieze above the picture rail. The third room in 'white and golden purple', included flat-topped display cases designed by Mackintosh, with grids of glazing on all four sides, recalling – on a smaller scale – his exhibition stand for the Glasgow School of Art at the Glasgow Internation Exhibition 1901. Though in a public arena, both the Rose Boudoir and the Writing Room were also highly personal spaces, drawing heavily on the decorative schemes of the Mackintoshes' and McNairs' respective domestic surroundings at 120 Mains Street, Glasgow, and 54 Oxford Street, Liverpool, and including several items from these interiors.  

The Official Exhibition guidebook included a brief description of the Scottish Section. Its author was apparently unsure of some attributions and the spellings of some names. 'In the first room we can see panels and furniture by Mrs. Mac Kintosh of Glasgow, and a desk with two beautiful panels, which costs 1200 lira. In the second room the Glasgow school students exhibit their embroidery and furniture designed by Mac Klintosh [sic]. In the third room we examine a screen and a desk in cedar, painted in grey, decorated in silver, by Ernest Taylor; a small mirror in beaten brass; Newbery watercolours; drawings in pen on parchment by Annie French; caricatures by Stewart Orr. In the middle of this scene we notice a display cabinet with leather-bound works on parchment, silk, etc. Amongst these items there is one in white silk with gold decorations which is worth 800 lira.'

Sales and prizes

The exhibition was described as 'a financial failure' and the Scottish Section was ultimately burdened with a deficit of £51 10s 2d. Although a substantial number of items were sold, each item was subject to 15% commission collected by the Turin sales agent, Signor Gineri, and the exhibition committee.

A significant proportion of Mackintosh's and Macdonald's work was bought by Fritz Waerndorfer and shipped to Vienna in November 1902. Among these items were the black writing desk, a cabinet, light fittings, and two plaster panels. The total sum paid was £178 11s 6d, the equivalent of around 70% of Mackintosh's annual income as an architect in Glasgow in 1902.

Despite the commercial disappointment, the Scottish Section achieved a number of honours: the Newberys and the Mackintoshes were awarded diplomas of honour; Jessie M. King received a gold medal; and a further five silver medals and diplomas of merit were presented. In making the award to the Mackintoshes the jury acknowledged their leading role in the decorative arts in Scotland and the influence of their work abroad. The prize, 'besides being a homage to the most notable artist-decorators of the Scottish region', served 'to indicate the most exquisite, simplest and most genuine form of a decorative art which is at once completely ideal and completely local.'

Reception

The exhibition was reviewed widely across Europe: analysis of the buildings and of each country's exhibits appeared in decorative arts and architecture journals as well as the press. German publisher Alexander Koch produced a special French-language edition of the exhibition catalogue together with photographs and essays, which also appeared in German in his journal Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration.

The English-language reviews of the Scottish Section repeatedly highlighted Mackintosh's overall control of its design, the significant contribution made by female designers, and the consistently austere and simple style of work presented by the chiefly Glasgow-based designers. They also analysed the exhibits in some detail. Interestingly, in contrast to the other international exhibitions in which Mackintosh participated, the British architectural as well as the decorative arts press took notice of the Turin exhibition.

The review in the Studio was the only one so far identified to focus on Mackintosh's treatment of the setting for the Scottish Section as distinct from the objects displayed:

From the first, the architect decided that three rooms without any exhibits should be in and for themselves matter for exhibition. Containing nothing, they yet should be material for study, and the exhibits, should be added enrichments, and should by treatment fall into the general scheme. The spectator on entering was to be struck by the fact that here was something novel and complete in its general ensemble, and was to be insensibly led on to examine in detail the work of its parts and the matter exposed for exhibition.

It described the Rose Boudoir as 'an epitome of the work of an architect and of an art-worker, labouring together as co-partners in the same scheme'.

Walter Crane, writing in the Art Journal, felt the 'Scottish Section really exemplifies the taste and resources of the Glasgow school' and described Mackintosh's design as 'quite characteristic in its somewhat austere refinement'.

In the Architectural Record, Italian architect and critic Alfredo Melani, who had been a leading figure in establishing the exhibition, described the Scottish Section as 'what is most spiritual and most characteristic at Turin', and the Rose Boudoir as 'the most charming thing at the International Exposition'. He also called attention 'to the great activity shown by women, married and single, in this Scotch section, which represents wonderfully well the ideas and efforts of the Glasgow school.'

William Scott, writing in the Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects, appears to have been the only commentator who questioned the need for separate English and Scottish sections: 'It may not be easy to explain why on other than merely personal grounds there should have been made the unnecessary and invidious distinction between an English and a Scotch section.' Like many others he remarked on the more accomplished presentation of the Scottish Section: 'There is at least some attempt at arranging the various objects in a sort of relation to one another ...' However, he was clearly sceptical about the Scottish exhibits: 'it does but confirm the connection that many of them must be "gey ill to live wi". We may comfort ourselves with the thought that in execution
Reviews in German-language decorative arts journals simultaneously praised and expressed deep-rooted scepticism about the Scottish Section as a whole and the Mackintoshes’ work in particular.

Alexander Koch's *Immedeckoration* pronounced that 'Germany ranks in first place alongside Holland and Scotland'. An extended report followed in sister publication *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*, where Georg Fuchs gave a sceptical assessment of 'Mackintosh's efforts' in Turin, focussing on the decoration of the Rose Boudoir, about which he was thoroughly unconvinced. He concluded: 'We would be well advised to observe Mackintosh where he can pursue his genius less compromised by external factors and the barbaric influences and nuisance of exhibitions.'

W. Fred in *Dekorative Kunst* described the Scottish Section as 'excellent' and the Mackintoshes and McNairs as 'delicate Scottish poets' whose work had appeared regularly enough in the journal not to warrant much further comment or analysis. He did however highlight the 'austerity' and 'asceticism of the quiet decoration' of the rooms, and the unified style of the Scottish exhibits, which he felt had a serious, clear spirit.

Writing in *Kunstgewerbeblatt*, Anna L. Plehn focussed on the exhibits rather than the setting of the Scottish Section. While commending the 'subtle artistic ideas', and careful arrangement, she expressed concern about the fitness for everyday use of the furniture on display, suggesting that a 'neglectful disregard and disinterest had been shown with respect to the purpose of the exhibits.'

Leopold Gmelin in *Kunst und Handwerk* stated that the 'austerity verging on violent asceticism' of the Scots could be considered an advance on the point of departure set by English Arts and Crafts, but he also stressed the 'morbid over-refinement' of the furniture. In general, he considered the Scottish work to represent art in decline.

In the 1940s, German painter and writer, Friedrich Ahlers-Hestermann, who had visited the Turin exhibition as a young man, echoed earlier comments on the Scottish Section: 'Here we found the strangest mixture of puritanically severe functional forms and lyrical sublimations of the practical. These rooms were like dreams...'

The exhibition jury, which included Crane and Melani, described the Rose Boudoir as a room of 'white, chaste severity' and its furniture and art works as a 'slender and shy body of decorative art', while the other Scottish rooms had a 'more robust tone'. Elsewhere, Melani emphasised in positive tones the simplicity, and naive and mystical mood of the entire Scottish Section, which he felt evoked the spirit of Shelley and Keats.

Leonardo Bistolfi, writing in *L’Arte decorativa moderna*, also associated the Scottish work with literary sources, specifically Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck, whose *Seven Princesses* inspired the Mackintoshes' later gesso panels for the music room at Fritz Waerndorfer's home in Karl Ludwig Strasse, Vienna. Bistolfi also remarked on the purity, simplicity and other-worldly atmosphere of the Scottish Section as well as its significance for modern art.

For the incredulous Milanese newspaper critic Ugo Ojetti, however, these qualities were indicative of a fragile and short-lived fashion; furniture had been made by amateur carpenters and the rooms decorated with poor materials. He concluded: 'All of this is not new art: in fact, it is not art.'

French reviews also acknowledged the distinctive style of the simple and harmonious Scottish Section, and praised the textile work, but expressed reservations over the practicality and comfort of Mackintosh's furniture.

**People**

**Job Book**

The job books of Honeyman & Keppie (later Honeyman, Keppie & Mackintosh) are now held by The Hunterian, University of Glasgow and include four volumes related to the Mackintosh period. The books were used by the firm to keep a project-by-project, day-by-day record of contractors, suppliers and expenditure. The name of a project and/or client is usually at the top of the left-hand page, followed by information about tradesmen who tendered. The name of the measurer (quantity surveyor) is usually at the top of the right-hand page, followed by information about payments to contractors and suppliers. All of the data for M201 is entered in the tables below.

Page numbering is not consistent in the job books. Sometimes a single number refers to a double-page spread and sometimes each page is individually numbered. Here, each image of a double-page spread is identified by the number given at the top of the left-hand page. (Images of all of the pages from the four job books can be found at Browse Job Books, Visit Book and Cash Book.)

The following information about M201 has been extracted from the job books:

**Documents**
Published

- Vittorio Pica, L'Arte Decorativa all'Esposizione di Torino, La Sezione Scozzese, Bergamo, 1902, pp. 211–34
- Riccardo Spigliati, Guida della prima Esposizione internazionale d'Arte Decorativa moderna, Turin: Matteo Artale, 1902
- L'Esposizione Internazionale de’s Arts décoratifs modernes à Turin, Darmstadt: Alexander Koch, 1902
- Efisio Atelli, 'Esposizione internazionale d'arte decorativa moderna in Torino', Natura ed Arte, 9, 1 October 1902, pp. 620–3
- Leonardo Bistolfi, 'L’Arte decorativa moderna', conference announcement, L’Arte decorativa moderna, 1, May 1902, pp. 143–4
- 'Kràische Umschau, Innendekoration, 13, 1902, p. 230
- Walter Crane, 'Modern Decorative Art at Turin: General Impression', Magazine of Art, 25, 1902, pp. 488–93
- 'The First Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art at Turin – The Scottish Section', Studio, 26, 1902, pp. 91–103
- W. Fred, 'Die Turiner Ausstellung', Dekorative Kunst, 5, 1902, pp. 405–6 (illustrations continue to p. 415)
- Roger Marx, 'L'Exposition internationale d'Art décoratif à Turin', Gazette des Beaux-Arts, 28, 1 December 1902, pp. 507–10
- Alfredo Melani, 'L'Art Nouveau at Turin', Architectural Record, 1902, pp. 739–40
- Alfredo Melani, 'L'Esposizione d'Arte Decorativa odierma in Torino, V, Inghilterra e Scozia', L'Arte Italiana Decorativa e Industriale, 11, August 1902, pp. 63–8
- Alfredo Melani, 'Di fronda in fronda, Luce e Arte', Arte e Storia, 21, 1 October 1902, p. 126
- Ugo Ojetti, 'L'Arte Nuova a Torino', Corriere della Sera (Milan), 20–21 June 1902
Notes:


2: *Arte e Storia*, 20, 5–15 May 1902, p. 64.


6: 16 April 1902 was a Tuesday. Berlin, Werkbundarchiv, Museum der Dinge: Hermann Muthesius Estate, letter from Charles Rennie Mackintosh to Hermann Muthesius, 16 April 1902.

7: Universität für angewandte Kunst Wien, Kunstsammlung und Archiv, letter from Fritz Waendorfer to Josef Hoffmann, 29 April 1902, Inv. Nr. 3997.


10: Glasgow School of Art Archive; letter from Francis H. Newbery to exhibition executive committee and balance sheets, April 1903.


14: 'Turin Decorative Art Exhibition', *Glasgow Herald*, 27 February 1902, p. 7; Juliet Kinchin and Pamela Robertson, 'La Sezione Scozzese', in Rossana Bossaglia, Ezio Godoli and Marco Rossi, *Torino 1902: Le Arti Decorative Internazionali del Nuovo Secolo*, Milan: Fabbri Editori, 1994, p. 536. The newspaper article states that Edinburgh embroidery and mural artist Phoebe Traquair would submit work and Glasgow architects Salmon & Gillespie would have their own room. However their participation was not realised, though a combined electric fireplace and clock in brass by Gillespie was exhibited. See Georg Fuchs, 'Mackintosh und die Schule von Glasgow in Turin', *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*, 10, 1902, p. 576.

15: 'Turin Exhibition', *Glasgow Herald*, 10 May 1902, p. 3.

16: 'Turin Exhibition', *Glasgow Herald*, 10 May 1902, p. 3; Glasgow School of Art Archive; letter from Francis H. Newbery to exhibition executive committee and balance sheets, April 1903.


20: See section 'B' on official map in Riccardo Spigliati, Guida della prima Esposizione internazionale d'Arte Decorativa moderna, Turin: Matteo Artale, 1902.


24: Riccardo Spigliati, Guida della prima Esposizione internazionale d'Arte Decorativa moderna, Turin: Matteo Artale, 1902, p. 41.

25: Glasgow School of Art archive: letter from Francis H. Newbery to exhibition executive committee, and balance sheets, April 1903.

26: Mackintosh's salary in 1902 was £248 9s 9d (£20 per month plus an additional £8 9s 9d in expenses). The Hunterian, University of Glasgow: Turin exhibition research notes; The Hunterian, University of Glasgow: John Honeyman & Keppie / Honeyman, Keppie & Mackintosh / Keppie Henderson cash book, 1889–1917, GLAHA 53079, pp. 71–5.


29: 'The First Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art at Turin – The Scottish Section', Studio, 26, 1902, p. 93.


Mackintosh Architecture: Context, Making and Meaning

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