

From Mine to Table: Willow Pattern China in Miss Cranston's Glasgow Tea Rooms



Figure 1: Belle Vue Pottery, *Plate*, 1826-1841, earthenware.

When one enters an art gallery, descriptions (usually on a white rectangle next to the artwork) often consist of the artist's name, the date it was made, the medium, the artwork's title, and a brief description of its style and influences. This is the standard way art is understood. But is there a way to understand art as more than its conception, style and subject matter?

This essay rebels from such descriptions. This is a material history which focuses on social and environmental implications.

The focus of this essay is Miss Cranston's Willow Tea Rooms in Glasgow. Kate Cranston opened four tea rooms across the city and Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928) designed each one – two of which still exist today. Both proprietor and designer shared a "vision of bringing art into every

aspect of daily life and into everyone's reach".¹ There was only one element of the tea room's design outside of Mackintosh's control: the Willow Pattern earthenware (fig.1).

It is almost certain that the Willow Pattern tea sets were manufactured in Britain. But what were these cups and saucers before they were cups and saucers? This essay is more than a history of this object as an object: it will consider the material origins of Willow Pattern China and its place in the context Mackintosh's interiors, when they were opened and today.

In order to create an alternative history of the tea rooms, I will draw on the work of three ecocritical theorists who write on transcorporeality. There are a number of ways of defining transcorporeality, but put simply, Alaimo describes it thus: "(...) transcorporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures".² In addition to drawing on Alaimo's work, this essay is influenced by Daisy Hildyard's book *The Second Body* which highlights the visceral feeling of seeing trans-corporeality – or, as she descriptively describes it, seeing "dissolving boundaries".³ The final theorists I will utilize are Neimanis and Walker who argue for "bringing climate change home".⁴ How, for example, a piece earthenware in Scotland can help today's tearoom visitors understand their connection to the physical effects of global heating.

Therefore, through engaging with various theories of trans-corporeality, this essay will aim to understand the connection between Glaswegians (past and present) and the material origins of Willow Pattern China. This is an environmental and social, historical and contemporary study. But it is also a critique of British society's (past and present) disregard of raw materials in art and design, the issues this causes, and what is to be done about this cultural trend.

The History and Style of Kate Cranston's Willow Tea Rooms

Before launching into an analysis of Willow Pattern China, it is important to first give some context to its Scottish home. Kate Cranston opened her first Glasgow tearoom in 1878 on Argyle street and went on to open several more, including the still standing Willow Tea Room on Sauchiehall street (opened

¹ Jocelyn Grigg, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh* (Glasgow: Drew, 1987), 66.

² Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: science, environment and the material self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2.

³ Daisy Hildyard, *The Second Body* (Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017), 35.

⁴ Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker, "Weathering": Climate Change and the "Thick Time" of Transcorporeality" *Hypatia* 29, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 559. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24542017>

1903) – Sauchiehall, rather fittingly, meaning ‘meadow of willows’ in Gaelic.⁵ This particular tea room will be the focus of this essay.

Everyone of all genders and classes came to the tea rooms, it certainly didn’t exclude working class people or women. The tea rooms included female-only rooms, male-only rooms as well as mixed gender dining spaces.⁶ Grigg perfectly encapsulates the plethora of people who came to the tea rooms: “To Miss Cranston’s came business men and apprentices, ladies and ladies’ maids with democratic appetites”.⁷ The popularity of the establishment must also have come from the growing temperance movement: here, people could enjoy refreshments that weren’t alcoholic.⁸

As stated in the introduction, bringing art into the tea room was of the utmost important to Miss Cranston. Thus, Mackintosh’s interiors can be read as artworks in themselves, heavily influenced by Japonisme. The unified theme of the décor was willows, “expressed in stylized form in the furniture, stained glass and a frieze of plaster panels” (fig. 2).⁹ The willow motif is almost always repetitive and linear which gives one the impression of sitting in a clearing of willows.¹⁰

To early 20th century Glaswegians, this tearoom must have felt so far removed from the industrial, sooty city streets. German architect Hermann Muthesius said in 1905 that “(...) any visitor to Glasgow can rest body and soul in Miss Cranston’s tea rooms and for a few pence drink tea, and have breakfast and dream that he is in fairy land”.¹¹ Mackintosh’s interior was one of pure escapism, especially for working class visitors.

Today, the Willow Tea Rooms are almost exactly as they were when Mackintosh first designed them. In 2014, a woman called Celia Sinclair bought the tea rooms which were falling into bad condition.¹² Elements of the tea room including the fireplaces had to be recreated from scratch but many components of the décor only required restoration.¹³

⁵ Kath Pick, *Mackintosh’s Tea Room*. BBC Two, 2022: 48:05. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0bdm8gm>

⁶ Grigg, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh*, 65.

⁷ Grigg, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh*, 65.

⁸ Pamela Robertson, “Catherine Cranston” *The Journal of Decorative Arts Society 1850 – present*, no.10 (1986): 10. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41809151>

⁹ Grigg, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh*, 67.

¹⁰ This idea was expressed in the adjoining exhibition next to The Willow Tea Rooms, Sauchiehall Street (now called Mackintosh at the Willow).

¹¹ Grigg, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh*, 71.

¹² Pick, *Mackintosh’s Tea Room*.

¹³ Pick, *Mackintosh’s Tea Room*, 1:30.



Figure 2: Charles Rennie Mackintosh, *Salon de Luxe*, 1903, Willow Tea Rooms, Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow.¹⁴

This is a simple explanation of the history and design of Miss Cranston's Willow Tea Rooms, not unlike the traditional gallery description criticised in the introduction. Though my wish is to rebel from this way of presenting art history, this narrative represents the challenge of moving away from this kind of historical representation. It was easy to attain information on these aspects of the tea rooms. Indeed, a much longer linear history could have been given.

What follows is an analysis of what little information was obtained on the materiality and material origins of the willow pattern china used in the establishments. It was virtually impossible to find any information on where Mackintosh's design materials came from. Even the information that was attained is sparse, fragmented. Therefore, much of what follows is an approximate material history of an iconic British design.

Glasgow and St. Austell

With the available information, this section aims to make a deduced analysis of Willow Pattern ceramics and how they connected workers in Glasgow and Cornwall.

Transfer printing was the technique which was used to decorate willow pattern ceramics, a technique still used today. This technique utilises a copperplate which has been engraved and covered in ink.

¹⁴ "The Salon de Luxe", The Willow Tea Rooms Trust, accessed April 16, 2023, <https://www.willowtearoomstrust.org/the-gallery>

This copperplate is then used to print on wet paper which in turn is pushed onto a glazed ceramic.¹⁵ Willow pattern wares were usually decorated in scenes inspired by Chinese culture.

Though this may seem like the beginning of this type of object, its conception as an object is not its beginning. What of its material source? It is almost certain that the blue and white china used in Mrs. Cranston's tea rooms came from Great Britain as this technique is known to have been invented in England during the 1750s.¹⁶ Therefore, it is also incredibly likely that its clay came from this country too. Though this is not known for certain, we can ascertain that the clay used for the china in Miss Cranston's tea rooms came from Cornwall – specifically St. Austell, a town on the Devon border. By the beginning of the 19th century, St. Austell was mining the greatest amount of clay in the world. By the middle of the century, china clay was being mined at 65,000 tons every year.¹⁷ The estimated guess that Miss Cranston's willow pattern originated in Cornwall can be given more credibility when one considers how much Cornish clay is still used for willow pattern tea sets today. Burleigh pottery in Middleport still sources its china clay from Cornwall.¹⁸

Therefore, the connection between Miss Cranston's Glasgow tea rooms and the small town of St. Austell has been established. But what are the social implications of this connection? As stated earlier, Miss Cranston's tea rooms were an escape for many including Glasgow's working people. The tearooms were a place beauty, away from the dirty city. Yet the story of those who mined the clay was very different.

The large quantity of mined clay meant a large workforce and their working conditions were harsh. The men who worked in the pits were "either spraying the walls of open pits with high-pressure hoses to remove the clay, or processing and transporting the material, which was exported to all corners of the globe".¹⁹ Did these miners have a place where they could escape? My research hasn't found this to be the case. This is a case of working people working for working people. Working class Glaswegians were implicated in the poor working conditions of Cornish clay miners.

Realising this connection between workers from two ends of the British isles brings with it a sense of irony. Mackintosh's desire was to bring the outside inside through the use of willow motifs, stylistically inspired by notions of Japan. This is probably why Hermann Muthesius described the tea room in the way he did – 'fairyländ' was so removed from industrial Glasgow. And yet, tearoom goers were only allowed to *imagine* they were in a Japanese garden, when in actual fact, they had a far

¹⁵ The editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Transfer Printing" in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified September 23, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/art/transfer-printing>

¹⁶ Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Transfer Printing".

¹⁷ "The China Clay Industry", Cornwall Guide, January 12, 2022, https://www.cornwalls.co.uk/history/industrial/china_clay.htm

¹⁸ "Meet the Craftsmen: Chris", Burleigh.co.uk, October 12, 2016, <https://www.burleigh.co.uk/blogs/news/meet-the-craftsmen-chris>.

¹⁹ Cornwall Guide, "The China Clay Industry".

greater connection to a mining town in the south of England. Charles Rennie Mackintosh's interior could only make an illusion to the outside, while the functional teacups were quite literally, no matter how disguised in decoration, of the outside.

Stacey Alaimo argues that humans tend to see themselves removed from nature. She makes the point that by ignoring the fact that our excrement must go somewhere, this enables us to see ourselves as refined and reasonable people separated from "nature's muck".²⁰ Astrida Neimans and Rachel Loewen Walker also speak of the human desire to protect ourselves from the elements, though it is never entirely possible. They write, "we engineer walls and roofs, heating vents and cooling systems" to protect ourselves.²¹ But how does this relate to Charles Rennie Mackintosh's interior? Perhaps people were (and are still) only happy to imagine themselves in nature, to be in a cleaner version of it. Mackintosh's willow motifs are not made of real branches. This also points to a cultural trend: the fact that the willow pattern china was the only element of the tea room I could find any information on suggests that the want to know more about an object's materiality is not widespread. The fact that the maker of this china cannot even be named reveals two things. Either, records of the china have been badly kept, or, this did not matter to Miss Cranston when she purchased it. In either case, one can make a fair argument that people would rather be consumed in a beautiful representation of nature, rather than know the real nature sitting in their hands or their connection to it. Nor do they want to know the conditions under which the material was extracted.

The Willow Tea Rooms, Spring 2023 and The Future

Daisy Hildyard uses one of the characters in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels to describe her version of trans-corporeality. Lila, one of Ferrante's main characters, sees dissolved or bleeding edges in the things that surround her. At one point in the series, she watches her neighbour Marcello 'merging' into a car: "The car's boundaries were dissolving, the boundaries of Marcello, too, at the wheel were dissolving, the thing and the person were gushing out of themselves, mixing liquid metal and flesh. She used that term: dissolving boundaries".²²

Hildyard's book also describes the times when she has found the 'second body'. A quotation from the book's blurb sums this concept up well: "Every living thing has two bodies. To be an animal is to be in possession of a physical body, a body which can eat, drink and sleep; it is also to be embedded in a

²⁰ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 8.

²¹ Neimans and Walker, "weathering", 563.

²² Hildyard, *The Second Body*, 36.

worldwide network of ecosystems”.²³ Throughout the book, Hildyard talks about the times she has found the second body. It is never a consistent feeling, but one that comes in flashes. Hildyard describes the flooding of her house and how her second body “came to find” her first body.²⁴ She felt that the totality of “animal life” had entered – bacteria, fishes and foxes had come into the house.²⁵

Though Hildyard’s example expresses an obvious penetration of her home, I certainly had a sense of dissolving boundaries as I held and drank from the Burleigh Willow china, sitting in Miss Cranston’s restored Willow Tea Rooms. Yet my experience was slightly different from Hildyard’s.



Figure 3 : The Gallery Mezzanine of the Willow Tea Rooms (now called Mackintosh at the Willow), post 2018 restoration.²⁶

It is known for certain that the clay used for Burleigh china (the kind now used in the Willow Tea Rooms) is also from Cornwall.²⁷ Therefore, my research brought me back to the south coast of England to find out about the mining process today. Though it is unlikely that harsh mining conditions have continued into the 21st century (due to workers’ unions), the environmental implications of clay extraction have come under scrutiny. In 2014, Mark Pilcher, part of the Environment Agency, wrote an article on the ‘white alps’ of St. Austell. Though the words may sound romantic, these hills are actually large mounds of waste from china clay extraction.²⁸ Though steps have been taken to limit

²³ Hildyard, *The Second Body*.

²⁴ Hildyard, *The Second Body*, 95.

²⁵ Hildyard, *The Second Body*, 95.

²⁶ “The Gallery”, The Willow Tea Rooms Trust, accessed April 16, 2023, <https://www.willowtearoomstrust.org/the-gallery>

²⁷ Jean Sinclair, “The Burleigh Story”, The Willow Tea Rooms Trust, January 13, 2021. <https://www.willowtearoomstrust.org/blog/2021/1/13/the-burleigh-story>

²⁸ Mark Pilcher, “A whiter smile, a greener environment: cleaning up with China clay,” *Gov.uk* (blog), April 25, 2014, <https://environmentagency.blog.gov.uk/2014/04/25/a-whiter-smile-a-greener-environment-cleaning-up-with-china-clay/>

river contamination, the peaks are still as white as ever. Pilcher predicts that it will take twenty years for the Cornish “heath lands” to go back to their original colour.²⁹ One can only imagine how bad contamination was during the last century.



Figure 4: The China Clay mountains near St. Austell.³⁰

Knowing this information allowed me to access the second body. Drinking from the blue and white teacup, I could not unsee the white peaks that Pilcher described. My eyes no longer just saw the decoration. I felt the waste mounds of Cornwall enter the space of the tea room, just as the fish entered Hildyard’s home.

Yet the ability to find the second body through the decorative arts is subtler and far harder to access than when live species enter a ‘human home’. I could only find the second body through in-depth research. Visitors to the tea rooms today will only open a connection to St. Austell if they have done their research. But why would they want to find out about the environmental impacts of an industry miles away from Glasgow?

Neimanis and Walker believe in the importance of “(...) bringing climate change home”.³¹ They argue that climate change is hard to relate to in a substantial way.³² Therefore, their aim is to lessen

²⁹ Pilcher, “A whiter smile”.

³⁰ Cornwall Guide, “The China Clay Industry”.

³¹ Neimanis and Walker, “Weathering”, 559.

³² Neimanis and Walker, “Weathering, 559.

the gap between the scale of climate crisis and the proximity of one's own flesh.³³ This means recognizing that "(...) our bodies are both the products and the vehicles of iteration".³⁴ But we can also apply this to our proximity to objects. Through learning about materials and their extraction, we may be better able to understand ourselves in relation to climate crisis. Objects provide a perfect way to do this. We may also understand the cultures and lives of those who brought such objects into being.

The hope now is that researchers and curators will help audiences to understand their connection to the climate crisis. Ideally, the 'brief descriptions' in the gallery will include a history of what and who 'made' the artwork before the artist could even conceive it as an artwork.

Apathy towards materiality in art is a cultural phenomenon as well as the product of museum curators. It is clear that this kind of apathy was just as prevalent in Mackintosh's lifetime as it is now – otherwise, we would know where the wood for Mackintosh's chairs came from or the pigments for his stain-glass windows.

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to reveal an alternative history to Miss Cranston's Willow Tea Rooms. When one knows about material origins, one sees more than just the art or object before them. Stories of lives and environmental damage permeate our vision. Audiences and society at large only seem to be interested in a sanitized art history, where style and subject matter separate the viewer from any implication in unethical practices.

Yet art and objects have the power to help us understand the scale of climate crisis and our place in it. Infographics and statistics can only do so much to elicit sympathy or panic. Yet the tangibility or intimacy we have when we hold or view a piece of art makes our physical connection to the earth all the more transparent and effecting.

The aim was never to critique early 20th century tea rooms goers – how could they have known they were implicated in poor working conditions? – but to point to a long-standing cultural trend of ignoring the geneses of art. We may forgive last century's working people and their desire for aesthetic escapism, but today, a far more complex, interesting of the Willow Tea Rooms can be told.

³³ Neimanis and Walker, "Weathering", 562.

³⁴ Neimanis and Walker, "Weathering", 567.

In the years to come, I would love to tell the story of all elements of Mackintosh's design – the lamps, chairs, friezes and staircases. Art history needs to move beyond subject matter.

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