

Louis Comfort Tiffany

By

Michelle Reed

University of Evansville

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“Styles are merely the copying of what others have done, perhaps done better than we. God has given us our talents, not to copy the talents of others, but rather to use our brains and our imaginations in order to obtain the revelation of True Beauty.” Louis Comfort Tiffany, whether he meant to or not, described his own artwork in these two preceding sentences. Not only did he create pieces of true beauty, but he achieved something no one else had. Tiffany is a name often associated with fine jewelry and that is one area of fine art in which Louis Comfort was prolific. Perhaps a medium that he was even better known for, however, was his exquisite and stunning stained glass masterpieces. John Loring said, “Louis Comfort Tiffany made the greatest and most enduring contribution to the decorative arts of any designer of the Art Nouveau period, and, it could be legitimately argued, of any American” (7).

On February 18, 1848, a son was born to Charles and Harriet Tiffany. Louis Comfort Tiffany was the eldest of the Tiffany children. He had three siblings, a brother, Burnett, and two sisters, Annie and Louise. The Tiffany household was a strict one that did not put up with any nonsense. Louis, a small and wiry boy with reddish-brown hair, continually baffled his father and caused conflicts. He was very talented and creative, yet played very roughly with his toys. His moods were unpredictable, he was constantly bombarding his peers with practical jokes, and he repeatedly tormented his younger brother. In spite of his rambunctiousness, Tiffany could be tender and loving, yet demanding of affection from his parents.

Realizing how headstrong their eldest boy was going to be, Charles and Harriet decided to send Louis to a boarding school. Louis’ only formal education was at the Flushing Academy on Long Island (Koch Rebel 6). Louis rejected his formal education, however, and at the young age of fourteen, his artistic career began while he was a student from 1862 to 1865 at the

Eagleswood Military Academy in New Jersey. Although, LCT, as he was known, had no intentions of pursuing a military future, an artist who frequented the academy inspired him. Georges Inness, a well-known landscape artist of the time, met with Tiffany and motivated him. Louis began spending his time painting and drawing rather than partaking in the acts of war. In 1865, LCT left Eagleswood to pursue his artistic interests in New York, (Loring 7) apprenticing with Inness (Koch Art Glass 3).

In 1871, while visiting his sister's fiancé, Louis Comfort Tiffany met the woman who would become his blushing bride, Mary Woodbridge Goddard. After a year of courtship, Louis and Mary wed on May 15, 1872. The couple had their first child, a daughter, in New York on April 3, 1873. In December 1874, Mary bore a son who survived a mere three weeks. In January 1878, another son, Charles, was born into the growing Tiffany family. Another daughter, Hilda, arrived August 24, 1879 (Koch Rebel 8).

Having been raised in an atmosphere of wealth and comfort, Tiffany was accustomed to beautiful things (Arwas 1). Consequently, his parents had always expected Louis to take over the management of his father's business, Tiffany & Company, an already prestigious and extremely successful silver and jewelry mercantile (Koch Art Glass 3). LCT had other ideas. He had little, if any, interest in the family's thriving business (Koch Rebel 6), and was determined to have a career as an artist, in particular, a painter (Arwas 1). Though Tiffany's family felt that art was not a respectable occupation, his father placed no obstacles in Louis' way (Koch Art Glass 3).

Tiffany became known as a talented painter when he first exhibited one of his works in New York in 1867. Throughout the 1870s, Louis Comfort Tiffany continued to exhibit his paintings, the subjects of many of which were from his travels to Europe and North Africa

(Arwas 1). Due to his family's extensive wealth, Louis Comfort could easily afford to travel almost any place he desired. Tiffany's experimentation with glass began in 1872 with the funding and support of his father's business. Although Louis quickly became an expert in the glassmaking field, he continued to sell his picturesque oil and watercolor paintings for the next seven years.

At the age of thirty-one, Tiffany started an interior decorating firm, his first business venture (Loring 7). In the following years, Louis decorated the homes of many of his father's friends, including George Kemp. Kemp commissioned Tiffany to adorn his lavish home on Fifth Avenue. After completion of the project to enhance his home, Kemp was so satisfied that he arranged for Tiffany to receive a commission to decorate the Veterans' Room of the Seventh Regiment Armory in New York. The Veterans' Room assignment was Tiffany's first large-scale opportunity in a public setting, and once completed, the interior designs were a huge success. Louis' success with this assignment launched his new career and, for the next decade, he was occupied with interior design projects. In 1883, he was asked by President Chester Arthur to redecorate several of the rooms in the White House (Koch Art Glass 3-4). One piece that Louis developed for the White House, a stunning floor-to-ceiling glass screen, was later destroyed after an order to demolish it was given by Theodore Roosevelt (Grant 40).

After his work at the White House was completed, Tiffany's business expanded so rapidly that he had to turn much of the designing responsibility over to his approximately 100 associates. Although he could not personally attend to every request, Louis surrounded himself with only the finest craftsmen. He assured each and every customer that, during its design, each contracted decorative scheme was coordinated in style and color. The sundry customers Tiffany designed for were scattered all over the world and included Cornelius Vanderbilt in New York,

Potter Palmer in Chicago, Lily Langtry in London, several New York theaters, a yacht, and Mark Twain's home (Arwas 1).

In 1884, after twelve years of marriage, the death of Louis' wife, Mary, left him in great distress. After surviving numerous business difficulties and grieving his lost wife, Tiffany remarried in 1886. His second wife, Louise Wakeman Knox, was a clergyman's daughter. His business recuperated and, in fact, Tiffany had to expand his organization to carry out the numerous commissions he was receiving from architects and churches (Arwas 2). Tiffany's father, Charles, was exceedingly satisfied to see his son back on his feet and creating art with a renewed vigor. Additional children soon arrived, including a set of twins. Two others were also born to Louis and Louise, making Tiffany the father of eight children (Koch Rebel 67).

One of Tiffany's greatest talents was his eye for color. He decided that making stained glass, combined with his love of color, would be his best opportunity to develop as an artist. He was even once quoted as saying, "Color is to the eye as music is to the ear" (Grant 38). In 1893, Louis Tiffany produced his first handmade iridescent glass that would be famously known as "favrite" glass. The following year, favrite glass became his registered trademark (Grant 41). The term "favrite" is derived from an old English word meaning "handmade." The use of this term is often said to signify Tiffany's commitment to creating art with a special touch (Pfitsch 17). Louis defined favrite in his own words as "... distinguished by certain remarkable shapes and brilliant or deeply toned colors, usually iridescent...of pleasing metallic luster changeable from one to the other, depending on the visual ray and the brilliancy of the light falling upon or passing through the glass." This design of favrite glass allowed Tiffany to "avoid the use of paints, etching or burning, or otherwise treating the surface of the glass" (Grant 41, 61).

The new style of glass enabled Tiffany to reproduce the gorgeous blends of colors in the natural world, which were intriguing to him. He enjoyed nature throughout his life, including the astonishing feathers of peacocks, the shining shells of beetles and the wings of butterflies. Louis' invention was so popular that almost every known glass studio in operation at that time copied it. Of course, none could equal the quality or style that Tiffany had defined (Zellman). John Gilbert Lloyd had the opinion that, "...Tiffany windows established a precedent and affected the public taste and preference for decades to come" (Koch Rebel 58).

As Louis Comfort was creating his new favrile glass, the artistic world, too, was beginning a new movement. The masterpieces of this short-lived era have come to be known as Art Nouveau. From approximately 1890 to 1915, artists abandoned and rejected the realism of the 19th century and turned to nature for inspiration. Curvaceous, organic, and undulating lines were the sought after decoration. Yolanda Digaetano claimed, "Art Nouveau was, at its best, a decorative movement of exquisite craftsmanship and individual character seeking a new expression and reflecting the social and political reforms of its day" (1).

The glass of this era came to be known as *art glass*. Art Nouveau glass creations were, and still are, considered to be some of the most uniquely beautiful expressions of that movement. One of the liberties that Tiffany took advantage of when creating his style was the designing of new and unconventional forms of sensuous and exotic appeal. He was extremely knowledgeable of the properties of glass and this allowed him to stretch the glass to the limits and create the curvaceous lines that were so popular in the Art Nouveau period. At the turn of the century, Tiffany was hailed as the leading American in the styles of Art Nouveau (McKean Treasures 3).

One vital element of Louis' artwork was movement. In most of his pieces, there was hardly a moment for the eye to rest; the surfaces and contours seeming to be constantly on the

move. His vases and lamps were designed covered with web-like lines and leafy vines that engulfed the pieces. Many of his forms had continuous contours that gave the viewer the sense of a swelling motion (Digaetano 16). Overall, Tiffany's pieces were like a fluid, flowing motion that one could actually feel by just gazing at the work.

As briefly mentioned earlier, color was always a major aspect of LCT's prolific career as an artisan. Tiffany strove to bring bright, bold colors to his pieces. He wanted to use strong, sensuous colors to provide a great contrast to the viewer's eye. Louis' bountiful palette consisted of colors including saturated golds, deep blues and greens, offset by brilliant reds, whites, and lime yellows. Tints and hues of these basic colors also gave an even greater variety to his creations (Digaetano 16-17).

With more than eighteen types of glass and thousands of unique pieces, Louis Comfort Tiffany took on an even greater task. After the death of his father in 1902, and his inheritance of Tiffany & Company, Louis built Laurelton Hall, a spacious 84-room mansion on 580 acres in Oyster Bay Long Island (Maneker 45). He designed the home to perpetuate his creations and reveal his concepts of true beauty. He also planned for Laurelton Hall to be a museum of decorative arts for his various collections and an art school where young and up-and-coming artists could be inspired. The house was so named in honor of a resort hotel that had once been at that location (Koch Art Glass 25). The vast number of rooms included a library, a Chinese room, the Daffodil Terrace, and a smoking room. A scrumptious blue glass dome encapsulated a three-story court that housed a pipe organ on the top floors. A fountain on the main floor was fed through a slender vase by a stream. The fountain then flowed down the sides, into a basin, and through a marble trough to fountains and terraces far beyond what the eye could see. Colored lights beneath the fountain slowly changed the water's apparent hue from green to blue to violet.

Velvet cushions, mosaic floors, flowers and tropical plants were everywhere (McKean Treasures 6).

The mansion was decorated with light colors that gave it an airy, almost weightless quality. The materials that supported and gave life to this masterpiece included marble, glass, concrete, lead and wood (9). Tiffany's mansion was the ultimate example of Art Nouveau. The estate was a breathtakingly beautiful example of Louis Comfort Tiffany's artistic ability and quite possibly one of his most lavish creations. The world may never again see a mansion as stunning as the one Tiffany created; it was the only Art Nouveau mansion created west of the Atlantic Ocean. As Hugh McKean put it, "It summed up Tiffany's inventiveness, his daring, his ability to work effectively in many different mediums, his appreciation for materials, and his fascination with the concept of total art" (Revolt 24).

When Tiffany was building his mansion, he envisioned helping young students achieve their dreams of careers in art. In July 1918, he created the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, which was to operate at Laurelton Hall and serve as a retreat for budding artists (Koch Rebel 152). LCT gave \$1,500,000 as well as 80 acres of his estate, including his house, the art gallery, and his art collection to the Foundation (Arwas 3).

A Board of Trustees was created and wrote a constitution to lay forth the lines along which the Foundation was to be organized. The Trustees wrote, "The nature of the institution is an art institute, the object and purpose of which are art education directed toward both art appreciation and production, within the scope of industrial as well as the fine arts, and as one means toward those...the establishment and maintenance of a museum to contain objects of art" (Koch Rebel 150). Guests of Laurelton Hall had to be screened by the Foundation and were required to be American citizens between the ages of 25 and 35. Recipients of the opportunity to

attend the Foundation were chosen based on ability, previous technical training, and recommendation of three or more recognized artists in their particular field of study. The students would not be subjected to a rigorous academic schedule, but would rather learn by Tiffany's principles of art-by-absorption.

On May 1, 1920, the first nineteen approved students began a session that would last all summer. As guests of the Foundation, they had access to Laurelton's bowling alleys and tennis courts. They were housed in the stables that had been converted to dormitories and could visit the gatehouse that had become an art gallery (Koch Rebel 153). The school served many promising artists throughout its duration until its closing in 1942 (Koch Art Glass 25). For three days in 1957, a fire blazed through the extravagant mansion, destroying much of the home and many of LCT's pieces. Fortunately, before the home was completely demolished, Hugh McKean, a former Tiffany Foundation scholar and his wife rescued many artifacts and thus began their great collection of Tiffany treasures that would become the underpinning of many future Tiffany exhibits (McKean Treasures 7).

The infamous American Art Nouveau artist, Louis Comfort Tiffany, died on January 17, 1933, just one month before his 85th birthday (Loring 246). By this time and for several decades after, the Tiffany name faded from glory in the art world. The Depression had defaced much of the value of his magnificent works of art. Many of his creations were tossed in the garbage or placed in rummage sales. Louis' will ended his own firm and his only son assumed management of Tiffany & Company. The remaining stock of Tiffany studios was sold at an auction just a few weeks after his death. Items including paintings, tapestries, windows, chandeliers, furniture, and pottery were sold at a fraction of their original prices. In the 1930s and 1940s, Tiffany's name was dismissed, and his artwork ridiculed for its aesthetic qualities. Glass during this time was

considered valid only if it was clear. The colors and designs in Tiffany's glass were thought to be gaudy and grotesque (Koch Rebel 211-12).

After World War II and the destruction of great quantities of Tiffany-ware, thought to be worthless, a renewal of interest in Art Nouveau brought appreciation and the value of Tiffany's pieces rebounded, eventually soaring past their original prices. Today, his lamps and favrile glass are in high demand with collectors and are hard to come by (Grant 62). Prices for LCT's masterpieces range from \$250 for a small bowl or vase to the world record, held by a Christie's auction, at \$2,807,500 (Maneker 47). The "Lotus" lamp that was sold in December 1997 at this staggering price was one of two known examples, and was originally commissioned by Ada Wrigley, the wife of William Wrigley Jr., the founder of the gum corporation. In 1906, the listed price of this limited edition "Lotus" lamp was \$750, while a six-room house could have been bought for only a few hundred more at \$1000 (Grant 62).

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Tiffany's pieces were exhibited all over the country. Magazines and newspapers could not say enough good things about the artist and his work. Within a few short years, the number of private collectors rose dramatically. Today, Tiffany glass is considered a valuable antique. Early works have become collectors' items and garner some of the highest prices at 20th century decorative art auctions (Koch Rebel 213-14).

Throughout his life, Louis Comfort Tiffany wanted his artwork to bring pleasure to others. His art was not necessarily created to please the public, but to express his own personal convictions about art and life. One might question why Tiffany's art was and is considered so great. Understanding his work may not be an easy task, but knowing that his desire to make life good for others by placing beauty within their reach was a good place to start. He made this mission clear at a speech he gave at one of his extravagant birthday parties in 1916. Tiffany told

his close friends and relatives, "I have always striven to fix beauty in wood, or stone, or glass, or pottery, in oils, or watercolor, by using whatever seemed fittest for the expression of beauty. That has been my creed" (McKean Revolt 17-19).

One look at a piece of Tiffany art and one can easily see that he succeeded in reaching his goal. He was a determined man who believed that every man should do his own thinking. This personal belief served him well throughout his life, including one incident in particular. Had Tiffany not been such an independent person, his life would have been cut short. Tiffany had booked reservations on the Titanic for some family members and himself. Three days prior to the ship's maiden voyage, he learned that the meals were already planned and guests could not choose their own food. LCT immediately cancelled the bookings for the ocean voyage claiming, "No one was going to tell him what to eat" (McKean Revolt 21). Not only did this quality save his life, but also it provided the world with some of the greatest stained glass ever created.

The importance of color and its impact on the spectator were Louis Comfort's focus when creating stained glass windows (Koch Art Glass 34). As a first-hand observer, this author can vouch for Tiffany's gorgeous work. The First United Methodist Church in Clinton, Indiana is home to an exquisite Tiffany window that was made in New York and was placed in the south wall of the vast sanctuary of the church in 1916. The three inspiring windows are a sea of gorgeous blues with Jesus walking on water. This piece is an absolute amazing work of art. Every time one looks at it, he or she is reminded of Tiffany's creations and abilities. The vivid colors are bold and bright; they bring joy and happiness to the viewer. It is hard to believe that someone could create something as spectacular as this window. The church has truly been blessed to house this work of art. This researcher, having witnessed a magnificent Tiffany stained glass window, holds the view that Louis Comfort Tiffany accomplished his life goal of

the "pursuit of beauty." The church is currently raising money and paying for the windows to be cleaned. Due to the seven layers of glass that make up these panels, cleaning takes several months. The Tiffany Studios signature is in the lower right corner of the right panel.

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