This elegant book breaks new ground. Published to accompany an exhibition of the same title, it examines the careers of husband and wife artist-designers Herbert (1868-1955) and Frances McNair (1873-1921). Surprisingly, up to now there has been no monograph published on either, yet their names have been well known for the last century. They formed half of the ‘the Four’, the quartet of Glasgow designers of whom the other members were the architect and designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh and his artist-designer wife Margaret Macdonald, elder sister of Frances. Margaret has also been relatively neglected, but, with Frances, she was the focus of a biographical study by Janice Helland called The Studios of Margaret and Frances Macdonald (Manchester University Press, 1996). Herbert McNair has received even less attention, with only a single article (by Mackintosh scholar Roger Billcliffe) back in the early 1970s. Mackintosh has always been viewed as the star of the four, his work as architect and designer casting a shadow over the other three. The book, and its accompanying exhibition set out to redress the situation.

The exhibition was a difficult one to curate, given that so relatively little of the McNairs’ work has survived. Herbert McNair is credited with destroying much of the work of Frances after her untimely death in 1921 and also his own. The book, on the other hand, is able to round out the picture, publishing images of work illustrated in the periodicals of the day. The catalogue raisonné which takes up a full half of this book is a basic list of all items known to have been made. Yet, although there is little discussion of the individual works, at least the generous illustrations record many lost pieces as well as colour images of the surviving works. It is arranged by medium, starting with furniture and interiors, proceeding in an unexplained order through graphics, metalwork,
pastels, textiles to watercolours. Some sections blend the work of the two McNairs (and where appropriate the collaboration of Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh), but others (graphics, metalwork) deal strictly first with that of Frances then items by Herbert McNair. The reader needs to work quite hard to catch everything.

For critical analysis of the work the reader must rely on the essays. There are four of these, grouped within the first seventy-nine pages. They are of varying length, scope and quality. The opening essay, by Juliet Kinchin of Glasgow University and Joseph Sharples of Liverpool University, deals with the cultures of these industrial cities. Macdonald and McNair studied, set out on their careers and ended their days in Glasgow, but they also taught and worked for almost a decade from the late 1890s in Liverpool. As modern, confident cities each with its modern base in shipping and heavy engineering, they seem perhaps to have much in common but there were differences too. Unlike Liverpool, Glasgow ranked as a ‘workshop of the world’ and commanded, as Kinchin puts it, ‘a greater awareness of, and demand for, design skills than in Liverpool’. Design-based industries made Glasgow but not Liverpool. Related to this taste and priorities in education and commerce also differed. This difference would be acutely felt by Herbert McNair in the 1900s and its effect finished his career.

Pamela Robertson contributes the second essay, a biographical and critical account of the McNairs and their work. This is laid out chronologically, interweaving the lives of the couple within the shifting cultural climates experienced by the pair. Robertson’s writing is perceptive and carefully considered, with quotations from contemporary reviews, information on lesser known exhibitions supplied, and the dream world of the artists’ images delicately delineated.

Like Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald, the McNairs met in the early 1890s through Glasgow School of Art where McNair, working in an architectural office, was an evening student. Frances Macdonald attended day classes. Socially and artistically they were well suited. In 1895, following the Macdonald sisters’ establishment of a city centre professional studio, McNair also set up on his own account. Henceforth, like Frances, he practised as a designer and an artist. In 1898 he moved to Liverpool to take up a new post of instructor in design at the new School of Architecture and Applied Art, to be joined by Frances on their marriage the following year. Their romantically named son, Sylvan, was born in 1900.
Up to this point and for a short period thereafter the story is an optimistic one. McNair brought with him a solid and wide professional experience in architectural and design education, and soon Liverpool was benefiting from his tuition in textiles and wallpapers, graphic design and stained glass. Frances, who to this point had worked mainly in beaten metalwork, graphic design and watercolour, now turned to jewellery and textiles. They showed in Vienna in 1900 and in Turin in 1902. On both occasions it was a family affair with their work adjacent to that of the Mackintoshes who themselves had married in 1900. The ‘Art Sheds’, where Applied Art had been based, had a semi-bohemian upbeat sense which contrasted with the London-controlled design conformity of Liverpool’s municipal art school.

By 1909 Frances and Herbert McNair were back in Glasgow but life was difficult financially and professionally. Frances from time to time taught embroidery and metalwork at the School of Art, and they both painted and exhibited work in watercolour to eke out a modest living. Their paintings reflect the sadness of a necessarily reduced way of life. McNair took to drink. Frances died in 1921, it seems by her own hand. McNair did not work again but ‘disappeared into obscurity’, running a car-hire firm then living with his sisters. Sylvan McNair moved to South Africa. Robertson’s account is subtle and sympathetic, but she only begins to lift the lid on the symbolism inherent in the work of both artist-designers. The McNairs were ambitious image makers, their watercolours not mere responses to poetry but quite extraordinary and individual works.

Janice Helland’s essay looks at the issue of collaboration and identity through an examination of the McNairs’ artistic interiors. The ephemeral nature of room arrangements, whether in the artists’ own home or (especially) those created for public consumption in temporary exhibitions, is detailed through examination of their furnishing components, an abundance of archive images and published reviews of the period. Helland seeks to place the McNairs’ collaborative rooms in an Arts and Crafts context, drawing William Morris’s Red House fitted furniture and enameller couples Arthur and Georgie Gaskin (Birmingham) and Nelson and Edith Dawson (London) into the discussion. She underlines the uniqueness and integrity of the McNairs’ home where the painter Augustus John admitted he ‘responded frigidly to the curly door knocker and the rectangular troughs fitted with night lights’, but he also commented that they worked ‘as they
played, in perfect unison’. Like the Mackintoshes, this was a partnership of minds.

Despite dealing with the important subject of visual and intellectual synthesis, Helland’s essay is perhaps the most fragmented and lightest of all four. Like Robertson, she touches on the symbolism inherent in the individual works as much as their overall presentation and meaning. An example of this is McNair’s pastel *The Flourish* and Frances’s *Frog Prince* which were shown in their 1902 Turin ‘room’. Most of the essay pursues the idea of ‘feminine’ space or the ‘enigmatic’ representations of women in their work. As with Robertson’s essay it establishes the culture for a proper exploration of the deeper meaning of the work then frustratingly lets go.

Annette Carruthers’ essay is an account of the furniture and metalwork designed by the McNairs. This measured, thoughtful piece is based on detailed primary research including exhibition catalogues and periodicals. In her analysis she draws out the differences between their work and their English counterparts, allying the McNairs to Europe, at least in style. McNair (like Mackintosh) was not committed to workmanship, but this was true also of many Scots practicing as Arts and Crafts designers to whom an artistic, Celtic imagination was paramount. Generally this is a thorough appraisal. Exploring the work when so few pieces have survived is difficult to say the least, and Carruthers provides a solid account of the range of what was designed.

Given the paucity of known work, this was a brave book to compile, and an even braver exhibition to present. The story of the McNairs is one worth telling, giving an all too real account of the fragility of lives in design. The book and exhibition took four years, but a longer monograph dealing more analytically with the lives and especially the work might have resulted in a more satisfying critical study. Perhaps it is already planned. Robertson says this is a survey and ‘a beginning’. As it stands, the book is a useful and valuable addition to the growing bibliography of designers who so richly deserve our attention.

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