

# Helena Smith



## **Take a trip with Mackintosh to Glasgow School of Art**

There aren't many opportunities to take a tour of a master building with the architect, especially when the architect in question has been dead for more than eighty years. But visiting the Glasgow School of Art, you have the uncanny feeling that its creator is leading you around.

Walking into the art school, a pool of light illuminates the central staircase, pulling you into the building. The stained glass of the doors to either side depict watchful eyes. And as you go up the staircase the banister is unusually high, but by the top has become rather low, emphasising the sensation that you are rising through space. An enclosed glass corridor that runs along the back of the building has only one small square aperture – it's placed so that when you open it your eyes fall on an elegant metal sculpture on the rooftop, depicting a tree, one of the symbols of Glasgow.

If you feel manipulated by these touches, it is manipulation of the most playful and romantic kind. And it is combined with an altogether more robust sensibility: this remains a working building, as the scuffed wooden floors, crowded corridors and bustle of student activity testify. An artist to his fingertips, Mackintosh was acutely aware of the needs of art students; this concern is perhaps most evident in the north light that floods the painting studios, where generations of students have worked.

And other elements are still very much used for the purposes they were designed for: the janitor's room which sits like a Japanese lantern in the stairwell; the director's office, in a suitably supervisory position over the front door; and the wooden desks dotted around at strategic points for students to sit and sketch the city skyline.

The masterpiece of the building though is the library, again, still very much in use. The tall dark wooden columns evoke the stillness and contemplative feel of a forest clearing, with irregularly hung lanterns illuminating it like a sunburst. As the students who lead visitor tours will testify, the building and the man remain a vivid, living inspiration.