

Dear Mr Mackintosh,

I write to congratulate you on the extraordinary longevity of your success in Scotland. I know that you did not have an easy relationship with home nation, and felt your unique genius to be better appreciated on the continent. As with many artists, perhaps it was your curse to dream well ahead of the time and circumstance of your birth, only for the rest of us to catch up long after you have thrown down your pencil in despair. And what designs those pencils brought to life! Your use of colour and texture within your interior designs is unique and I do rather wish you would come out of your retirement to berate, with the full heft of your bitterness towards the conservatism of British design, the current monopoly of shades ranging from elephant's breath to arctic snow, and then from slate to pitch. Everything is black and white! Huge expanses of glass which, although radical the first few times, are now so universal they have nothing left to say. In your own work, every influence is carefully frozen in its essence, Japan isolated in the curve of a doorway, the sweep of a bench; the colours of the English countryside dyeing the sunbeams as they filter through stained glass windows; flowers which, in their abstraction, whisper with the easy elegance of Art Nouveau.

I wonder whether your current veneration in your home city fills you with as much disquiet as its failure to recognise your work did during your lifetime? Your watercolours, painted onto mugs, can be brought for £6.99 and (unsurprisingly) these utterly fail to capture the unique, almost ethereal, quality of the originals. The watercolours are my favourite examples of your work, so true to reality and yet so different. They are less overwhelming than the immaculately coordinated interior inside The Willow Tearoom and your other projects.

On the subject of your commissions: The Hill House. I am afraid I have a bone to pick with you. It leaks. You, the greatest architect of your generation, built a house in

1

notoriously damp Scotland and opted to render it in white, which looks beautiful but lets the water in. This, I am afraid, was a grave choice of form over function, and even during your lifetime the Blackie's staff had to discreetly place buckets around the place to catch the drips. Rather spoils the 'I thought through and designed everything from the dining chairs to the chimney stacks' aesthetic. In an attempt to stop the building collapsing like damp cardboard it has been shrouded underneath a second house, a

skeletal frame of bolted steel, hung all around with curtains of chainmail. Those involved venture that you might quite like its modernistic lines, but, knowing how notoriously pedantic and controlling you could be over the details of your projects, I think maybe this is wishful thinking. Still, the good volunteers of the Scottish National Trust would be *ecstatic* to have you visit the Hill House again, although they consider the possibility of this happening to be fairly small as you are now one hundred and fifty-two years old. They clearly have not realised the truth of the old idea that 'our dead our not dead to us until they are forgotten'.

You really are (forgive me for bringing it up) approaching a quite extraordinary age and I have no doubt you are shielding from the current crisis, hopefully with you beloved and equally talented wife, Margret Macdonald. I am sure you watched with the same wide-eyed horror as the rest of us as the Coronavirus death toll rose on the TV, white letters marching against a red banner to the threatening hum of the rolling news. It is a strange time for art, isn't it? There seems nothing more ephemeral, more indulgent, nothing more get-a-grip-we've-got-bigger-things-to-worry-about. And all the formal apparatus of art, the great hulking, breathing, circulatory machine of galleries and prizes and awards has shut down and slumbers in a kind of toxic peace, behind barred doors and turned off lights. What purpose does art have in this apocalyptic world? On the other hand, what do we have *but* art? Art to remind us of our humanity when the company of other human's is forbidden.

The pandemic, as well as giving us new words, has given us a catalogue of new images. The triangles of white masks on the masses, separated by a uniform adherence to the rule of distance. The toxic orange, red and grey of the little Corona germ graphic, abstract art for medical explanation. Perhaps you will be inspired to paint germs instead of flowers now, there strange form already half way towards the sense of distorted shape you made your own. Mr Mackintosh, what advice could you offer young people on how to exist in a world which doesn't value what we do? As someone who craved acknowledgment from a city which ignored him in his lifetime, who watched as in recent years their work was devastated by both fire and flood, who saw the First World War, what would you say to us now, about whether art is an indulgent frippery or a human necessity?

2

Perhaps the answer is already here, in the rainbow's children draw and then stick in the post office windows. Perhaps you have already dispensed all the wisdom we need in the oft quoted maxim of your style 'art is the flower ... life is the green leaf'ⁱⁱ. When the

leaves are dark and drought ridden, haunted by pestilence and fear, it is the seeds from the flowers which litter your work which will germinate into the next generation, and it is that generation, my generation, which will ensure that your legacy is carried forward in our art, and not forgotten.

Yours Sincerely,

Isabel Burns

ⁱⁱ Eliot. "Adam Bede by George Eliot." *Project Gutenberg*, 21 Jan.

2006,

www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/507?msg=welcome_stranger.

ⁱⁱ Brett, David. *C.R. Mackintosh: the Poetics of Workmanship*. Reaktion Books,

1992

