

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Ann Macbeth

(Bolton 1875 – 1948 Carlisle)

Angels Garlanding the Infant Christ

Watercolour heightened with gouache and gold paint

44.5 x 63.5 cm; 17 1/2 x 25 in.

Signed lower right: *Ann Macbeth*

Provenance

Fine Art Society London;

Sotheby's, Scottish Pictures, 1 May 2008, lot 48, where acquired by the previous owner.



Immersed in a purely spiritual realm, a majestic angel dominates the vertical axis, standing directly above the Christ Child with outstretched wings that span the width of the image. Flanking this central figure are two smaller angels kneeling on either side of the infant, each gently holding a portion of a floral garland that encircles the Holy Child. The ring of blossoms - most likely daisies, symbolising innocence and purity - forms an ornamental frame around the baby, thereby reinforcing his significance at the heart of the scene. The Infant Christ is depicted in a state of serene repose, encircled by a luminous halo inscribed with a cross.

Stylistically, *Angels Garlanding the Infant Christ* reflects the Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts aesthetic of its era. The figures are gracefully elongated and outlined with a clarity that recalls stained glass or illuminated manuscripts. Instead of striving for Renaissance-style depth, Ann Macbeth emphasizes two-dimensional pattern and rhythmic design. The composition's balanced geometry - a central upright angel, symmetrically paired kneeling angels, and the loop of the garland - creates a sense of formal harmony. Decorative motifs abound: the angels' wings and robes are embellished with repeating floral designs, and the very act of garlanding becomes a visual theme uniting the scene. This integration of figure and ornament is characteristic of the Glasgow Style, in which pictorial art was often suffused with decorative pattern.

Macbeth's treatment of this sacred subject is deeply informed by the Arts and Crafts and late Pre-Raphaelite approaches to religious art. The drawing's flattened space and emphasis on pattern give it a liturgical character, akin to a tapestry, stained-glass window or panelling that might adorn a chapel (see for example Macbeth's tapestry *The Nativity* at the Glasgow Museums, Fig. 1, and Mary Watts' panels for the Aldershot Chapel, Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. Ann Macbeth, *The Nativity*, 1945-1946, linen embroidered with multicoloured wool, silk, beads, gold wire. Glasgow Museums.



Fig. 2. Mary Watts, *Angels in adoration*, painted gesso wall panel. Guildford, Watts Gallery.

This reflects the turn-of-the-century British revival of religious art, in which artists sought to recapture the spiritual intensity of medieval imagery through modern design. Macbeth applies gold paint to select areas - most prominently in the halos and in ornamental accents - to simulate the lustre of precious metal. The gold catches and reflects light, literally illuminating the sacred figures and hearkening back to the use of gold leaf in Byzantine icons and Gothic manuscripts - aligning with the broader Arts and Crafts fascination with these antique sources. The layered application of gouache atop watercolour suggests she carefully built-up ornamental elements - much as one might layer stitches in embroidery - to achieve a jewel-like intensity.

Ann Macbeth was a British artist, designer and educator whose career epitomised the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement. Born in Bolton, England in 1875, she studied at the Glasgow School of Art from 1897 to 1901 and became a prominent figure among the “Glasgow Girls” - the talented group of women artists associated with the Glasgow Style.¹ Trained under the influential textile artist Jessie Newbery, Macbeth quickly distinguished herself in the fields of embroidery and design. In 1908 she succeeded Newbery as Head of the Needlework and Embroidery department at Glasgow School of Art, a position she held until 1921. Macbeth was not only a practitioner but also an author and advocate: she co-authored the seminal manual *Educational Needlecraft* (1911) to promote craft education, and she lectured widely on design across Britain. She was an associate of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh, part of the creative circle that brought international attention to Glasgow’s distinctive art nouveau movement. Her works were exhibited in major exhibitions in Europe, and she earned awards such as the Lauder Prize from the Glasgow Lady Artists’ Club in 1930 and 1938.

In addition to her artistic pursuits, Ann Macbeth was a committed social activist. She was an active suffragette who believed in the power of art to advance women’s rights. Notably, she designed embroidered banners for the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) and other suffrage organisations, transforming traditional craft into bold political statements.

¹ See J. Burkhauser (ed), *Glasgow Girls: Women in Art and Design, 1880-1920*, Edinburgh 1990 and the section dedicated to Ann Macbeth by L. Arthur, pp. 153–155.