

# New Women and Decadent Women in the 1890s

## *Background Notes*

Professor Anne Anderson - 16 November 2016



**Evelyn de Morgan, Night and Sleep, 1878**



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## **New Women and Decadent Women in the 1890s**

The New Woman was a product of the fin de siècle, a time of prosperity but also social unrest and instability. The need for respectable middle class women to find work was partly due to demographic changes. Since mid-century the birth rate had been rising causing an imbalance in the population as more girls were born or survived than boys. By the 1870s the problem of the 'redundant' woman was causing concern. Many women were destined to remain unmarried; unfortunately the occupations open to them were limited. As practicing as an artist did not erode one's femininity this was deemed suitable, although women were often curtailed by medium (watercolours) or subject (flowers). Many women stayed within the orbit of the decorative arts, painting or decorating china. With the opening of the Slade School of Art (1871) women could at last gain a proper education; they were even allowed admittance to the life classes. With the emergence of the Arts and Craft movement in the 1880s women discovered new opportunities; skills, such as needle-working or embroidery, could now provide an income. More forward women tackled metalworking and jewellery making, as well as mural painting.

While women began to make a name for themselves as artists and craft workers (May Morris, Georgie Gaskin,

the Macdonald sisters and Jessie Marion King) their assertiveness was taken by conservatives as breaking social norms. As New Woman many women artists wished to preserve their independence declining to marry or have children; some went as far as supporting the suffrage cause. Edward Burne-Jones inspired a large following, often referred to as third generation Pre-Raphaelites: painter Maria Spartali Stillman, (1844-1927), painter Evelyn De Morgan (1855-1919), painter Kate Bunce (1856-1927), and painter and craftswoman Phoebe Traquair (1852-1936) all fell under his sway. He also inspired a younger generation of women: painter Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale 1872-1945 and the Glasgow Girls. Georgina Evelyn Cave Gaskin (1866-1934) and Katharine Adams (1862-1952) were important figures in the Arts and Crafts movement.

### **Glasgow School...Glasgow Girls**

Women artists flourished in Glasgow during a "period of enlightenment" (between 1885 and 1920). They actively pursued art careers attending the Glasgow School of Art which enjoyed a significant period of "international visibility". The influential and progressive head of the art school, Fra Newbery established an environment in which women could thrive both as students and as teachers. Women benefited from the new Glasgow Society of Lady Artists (founded 1882) which offered a place for

women artists to meet and also had exhibition space. In addition, many art school students and staff were involved in women's suffrage.

## **The Four or the Spook School**

Among the most prominent members of the Glasgow School collective were The Four. They numbered:

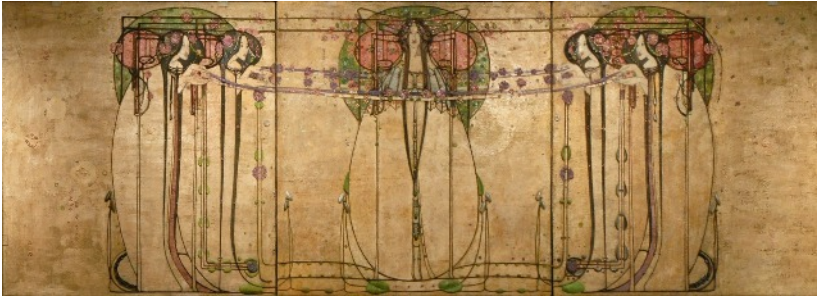
Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928), architect, designer and artist (Margaret Macdonald's husband).

Margaret MacDonald (1864-1933), painter, graphic designer and craftswoman.

Frances Macdonald (1873-1921), her sister, painter, graphic designer and craftswoman.

Herbert MacNair (1868-1955), architect and designer (Frances' husband).

The Four defined the Glasgow Style's fusion of influences, namely the Celtic Revival, the Arts and Crafts Movement, and Japonisme. Otherwise known as the Spook School, The Four made a significant contribution to the emergence of Art Nouveau. The name, Spook School, or Spooky or Ghoulish School, was originally a derisive epithet given to their work which "distorted and conventionalized human form"



Margaret Macdonald, *The May Queen*, Glasgow, 1900

The leading Glasgow Girl painter was Bessie MacNicol, 1869-1904, who formed a close friendship, if not a romantic attachment, with the Glasgow Boy Edward Atkinson Hornel in 1896-1897, who was five years her senior. Under his influence she lightened and brightened her palette. Sadly she died in childbirth in 1904, a fate shared by many aspiring women. Other Glasgow girls, including Jessie Marion King, Hannah Walton and Annie French, can be found in Jude Burkhauser (1990) *Glasgow Girls: Women in Art and Design 1880-1920*, Exhib. Cat. (Glasgow: Canongate).

Concurrently Art Nouveau took Woman as the embodiment of Nature as its leading motif, as seen in the posters of Alphonse Mucha and the jewels of Rene Lalique. The female form was remorselessly exploited

with Woman invariably cast as a *femme fatale* or destroyer of man, as seen in Aubrey Beardsley's *Salome* and Gustav Klimt's *Judith*. The dancer Loie Fuller was seen as the embodiment of Art Nouveau; her dramatic performance at the Folies Bergères, was captured by many artists including Henri de Toulouse Lautrec. At the *Moulin Rouge* La Goulue (Louise Weber) and June Avril scandalised Parisian society by dancing the Can-Can. Cleo de Merode, Carolina "La Belle" Otero and Liane de Pougy appeared to embody the sexually liberated woman. Courtesans enjoyed celebrity and a lavish life-style, all too often dying in poverty once their beauty had withered. The New Woman raised the spectre of 'gender bending' as she was either a virago or a siren. Whether a professional artist or the artist's muse the modern woman caused much anxiety!

## **Books**

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Yeldman, Charlotte (1984) *Women Artists in Nineteenth Century France and England: Their Art Education, Exhibiting Opportunities and membership of Exhibiting Societies and Academies, with an Assessment of the Subject Matter of Their Work and Summary Biographies* (New York and London: Garland).



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