

At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, the art world was undergoing many changes. Glasgow became an important centre for artists and designers due to its wealth and the influence of its inhabitants who had the courage to pursue new ideas.

Annie French was one of the students at the famous Glasgow School of Art, and later she became a tutor there. In 1914 she moved to London after her marriage to a fellow artist, and in the late 1930's came to Kenley where she lived until 1954.

Annie French was born in 1872; her father was a metallurgist and was sufficiently well-off to allow her to become an art student. Indeed, three of her sisters who had shown an interest in art had already attended art schools, so she was following a growing trend in the family's pursuits. Annie started at the Glasgow School of Art, the Principal of which, *Francis Newberry*, actively encouraged the students to follow their own styles. She settled on line drawings, especially of romantic figures and similar subjects. Annie was able to continue in her chosen style throughout her life, largely because she had no real need to create an income from her work.

It was not long before she was noticed in an influential art magazine, "The Studio", and this may have motivated her to produce watercolour pictures as well as her more usual pen and ink drawings. Her style sometimes recalls that of the Pre-Raphaelites but also (perhaps inevitably for one working in a centre of modern art) a definite Art Nouveau influence. Her pictures were generally of small size, and she drew them first as line drawings and added colour later. Drawings of delicate ladies amongst flowers and woods were a speciality of hers but she also designed ceramics. The backgrounds were usually highly detailed and full of flowers and other plants. She achieved the lovely delicate tones by using fine pencil lines, dots and hatching; this was work that required lots of ingenuity, time and patience.

Although Annie's pictures may have been small in size, her work appeared in public exhibitions from as early as 1903, and she continued to show pictures until at least 1924. Over the years she had her work hung in exhibitions in thirteen different galleries including not only the Royal Scottish Academy and the Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts, but also the Royal Academy in London. This was no mean achievement.

Annie French was especially fortunate to be an artist in Glasgow at that particular time. Although the city was a huge industrial centre producing ships, locomotives, bridges, cranes, pumps and similar machinery, some of its wealthy inhabitants also turned to other matters and became interested in art. This not only encouraged people to pursue stud-



... BY **KEN HARMAN** ...

ies in this field, but also created a demand for local works of art. Admittedly Glasgow already had its own School of Art which had been founded as long ago as 1844, and this had moved to larger premises in the centre of the city in 1869; but it was the appointment of Francis Newberry as the new Head of the school in 1885 that boosted things. He was a strong advocate of new ideas and became the mainspring of change. It was not long before he found that a number of students were dissatisfied with the attitude of the Royal Scottish Academy to their work (which admittedly contained what were then unusual influences such as Japanese art), and Newberry strongly supported them in their campaign. By 1895 the School of Art had formed its own style of art and this was rapidly noticed on the continent, especially in Vienna which at that time was another place of great change in art. Links were thus formed with artists on the continent, and the Scottish style became generally known as the "Glasgow Style". It is no surprise that the male students soon became known as the "Glasgow Boys". Francis Newberry had always encouraged women to study at the School of Art, and in modern times the many female artists of that era at the School of Art have been entitled the "Glasgow Girls" - of which Annie French was, of course, one.



Annie French c. 1900

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Newberry then set about finding funds for a new building on a nearby site in Renfrew Street for the School of Art. Once the arrangements had been completed, a competition was held for the design. There is little doubt that Newberry was not at all displeased when the winner was announced as *Charles Rennie Mackintosh*, for his plans were indeed in a completely new style and were the sort of design that Newberry loved. The design used ideas of the past together with pure Art Nouveau and produced a building which became a milestone of the Modern Movement. It is now regarded as one of the most remarkable structures of the time. The actual work was carried out in two stages (1898-99 and 1907-09); it is still in use for its original purpose, and can be visited. Mackintosh did not only design buildings; he was a painter and designer as well, and at Glasgow was one of a group of artists whose reputation soon went far beyond Britain and he was received with much enthusiasm when he visited Vienna.

It was amongst all this activity that Annie French studied and taught, and it is not surprising that many of those in the School of Art were much influenced by Mackintosh's ideas which added so much to the fame of the "Glasgow Style". Of course, she was but one of a number of women students and teachers at the School, and some of them are still renowned such as the *Macdonald sisters* (Frances and Margaret), *Jessie Newberry* and *Jessie M. King*. Although the artists and designers worked largely for themselves and their friends, some did produce work for enterprising firms. Annie herself drew a number of pictures for use in books. She also had pictures issued as postcards; a local publisher, *Alexander Baird & Son*, used a number in their "Signed Series" some of which were helpfully produced for use as narrow book marks. In 1909 she became a tutor at the Glasgow School of Art and continued working there until she moved south in 1914.

Annie married another artist, *George Wooliscroft Rhead* in 1914 and moved to London where the couple lived at "Eaglesmere", Trinity Rise, Tulse Hill. Rhead, who was not only a painter, etcher and stained-glass artist but also an art critic, was older than Annie and had exhibited at the Royal Academy since 1882, but unfortunately he died in 1920 at the age of 65. Nevertheless Annie carried on with her beloved artistic work and continued exhibiting until 1924. By 1939, she had moved to 1, "Oaklands", Hayes Lane, Kenley together with one of her sisters, *Margaret*. Another sister, *Agnes*, also came to "Oaklands", which had been built in 1865, was bought by *Sir Joseph Lawrence* in 1892; he was prominent in the newspaper industry, and from 1901 had been Member of Par-

liament. But after his death in 1919, his fine large home lay empty for some years until it was converted into flats. At that time, it must still have been a rather splendid place in which to live, and inevitably Annie French would surely have produced pictures of it and the grounds. The French family stayed there throughout the Second World War and it was not until the 1950's that anything happened to make any change necessary. But then Margaret died (in 1952), and Agnes had an accident from which she did not recover, dying in 1954. This probably prompted Annie to move to Jersey where she had relatives, a sister-in-law, Jasmine (Lady French), and a nephew Eric. Annie lived there until she died in her early nineties in 1965. It may be that one day someone will recall the French sisters' days at "Oaklands" or in Jersey, but we do know a little of Annie's later years from letters she wrote from Jersey in the late 1950's; she herself was keen on reading (especially of biographies); enjoyed the companionship of her family very much, and was interested in its ancestral connections with the Gordon family. She was not a supporter of gambling or the football pools, or of the "Womens' Lib." of those days. We can assume that her life at Kenley was based on the same sort of things, and she must have retained her love of art, for an album exists from the Kenley years which she filled with her delicate pictures of even smaller size, perhaps, than her earlier works.

In retrospect, it is probably true to say that Annie French was less important an artist than some of the other "Glasgow Girls", but nevertheless her work was obviously popular enough at the time, and has certainly become so again in recent years. Nevertheless it is difficult to establish how much of her work still exists; she was one of those people who saw to it that anything unwanted was destroyed and perhaps we should not be surprised that so few pieces can be traced today. The Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries do have a number of her works, and "The Daisy Chain" can be viewed at the Print Room at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Of course, other pictures are privately owned. The once common postcards are rarely encountered today.



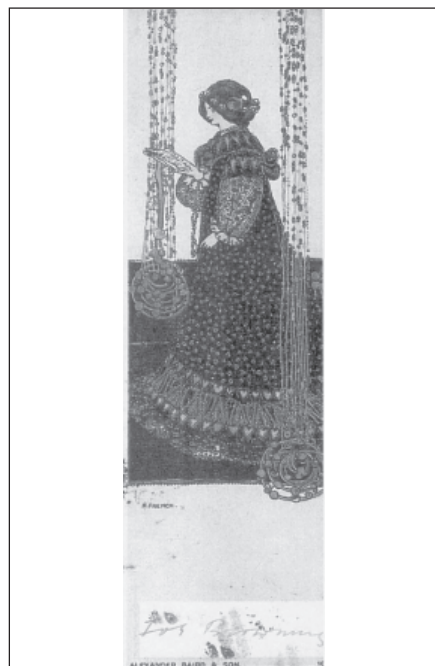
➔ **"The Daisy Chain"** – a picture made originally as a book illustration; it is drawn in ink on vellum, size 18,2 cm x 37,3 cm – with the permission of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

We have been able to include reproductions of the portrait of Annie French and of some of her pictures mainly thanks to the kindness of museums.

➔ **"Woman and Boy"** – from one of Annie's late scrapbooks. Reproduced with the permission of the Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries.

↘ Untitled Art Nouveau postcard depicting a lady holding a bird together with plants in containers. Published by Alexander Baird & Son as number 1022 in their "Signed Series". Posted in Manchester in 1905. From a private collection.

↙ Untitled Art Nouveau postcard showing a lady reading a book, unusually, an indoor scene, she is surrounded by typical Art Nouveau decorations. Published by Alexander Baird & Son as number 1017 in their "Signed Series". It is described as a "Book Post Card" and was meant to be used as a bookmark. This copy was posted in Westgate-on-Sea in 1904. From a private collection.



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