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TITLE: A LOST MASTERPIECE IS FOUND IN VIENNA

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For years, all the definitive sources declared that every trace of Charles Rennie Mackintosh's only major Continental commission--the turn-of-the-century music room in the Viennese house of Fritz Waerndorfer--had disappeared long ago. The pioneering Scottish architect's total scheme and furnishings, as well as the large frieze by his wife and fellow member of the Glasgow Four, Margaret Macdonald, would be known to mankind only through faded sketches and written descriptions.

But in 1990, in the course of renovation work at Vienna's Museum for Applied Art, an astounding discovery was made. Behind a partition wall and a large chest--concealed in the dark since the Nazi era--was a wooden crate. And stacked inside the crate were the three panels of Margaret Macdonald's remarkable frieze, in many ways the focal point of the Waerndorfer music room: a ravishing illustration based on a scene from Maurice Maeterlinck's play *The Seven Princesses*. Now this resurrected[cont. on p.70]

frieze, after careful restoration, can again be seen in Vienna--and is published on these pages for the first time ever.

Fritz Waerndorfer was as tenacious a patron and collector of the avant-garde as could be found in Vienna ninety years ago. A friend of some of the leaders of the Vienna Secession, he was particularly loyal to Gustav Klimt. Waerndorfer had drawers full of Klimt drawings and owned some of the artist's best-known early canvases. Waerndorfer's sights went well beyond Vienna, however, and he owned twenty-four drawings and about one hundred and fifty letters by the English artist Aubrey Beardsley. It was his awareness of modernism in the British Isles that led him to commission Charles Rennie Mackintosh to decorate and furnish the music room in Vienna.

But Waerndorfer's life took a difficult turn shortly before World War I. The wealthy collector went bankrupt, sold his Klimts and, in 1914, moved to Miami. His wife tried but failed to sell their house and its furnishings. The most scholarly treatise on the subject of Mackintosh's music room, written by Peter Vergo in 1981, provides the following account of what was thought to have happened to the room in subsequent years:

On the basis of the evidence that has so far come to light, it would seem that the Waerndorfer music room was probably destroyed at quite an early date--perhaps as early as 1916. Despite continual rumours that this or that piece of furniture has turned up at some sale or in some private collection, not a trace of its furnishings or decorations has survived...

The contents of the Mackintosh room, including the Maeterlinck panels, were of-

ferred to the Austrian Museum for Art and Industry in the summer of 1916, but the museum was not then in a position to acquire them. The only further record of events is that the Waerndorfer house, presumably still complete with its decorations, was finally bought some time in 1916 by a Wilhelm and Martha Freund. The rest is pure surmise.... [One writer] also states that "a certain Herr Wimmer"--by whom is meant, presumably, Professor Eduard Josef Wimmer--was able to save the Maeterlinck panels from destruction, and that they were subsequently exhibited at the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Vienna. There is, however, not a shred of evidence to support this assertion. There is no record of any such exhibition having taken place.... On the basis of the surviving visual evidence, and given that this was Mackintosh's only significant continental commission, it is easier to share Roger Billcliffe's sentiments that the destruction of the Waerndorfer music room is "without doubt the most serious of the many acts of vandalism which seem to have pursued Mackintosh's work."

Precisely how Margaret Macdonald's panels ended up in their secret storage is a mystery that may never be solved. The Museum for Applied Arts built a new underground storage space in 1990, which is when the wooden box was found. The crate had no labels. According to Reinald Franz, the vice-director of the library and graphics at the museum and one of the organizers of the exhibition of the frieze, "As far as we can reconstruct, it was brought to the museum during World War II, as lots of pieces were brought to be protected here." And so it was placed deep in the cellar behind the wall behind the chest--without any written record that remains. Its protector may well have feared that the slightest hint of its location would have put it in peril.

One result of the panels' half century of concealment is that they emerged in good condition. And given the complexity of their construction and the elaborate nature of their surfaces, this is a state of affairs to be grateful for. The panels, which were signed and dated in 1906, were made on a wooden substructure over which a layer of gesso was applied, with plaster laid on top of the gesso. Then decorative patterns of more plaster were applied on top of the primary coat, and semiprecious stones and mother-of-pearl were inlaid in that.

The scene that emerges within Margaret Macdonald's creamy swirls shows the moment in *The Seven Princesses* when the central figure of the prince holds a dead princess in his arms, with two mourning princesses on his right and four on his left. The style has an exotic, Eastern look to it--not unlike Beardsley's illustrations for Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*:--with a density of curves that suggests a Persian miniature. It combines

the high sophistication of Art Nouveau with a fairy-tale sensibility.

Enchanting as the frieze is to behold, and grateful as we are for its resurrection, the loss is that it can no longer be seen as intended: as a single element in what Mackintosh and Macdonald had conceived of as a collaborative effort.

But the fate of these panels reflects the realities of our century. First they thrived, then they lived in darkness. The art world these days is full of tales of the reemergence of objects--usually thousands of miles from their prewar origins. This is the odd case of one such artwork that never moved far but still seemed lost. Now everything possible has been done to obliterate the tragedy of the past. It is the power and role of art to survive where people cannot, and the resurrection of Margaret Macdonald's frieze is one such victory.

#### Added material

A 1906 Art Nouveau frieze by Margaret Macdonald--made for a Viennese music room designed by her husband, Charles Rennie Mackintosh--was recently rediscovered and restored after 50 years of concealment. **BELOW:** The three panels, each measuring 60 by 79 inches, illustrate a scene from Maurice Maeterlinck's play *The Seven Princesses*. Details (clockwise from left) reveal the mother-of-pearl and semiprecious stones that were inlaid into the impastoed gesso surface.

**LEFT AND BELOW:** In the panels, Macdonald combined her signature pale palette with the whirlash curves, flower motifs and deliquescent figures that are emblematic of the Art Nouveau movement. Mackintosh's furnishings for the room have all been lost.