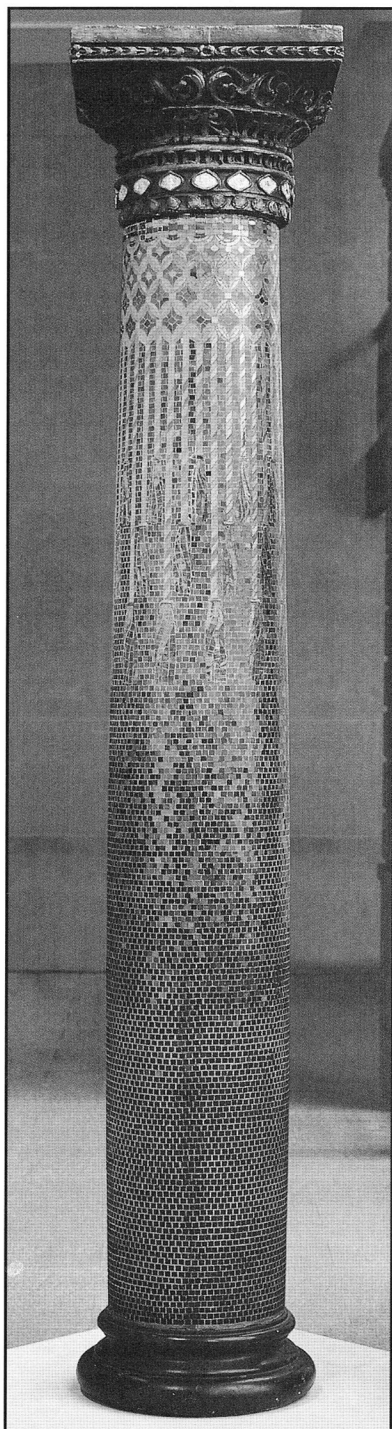


Louis Comfort Tiffany

by Gail Leggio

The Crystal Palace Exhibition (formally, the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations), held in London in 1851, displayed physical evidence of contemporary Britain's technological advances and unprecedented wealth. Yet, while the crowds gaped, the seventeen-year-old William Morris (1834–96) lamented the soul-deadening coarsening of public taste.¹ The machine-made goods included decorative—or at least decorated—household objects untouched by any artist's hands. Morris and his mentor, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–82), along with a few friends, decided that, if they wanted furniture fit to live with, they would have to make it themselves. The founding of Morris, Faulkner & Co. in 1861, a commercial firm dedicated to raising the standards of beauty and craftsmanship in everyday life, initiated a design revolution that spread across Europe and to the United States. Building on the teachings of John Ruskin (1819–1900) and the Gothic Revival architecture of August Welby Pugin (1812–52), the Arts and Crafts Movement would influence styles as apparently diverse as Art Nouveau and Bauhaus modernism. As designer and illustrator Walter Crane (1845–1915) wrote in 1911: "The great advantage and charm of the Morrisian method is that it lends itself to either simplicity or splendor. You might be almost as plain as Thoreau, with a rush-bottomed chair, piece of matting, and oaken trestle table, or you might have gold and lustre (the choice ware of William de Morgan) gleaming from the sideboard, and jewelled light in the windows, and walls lined with arras tapestry."²

In the United States, no artist-craftsman-entrepreneur exemplified the splendid side of this aesthetic better than Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848–1933). Celebrating the 150th anniversary of Tiffany's birth, The Metropolitan Museum of Art is presenting an exhibition of approximately 150 works, drawn almost exclusively from its own collection.



Louis Comfort Tiffany, Tiffany Studios
Mosaic column, c. 1905
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

With his father's firm (which fabricated gold and silver objects for New York society) as an example, Louis Comfort Tiffany opened his first business in 1879, in collaboration with Samuel Colman (1832–1920), artist-collector Lockwood de Forest (1850–1932), and textile designer Candace Wheeler (1827–1923). While the firm was dissolved in 1881, you can still see an example of its elegant interior glass in the Mark Twain House in Hartford, Connecticut, which also features wallpaper designed by Walter Crane. In 1885, Tiffany formed a new company, Tiffany Glass and Decorating, which evolved into Tiffany Studios.

As a young man, Tiffany traveled through Europe and North Africa with future-partner Colman. He was working as a painter then, but Tiffany was already soaking up an aesthetic atmosphere that would bear fruit when he found his true *métier*, the decorative arts. Recalling his travels, Tiffany later wrote that “the people and the buildings... clad in beautiful hues” convinced him of “the preeminence of color in the world...”³ Inspired by Byzantine churches, Tiffany began using mosaics in interiors in the 1870s. Tiffany's mosaic work illustrates both his genius as a colorist and his innovative approach to traditional mediums. Re-thinking the square, flat, solid-color tesserae of earlier mosaics, Tiffany experimented with modeled, iridescent and semi-transparent glass, sometimes backed with foil, in a variety of irregular shapes. Choosing an unusual genre for the medium, Tiffany executed remarkably illusionistic landscapes in mosaic. *Garden Landscape with Fountain* (c. 1905–15), in the Charles Engelhard Court of the Met's American Wing, is a tour de force. A traditional flat, abstract mosaic frame surrounds a view of hazy sky, cypress trees, a balustrade with urn overflowing with pink roses, and two swans gliding across a lily pond. Composed of irregular lengths of blue glass (for water) and mottled pink and green glass (for plants), the waterlily pond suggests Monet. A mosaic column, also in the Engelhard Court, is more obviously related to Byzantine models. The c. 1905 column, a little over eleven feet in height, is covered in subtly gradated blue tesserae, ranging from bright peacock at the top to almost black at the base, overlaid with a *trompe l'oeil* fringe of gold tassels.

Like William Morris, Tiffany experimented with materials and techniques. Both men were open to multicultural design influences, including Celtic and Islamic sources. Even at the height of their medievalism, the Pre-Raphaelites had shown eclectic taste. Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the American expatriate James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) had scoured London—sometimes together, often in friendly competition—for fine examples of “blue-and-white” Oriental ceramics. While Morris's personal taste tended toward fusions of French Gothic, Norse folk and indigenous cottage vernacular, however, Tiffany often created effects reminiscent of Ali Baba's cave. For his own top-floor apartment on East Twenty-Sixth Street in New York City (1878), Tiffany assembled an exotic *mélange* of Oriental rugs, Japanese wallpapers, Indian woodwork, Chinese porcelain, and his own stained glass.⁴

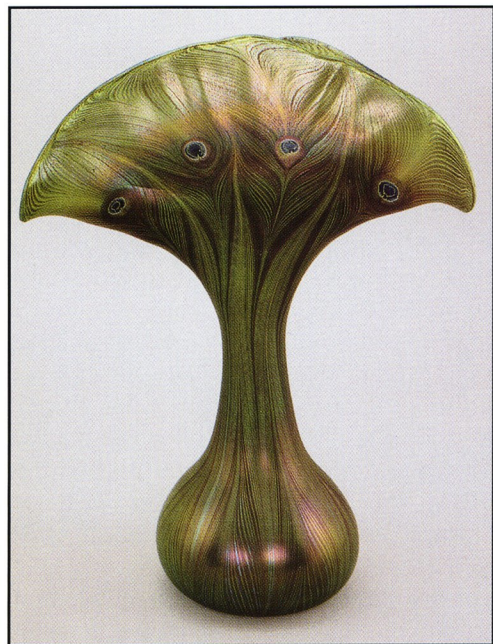
As makers of stained glass, Morris and Tiffany were major contributors to the revival of an artform that had been, before the mid-nineteenth century, virtually moribund. Yet their approaches are very different. A stained-glass traditionalist and pioneer conservationist, Morris worked with his collaborators to recreate the jewel-like colors—sapphire blue, ruby red—of the best Gothic glass. With Sir Edward Burne-Jones (1833–98) as chief designer, Morris favored bold, large-figure compositions. The recent Burne-Jones retrospective at The Metropolitan featured a typical example, a Saint Mark window (Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery), designed in 1874 and executed by Morris & Company in 1883.⁵ While the modeling

of the face and hands shows Renaissance influence, the overall effect is more like an illuminated manuscript page than an illusionistic painting. The brilliant blue of Saint Mark's robe and the deep red of the background are cut into irregular abstract shapes by the emphatic leading lines, calling attention to the flatness of the picture plane. In an essay for an 1883 exhibition, Morris declared "absolute blackness of outline and translucency of colour are... the differentia between glass painting and panel or wall painting.... Shading is a dulling of the glass; it is therefore inconsistent with the use of a material which was chosen for brightness."⁶

Tiffany would have agreed with Morris that simple drawing was essential to good

stained-glass composition. But where Morris's model was the illuminated page, Tiffany's was more often the Japanese print. For Tiffany, being true to the medium of glass did not preclude mottling. Experimenting with streaky and diaphanous color, Tiffany frequently created an illusion of depth, as if the panel were a landscape painting or an actual window with a view. Along with John La Farge (1835–1910), Tiffany was trying to expand the possibilities of glass. By 1881, both men had patented kinds of opalescent glass, with milky shading and rainbow shimmers. Both achieved new effects by plating, building up layers of glass for depth of color and three-dimensionality, and by incorporating chunks of glass to simulate rocks or gemstones.⁷

Tiffany's unusual approach to leading contributed significantly to the illusionistic space of his glass pictures. In Gothic glass, the metal supports, called "comes," are uniform



Louis Comfort Tiffany
Tiffany Glass and Decorating Company
Peacock vase, 1893–96
The Metropolitan Museum Of Art

in width and obviously functional. By varying the width and texture of the comes, Tiffany could disguise them as vines or branches, making them disappear into the composition. A spectacular window installed in the Engelhard Court demonstrates how effective this method could be. On loan from the Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art, Winter Park, Florida, *View of Oyster Bay* (c. 1908) was executed for the New York residence of William Skinner. Although identified with Long Island, the scene is schematic enough to suggest an idealized shorescape. Soft plum headlands, visible across a stretch of opalescent pale blue water, are depicted with a convincing sense of distance. In the manner of a Japanese print, the wisteria vines that frame the view are pushed right up against the picture plane, as if we were looking through the black-leaded panes of a wisteria-draped window at the Long Island Sound. The twisting vines have a graphic energy, while the flowers are executed in a subtle palette of blues and violets. Some clusters of blossoms are only vaguely delineated, cloudy forms; in others, separate petals are marked off by delicate leading.



Louis Comfort Tiffany, Tiffany Studios, *View of Oyster Bay*, c. 1908
Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art, Winter Park, Florida

Flanking *View of the Oyster Bay* in the Engelhard Court are two *Grapevine* panels (1902–15) with favrile-glass molded grapes vining over a trellis. Against softly mottled parchment-yellow background light, the green leaves are translucent. The grapes range in color from cobalt blue to purple to almost black. Tiffany's colors are always sophisticated, whether his palette is low-key or vibrant. One of the most striking pieces in the exhibition is *Hibiscus and Parrots* (c. 1910–20), a small domestic panel that plays the brilliant plumage of the birds against the subtler colors of the flowers, which are creamy white, streaked with ocher and pale rose. A yellow sky modulates, in the lower part of the panel, to a cloudy sage green, which registers optically as distant foliage. The two cavorting parrots have yellow heads, tinged with emerald at the crest, and cobalt-and-emerald bodies. Adding to the vivacity of the composition are wing feathers executed in textured relief.

Tiffany's technical wizardry is even more evident in his favrile glass vases. (The term is derived from an old English word meaning "handwrought.") In 1893, Tiffany opened a glasshouse in Corona, New York, under the direction of Arthur J. Nash, a British glassmaker. While drawing on ancient glass, as well as Venetian, Islamic, and Bohemian sources, Tiffany glass vessels were also highly original works of art and quickly attained the stature of the glass being produced in France by Emile Gallé. Parisian art dealer Siegfried Bing (who helped coin the term *Art Nouveau*) immediately recognized their importance and placed them in museums in Paris, Berlin, and Tokyo. The Metropolitan Museum acquired its first group of favrile glass vases in 1896, just three years after Tiffany began producing them. They were donated by Henry Osborne and Louisine Havemeyer, the collectors for whom Tiffany had decorated a showplace house at 1 East Sixty-Sixth Street.

Tiffany favrile glass shows the artist as alchemist, transforming raw materials in a crucible of fire. As the glass was being blown, various colors were introduced and blended. The object was fumed with metallic oxides for iridescence, and the glass was reborn in tones of gold, silver and precious jewels. One superb example is an 1893-96 Peacock vase (14 1/8 inches high) that rises from a bulb-shaped bowl, narrows, and then spreads out into a spectacular fan at the top. Thin, green-bronze threads simulate peacock feathers, and the ruffled lip is punctuated with small iridescent eyes. In form and iconography, this is a quintessential *Art Nouveau* object.

Tiffany's favrile pieces sometimes challenge conventional notions of beauty and finish. Ancient glass, when unearthed, usually showed signs of corrosion from damp. Tiffany's Cypriote vases (1912) mimic antique glass in decay, with their shimmer of gold or blue iridescence. A stunning 1908 Volcano or Lava bowl (6 1/3 inches high) is even more radical. Always inspired by nature, Tiffany here delves into the innermost processes of the earth itself. At once lumpen and dazzling, this off-center handful of blackened, metallic glass smolders with the red light of still-fiery embers, crusted over with green-gold iridescence, suggesting a parallel between the glassmaker's art and the geologic creation wrought by volcanic action.

A 1903 wide-shouldered vase glows with a softer luminescence. Green leaves and pink berries seem to float, suspended in golden light. The effect is achieved by applying layer upon layer of clear, colorless glass. Exposure to metallic oxide fumes adds the incandescence that emanates from deep inside the bowl. Another product of industrial alchemy, Tiffany Studios enamelwork was built up from glass and glass silicates, colored with metallic oxides, applied to copper or other metals, sometimes layered with gold or silver foil. Several talented women—Patricia Gay, Julia Munson, and Alice C. Gouvy—directed the operation.⁸ The name "Tiffany" came to designate a collaborative entity that included dozens of talented designers and craftsmen. Typical of Tiffany enamel is an 1899 Plum bowl (9 1/2 inches wide), a squat vessel weighed down by the load of blue-violet plums that cluster around the rim. Green-gold leaves cling to the curves of the bowl, which is a reddish-orange mottled with aubergine, suggesting the purplish tarnish that blooms on old copper. Tiffany's fascination with natural processes extends, beyond the ripening of the high-relief repoussé plums, to the iridescence that shimmers at the edge of decay.

Tiffany's flower-form vases are the most extreme of his *Art Nouveau* pieces, exaggerated attenuations of the conventional goblet shape, resembling distended buds wrapped in veined translucent leaves. One 1894 vase (18 3/4 inches high) poises an opening pink-petaled blossom atop an improbably spindly willow-green wand of a stem.

A sixteen-inch Jack-in-the-Pulpit vase (1900–15) has a futuristic metallic patina and a trumpet like a turn-of-the-century gramophone. While clearly based on a real flower, it suggests an alien botanical specimen. Devout naturalist though he may be, Tiffany can create flora that exist only in the realm of the imagination—or science fiction.

The Tiffany lamp, his most famous product, combines a characteristic love of natural, especially botanical, forms with a pragmatic interest in new technology. With the invention of the electric bulb, it became possible for the first time to direct light downward, as well as up. The Met exhibition included a re-creation of a studio workstation, with drawers full of irregular pieces of colored glass, tools, and a model for the sixteen-inch Tulip shade, showing how pieces were arranged—like a jigsaw puzzle—over a wooden dome. One working drawing for a Fruit shade (c.1900–15), in watercolor and graphite, had already been sectioned for transfer. The Water-lily table lamp (1904–15) in leaded favrile glass and bronze was a splendid example of the finished product. Water-lilies descend over the domed shade, hanging from reddish stems, effectively silhouetted against a background of rippled, almost transparent pale blue glass, suggesting water. The blossoms range in color from slate blue and mauve to rose and lemon-yellow. Often two or three colors appear blended in a single, lead-framed petal. The reedy shaft of the lamp spreads out into a base of naturalistic lily-pads, the brown-green patina of the bronze mimicking the color of the fecund bog from which the flowers emerge.

Tiffany's jewelry has a talismanic magic derived in part from a sometimes startling naturalism, combined with an unusual sense of color and surface. While his father's firm, Tiffany and Company, worked in intrinsically valuable gems, Louis Comfort Tiffany preferred semi-precious stones, such as opals, coral, garnets, moonstones, and amethysts. His French contemporary René Lalique (1860–1945) took a similar tack, as was demonstrated by the dazzling exhibition "The Jewels of Lalique," at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum earlier this year. The *fin-de-siècle* poet Gustave Kahn summed up Lalique's philosophy this way: "the old jewel was based on the idea of wealth; the new is built upon an artistic idea."⁹ Lalique exploited the coloristic possibilities of semi-precious stones and the translucency of inexpensive materials, especially glass and enamel, in asymmetrical designs based on natural motifs, such as peacocks, insects and wildflowers. Tiffany similarly employs less-expensive materials in daring, organic designs. A 1904 Tiffany necklace features grapes of circular black opals, with green-and-gold enameled leaves. A 1904 hair ornament, once owned by Louisine Havemeyer, combines platinum, enamel, black and pink opals, and demantoid garnets in a miraculously delicate design of two dragonflies perched on dandelion puffs, one of them already half-blown. The ephemeral dandelion puffs, which can be carried away by a breath, are fashioned of platinum filaments touched with dots of white enamel.

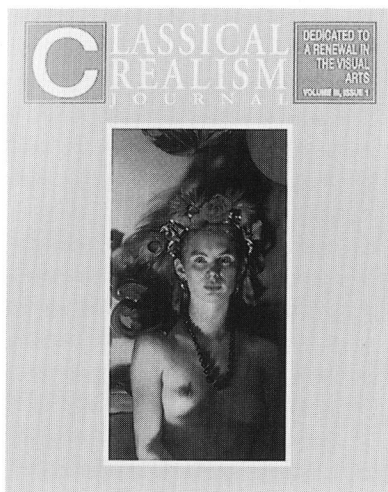
Keen observation of nature, formal ingenuity, and an innovative use of materials are apparent throughout the Met's collection of mostly small objects. But like William Morris and other artist-designers of his time, Tiffany believed in creating a total aesthetic environment. Installed in the Engelhard Court of the Met's American Wing is a loggia from Laurelton Hall, Tiffany's house in Cold Spring Harbor on Long Island. The eighty-four-room, eight-level building, vaguely Near Eastern in style, centered on an octagonal courtyard with an iridescent-glass fountain. First conceived in 1902 and finished around 1920, the house was destroyed by fire in 1957. Among the elements salvaged was the Met's four-column loggia, based on a palace in Agra,

India, but embellished with Tiffany's distinctive coloristic panache. The lotus, dahlia, poppy and saucer magnolia capitals are executed in glazed pottery; the supporting stems are made of green glass. The frieze and spandrels are made of iridescent peacock-blue glass mosaics. With a lily-pond fountain splashing in front of it, and the *Oyster Bay* and *Grapevine* windows glimpsed through it, the loggia helps make the Engelhard Court one of the most inviting spaces in the vast Met complex.

The exhibition catalogue, *Louis Comfort Tiffany at The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, by Alice Cooney Frelinghuysen, curator of American decorative arts, is both beautiful and highly informative. The exhibition continues at the Met through January 31, 1999.

Notes

1. Isabella Anscombe and Charlotte Gere, *Arts & Crafts in Britain and America* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1983), p. 56.
2. Cited, *ibid.*, p. 14.
3. Alice Cooney Frelinghuysen, *Louis Comfort Tiffany at The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (reprint of *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Summer 1998), p. 6.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.
5. Stephen Wildman and John Christian (with essays by Alan Crawford and Laurence des Cos), *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998), pp. 174–5.
6. Cited in Ray Watkinson, *William Morris as Designer* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1983), p. 39.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Frelinghuysen, *Tiffany*, p. 77.
9. Cited by Marie-Odile Briot, "The Physics and Metaphysics of Jewelry: 'Something That Has Never Been Seen Before'" in *The Jewels of Lalique*, ed. by Yvonne Brunhammer (Paris-New York: Flammarion, 1998), p. 60.



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