

LETTER/POEM TO CHARLES RENNIE MACKINTOSH
ON 152ND ANNIVERSARY OF YOUR BIRTH, 7TH JUNE 2020



*Charles Rennie Mackintosh's watercolour
'Palalda' painted in 1924*

Pitt Street, leading to Glasgow School of Art

Letter/Poem to Charles Rennie Mackintosh on 152nd anniversary of your birth, 7th June 2020

Charles Rennie Mackintosh,
So many hill towns you made eternal,
gifted us in exquisite watercolour
but in this medieval one, *Palalda*,
you bafflingly (and akin some grumpy God
or a cuckoo placing her eggs in another bird's nest)
erased some houses, swapping by pasting on
paper ones and then seamlessly merging.
Was it cathartic this fuse of two visuals?
Disenchantment with architecture taking
physical form that urged you to tamper
with that hill town's reality—or something else?
Initially something awry even in my layman's eye:
lowest house not same scale or mood
and in atmosphere more a modern bungalow
that's zilch to do with communal living
and thus at odds with house jumble above
or public feel of your childhood
tenements in Dennistoun, Townhead.

This appliquéd *Palalda* house seems more
a tortured yen for another structure on a hill.
Had *Palalda*'s tall perspective been familiar?
Had you started thinking of singular
Glasgow School of Art atop another hill?
In same baffling way, you changed spelling of your surname
and just like the enigma of this not-quite-reality
hill town, you never said why.

As you eyed houses trudging to sky,
were you legging it up Pitt Street visualising
yourself ascending steps to Art School's
imposing entrance that beckoned
to move upwards and then inwards
like the stepped streets of *Palalda* or a ziggurat?
Had those sleight-of-hand houses been
sudden nostalgia to relocate yourself,
see again Miss Cranston and her art tearooms,
feel rain, listen to Glasgow folk, or maybe
sit in a Chinese room in Ingram Street,
even recall *Japonism* with its habit
of texture, light and shadow to create
an interior evoking calm and organic?
Odd that long-ago in Clyde shipyards
a panic of Japanese navy engineers.
Were they, to you, not exotic birds
in your known place but something

inclusive in your collective soul?

As you soaked your paintbrush, did you see
those houses as nests, recall your first
nest with Margaret in that Mains Street flat
with its pure lines, subtle tones, ship-shape
interior at odds with nearby heavy-curtained,
dark, ornament-strewn Victorian homes?
You chose mostly grey and white, offset by
bright twigs and flowers, and for your bedroom,
green panels, purple stained glass,
so it seemed you lived within a
metaphysical, parading peacock.
Were you creating a disinterested space
so colour stressed?
Was the grey soul of Glasgow not enough?

As you altered *Palalda* were you also
evoking your wife when she was young
and 'Margaret Macdonald'?
Eventually, your style of watercolours
merged with hers and maybe your dual
works of art were your assigned children:
thousands of bright beauties thoughtful
with present and future, folks' needs,
and not the past and custom.

In that iconic photo of you
(the one 'they' always use),
the one with your Victorian cravat flowing down
your chest, you seem to be pensively looking to the future.
Was it you worried the future wouldn't recall you,
and you'd be wronged? Never.
We yet see you in the river of beauty you formed.

I'd like to think "the ends" didn't truly
come in London but that you're still loping
up Pitt Street in the Glasgow rain,
even still painting *Palalda*, longing for
your roots like a pulled flower, waterless.
Will you forever be wetting your paintbrush
in the River Clyde in memory
or am I being possessive?
You'll probably be saying 'Yes', and that you
belong to all and everything
and were never a cuckoo but have a universal nest.

To me, the River Clyde is where I'm standing
but I guess to you it's a brown God that leads to the sea.

The End