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The Glasgow School Sisters who Influenced Klimt

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Despite being central to the “Glasgow style” of art, influential the expansion of the Art Nouveau movement, sisters Margaret (1864-1933) and Frances MacDonald (1873-1921) were both born in England. The MacDonald family, however, moved to Scotland when the girls were still young.

Due to their privileged upper-middle class background, Margaret and Frances received a rare female broad education in subjects ranging Latin to science from a pioneering school for girls. After their earlier schooling, in the early 1890’s the sisters then enrolled at the Glasgow School of Art. Unlike many places education, which still restricted and excluded the basis of sex, the Glasgow School was described as providing a more “enlightened” space for women artists. Here the sisters and their fellow females were allowed to work towards a career in art studying a variety of mediums, from textiles and embroidery to painting and metalwork designs.

Buoyed by their experience, Margaret and Frances left the School in the mid 1890’s to set up their own shared art studio at 128, Hope Street in Glasgow. The sisters worked collaboratively on a number of projects and their work developed a particular and distinctive style, as they drew heavily from folklore and mysticism for their themes.

During their student days, both sisters had met their future husbands. Margaret later married designer and architect Charles Mackintosh and Frances wed James MacNair, a Scottish artist and designer. Their marriages, in turn, lead to a dissolving of the sisters’ artistic partnership as Margaret and Frances began collaborative work with their respective partners, as was expected dutiful wives. During such work much of the sister’s own artistic input was credited their husbands. However, the sisters exhibited their work internationally. Margaret’s artwork was shown in Vienna, for example, and has been highlighted as a profound influence such renowned artists as Gustav Klimt.

Margaret never had children, unlike Frances who gave birth to a son, and this was influential on both sister’s futures. Margaret, without the responsibility of motherhood, was able to have a certain limited freedom and independence that Frances now lacked. The elder sister therefore received more attention and success. Also Frances and her husband suffered financial losses which impacted their artistic careers. It could be said that such differing paths are evident in the work each sister produced. While both artists focused on highly stylized women and symbolic female experience within their artworks, Margaret’s figures are perhaps more positively portrayed than the sometimes later lonely and bereft figures created by her sister.

Despite the difficulties encountered women, from restrictive gender role to artistic erasure via male spouse, Margaret and Frances MacDonald did however, both gain from an era of burgeoning feminism. The importance of access to education, professional status and the support of fellow women can not be denied. Both artists, in turn, require full recognition their vital, inspirational and unique role within Western art.

This was something Charles Mackintosh, husband of Margaret, himself could not deny. While he was the one who received international acclaim, he stated his much lesser known wife...

“Margaret has genius, I have only talent.”