

Dear Charles,

I hope this letter finds you well and lockdown has inspired you to come up with more groundbreaking designs. We are living in strange times indeed with much uncertainty surrounding the future. I am sure that the current situation has unleashed in many an artist an unremitting sense of the need to create and leave something behind for posterity. How lucky you are to have already established yourself in this way. What first interested you in pursuing an artistic career and when was the pivotal moment that you realised art was your calling? They say as a child you experienced regular bouts of ill health and I wonder if this is what led you to seek solace in nature and drawing?

There are so many objects you have designed that delight my eye. One of these is the exquisite 'Jewel Box' (c1896) which you made for Jessie Keppie. It looks so natural despite being a man-made object. It is almost as if this box could have been found 'growing' in nature such is the floridity of the lines on the plaque on the inside of the lid and the leafy stems which surround the sides. It has the effect of looking as though molten brass has been poured over organic patterns and has cooled over time.

My favourite pieces of yours, however, include many items of furniture, in particular 'Bookcase' (1900). The economic use of curving lines pays homage to Art Nouveau without imitating its overarching intricacy. The curving forms atop the loops of stems suggest flowers against a full moon whilst the small white blobs evoke petals falling in the moonlight. It is a deeply poetic image. One envisages the spectator of this scene brooding over life's important questions, a fitting theme for a place to store books. The overall simplicity of the bookcase and the use of a monochrome palette point to Japanese art as a major influence. I wonder where you first came across this style. Was it E.W. Godwin's Anglo-Japanese furniture? The stark quality and restraint of his sideboard certainly makes me think of pieces such as your 'Order Desk Chair for The Willow Tea Rooms, Glasgow' (1904). The straight lines and geometric shapes are also reminiscent of the chequered motif on your wife's 'Menu' (1911). I think it is wonderful how you both collaborated on many projects together. It must have been incredibly exciting to have travelled to Vienna with Margaret for the 8<sup>th</sup> Secession Exhibition in 1900. Praise and recognition from the likes of Josef Hoffmann must have given you a great sense of validation and encouragement. Hoffmann must have been so impressed since he came to see you especially in Glasgow in 1902. I wonder if you took him to one of Miss Cranston's tearooms and what you discussed and whether his art influenced yours. The high-backed chair you made for the living room at 78 Derngate, Northampton (c1916) seems to owe something to his 'Sitzmaschine' Armchair (c1905).

I must confess I have never visited one of your buildings but pictures of The Glasgow School of Art before the fires show a functional building but not without beauty. It was a strange but in my view successful hybrid of the Scottish baronial style and the Japanese aesthetic. If I had been an art student back in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, I would have used the library all the

time. Who would not have wanted to have sat down with a good book surrounded by such an interior? The rich colour and complexity of the structure of timbers and beams gives a certain gravitas to learning and I can just imagine myself in there, sitting in that central courtyard, the light flooding in through those gridded windows as I leaf through a tome and sketch ideas.

Your work has certainly left an indelible impression on me, so much so that I decided to design a cabinet inspired by your art. I thought what better subject than to depict a koi pond as it lends itself to a Japanese-style piece. I have used your straight and curving lines, the former in the bars of light and shadow on the water and the koi themselves and the latter in the water lilies and lily pads. I have also tried to recreate your cells of colour (these would be made of leaded glass) whilst introducing a Japanese feel by making the body of the cabinet mostly black bar the two door knobs. The clarity and hard quality of the cabinet reminds me of your watercolour paintings you did when you moved to the South of France. Paintings such as 'Collioure' (c1924) show a seaside village that is highly defined just like the pond. I hope I am not too bold in saying that I believe I have captured something of your visual idiom whilst staying true to my own predilection for abstract design.

I wrote a little poem to go with my design. What do you think?

### **The Pond**

In and out of light they glide

In waters without current or tide.

Under the lily pads they sometimes hide,

Swishing their tails from side to side.

They are like thoughts betwixt two worlds:

Worlds of sadness and worlds of joy

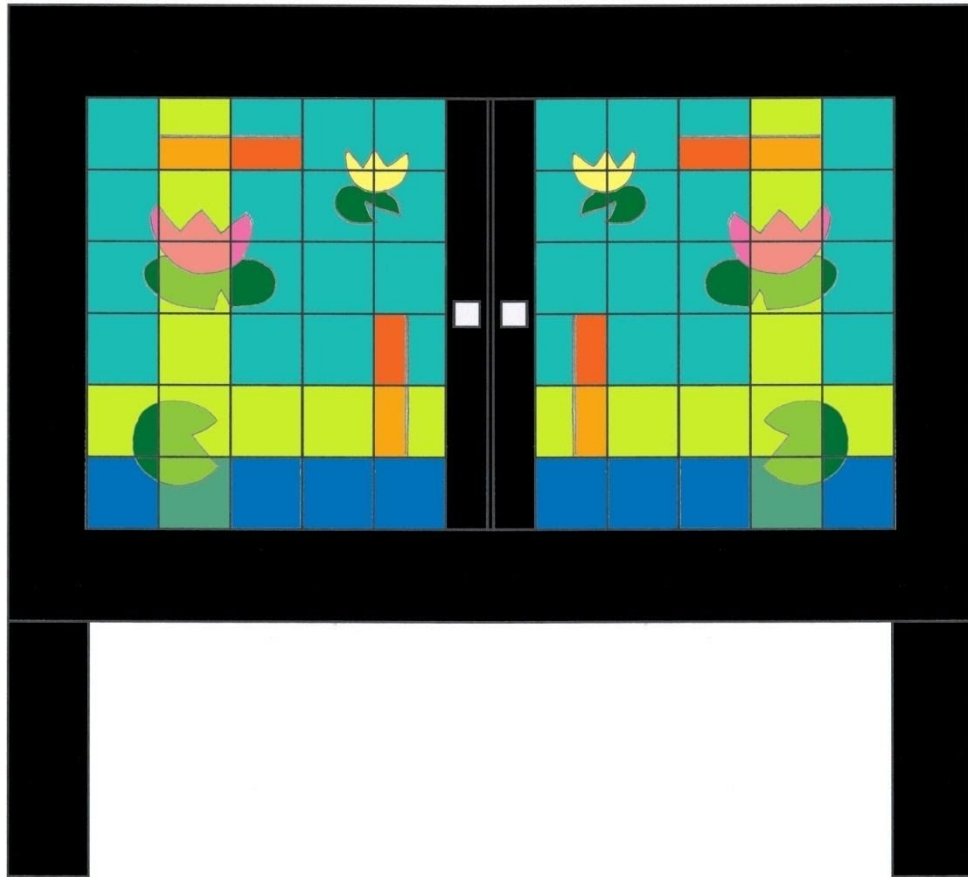
And many an hour I have learnt to swim

From a little pond of orange koi.

Well, I should go but I have one final question. I have been pondering the meaning of your famous words about artists striving to make their flower 'a beautiful living thing'. Some say you refer to the power of art to defeat death. Are they right? I cannot help thinking that you are also referring to love for every time I see flowers in your work and Margaret's, it is as if you have both gifted each other something 'more lasting than life itself' – an immortal rose.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah



**The Pond, 2020**