

Liberalized or Objectified?

The representation of women
in the art of Frances Macdonald
during the Art Nouveau movement

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Preface

This thesis is a culmination of my affinity with female emancipation and gender studies, which has been my driving force behind the research. With my passion for addressing the critical relationship between art, architecture, and women, I aim to inspire and educate both women and men about the qualities and contributions of women in the field of art.

I would like to express my gratitude to Francesca Savoldi for sparking my interest in gender-related studies. It has been highly inspirational to witness how she established herself in the academic discourse as a feminist researcher. I am also thankful to Jean-Paul Baeten for his critical perspectives and openness to deviating from the conventional curriculum, as I translated my initial inspiration into a feasible research proposal. Atria, the Institute for Female History and Emancipation, has been of great help during my visit to their library and archive. Their dedication to making crucial aspects of female history accessible has been truly inspiring. Lastly, I hope that you, the reader, will enjoy reading this thesis, as it revolves around a topic that I am deeply passionate about.

Abstract

This research offers an interpretive analysis of Frances Macdonald's artistic portrayal of women during the Art Nouveau movement, with a focus on the evolving societal roles and positions of women. Through a visual analysis of Macdonald's artwork and a review of relevant literature, this thesis argues that her works can be interpreted as an attempt to accurately represent the limitations and struggles faced by women, including herself, during the Art Nouveau era.

Macdonald's portrayal of women in her artwork was often ambiguous, challenging the prevalent archetypes of the *Femme Nouvelle* and *Femme Fatale*, which were commonly depicted by male artists during that time. Her artwork depicted women in roles such as lovers, mothers, or sexual beings, often portrayed as unattractive or sexually unavailable. This deviation from the conventional portrayal of women in Art Nouveau art was a deliberate attempt by Macdonald to present a more authentic representation of women's experiences during that era.

This thesis sheds light on the often overlooked position of female artists, like Macdonald, within the artistic world of Art Nouveau. By comparing Macdonald's iconography with the prevalent iconography of Art Nouveau, this research challenges the dominant narrative of Art Nouveau as a reflection of women's emancipation and liberation. The provocative nature of Macdonald's art, influenced by her affinity with women's rights, highlights her effort to voice a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of women's roles and positions in society.

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Introduction

Mysterious, unsettling, and thought-provoking: Frances Macdonald challenges the status quo of female iconography during the Art Nouveau movement. Her artistic portrayal of women pushes boundaries, compared to the archetypes of the *Femme Nouvelle* and *Femme Fatale*, which were commonly portrayed in the time's predominately male art world. They evolved during the early-19th and late-20th century, when women were starting to achieve a more emancipated status.

This thesis aims to explore how Frances Macdonald's artistic portrayal of women can be interpreted within the changing societal roles and positions of women during the Art Nouveau movement. To achieve this, the thesis is divided into two main components: (1) a broader contextual analysis of Art Nouveau iconography, with a focus on the *Femme Nouvelle* and *Femme Fatale*, to provide a general overview of female iconography in Europe during that time, and (2) a more in-depth examination of Frances Macdonald's work, specifically nine artworks from different phases of her artistic career spanning from 1890 to 1921. The analysis in this study will primarily focus on the themes of objectification¹ and sexualization².

The archetypes of *Femme Nouvelle* and *Femme Fatale*, which were prevalent during the Art Nouveau era, have been extensively discussed in literature. This thesis seeks to add to the academic field by critically analyzing the accuracy of these archetypes in reflecting the era's societal shift towards female emancipation, by putting them into comparison with Frances Macdonald's works, that deviated from these archetypes. Despite the lack of attention given to Frances Macdonald, and female Art Nouveau artists in general in the existing literature, Janice Helland's works provide valuable insights into Frances' artistic career. This thesis builds upon Helland's work by contextualizing Frances Macdonald's art within a broader societal context, and the dominant trends in female iconography during the Art Nouveau era. By this comprehensive approach, this thesis provides new insights

¹ Objectification is defined as the treatment of an individual as an object, resulting in a portrayal that is passive, submissive, and often purely decorative. In contrast, treating an individual as a subject results in a portrayal that is more autonomous, active, and assertive, acknowledging the individual's thoughts and experiences.

² Sexualization refers to the process of placing undue emphasis on an individual's sexual attributes or behaviors, which is often associated with their physical appearance, and may involve nudity and the exaggeration of idealized beauty standards. The contrary of sexualization would involve portraying an individual in a manner that is more neutral, modest, or non-approachable. The two themes of Objectification and Sexualization do not necessarily always co-exist but are highly interrelated.

regarding Frances' position as a 'New Woman' and how her works deviated from the conventional expectations of artists during that time. This addresses the current lack of understanding of the exchange between the female experience and the creation of art, and how female works can be understood as accurate representations of societal struggles.

Structure and methodology

This thesis provides an answer to the main question: *How can Frances Macdonald's artistic (sexual) portrayal of women be interpreted within the evolving societal roles and positions of women during the Art Nouveau movement?*

1.1. Social: The role and position of women in late-19th and early-20th century society.

Firstly, the historical context of women's roles and positions in society during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, specifically in Glasgow, will be examined through a literary analysis of primarily secondary sources. This includes an overview of the prevalent attitudes toward women, their rights, and their participation in the public sphere. This historical context is relevant to understand how it contributed to the dominant visual language in the iconography of the time, which will later be compared to Frances Macdonald's visual language. Additionally, it provides an introduction to the social context that Frances Macdonald was experiencing as she produced her art.

1.2. Visual: The dominant trends in the time's female iconography

Secondly, the prevalent female archetypes, the *Femme Nouvelle* and *Femme Fatale*, in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century (Art Nouveau) art will be explored, through a focus on the themes of objectification and sexualization. For this, a literary analysis of secondary sources has been used, with images added for an illustrative purpose. This analysis of the prevalent trends in the representation of women in Art Nouveau art is necessary to understand how Frances Macdonald's art differs from this dominant visual language, emphasizing her efforts to express an alternative female experience.

2.1. Social: Frances Macdonald and her position in Scotland's artistic world

Lastly, the thesis will focus on Frances Macdonald herself, examining her lifeline and personal values and experiences that may have influenced her art. This includes an overview of her role as an educated 'New Woman', her roles as a mother and wife within her marriage with Herbert MacNair, and her involvement in the women's rights movement. Understanding Frances Macdonald's personal female experience is necessary

for interpreting her art and determining her desire to express alternative images of women, which may differ from the prevalent imagery of Art Nouveau.

2.2. Visual: The representation of women by Frances Macdonald

Additionally, this part will provide an overview of the representation of women in the iconography of Frances, again through a focus on the themes of objectification and sexualization. To put this in perspective, this part will reflect on the prevalent images in the time's iconography. By integrating Macdonald's personal female experiences with the findings of this study, it aims to conclude how these experiences may have influenced her to express a unique, potentially more authentic, portrayal of women. The visual analysis involves a layered examination, which incorporates personal interpretation rooted in previously gathered knowledge, supported by additional secondary literature, primarily authored by specialist Janice Helland.

Results

2.1. Historical Context

2.1.1. Social: The role and position of women in late-19th and early-20th century society

A time of change

During the eighteenth-century, the Industrial Revolution contributed to a certain societal perspective on women's place and role. With the rise of industrial capitalism, the public sphere became important for commerce and professional life, but it was predominantly associated with men.³ The private domain of the home gained significance as a sanctuary of safety and domesticity, which was connected to womanhood's virtues of '*piety, purity, and submissiveness*'.⁴ This ideology of femininity positioned women as dependent, self-sacrificing, and passive, which was reflected in the portrayal of women in mid-nineteenth-century art. Gorham's analysis of Victorian literature and art revealed that women were repeatedly depicted as *innocent, pure, gentle, and self-sacrificing*⁵, confined to the private sphere of domesticity. Women were portrayed in modest attire, with a passive and submissive character, often associated with death or a deathless sleep (*Figure 1*). Generally, explicit sexuality remained suppressed in the time's art.⁶



Figure 1: Jean-Baptiste Bertrand (1872). *Ophelia*. [Oil on canvas, 89.5 x 181.5 cm.]. British Museum, London

³ Gorham, D. (1982). *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*. New York: Routledge. Page 3.

⁴ Fehlbaum, A. (2016, March 16). Cult of Domesticity . The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies [1] (no page)

⁵ Gorham, D. (1982). *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*. New York: Routledge. Page 4.

⁶ Werness, H. (1984). The Modest Maiden in 19th-Century Art: Evolution of a Theme. *Woman's Art Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 7

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the role and position of women in society changed drastically, as the legal and professional opportunities for middle-class women started to expand.⁷ A new social and cultural phenomenon evolved, the rise of the New Woman, as women began to assert themselves more in society and challenge traditional gender roles, for example by fighting for their rights to vote and to work.⁸ While women still failed to find wealth or reputation in a lot of professions, it became more accepted for women to attend higher education, to pursue ambitious strivings, and overall to be more involved in the public sphere. The inextricable connection between women and domesticity started to disintegrate.

Fin-de-Siècle Glasgow

While this transition into a new era was most clearly felt in *Fin-de-Siècle* France, it was part of a broader shift that was also noticeable in the United Kingdom. Around 1890, Frances Macdonald had the age of seventeen, as she moved to Glasgow. Women were beginning to achieve a more emancipated position in Glasgow's society, yet they were often not recognized as equals.

Women's suffrage was a major issue during this time, and women in Glasgow and other parts of the UK were actively campaigning for the right to vote. The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was founded in 1903, and its members engaged in a range of tactics, including demonstrations, hunger strikes, and property damage, to pressure the government to grant women the right to vote. It was not until 1918 that women over the age of 30 were granted the right to vote in the UK, and it was not until 1928 that women were granted equal voting rights with men.⁹

In late 19th century Scotland, women's right to work was limited, and they were often excluded from certain professions and industries. Prior to World War I, women were expected to operate in the '*domestic sphere*' of the Scottish society, and to complete tasks such as maintaining the house, caring for children, cooking, and cleaning.¹⁰ However, society started to gain higher awareness regarding gendered inequalities. According to

⁷ Silverman, D. (1989). *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France*. London, England: University of California Press. P 63

⁸ Blattner, S. (2015). Alphonse Mucha and the Emergence of the "New Woman" during the Belle Époque (1871–1914). *Ursidae: The Undergraduate Research Journal at the University of Northern Colorado*. Vol. 4: No. 3, Article 1. Page 5.

⁹ Leneman, L. (2015, Feb 27). The women's suffrage movement in the north of Scotland. *Northern Scotland, Volume 11 (first series) Issue 1*, pp. 58-70.

¹⁰ Hughes, A. (2010). *Gender and political identities in Scotland*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Tusan (1998), by the 1870's and 1880's popular British journals, magazines and novels widely discusses so-called 'independent', politically active women.¹¹ By the 1890's, feminist identity was a highly debated topic in the UK.

Frances Macdonald was able to benefit from one of the advantages of increased opportunities and rights for women, as she was admitted to the Glasgow School of Art, which was one of the first institutions that offered female artists a chance to higher education. According to Helland (1993), the School provided a space for women to develop their artistic voice. In particular, the school was instrumental in supporting the careers of female artists, providing them with education and opportunities that were often denied to them elsewhere.¹² In 1888, the first female student got emitted, Jessie Wylie Newbery, who was later appointed head of the school's embroidery department.¹³ In addition to admitting female students, the Glasgow School of Art also employed several female teachers.

2.1.2. Visual: The dominant trends in the time's female iconography

A change in art

During the time that Frances Macdonald was a student at the Glasgow School of Art, a period of significant social change was occurring which had a noticeable impact on the art world. The late-19th century is marked by a critical shift in the role and position of women alongside the emergence of a new era of female iconography.

In the late-19th century, the ongoing economic changes and new technological advancements brought about mass consumption and increased use of mass media such as posters, prints, and illustrations.¹⁴ Women were frequently used as seducers or role models in alluring images, in which seduction played an integral part. It is argued that the freedom from domesticity and the introduction to the public sphere meant that men

¹¹ Tusan, M. E. (1998, Summer). Inventing the New Woman: Print Culture and Identity Politics during the Fin-de-Siècle. *Victorian Periodicals Review*, Vol. 13, No.2, pp. 169-182.

¹² Helland, J. (1993). Frances Macdonald: The Self as Fin-de-Siècle Woman. *Women's Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring - Summer), pp. 15-22. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/1358425>

¹³ Helland, J. (2019). *Women Artists and the Decorative Arts 1880-1935: The Gender of Ornament*. New York: Routledge.

¹⁴ Allard Pierson. (2020). *Godinnen van de Art Nouveau*. Amsterdam : W Books. Page 9-33

became sexually fascinated with women, as they became objectified by the male gaze.¹⁵ The changing position of women in society, along with the introduction of new art mediums, gave rise to a new world of Art Nouveau women who were portrayed almost to the total exclusion of the male.¹⁶ In the 1890's, art critic Camille Mauclair acknowledged a new type of female iconography, which he identified as "*painters of the 'New Woman.'*"¹⁷ This female archetype, which Mauclair refers to as the *Femme Nouvelle*, redefined artistic theory in late-19th century portraiture.¹⁷

The Femme Nouvelle

In decorative art, the liberated and idealized character *Femme Nouvelle* developed into a more fictional persona, a phantasm. Women were repeatedly depicted with delicate flower patterns and muted pastel colors, which added to the character of ethereal beings (*Figure 2*).¹⁸ In certain instances, the depiction of women was enriched with an added poetic layer, that leaned towards fairy-like appearances, emanating an aura of lightness and airiness.¹⁹ Although the emergence of the *Femme Nouvelle* is sometimes regarded as a representation of the liberated and emancipated woman, critics have raised concerns about this interpretation. By portraying them as idealized, almost goddess-like personifications, they lost part of their human qualities, which can be seen as a depersonalized reduction of women into passive objects. Critics argue that the decorative nature of excessive flowers and ornamentation conveyed women as fragile, helpless objects, only suitable for a decorative function within the home.²⁰ However, the use of sinuous lines suggested a sense of movement and dynamics, which contributed to a less passive character of the images.

¹⁵ Thompson, J. (1971). The Role of Woman in the Iconography of Art Nouveau. *Art Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 2, page 158.

¹⁶ Thompson, J. (1971). The Role of Woman in the Iconography of Art Nouveau. *Art Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 2. Page 158.

¹⁷ Mauclair, C. (1899). La Femme devant les peintres modernes. *La Nouvelle Revue*, 2^d ser., I, pp. 190-213.

¹⁸ György, V. M. (1980). Some Aspects of Art Nouveau in Arts and Letters. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, No. 4, pp. 73-84. doi:10.2307/3332370.

¹⁹ van Dongen, F. (1991, September). De Vrouw als Symbool. 'Femme 1900': het vrouwbeeld in de Art Nouveau. *Alpha*, page 5.

²⁰ Blattner, S. (2015). Alphonse Mucha and the Emergence of the "New Woman" during the Belle Époque (1871–1914). *Ursidae: The Undergraduate Research Journal at the University of Northern Colorado*. Vol. 4: No. 3, Article 1. Page 5.

In the images of the *Femme Nouvelle*, sexuality is valued by creating an appearance that is sophisticated and elegant, dressed in flowy attire and encapsulated by flowy lines of hair. The positioning of the bodies, dressed in loosely draped and transparent garments, evoked a sense of grace and power and is often to be considered sensual.²¹ Compared to the restricted character of women in eighteenth-century art, this is considered to be the sexual liberalization of women at the time.²²

However, female iconography in Art Nouveau is characterized by ambiguity, due to the cultural uncertainty that marked industrialized Europe during this time. New scientific insights, revolutionary ideas, and the emergence of new social movements challenged the familiar perception of reality.²³ Women were portrayed not only as elegant and seductive figures but also as cunning or introverted women, witches, and seductresses.²⁴ These opposing characters of the goddess and the witch, the virgin and the temptress, later gained recognition as the duality of *La Femme Nouvelle* and her evil side, now referred to as *Femme Fatale*.²⁵

The Femme Fatale

The *Femme Fatale*, a dangerous and seductive woman, has existed in various forms throughout history. However, it was during the Art Nouveau period that the concept became especially popularized and consistent, appearing more erotic and evil in art than before.²⁶ In contradiction to the *Femme Nouvelle*, the woman is expressed as more dominant and assertive, as a subject rather than an object. The *Femme Fatale* reclaims her active and autonomous character by representing an alluring, dangerous woman, intent on power and destruction. She is often depicted with opulent hair, a menacing gaze,

²¹ Blattner, S. (2015). Alphonse Mucha and the Emergence of the "New Woman" during the Belle Époque (1871–1914). *Ursidae: The Undergraduate Research Journal at the University of Northern Colorado*. Vol. 4: No. 3, Article 1

²² Blattner, S. (2015). Alphonse Mucha and the Emergence of the "New Woman" during the Belle Époque (1871–1914). *Ursidae: The Undergraduate Research Journal at the University of Northern Colorado*. Vol. 4: No. 3, Article 1.

²³ Allard Pierson. (2020). *Godinnen van de Art Nouveau*. Amsterdam : W Books. Page 9-10

²⁴ van Dongen, F. (1991, September). De Vrouw als Symbool. 'Femme 1900': het vrouwbeeld in de Art Nouveau. *Alpha*, page 8.

²⁵ Thompson, J. (1971). The Role of Woman in the Iconography of Art Nouveau. *Art Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 2, p. 164

²⁶ Allen, V. M. (1979). *THE FEMME FATALE: A STUDY OF THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT IN MID - NINETEENTH CENTURY POETRY AND PAINTING*. Boston: Boston University Graduate School. Page 1-9.

excessive jewelry, and the symbolic presence of serpents, which enhances her allure while simultaneously suggesting danger.²⁷ Some of the most well-known examples of the *Femme Fatale* are created by Aubrey Beardsley, who has proven to be an inspiration for Frances Macdonald. An example would be the women in *The Peacock Skirt*, an illustration for Oscar Wilde's play *Salome*, in which the woman has manipulative qualities and is driven by her obsession with her own beauty and power (*Figure 3*).

Sexualization is embedded in the archetype, as the *Femme Fatale* is considered to be a seductive woman, who uses her sexuality to control and manipulate men.²⁸ This makes the archetype a metaphor for power and seduction, that combines freedom with erotic intrigue. Characteristic for the *Femme Fatale* and the danger of seduction is the work of Alfred Roller '*Het haar als valstrik*', which shows a male lover that becomes ensnared and gets suffocated by the flowing hair of the female figure (*Figure 4*).

²⁷ Allard Pierson. (2020). *Godinnen van de Art Nouveau*. Amsterdam : W Books.

²⁸ Stricker, T. L. (2000). *A comparative study of femme-fatale imagery and its significance in selected fin-de-siècle art and literature*. Arkansas: University of Arkansas. Page 5.



Figure 2: Alphonse Mucha (1896). *The Four Seasons*. [Lithograph, 18 x 25 in.]. Macklowe Tiffany Lamps & Decorative Arts, New York



Figure 3: Aubrey Beardsley (1907). *The peacock skirt in Salome: a tragedy in one act by Oscar Wilde 1907*. [Block printing h. 21,7cm, b. 17,8 cm]. Allard Pierson, University of Amsterdam, archive Tetterode, inv. K 10-184

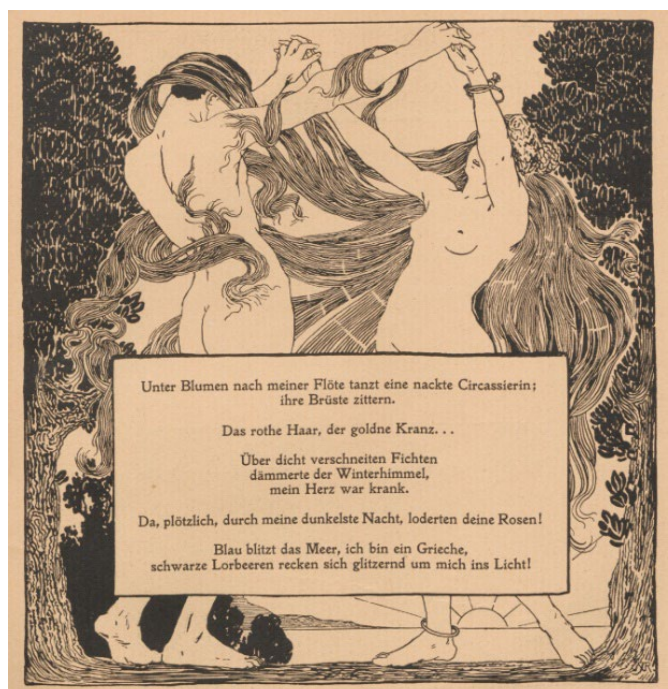


Figure 4: Alfred Roller (1898). *Het haar als valstrik*. [Illustration to a poem by Arno Holz]

2.2. Frances Macdonald

2.2.1. Social: Frances Macdonald and her position in Scotland's artistic world

Life path and family background

To better understand Frances Macdonald her motives behind her art, and how her depiction of women corresponds with the visual and social context of Art Nouveau iconography, her personal background has to be understood.

She and her sister Margareth Macdonald were born into a family with a strong artistic background. Their father, an accomplished engineer, was also a talented amateur artist, and their mother was a skilled watercolorist.²⁹ Art had been part of their lives from a young age before they enrolled at the Glasgow School of Art in 1890. Frances' opportunity to receive high-quality education was uncommon for women of her time, which allows for comparisons to be drawn between her and the rise of the *New Woman* in nineteenth-century Britain, symbolizing women's rights to education and employment.³⁰

During their studies, the two sisters collaborated several times. However, they managed to remain unique, both articulating different artistic styles. Especially in the iconography of women, her sister is known for applying a softer and less controversial visual language.³¹ Frances her early years at the Glasgow School of Art are regarded as a phase in which she deliberately sought out confrontation, and is interpreted as an attempt to reflect the position of women during that time.

At the Glasgow School of Art, Frances and Margareth formed close relationships with fellow students Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Herbert MacNair, who would later become their husbands. Mackintosh and MacNair were both instrumental in the development of the Glasgow Style. Together with the Macdonald sisters, they formed a highly influential artist collective in 1896, known as "The Four".³² As a collective based on equal contributions by both male and female artists, they challenged the conventional gender roles that were prevalent in the art world. Around the same period, Frances began working

²⁹ Helland, J. (1996). *The Studios of Frances and Margareth Macdonald*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

³⁰ Tusan, M. E. (1998, Summer). Inventing the New Woman: Print Culture and Identity Politics during the Fin-de-Siècle. *Victorian Periodicals Review*, Vol.13, No.2, page 169.

³¹ Helland, J. (1991). *The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle art: Frances and Margareth Macdonald*. Victoria: University of Victoria

³² Helland, J. (1996). *The Studios of Frances and Margareth Macdonald*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

from a shared studio in the city center with her sister Margareth, producing numerous artworks collaboratively.

In 1899, she wedded her husband MacNair and relocated to Liverpool, where she gave birth to their son in 1903. From that point onwards, Frances' life gradually took a new direction, as she embraced her role as a woman and mother. During this period she still created provocative works, but avoided heavy conflict, resulting in a more moderate approach. It is possible that this shift was influenced by her husband or her newfound role as a mother.

In the years that followed, Herbert Macnair faced several professional failures, concluding in the bankruptcy of the MacNair family in 1909.³³ At the time, it appeared that Macnair was struggling with issues related to alcoholism.³⁴ To achieve financial stability and establish new careers, the couple returned to Glasgow, where Frances tried to pursue her career as a teacher. Frances' persistent effort on pursuing an independent career, embodies the values of the time's *New Woman*. She demonstrates female autonomy and emphasizes women's ability to lead fulfilling lives independently, which aligns with Ellen Jordan's definition of the *New Woman* in her publication "*The Women's Movement and Women's Employment in Nineteenth-Century Britain*" (1999).³⁵

During this phase, Frances made several clear statements through her art regarding the role of women, particularly in relation to men. Perhaps this was motivated by her chaotic and unfulfilling experiences as a woman within a troubled marriage. Despite her efforts on pursuing a career in Glasgow, Frances did not experience much success in this later phase and her work remained relatively unknown. After her death in 1921, her husband destroyed most of her work, as well as his own.

Social engagement

To evaluate the extent of Frances' involvement in or awareness of the women's rights movement, as well as whether this may have been a theme she sought to express through

³³ Lyon & Turnbull. (2012, September 7). *FRANCES MACDONALD MACNAIR*. Retrieved from The Taffner Collection : <https://www.lyonandturnbull.com/auction/lot/111-frances-macdonald-macnair-scottish-1874-1921/?lot=131731&sd=1>

³⁴ Robertson, P. (2006). *Doves and Dreams: The Art of Frances Macdonald and James Herbert McNair*. Hampshire: Lund Humphries.

³⁵ Jordan, E. (1999). *The Women's Movement and Women's Employment in Nineteenth Century Britain*. London: Routledge.

her art, several people and events can be considered relevant. To the best of current knowledge, Frances Macdonald did not directly participate as a member of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) or any other feminist movement active at the time. Nonetheless, she was situated in an environment where such movements were active. Her colleague and friend Ann Macbeth, with whom Frances collaborated with on several artworks, was an active member of the WSPU.³⁶ Additionally, during the time Frances studied, her fellow female students were active in the Glasgow Society of Lady Artists, who aimed to promote the rights and opportunities of female artists.³⁷

The struggle for female artists to establish their credibility was still a pertinent issue at the time of Frances' education at the Glasgow School of Art. George Reid, the president of the Royal Scottish Academy, delivered a speech at the School's exhibition in 1892 in which he afforded no consideration for the female artist. In this speech, artists were referred to as male, and he even suggested that a woman could assist the male artist, rather than regarding the woman as a credible artist herself.³⁸

Frances got exposed to the issue of gender inequality not only through the Glasgow School of Art, but also through her family. This comes forward in a selection of letters that were exchanged between the Glasgow organizers of the Memorial Exhibition of Charles Mackintosh and P. Morton Shand, a London critic.³⁹ *"It is for these reasons that I hope that the exhibition may not be so arranged or announced as to give the impression that Mrs. Mackintosh was in any sense considered her husband's equal, or 'alter ego'. Outside of circles of loyal friends in Glasgow and Chelsea her work is either unknown, or long since forgotten."*⁴⁰ Margareth got repeatedly compared to her husband. In 1937, Morton Shand wrote that she was of *"decidedly inferior artistic caliber,"* but served as Charles' inspiration and collaborator in his decorative work.⁴¹

³⁶ King, E. (1978). *The Scottish Women's Suffrage Movement*. Glasgow : People's Palace Museum .

³⁷ Burkhauser, J. (1990). *Glasgow Girls: Women in Art and Design, 1880-1920*. Canongate Books: Edinburgh.

³⁸ Helland, J. (1996). *The Studios of Frances and Margareth Macdonald* . Manchester: Manchester University Press. Page 35

³⁹ Helland, J. (1991). *The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle art: Frances and Margareth Macdonald*. Victoria: University of Victoria. P 5.

⁴⁰ Shand, P. M. (March 1933). Letter from Morton Shand to William Davidson. Archives of the Hunterian Art Gallery, University of Glasgow.

⁴¹ Shand, P. M. (1937). Entry on Mackintosh in the Dictionary of National Biography 1922-30. Oxford.

Striving for radical change

Frances must have been incredibly passionate about expressing her critical view on women's role in society, given that the provocative female image she depicted brought even more criticism upon her than the average female artist typically received. Rather than focusing on establishing a successful artistic career, she was striving for change. The women she depicted were different, revolutionary. Her art is predominantly dark and lugubrious, with characters that challenge traditional ideals of femininity, with slim, ghoulish bodies and a distinctly menacing appearance. *"Painting figures with no clothes on has always excited opposition from a large portion of the public, but these ambitious enthusiasts in their search after truth paint their figures without even their flesh on"*, is how one of the viewers at the Exhibition of the Fine Art Institute in Glasgow describes the art created by the Macdonalds.⁴²

The works she produced made it hard for her to establish herself in Glasgow's art world. Alexander Roche, a Scottish painter and judge of the Glasgow School of Art Club exhibition, expressed his concerns about the designs by stating they *"should not go much further"*.⁴³ A columnist from The Bailie agreed with Roche's comments, and added to his statements *"As to the weird designs, to the making of which went impossible forms, lurid color and symbolism, that requires many foot-notes of explanation, the less said, perhaps, the better."*⁴⁴ In the same year, a critic for the Glasgow Evening News (1894) stated *that "it is difficult to comprehend why two young ladies (the Macdonald sisters), with nothing of gloom in their own atmosphere, should spend their time in designing ghastly caricatures of nature."*⁴⁵

Given the above statements, it appears that Frances did not produce her art to cater to a wider audience. Rather, her aim was to convey her personal experiences as a woman through her artwork. According to Helland (1991) her iconography of women can be understood as *"contextually accurate representations of women who were bound and restricted by a society that had not yet allowed women to vote"*.⁴⁶

⁴² Glasgow Evening News. (1894, November 17).

⁴³ North British Daily Mail . (1894, November 9).

⁴⁴ The Bailie. (1894, November 14).

⁴⁵ Glasgow Evening News. (1894, November 10).

⁴⁶ Helland, J. (1991). *The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle art: Frances and Margareth Macdonald*. Victoria: University of Victoria. Page ii (abstract)

2.2.2. Visual: The representation of women by Frances Macdonald

1. Early student years

The artworks produced by Frances during her early student years, spanning from 1890 to 1895, can be considered highly outspoken and confrontational. It was during this period that Frances worked most independently, as it occurred prior to the formation of the artistic group called 'The Four', and prior to the studio years with her sister. The pieces that she created during this time can be interpreted as means of expressing the prevailing social status of women during that time, with a particular focus on the themes of isolation and being trapped.

Girl in the East Wind (1893)

Girl in the East Wind (Figure 5), also referred to as *the Ill Omen*, is one of Frances her watercolors made in 1893. The painting uses a blend of greens, blues, and mauves to evoke a mysterious atmosphere. The woman's posture, elongated and aloof, suggests loneliness and detachment. The verticality, emphasized by the slender trees in the background, and her facial expression with her eyes downcast, underscore her silence and isolation. With her hands folded over her pubic area, and her feet and face in strict profile, she further distances herself from the viewer. As Helland (1991) describes, "*Her space cannot be entered*".⁴⁷ This painting can be interpreted as a reaction to the earlier described societal context in which women were introduced to the public sphere, and were increasingly subject to the male gaze. The *Girl in the East Wind* seems to claim her space outside of the house, while denying the prospect of objectification and desire.

Despite her unapproachable, introspective posture, she does not appear as submissive, passive, or dependent, which are qualities that were mainly assigned to women in 18th-century art. Instead, her calmness conveys a sense of security, suggesting that she draws her strength from solitude. Her character is not undeveloped or objectified, on the contrary, she reflects an emotional depth. In combination with her modest garments, and the absence of decorative elements, it is nearly impossible to identify similarities with the traditional iconography of the *Femme Nouvelle*. Despite the gloomy character, there is no trace of evil or seduction, as is typically associated with the *Femme Fatale*. Instead, the subject's sexuality is barely apparent, as her female forms are angular and suppressed. Overall, the painting creates a powerful impression of the woman's emotional and sexual withdrawal.

⁴⁷ Helland, J. (1991). *The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle art: Frances and Margareth Macdonald*. Victoria: University of Victoria. Page 105

Cover for the GSA (1893)

The topic of isolation reoccurs in Frances her work, for example in the cover *for The Glasgow School of Art Program (1893) (Figure 6)*. This time regarding two women. They are depicted sitting back to back, bound by a cloth to a slender tree trunk. The women reach for an apple, a theme that occurs more often in Frances's work, which would refer to the poisonous apple from Adam and Eve. The women are strapped, caught in their own hair, which makes a statement about personal restrictions. This is also a recurring theme in Frances her work, which suggests she wanted to vocalize the limitations faced by women in end-of-century British society. The artwork is created in a time in which feminist identity was a highly debated topic in the UK, however there had been no significant progress towards achieving equality in employment and voting rights, and the WSPU was not yet founded to pursue those goals.

While the sinuous lines and the long hair brings forth the decorative character of Art Nouveau iconography, the women do not seem to have a decorative function. The lines of the trees are curved and elegant, however still with a sharp turn included. The nude forms of the women are exaggerated, although they do not conform to traditional beauty standards, instead invoking a repulsive rather than a sensual character. As a result, the artistic language used does not convey an impression of elegance or fairy-like personas, like in traditional Art Nouveau iconography. Although the women are depicted in a state of captivity and thus not necessarily autonomous or assertive, their posture is active as they reach for the apple, indicating that their thoughts and experiences have been taken into account.

A Pond (1894)

A Pond (1894) (Figure 7) shows one of her greatest distortions of the human figure. The drawing depicts two androgynous figures whose features are harsh, with sharp and pointed elbows, wrists, and fingers. The figures are naked, with their angular joints clearly visible through their transparent robes. In the back, a group of figures emerges, which bear unsettling resemblances with semen. It was during this year that Frances Macdonald was highly criticized, for example by Morton Shand, as mentioned in the previous chapter.

The way Frances combines nudity with harshness and sexlessness, satirizes the Victorian woman, as portrayed in earlier art. She distances her work from the prevailing standards of female beauty. The women in the drawing, with their pointed chins, convey a dark and aggressive character reminiscent of the *Femme Fatale*. However, unlike the *Femme Fatale*, their aggression is not seductive or alluring, but rather a result of external pressures and restrictions. Their bodies cannot be considered sensual or erotic. The distortion of human

forms nearly makes them into fictional caricatures, yet they do not reflect the ethereal, light, fairy-like persona as seen in traditional Art Nouveau iconography.

2. Collaborative period

As stated in the previous chapter, there had been a turning point in the career of Frances. During the following time, 1895-1900, her student years came to an end. She was more influenced by her companions, as she was working as *'the Four'* as well as from her studio with her sister. Her artistic style showed a more moderate approach, which implied a transition from confrontation to resignation.⁴⁸

Poster for the GSA (1895)

One of the sisters' collaborative works is a poster for the Glasgow School of Art, produced in 1895 (*Figure 8*). The poster shows two figures, one rising above the other. The top figure stretches its arms, while the lower figure has a more introverted posture, holding a flower in front of her chest. Despite the suppressed character of the lower figure, the flowers and green leaves surrounding the poster seem to be emanating from her. As is typical in Frances her images, there is a clear emphasis on symmetry and vertical lines.

The meaning of this verticality is open to interpretation. Often, literature links tall and erect shapes to masculinity or a symbol of power.⁴⁹ However, it is unclear whether Frances intended to use gender analogies in her art. While both figures remain androgynous, the top figure appears more male due to its angular shoulders and exposed upper body. This could suggest the overpowering nature of men, perhaps within the School of Art, as the lack of recognition of female artists was still a persistent issue during this time. The flora and fauna emerging from the lower figure could symbolize the artistic qualities she exudes. The flowers and symmetry add to a decorative character, but in a more geometric and tempered way compared to the iconography in Art Nouveau. In combination with the ghostly faces, Frances seems to step away from the sophisticated and elegant appearance as depicted in the *Femme Nouvelle*. The female body remains angular, but softer than Frances' usual style during this period, indicating the influence of Margareth.

Spring (1897) and Autumn (1898)

The works of *Spring (1897)* and *Autumn (1898)* clearly mark the transition towards a more moderate approach. These female forms of the depicted women form a new suggestion

⁴⁸ Helland, J. (1991). *The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle art: Frances and Margareth Macdonald*. Victoria: University of Victoria. Page 217

⁴⁹ Niculae, R. L. (2014, January 1). Gender analogies in architecture. *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*.

of sexual availability. In *'Autumn'* (Figure 9), the woman keeps her elongated figure but gains a physique that is curvier and more conducive to childbearing, compared to her earlier work. Despite this new representation of sexual availability in Frances' work, the overall ghastly ambiance is still present, as the central figure is surrounded by floating skulls. The figure adjacent to her is slender and less suggestive and is associated with red apples, possibly referring to Eve's apple again. In *'Spring'* (Figure 10), the fertile-looking female is overshadowed by a second, more alarming woman with long, thin, claw-like fingers. Overall, the softer shapes subdued the aggressiveness, but the references to melancholy maintain a sense of confrontation in her work.⁵⁰

Especially in *Spring*, the female is depicted in a more decorative manner, with the introduction of flowers and pink and yellow pastel colors, as well as the presentation of rounded and exposed body parts. This adds to the character of the women as ethereal, fairy-like beings, similar to the *Femme Nouvelle*. Additionally, the central placement of the figures, without any obvious action, suggests a decorative purpose and positions them as if they were on a pedestal. This is reminiscent of the idealized portrayal of the *Femme Nouvelle*, suitable for a decorative function within the home. However, the gloomy and evil references in the background take away from the lightness and airiness, and suggest a deeper meaning beyond mere decoration. Despite the evil references, the women themselves do not embody a dangerous, evil or alluring image, as typically portrayed in the *Femme Fatale* archetype.

3. Her final years

The next artworks were completed as Frances was fulfilling her role as a wife and mother. Especially as the later works were created, she was dealing with difficulties within her marriage. Despite this, her artistic focus remained on resignation rather than confrontation. However, there is a newfound emphasis on the struggles faced by women, particularly in the context of familial or male relationships. Reflecting on the broader societal context, these images were created in a time in which women were progressively breaking free from traditional domestic roles and pursuing careers in the public sphere. However, Frances' experiences were divergent as she gained responsibility within the confines of the home, performing tasks that were conventionally assigned to women in pre-World War British society, such as maintaining the house, caring for children, cooking, and cleaning.

⁵⁰ Helland, J. (1991). *The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle art: Frances and Margareth Macdonald*. Victoria: University of Victoria. Page 289

The three artworks of this final phase will be compared to the iconography of Art Nouveau collectively, as all three convey a similar visual language.

It's a Long Path That Wanders to Desire (1909-15)

The painting *'It is a Long Path that Wanders to Desire'* (Figure 11) portrays a woman whose hair forms a path on which she stands, together with two male companions. Her raised hands, high shoulders, and uncertain facial expression suggest a feeling of suspicion or hesitation, which stems from the concept of desire. The presence of two male figures on the path directly links desire to the male gender. One of the male figures faces her with open arms, while the other has turned away, displaying a distant yet interested attitude. This painting is a rare example of an artist addressing female desire.⁵¹ It contains references to a woman who is uncertain about how to respond to the different attitudes of eagerness and inaccessibility.

Man Makes the Beads of Life But Women Must Thread Them (1912)

'Man Makes the Beads of Life But Women Must Thread Them' is an explicit reference to women's position within the family, resembling herself in the past years of her marriage. By this time, her son was nine years old and the family had recently relocated to Glasgow due to financial insecurity of her husband. The painting portrays a nude male offering a gift to the female figure. This gift is represented by an egg-shaped circle containing a child. The female figure is depicted holding a similar shape in front of her belly, with her hands entering the circle to nurture the child. This imagery conveys that while pregnancy is caused by the male, it is the woman's responsibility to care for the child. Frances may have intended to symbolize the pressures she experienced in fulfilling this role within the family.

Prudence and Desire (1912-15)

As the title already suggests, the two males in the painting are symbolic personifications of *Prudence and Desire*. The woman looks down and raises her hand in a disapproving way, clearly declining both of them. The woman's mind appears to be full of apples, referring to Eve again. The apple, that was eaten by Eve and got her expelled from the Garden of Eden, has come to symbolize sin and temptation. The depiction of the woman's thoughts may thus refer to her own desires as a woman, which she rejects by choosing a life of celibacy and isolation, as evidenced by her rejection of both male figures. The stern expressions on the male figures suggest a societal criticism of female sexuality, causing the woman to opt for a safe course of action to avoid judgment.

⁵¹ Helland, J. (1991). *The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle art: Frances and Margareth Macdonald*. Victoria: University of Victoria. Page 218

Across all three paintings, Frances used a similar visual language of shapes and colors. The colors used are predominantly dull, almost sickly green, with a distinct absence of decorative elements and other characteristics that defined Art Nouveau iconography. The only indication of elegance is faintly present in the beaded necklace in *'Man Makes the Beads of Life But Women Must Thread Them'*. In all depictions, the women are portrayed as part of an activity, interacting with a male figure. As such, they are active subjects with thoughts and feelings rather than being portrayed as passive or decorative. In both *It's a Long Path That Wanders to Desire* and *Prudence and Desire* the women are portrayed making decisions that grant them autonomy over their own lives. Unlike the *Femme Nouvelle*, who relied on elegance and power for her role model status, these women's autonomous and assertive qualities contribute to their exemplary function.

In contradiction to some of her earliest works, the bodies of the women appear to be ordinary. They are not shocking or repulsive, nor delicate or graceful. They are depicted without an emphasis on their sexual attributes, which gives the nudity no erotic value. The absence of decorative patterns, pastel colors, decorative flowers, and seductive sensuality distances the work from Art Nouveau iconography. The artworks acknowledge seduction and sensuality by referencing female desire, but in a manner that offers a critical perspective rather than with the aim of creating an alluring image.

Negative associations are primarily attributed to the male characters. This links the male with a sense of evilness or darkness, instead of the main female figure, as is often the case with the *Femme Fatale*. Consequently, the male character plays a pivotal role in the women's life choices and struggles.

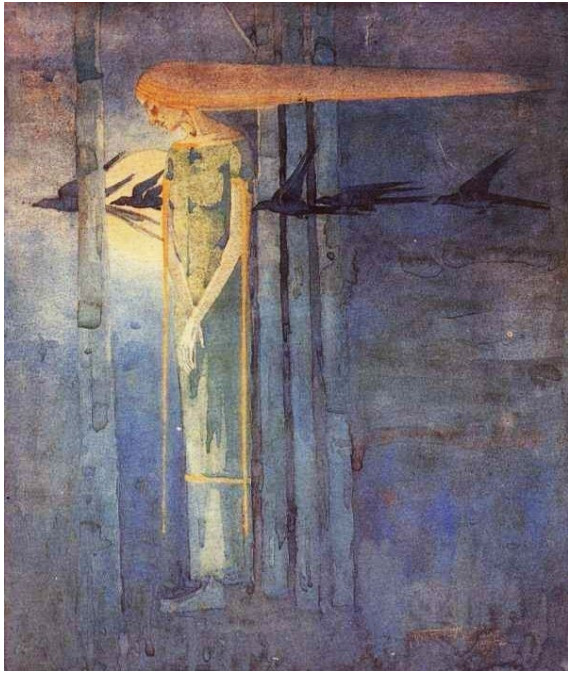


Figure 5: Frances Macdonald (1893). *Girl in the East Wind or Ill Omen*. [Pencil and watercolor, 51.7 x 42.7]. Hunterian Art Gallery, University of Glasgow



Figure 6: Frances Macdonald (1893). *Cover for the GSA*. [Lithograph; green ink on white paper, 352 x 225 mm]. The Museum of the American Arts and Crafts Movement, Florida

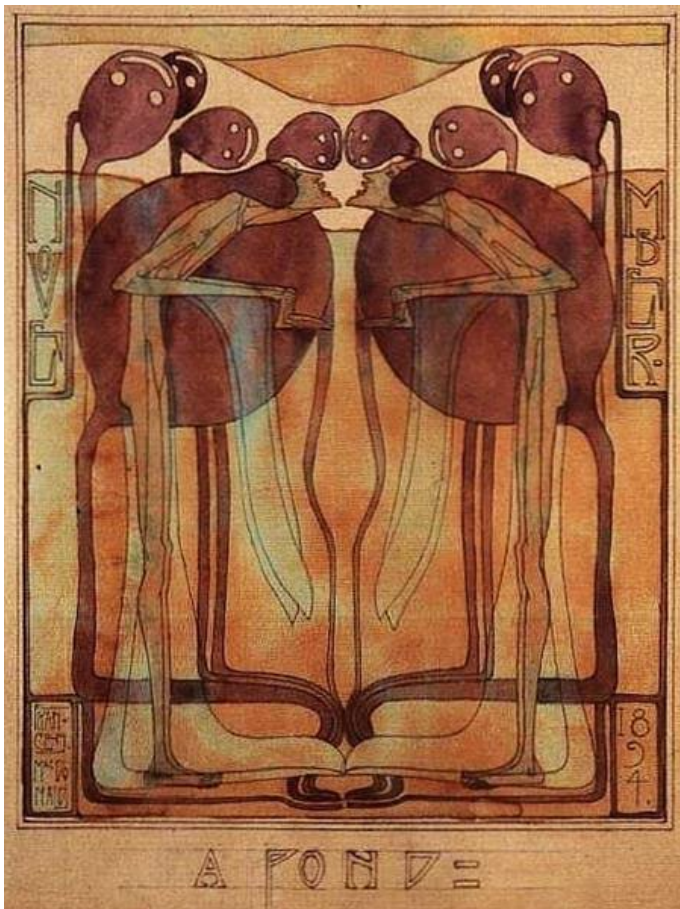


Figure 7: Frances Macdonald (1894). *A Pond*. [Pencil and watercolor on grey paper, 32.0 x 25.8]. The Glasgow School of Art Collection

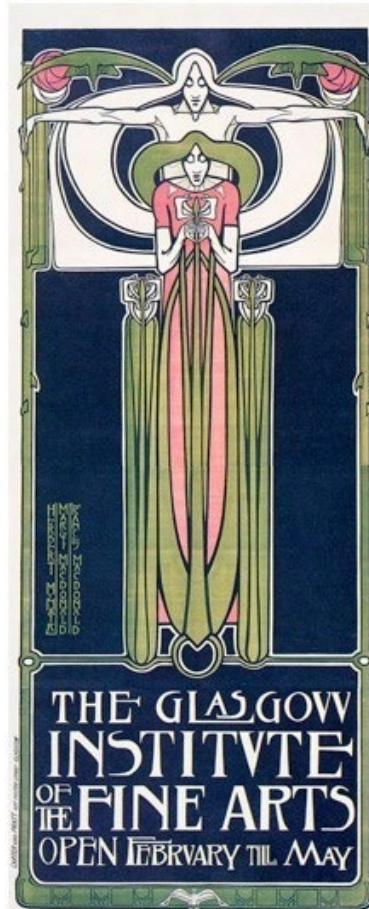


Figure 8: Frances and Margareth Macdonald (1895). *Poster for the GSA*. [Lithograph, 229.1 x 94.3 cm]. The Museum of Modern Art, New York



Figure 9: Frances Macdonald (1897). *Spring*. [Watercolor on vellum]. Glasgow Museum, Scotland



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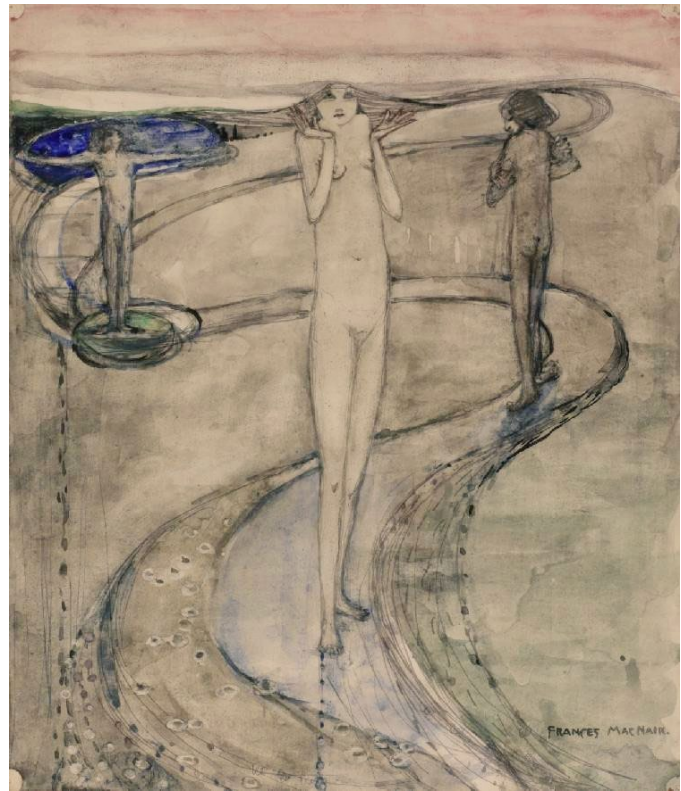


Figure 11: Frances Macdonald (1909-15). *It's a Long Path That Wanders to Desire*. [Pencil and watercolor on vellum]. National Museums Liverpool, England

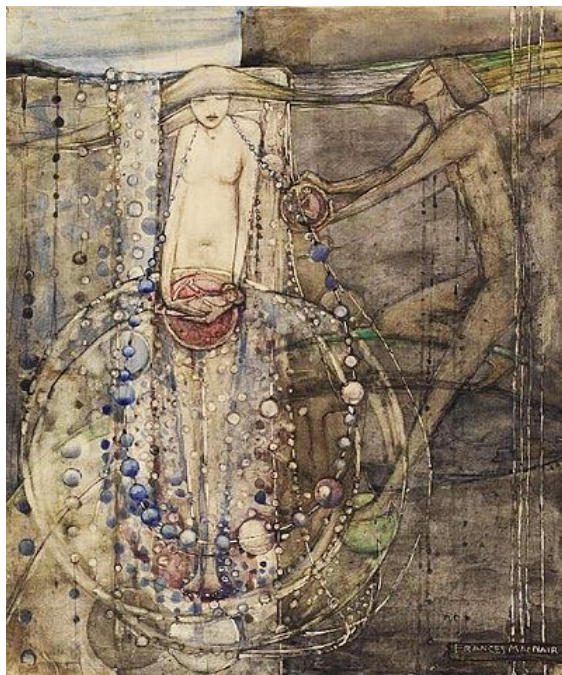


Figure 12: Frances Macdonald (1912). *Man makes the beads of life but woman must thread them*. [Pencil and watercolor on paper]. The Hunterian, University of Glasgow, Scotland



Figure 13: Frances Macdonald (1912-15). *Prudence and Desire*. [Pencil and watercolor, 35.2 x 29.9]. National Museums Liverpool, England

Conclusion

This research aimed to provide an interpretive analysis of Frances Macdonald's artistic portrayal of women, particularly in relation to the evolving societal roles and positions of women during the Art Nouveau movement. Based on both the analysis of Glasgow's and her personal context, and the visual elements of Frances Macdonald's art, it can be concluded that her works can be interpreted as an attempt to accurately represent the limitations and struggles that were faced by her, arguably even women in general, during the time of the Art Nouveau movement.

Although Frances her representation of women was ambiguous, it seems that she has always made an effort to refer to the female experience. The women she depicted expressed a societal context of suppression, or women's role as lover, mother or sexual being. At all times the women were unattractive or sexually unavailable, which undeniably implied revolution compared to the prevalent images of images during the time's Art Nouveau art. The contentious and provocative nature of her work emphasizes her effort to vocalize an alternative truth to the prevalent archetypes of the *Femme Nouvelle* and *Femme Fatale*, which were predominately created by male artist.

The visual analysis of Frances' artwork is substantiated by literature authored by art specialists, common symbolic references, primary sources from art critics, and the explicatory titles provided by the artist herself. However, it should be noted that visual analysis is inherently subjective, and this research raises questions about the original intentions of the artist, given the limited availability of primary sources. This is particularly relevant for the interpretation of Art Nouveau archetypes through secondary understandings. While they are proven to be relevant by a wide range of literature, the interpretations may be influenced by contemporary societal trends related to female sexuality. Future studies could benefit from incorporating a wider range of primary written sources for a more comprehensive understanding of the art.

Nevertheless, this research offers new insights by calling for a critical assessment of female iconography in Art Nouveau. Despite widespread literature associating this iconography with the emancipation of women, the analysis of Frances' artwork challenges this view, as her portrayal of women reflects a critical perspective on women's position within this supposedly more liberalized society. Future research could explore the argument that while the changing Art Nouveau iconography may not accurately reflect the female experience, it may still signify the evolving perception of women by men, thus nonetheless indicating a shift in women's roles and positions in society.

This thesis contributes to the academic field by conducting a critical analysis regarding the accuracy of the representation of women during Art Nouveau. Existing research often highlights the revolutionary nature of the new era of iconography, while overlooking the societal context in which female artists struggled to establish their professional careers. In contrast to the predominant focus on male Art Nouveau artists, this thesis sheds light on a female artist and her position within the artistic world. While Frances her iconography has been studied previously, this thesis uniquely compares her iconography with the prevalent iconography of Art Nouveau, providing further evidence to support her efforts in presenting an alternative image of women. This method has allowed to prove that while her works show similarities to the *Femme Fatale* archetype, she intends to convey a different narrative.

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