

Audio transcript

In the Mind's Eye | Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh's *The Mysterious Garden*

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[12:16]

Juliana Capes:

Description is an artistic process; it is drawing in the mind. Creating images in our minds to help us travel when we can't, to help us see when we are unable to and to help us visit places that are off reach to us. Together we can slow down the process of looking and take small quiet steps together, through an image, through words and through imagination to where we are now.

So, let's travel from where you are into an illustrative watercolour from the National Galleries of Scotland's collection that was painted in 1911 by Glasgow based artist Margaret MacDonald Mackintosh. Born in 1864, Mackintosh was an English-born artist who worked in Glasgow at the turn of the century, and whose pioneering design work became one of the defining features of British Art Nouveau.

The artist has made a distinctive dreamy design, marrying romantic figurative elements of feminine and natural forms with imaginative stylised pattern and design. It has predominately been painted cool night-time colours, in washy veils of misty transparent blues and crimsons. Like a garden filled with evening bluebells, dusky Lillies and moonlit roses. Indeed the painting is called *The Mysterious Garden*. The painting is large for a watercolour, a squarish 45 cm x 47cm it is the size of a small cushion that would fit on your lap. It has been painted onto vellum stretched over board, which is a very smooth white luminous surface made from calf's skin, similar to very polished soft leather. The lustrous ultramarine pigment is painted over this shining white in delicate washes, building the intensity of its hue. Intricate black ink brushwork adds in touches of modernity, like geometric symmetry and the use of grid like systems popular in Art Nouveau.

The majority of the painting's square composition is taken up by a stylised image of a feminine figure whose long hair forms ethereal cloaks and veils around her body, falling about her in a soft bulbous feathery form. The shape these folds and drapes make below her head swell out like a fat bottomed pear or a pumpkin, with a spherical bottom so swollen that it fills almost the entirety of the square composition.

The softly pointed head at the top of the spherical form leans slightly to the right, onto the two thirds line, as if in a swoon. Here we can gaze on the dreaming figure's face, her eyes closed and head bowed to the right, as if sleeping standing up within a cloud and leaning on an imaginary shoulder. We can see her face, neck and chest, like a bright marble bust draped about with reels of sparkling blue gossamer. In relation to the rest of the image this bust is very small and not in proportion to the body of the figure, that swells out bulbously beneath. It looks like a white dove perched atop of a ghostly fairy-tale carriage. The face has a rounded shape, pale pink-stained rosebud mouth, fine long nose and elegant neck and neat chest. The skin is pale as fine porcelain and glows like moonlight. It has narrow shoulders that flow downwards and connect to make a shape reminiscent of the body of a bird, making a dreamy bluebird inside the feathery swathes of blue drapery. It is a very idealised and imaginative version of a young woman, reminiscent of Pre-

Raphaelite women of the previous century and of fairy tales and Celtic mythology of human animal hybrids.

To me it feels like an allegory for a dream. The figure has her eyes closed, as if asleep and dreaming, and she is surrounded by what could be described as a bubble. It feels like that moment on the cusp of waking when you still remember your dream. As you wake up and try to remember, the dream pops like a soap bubble does when you try to touch it. So in this watercolour the dreamer is still in her dreamy bubble, as if cosseted in soft blankets of hair floating in deep cool water.

All around her the systems and structures of the dream still exist, but are not quite comprehensible, surreal almost, as if controlled by a different dreamer's logic. A subconscious system of patterns and forms. Above her stands a row of eight white feminine heads or masks with partially closed eyes and white flowers on their chins. These horseshoe shaped visages stand tall on elongated bodies, as if soldiers on guard along a wall or tall upright corpses in thin patterned open coffins. The elongated long rectangular shapes stretch vertically below each face to the bottom of the composition, forming a strong geometric background behind the dreamer in her soft bubble. In places the bubble is translucent and shows this stretched grid structure through its milky tendrils. The grid-like background could be a tall wall panels with every second panel topped with a mask like face.

At this point it would be remiss of me to not point out that this reason this design background grid is reminiscent of the tall thin proportions of Art Nouveau architecture and design, is because Margaret MacDonald Mackintosh was an integral pioneering part of this popular genre. As the creative partner and wife of the iconic Scottish architect Charles Rennie MacIntosh, she was instrumental in many of his well-loved designs, as the majority, if not all, of his architectural drawings were designed and detailed by her. As well as watercolours, Mackintosh was highly regarded as an artist and designer of gesso panels and metalwork, collaborating with her husband on many of their designs. The background of this image is reminiscent of these well-known works, such as the gesso panels she made for Miss Cranston's Ingram Street Tearooms and Mackintosh's Willow Tearooms in Glasgow that feature similar elongated forms. These panels are now on display in the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow.

She was a fascinating artist and a pioneering woman. In the 1890's before her marriage, the then Margaret MacDonald and her sister Frances MacDonald studied at the Glasgow School of Art, where they worked together in partnership producing metalwork, graphics, and a series of book illustrations. Their designs were characterised by distinctive stylisations of human and plant forms that created linear patterns from interlocking limbs, swirling hair and tendrils. This kind of illustration was familiar around this time in the early twentieth century, stylistically descended from the English painter Aubrey Beardsley and the Dutch artist Jan Toorop, both of whom had a huge impact on Glasgow artists at the time.

It must have been an exciting and heady time for the MacDonald sisters, they were young art students with an eccentric and creative circle of friends, influenced by Celtic mythology, nature, and fairy tales. Her peers included Jessie Newbery, head of embroidery at Glasgow School of Art and Ann Macbeth, a respected embroiderer and suffragist. They formed an artistic group called "The Immortals" and developed a very specific style of clothing worn in Glasgow's artistic circles of the day. These clothes were not typical of the period. They were making floor length dresses from rich fabrics that were covered in hand embroidery or stencilled and decorated with roses and leaves and fancy collars. You can see this influence of embroidery and stencils in the background grid panels, that on very close inspection could be a patchwork of long embroidered sashes and or long dresses,

with highly stylised and detailed embroidery swallows, iconic Celtic roses and other flowers making up the patterns behind the dreaming bubble girl.

While looking closely at these details it's worth noticing an intriguing area. At the two thirds line where the figure's head swoons to the side the top of her head touches the chin of one of the mask-like faces that are spaced in their even row across the top of the painting. This face is slightly different to the other seven in three intriguing ways. All the other faces are evenly spaced with decorative panels separating them, but this face is pushed into the gap between the fifth and sixth face, almost like an imposter. This face has no white flower on its chin, but instead has a large crimson Celtic rose connecting it to the dreaming figure and covering the bottom quarter of the face. The last difference is that this face's eyes are open and facing forward. Perhaps this is the dreamer awaking?

The symbolic or narrative qualities of this work are beguiling and to my knowledge there exists no definitive written explanation. It is speculated that perhaps the work was influenced by the Symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck's play *The Blue Bird*, which was performed in Glasgow in autumn 1910. It took inspiration from legend of the "Bluebird of happiness" which was inspired by a book of traditional folktales published by the French poet Catulle Mendès in 1886. This reading would also obviously connect to our already observed suggestion of a bluebird within the diaphanous plummy waves beneath the dreamers' shoulders. But it is likely an answer to the mysterious garden will never be found, and the painting's enigma is part of its appeal that leaves the viewer in a dreamlike state themselves.

The MacDonald sisters also took influence from other popular zeitgeists of the time such as the Celtic folklore revival and the influence Japanese art, with of which are visible in the watercolour within the Celtic style roses and the balance of natural forms and geometry. The sisters worked together until Frances's marriage to James Herbert MacNair in 1899 and Margaret Macdonald's marriage to Charles Rennie Mackintosh in 1900. Both couples were introduced by the then head of the Glasgow School of Art, Francis Newbery, who saw similarities in the four's work. The 4 of them then worked collaboratively, so much so that they came to be known as "The Four" and became prominent figures in Scottish Art Nouveau. Charles Rennie Mackintosh's architectural career obviously became one of significant quality and impact, coming to be one of Scotland's best ever loved architects whose influence stands to this day. But Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh was always renowned in her own right.