



## Decorative Arts: Design since 1860 (616)

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### Viewing Times:

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## Lot 361

**Estimate:** £10000 - £15000 + Fees

### FRANCES MACDONALD MCNAIR (1873-1921) DESIGN FOR A COVER FOR 'DAS EIGENKLEID DER FRAU', 1903

original cover design, pencil on brown tracing paper, laid on board, signed in pencil lower right FRANCES MCNAIR/ INV. DEL, inscribed ANNA MUTHESIUS and DAS EIGENKLEID

32cm x 25cm

### Provenance:

Phillips, London, 17 November 1998, lot 287

Collection of Donald & Eleanor Taffner, New York

Lyon & Turnbull, Edinburgh, The Taffner Collection, 7th September 2012, lot 64

Private Collection, London

### Literature:

Burkhauser, Jude 'Glasgow Girls: Women in Art and Design 1880-1920', Edinburgh 1990, p. 54, fig. 53 for illustration of the printed book cover.

Robertson, Pamela (Edit.) 'Doves and Dreams: The Art of Frances Macdonald and J. Herbert MacNair', Hampshire 2006, p. 170, exhib. ref. G17; G18, cat. ill. 16 for an image of the printed cover.

**Note:** A member of the 'Glasgow Four', Frances Macdonald McNair's collaborations with her sister Margaret, Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Herbert MacNair are celebrated as pivotal works in the development of the Art Nouveau aesthetic in Scotland. Equally, her individual output as an artist was radical and challenged the fanciful and idealised depictions of the female form that were prevalent in Victorian Art of the late nineteenth century. This important early work by Frances, an original cover design for '*Das Eigenkleid Der Frau*', epitomises the *avant-garde* movement and illustrates a bold feminist statement, depicting a fresh image of the emerging 'New Woman'.

Unlike some of her contemporaries, Frances' early life was not one of hardship. Her father's success as an engineer ensured the family was financially secure so that Margaret and Frances could enrol in Day Classes at the prestigious Glasgow School of Art in 1891, a privilege that, at the time, most young women did not enjoy. Indeed, the city of Glasgow in the 1890s was a highly prosperous one; quickly becoming one of the wealthiest cities in the United Kingdom, it was a model for innovative design and manufacturing processes within the shipbuilding and textile industries.

In this vein, the School of Art's main focus was to foster talented designers that would strengthen the city's key trades in an age of rapid change and increasing industrialisation. Yet the School's Director, Francis Newberry, equally valued the importance of nurturing individuality and actively encouraged students to explore their own interests in their work, creating unique avenues for artistic expression. Frances and Margaret

immersed themselves in this stimulating and progressive environment and one in which women were able to pursue a career as an artist, as opposed to undertaking classes for merely recreational purposes.

This unique approach to art and design was critical in Frances' formative years as an artist. In her early work, we see a distinct departure from the academic tradition, in favour of experimentation with stylised human forms and decorative linear patterns. This is confidently executed in her design for the cover of *'Das Eigenkleid Der Frau'* (Women's Own Dress). The design is steeped in lyrical symmetry as the eye traces around the abstracted curvilinear forms, dancing from figure to figure. Frances' links to the 'Glasgow Four' and the Art Nouveau aesthetic are also apparent; from the idiosyncratic lettering to preoccupations with botanical forms, in particular stylised roses. The book itself, authored by Anna Muthesius, is considered a seminal text in the development of early twentieth-century women's fashion. Muthesius and her husband Hermann, the architectural writer, became close friends with the 'The Four' after several trips to Glasgow and the Willow Tearooms. Anna believed women should have the freedom to choose their own clothes, styling and fabrics. Her book celebrates artistic dress and represents an outlet for radical expression for women, aligning itself well to Frances' artistic representation of the female form. The dresses were usually made by their designers and the book includes plates showing the Macdonald sisters wearing such dresses along with similar examples designed by Jessie Newbery and worn by her daughters, Mary and Elsie.

The turn of the century was characterised by great social and political upheaval. At the centre of this was the idea of the 'New Woman'; a financially independent woman who was able to engage more actively as a member of society. More women attained an education and joined the workforce to earn a living for themselves; they were able to engage in more sporting activities such as cycling, and they could freely express themselves through fashion. Taking a closer look at the design, one is immediately drawn to the enchanting linearity of the figures, deviating from the constraints of traditional Victorian representations of women as objects of purity and beauty. Here, the figures are imbued with an almost mystical quality, as they appear floating in a newly imagined world of femininity. Each woman is depicted in an elaborate shoulder-less dress which accentuates their feminine features; a mass of flowing hair carries the eye down the image until it catches the scattering of roses and every intricate detail of clothing, so as not to miss a single thread. These women refuse to prescribe to a rigid Victorian society of the past. Instead, they represent a promise of change, towards greater independence and individuality.

Frances' work was heavily criticised at the time and much of it was destroyed by her husband following her death, yet she was a pivotal artist in the development of the Glasgow Style and Art Nouveau aesthetic in Scotland. *'Das Eigenkleid Der Frau'* is a stunning example of her early designs that are confrontational, unapologetic, and defiant in illustrating a refreshing image of the 'New Woman' in a post-Victorian *avant-garde* era.