
SECRET SYMBOLS AND HIDDEN MEANINGS

Through our work on the gesso panels in the House for an Art Lover in Glasgow my wife Jenny and I have studied the work of the Mackintoshes in considerable depth. This was necessary since we had to research what theme was possibly being illustrated by the nine quickly sketched panels in Mackintosh's perspective drawing, and then develop this to complete the series around the room with a further twenty one panels. The task was made all the more difficult by the fact that the Mackintoshes never wrote down anything relating to the meaning behind their work, so what follows is, therefore, a personal interpretation gained from our researches.

First, we studied their early years and noted that Margaret Macdonald had lived in the midst of beautiful countryside at Chesterton Hall in Staffordshire from the age of twelve till just before her twenty-fifth birthday. Local legend has it that the house was built on the site of a Celtic stone circle. Charles Rennie Mackintosh was brought up on the edge of the Necropolis whose summit is a pre-Christian place of worship and is right next to Glasgow Cathedral. Also, although he lived in the city, his father introduced him to nature, by taking Charles with him, when he went to work in his garden. Very soon it became obvious that his son was developing a strong love of plants and flowers. These early influences undoubtedly fuelled the Mackintoshes' profound interest in nature - the spirit, and the ancient rites and religions. Added to this were the influences surrounding them at the Glasgow School of Art. Fra Newbery, the Director, was a very progressive and enlightened teacher, who embraced both the Spiritualist and the Celtic revivals. He invited leading artists, designers, writers, poets and philosophers to give talks at the school. Importantly he also introduced Mackintosh and Macdonald to the work of Maeterlinck, the Belgian philosopher and playwright, who was to have such an influence on their work. All in all, a curious amalgam of Celtic, Egyptian and Far Eastern themes and symbols appear in their work from this period onwards.

I can only describe a very few of the secret symbols which Mackintosh and Macdonald used. The first is the scarab, which clearly had huge significance to the ancient Egyptians as a symbol ruling providence, directing the powers of nature, renewal and regeneration, and the endurance of the human soul. At the centre of Mackintosh's 1900 gesso panel, 'The Wassail' which is the name given to the feasting and celebration after the harvest in the autumn, is a hidden scarab beetle. It's very obvious once you've seen it, and is such a structural element of the whole design it can hardly have appeared by accident.

Mackintosh's 1896 stencil wall painting on the walls of the Buchanan Street Tea Room also provides a rich



*Line drawing by Dai Vaughan, showing detail of the scarab hidden in *The Wassail*.*



The centre of the Wassail by Charles Rennie Mackintosh c. 1898.

source of hidden ancient symbols being used in an entirely new and unique way. Here we can see what is almost certainly a stylised portrait of Margaret Macdonald. Above her head are seven lotus flowers and in the centre of the figure is a rose, which is an illustration of an alchemical rose in the watercolour study but becomes more personal and stylised in the finished picture, where it has transformed into what we now know as The Mackintosh Rose. She seems to be growing like a tree, or within a tree as the spirit of the tree. The central motif of the wall is a huge bud-like shape that appears to be growing up into the sun. It is however, more a beam of energy growing up towards the light of the sun and personified by a pair of eyes sharply staring out into the room. As the the beam or stem rises up notice the number



Detail of the Buchanan Street Tea Rooms stencil design by Charles Rennie Mackintosh, 1897.

of flower/mandala symbols at various spaces. These bear a strong resemblance to Eastern diagrams illustrating the various states of awareness as consciousness rises towards enlightenment. My belief is that here we can see illustrated the chakras as wheels of vital energy situated along the spinal column. They are driving a flow of physiological and spiritual energy from the base of the spine upwards to open the thousand petalled lotus at the crown of the head.

There are many symbols in the Mackintoshes' work which add extra dimension, fascination and interpretation. Nothing was done for purely decorative effect alone. All their works are imbued with feeling and meaning. I believe both Mackintosh and Macdonald were very aware of the type of sympathetic magic they were creating, and this is what makes their work so powerful.

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This is a shortened version of a talk given to the CRM Society at Queen's Cross, 16 October 2002.