

Mackintosh Ladderback Chair

What Is a Chair?

In 1893, the young architect and designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928) gave a lecture to the Glasgow Architectural Association. In it, he advised his peers to “go straight to Nature” for their inspiration.

Around the same time, Mackintosh was beginning a fruitful relationship with three other students at the Glasgow School of Art: his fellow architect/designer Herbert MacNair, and two sisters, Frances and Margaret Macdonald. The Macdonald sisters were expert in painting and metalwork. The school’s director had kindly introduced them all to each other after noticing their similar artistic inclinations. “The Four,” as they became known, established the Glasgow Style. This aesthetic emphasized the vertical. It also included eerie human and plant images. (Some people called them “the Spook School.”) These curving images were distorted in a manner similar to that of Art Nouveau later in Europe. Yet from 1896 or earlier, one can also see highly abstract forms emerging.

In 1899, Herbert and Frances were married; in 1900, Charles and Margaret also tied the knot. All four continued to work together on architectural and other design commissions.

Mackintosh saw furniture as an integral part of architectural design. His Ladderback Chair of 1904 is in fact one of two duplicates. They were specially designed to form the two imaginary “poles” of the master White Bedroom at the Hill House mansion designed by Mackintosh outside Glasgow. These chairs cannot support casual or prolonged sitting. Perhaps one could lay clothes on them. But really they have a different purpose: an aesthetic purpose.

The walls, ceiling, floor, cabinets, drapes, and bed-coverings of the White Bedroom are all white or off-white. Apart from a very few colored decorative elements, only the two Ladderback chairs, and the dressing-table stool, are not white. Silhouetted against the white background, the chairs take on a two-dimensional appearance. Yet the two of them act powerfully to “organize” the space they are in.

The Ladderback Chair seems almost excessively vertical. This may have something in common with the elongated plant forms that The Four used