

1860-1919

Hill House chair

1903 ■ FURNITURE ■ EBONIZED WOOD ■ UK

CHARLES RENNIE MACKINTOSH



SCALE

One of the most strikingly original chairs of the 20th century was created by Scottish architect-designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh for Hill House, the house near Glasgow in Scotland that he designed in 1903 for publisher Walter Blackie. Like much of Mackintosh's furniture, the chair is made of ebonized wood. Its outstanding feature is the tall ladder back that extends all the way down to the floor. Mackintosh created similar chairs for several Scottish interiors as well as for the decorative schemes he exhibited in Britain and at the Vienna Secession. He used these tall-backed chairs in two ways: as dining chairs, which helped to define an enclosed, intimate space around the table; and as stand-alone pieces, set against the walls of halls and bedrooms, where they acted as decorative, rather grand elements in the room, often echoing the architectural features of the building. The Hill House chair was specifically designed to form part of the bedroom furnishings of Walter Blackie's home. Set against the pale walls at Hill House, the strong, clean geometry of Mackintosh's design became obvious. Every part of the chair appears straight, although the ladder back rungs are curved for comfort, and the design is a formal exercise in the interplay and balance of verticals and horizontals, rectangles and squares. It recalls the bold graphics of the Vienna Secessionists, whose work Mackintosh greatly admired, as well as linear Japanese design. In marked contrast to upholstered Victorian furniture of the period, this elegant chair can also be seen as a piece of modern, abstract art that was ahead of its time.

CHARLES RENNIE MACKINTOSH

1868-1928

Born in Glasgow, Charles Rennie Mackintosh served an architectural apprenticeship, attended the Glasgow School of Art, and then began to work for Glasgow architects Honeyman and Keppie, initially as a draughtsman. Here he met Herbert McNair, also a draughtsman, and the pair, together with sisters Margaret and Frances Macdonald, designed and exhibited work together and became known as "The Glasgow Four". In 1896, Mackintosh won a competition to design the Glasgow School of Art, and in 1897, he was commissioned to design a chain of Glasgow tearooms. In 1900, Mackintosh caused a sensation with his interior and furniture designs for the 8th Secessionist Exhibition in Vienna. He married Margaret Macdonald and the couple occasionally collaborated on projects. Mackintosh left Glasgow in 1913, when commissions began to tail off, and spent his final years painting watercolours.



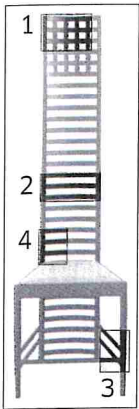
The ladder effect continues to the floor, increasing both visual impact and structural strength

The white seat forms a dramatic contrast with the dark wood

The slender legs harmonize with the other components of the chair

Closely positioned crosspieces are designed to be seen against a white wall

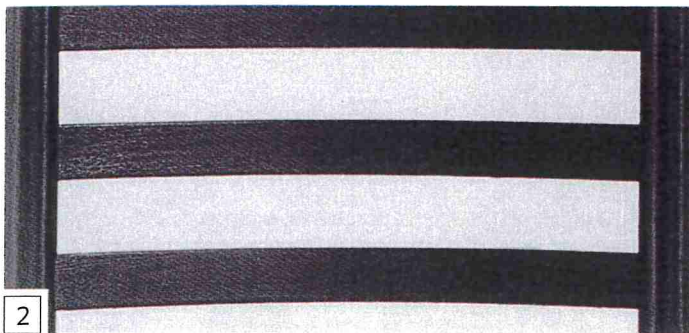
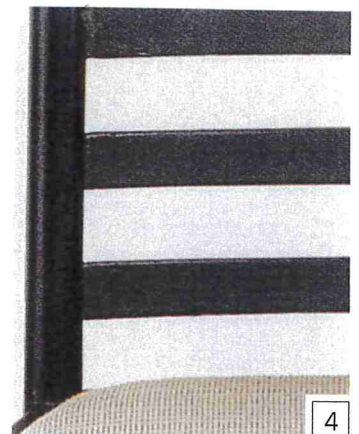
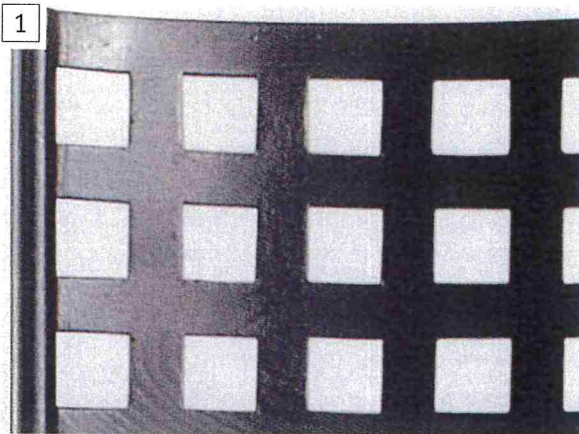
Visual tour



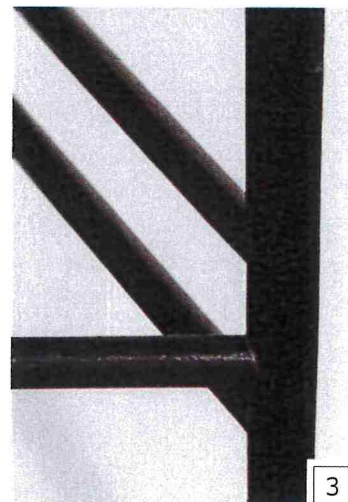
KEY

➤ GRID PATTERN

The upper section of the chair (taking up about one quarter of the tall back section) is made up of a grid of equal-sized small squares. This pattern is characteristic of many of Mackintosh's decorating schemes.



▲ **LADDER BACK** The simple ladder back is a feature of traditional "country" chairs in which the "rungs" are widely spaced slats of wood. In Mackintosh's version, the back is elongated and the "rungs" are square-section rather than slatted, and placed close together, to produce a geometrical effect.



▲ **UPRIGHT** The ebonized timber that Mackintosh specified for this chair is reminiscent of the lacquered wood used in Japanese furniture. Slender in comparison with other Mackintosh chairs, this one was designed to stand out against the white walls of the main bedroom at Hill House.

◀ **SIDE STRETCHERS** The chair is made of timber with quite a narrow section. Mackintosh reinforced the legs with double stretchers at the sides, to provide extra strength. This double stretcher echoes the ladder-like chair back, giving the design coherence.

ON ARCHITECTURE

In his buildings, Mackintosh combined the traditional with the modern. At Hill House, the quintessentially Scottish harled (rough-cast) exterior contains innovative interiors. The most impressive are the library and hall, with their dark wooden panelling and doors, the spacious, airy drawing room, and the elegant main bedroom. This is where the Hill House chair can be seen, set between two white wardrobes. The repeating patterns of squares on the fittings and furniture all help to unify the decorative scheme.



▲ Main bedroom, Hill House

ON DESIGN

Mackintosh was successful both as an architect and a designer, and some of his most striking interiors were produced in collaboration with his wife, Margaret Macdonald, an accomplished designer of textiles, stained glass, and graphics. Mackintosh's best work was for clients such as Walter Blackie, who commissioned both exteriors and interiors. In several of Mackintosh's major projects, such as the Glasgow School of Art, Kate Cranston's Glasgow tearooms, and Hill House, the furniture designs were so successful that they were manufactured and used beyond their original settings. The striking Argyle chair made for one of Kate Cranston's tearooms, its tall back surmounted by an oval, is one of the most iconic. Its contrasting curves and strong verticals make it instantly recognizable. The Willow chair, another tearoom design, has a distinctive geometrical pattern of intersecting verticals and horizontals.



➤ Argyle chair, 1897