

... her hair was being dressed in the fashion of the day: at the back a wonderful erection, supported by a high backed tortoise-shell comb, and in front curls. Her hair was very red, and she was not pretty, but I admired her very much.¹

The Macleay women all had bright red hair, this feature was documented in the diaries and letters of George Boyes: *The Young ladies, as they are called by courtesy, are six in number ... The colours of their hair vary from sandy to the deep red tone of a vitrified brick – the former Maman calls Auburn, the latter chestnut.*²

I have taken this image of red hair and used it to weave a sense of magic into the fabric of the House. In Debussy's opera *Pelleas et Melisande*, Melisande lets her long hair down through the window to connect with Pelleas her lover ... he entangled himself in her tresses. The cascades of red hair which I have poured through the windows of the cellar and over the dining room table become a metaphor for this process of connection to time and memory and to the physical presence of the women.



Anne Graham

Boyes also describes the Macleay women at a ball: ... *the first time I saw them they wore some gauzy Coquelicot stuff over a satin slip, very loose long sleeves brought up close around the neck ... They danced Quadrilles ... the exertion they made was very obvious – and in spite of it a refractory foot would absolutely, now and then refuse to quit the floor and press its leaden weight upon the earth when it ought to have been trembling in the air.*³

This extract, although unkind, seems to give a presence and solidity to the Macleay women. The material contrast of the *gauzy Coquelicot stuff* with the weight of their *leaden feet* illustrates what was desired of women at this time, Boyes wanted the girls to dance delicately with no hint of bodily weight, instead the Macleay women resolutely responded to gravity. Boyes' opinion of the women mattered little to them, they were scholars. Throughout her life Fanny, the eldest daughter, collected and made drawings of entomological, botanical and zoological specimens. I have used Fanny's *Grecian Urn* flower painting to extend this idea of collection and entrapment, the women were like butterflies trapped by the conventions and expectations of the time.

The house is loaded with memory, there is a sense that it may be possible to walk through a door and into the life of the Macleay women. Perhaps the interventions of art can provide access to that magical space which is neither past nor present but the space of imagination.

1 Morton Herman (ed.), *Annabella Boswell's Journal*, Sydney, A&R, 1965; Joy Hughes, *Brief Notes on the Macleay Family* (HHT, c.1988)

2 Peter Chapman, *The Diaries and Letters of G. T. W. B. Boyes 1820-1832*, Melbourne, OUP, 1985, pp 255-6

3 *ibid.*, p 256

Melisande (detail)
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