“Nature in Her Most Seductive Aspects”: LOUIS COMFORT TIFFANY’S
FAVRILE GLASS

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On December 8, 1896, Henry Osborne Havemeyer, who was to be one of the great benefactors of the Metropolitan, sent a letter to Henry G. Marquand, then President, offering to give the Museum a group of fifty-six objects. “Since the Tiffany Glass Co. have been making favrile glass,” Mr. Havemeyer wrote, “Mr. Louis Tiffany has set aside the finest pieces of their production, which I have acquired for what I consider to be their artistic value. Their number now is such that I am disposed to offer the collection, which is one of rare beauty, to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.”

The famed contents of the Rembrandt room in the Havemeyer house at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Sixty-sixth Street, the series of Manets, the Degas bronzes and pastels, the Greco View of Toledo, the splendid examples of Near Eastern and Oriental art, which came to the Museum after the death of Mrs. Havemeyer in 1929, so quickly and completely overshadowed these early gifts that by 1931, when a monumental catalogue of the Havemeyer family collection was issued, they went completely unmentioned. Today, however, a marked revival of interest in the turn-of-the-century style called art nouveau, and in the works of its leading American exponent, Louis Comfort Tiffany, endows this little-known portion of the Havemeyer collection with new significance. Together with two important gifts of Tiffany’s later productions—including a selection of documented specimens from Tiffany’s personal collection at Laurelton Hall in Oyster Bay, Long Island—they become a principal resource for more penetrating research into the mysteries of the Tiffany Studios. For although

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much has been written in recent years about Tiffany favrile glass and about the important part it played in bridging the gap between nineteenth century eclecticism and modern art, little beyond this aesthetic re-evaluation has appeared in print. Tiffany headed a vast organization of designers, craftsmen, and decorators, and his production ranged over a period of fifty years, yet neither the chronology of his works, nor even the extent of his personal responsibility for them has ever been convincing established.

Louis Comfort Tiffany, born February 18, 1848, was the son of Charles Lewis Tiffany, one of the founders of Tiffany and Company. Thus born to wealth and advantage, he was subjected at an early age to an atmosphere in which good design and high-quality workmanship were prime considerations. Although it was intended that he assist his father in the operation of Tiffany and Company, Louis Tiffany headed rather in the direction of the fine arts. He studied painting with George Inness and Samuel Colman, who awakened in him a profound love of color, and when he went abroad for the first time in 1869, he continued his studies in the Parisian atelier of Léon Bailly, an artist noted for his landscapes of North Africa and the Near East. In the shops of Paris, furthermore, he became acquainted with the decorative arts of the Orient and Near East, which had recently taken Europe by storm, and he himself later traveled in North Africa, where the exoticism of the Moorish style was indelibly impressed upon him.

Upon Tiffany’s return to America from a second trip to France, in 1875, his interests gradu-
ally turned toward the decorative arts. He worked first with Candace Wheeler, whose Society of Decorative Art had received its impetus from the resurgent interest in the decorative arts manifest in the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876. In 1879 Tiffany organized his own firm, Louis C. Tiffany, Associated Artists, inviting Samuel Colman, Lockwood De Forest, and Candace Wheeler to join him in the enterprise.

As the leader of this organization, known subsequently as the Tiffany Glass and Decorating Company, Tiffany gained a reputation as New York’s most fashionable decorator, and in this capacity he was invited by the Havemeyers in 1890 to design and execute the interiors of their new house, which Charles Haight had planned for them in the latest Romanesque taste. Tiffany and Samuel Colman outdid themselves: a rich confection of Oriental, Moorish, and Byzantine elements was created to provide the “proper” setting for the Havemeyers’ great art collection.

It is not surprising to find that the glass the Havemeyers presented to the Museum in 1896 had been “set aside” by Tiffany as the best of his production. He knew that was what the Havemeyers expected. Shortly after the collection was delivered to the Museum, on January 8, 1897, Tiffany himself arranged it for exhibition. And with this public display came the realization: Louis Tiffany the glassmaker had arrived—his work was on view at the greatest museum in the land. This accomplishment Tiffany evidently exploited to the fullest. In 1900 he supported his claim that “many of the great museums of the world have purchased collections of Favrilé Glass for permanent exhibition” with an impressive international list of forty-three, among which was the Metropolitan. He was perhaps only pushing the truth a little; it was obviously more important to Tiffany that his works were on view at the Metropolitan Museum than how they got there.

It was in a somewhat different vein that in 1925 Tiffany himself offered, as a loan to the Museum through the Tiffany Foundation, a selection of important pieces from his own collection. Undoubtedly he was somewhat unhappy with the limited range of techniques represented in the exclusively early works of the Havemeyer collection. As a complement to the Havemeyer pieces, which date from 1893 to 1896, Tiffany selected a group of twenty-seven pieces of favrile glass, fifteen pieces of enamel on copper, one piece of pottery, and a carved wooden box, all representing the highest development of his style from 1897 to 1913, and largely illustrating techniques and designs developed after the period of the Havemeyer collection. Among the host of forms and techniques he chose were an important group of “paperweight” pieces, with flower and leaf patterns encased between layers of clear glass, a selection of his copies of ancient glass, and an example of “stone” or “agate” glass. Accompanying the objects came an inventory, a document that has proved to be of great value, for not only does it present a brief commentary by Tiffany himself on the majority of the objects, but, most significantly, it gives the date when each was created.

In 1951 the Museum was fortunate in receiving this collection as a gift from the Tiffany Foundation, and in 1955 another major group of Tiffany glass came to the Museum, from an anonymous donor with Tiffany family associations, enriching the Museum’s holdings of types already represented and expanding the scope of the collection to include some of Tiffany’s more commercial productions.


Louis Tiffany had become interested in glassmaking as early as the 1870s, shortly after his return from Europe, and his attention first turned to the production of modern stained glass. He sought to restore to the medium the purity and brilliance of the windows he had seen in the Gothic cathedrals of France. Struck by the poor quality of window glass that was commercially available, Tiffany found that the glass in the common preserve jars of his household had a richer, more vibrant color. “So I set to puzzling out this curious matter,” he later reported to the Rembrandt Club of Brooklyn, “and found that the glass from which bottles are made contains the Oxides of Iron and other impurities which are left in the sand when that is melted . . . . Refining the pot-metal only made weak, uninteresting glass.”

Not only had those elements that had given medieval glass its scintillating power been removed, but modern workers in stained glass further denied the essence of their medium—the conveyance of brilliantly colored light—by applying paint to suggest the modeling of figures and the details of objects. It was Tiffany’s intention to incorporate within the medium itself not only the colors but also the texture that his pictorial subjects demanded.

He undertook his first experiments at Thill’s glasshouse in Brooklyn, where he developed a glass that, without further painting or firing, could be used to suggest the form and texture of draperies. Realizing, however, that without his own establishment he could not engage in the constant experimentation his interests demanded, in 1878 he established his own glasshouse, with the Venetian glassworker Andrea Boldini in charge of the furnaces. Both this and a subsequent glasshouse were leveled by fire, so from 1880 to 1893 Tiffany was forced to continue his work at the Heidt glasshouse in Brooklyn. Here he was able to carry his original ideas to a point of widespread application. In 1893 he again established his own furnaces, this time at Corona, Long Island, with Arthur J. Nash, an experienced glass manufacturer from Stourbridge, England, as superintendent, assisted by his two sons.

By this time Tiffany had already made significant progress in the development of his new medium, which he was ultimately to call “favrite” glass. Composed of various colors of glass fused together while still in the molten state, favrite glass was capable of a vast range of decorative effects. With one blend of colors, for example, Tiffany was able to develop the effect of a cloudy sky; another composition suggested flowers and foliage; while a simple yet richly opalescent glass was twisted and manipulated to resemble the folds and wrinkles of drapery. Indeed, an early account of the Corona factory estimated that there was kept on hand a stock of two or three hundred tons of favrite glass, representing about five thousand different patterns for windows.

Tiffany next sought to apply the same precepts to the production of ornamental glass. Whereas in the preparation of large flat slabs for windows there was no need to relate pattern to form, in ornamental pieces the problem of decoration was further complicated by the necessity for the design to be intimately related to the shape of the object itself. Tiffany was not one for discussing
publicly the technical aspect of his productions, and we know little about the methods he used. However, Samuel Bing, creator of the famous shop Art Nouveau Bing in Paris and Tiffany's enterprising agent in Europe, provides us with an invaluable description of the basic process involved:

"Look at the incandescent ball of glass as it comes out of the furnace; it is slightly dilated by the initial inspiration of air. The workman charges it at certain pre-arranged points with small quantities of glass, of different textures and different colours, and in the operation is hidden the germ of the intended ornamentation. The little ball is then returned to the fire to be heated. Again it is subjected to a similar treatment (the process sometimes being repeated as many as twenty times), and, when all the different glasses have been combined and manipulated in different ways, and the article has been brought to its definite state as to form and dimensions, it presents the following appearance: The motifs introduced into the ball when it was small have grown with the vase itself, but in differing proportions; they have lengthened or broadened, while each tiny ornament fills the place assigned to it in advance in the mind of the artist."

In the surface decoration of his pieces Tiffany had an especial interest in simulating the iridescence of ancient glass, an effect he attempted in many of his productions. Whereas ancient glass had become iridescent through natural decay over long centuries of burial in damp soil, Tiffany sought to duplicate the same appearance chemically. An early publication of the Tiffany Studios coyly hints at the process involved: "Mr. Tiffany obtains his iridescent and lustre effects . . . by a careful study of the natural decay of glass . . . and by reversing the action in such a way as to arrive at the effects without disintegration." Bing briefly but more concretely suggests the technique: "The glass, while still hot, is exposed to the fumes produced by different metals vaporized."

Although generally employed as an added surface embellishment, Tiffany occasionally used iridescence alone as the principal means of decoration. A large, free-form bowl (Figure 2) in his so-called lava technique is one of three such pieces, dating from 1908, that came from Tiffany's personal collection and that show the extraordinary variety of design possible within the range of a single style. A remarkable series of small vases, representing the purest form of Tiffany's a l'antico style, exhibit the same amazing virtuosity, counterfeiting the pitted and iridescent surface that only the fortuitous action of time had formerly been able to accomplish (Frontispiece).

The basic techniques of favrile glass found many applications, one of the most popular of which was the so-called peacock-feather design, of which the Museum possesses several fine examples (Figure 3). Tiffany first exhibited vases and plaques in this design at the Tiffany Studios

in 1896, after a year-long series of experiments. The eloquent Mr. Bing perhaps best captured the essence of these richly iridescent pieces in the uninhibited prose of his catalogue for the exhibition of Tiffany's work at the Grafton Galleries in London in 1899:

"Just as in the natural feather itself, we find here a suggestion of the impalpable, the tenuity of the fronds and their pliability... Never, perhaps, has any man carried to greater perfection the art of faithfully rendering Nature in her most seductive aspects. And, on the other hand, this power which the author possesses of assigning in advance to each morsel of glass, whatever its color or chemical composition, the exact place which it is to occupy when the article leaves the glassblower's hands—this truly unique art is combined in these peacocks' feathers with the charm of iridescence which bathes the subtle and velvety ornamentation with an almost supernatural light."

Another outstanding application of the favrile glass technique was the so-called paperweight pieces: flowers and leaves of colored glass were encased within the walls of a vase or bowl, and occasionally the whole was then embellished with a veil of iridescence. "Produced by numerous glasses of various chemical constituents reacting one upon another"—in Tiffany's own words—these spectacular pieces were created with widely varying decorative effects. A red bowl from the Laurelton Hall collection (Frontispiece), dating from 1903, demonstrates how the decoration was gradually built up with successive applications of colored glass. A vase with yellow flowers against an iridescent gold background, executed in 1904, Tiffany described in his inventory as an "unusual specimen of chemical reaction producing extraordinary color effects in a floral motif." A monumental vase of slightly iridescent glass inset with green leaves and white gladioli (Figure 4), datable to 1909 by the Tiffany inventory, represents the climax of this technique; it is identical to a piece, now privately owned, that Tiffany chose to exhibit at the Alaska-Yukon Exposition in Seattle in the same year.

5. Iris vase, Tiffany Glass and Decorating Company, 1897. Height 11 3/4 inches. Gift of the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, 51.121.8

Other gems of the Museum's collection, showing the tremendous range of his production, include a black vase with blue iridescent decoration suggesting the form of the iris (Figure 5)—a piece that Tiffany himself selected for reproduction in color in *The Art Work of Louis C. Tiffany* in 1914. Another outstanding example—Tiffany called it a "specimen of glass of intense chemical reaction, the colors being brought out by cutting"—is a small piece of "stone" or "agate" glass (Figure 6), which is indeed a close approximation of a natural mineral substance; an inscription indicates that it was among the pieces Tiffany exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1906. There is also a wide selection of flower-form vases, in which Tiffany captured most intimately the spirit of art nouveau. All in all, the collection of Tiffany glass at the Metropolitan represents a panorama of the effects he was able to achieve from his initial experiments in ornamental glass in 1893 to the culmination of his techniques in the morning-glory vases of 1913 (Figure 7).

Because Louis Tiffany chose to make available to the public so little information concerning how his works were designed and produced, there has grown up a substantial body of myths to fill in the gaps. The well-documented pieces in the Museum's collection can perhaps dispel some of these. For example, it is rather generally stated that Tiffany signed all his works, and that lack of a signature is evidence enough of other authorship. But in the Havemeyer group, selected from Tiffany's earliest works, only a single piece is signed. Several of the earlier pieces from Tiffany's personal collection are also unsigned. At least insofar as early productions are concerned, the legend that Tiffany himself signed each piece need no longer be perpetuated.

The Havemeyer collection presents other valuable documentary information as well. Having led a sheltered existence at the Museum, these pieces are rich in paper labels attached at the Tiffany showrooms, labels that most pieces have lost through successive household washings. Nearly every piece bears the early label of the Tiffany Glass and Decorating Company, but one—an early bottle vase (Figure 8) in "laminated" glass—has instead a printed, partly torn sticker (Figure 9) that reads "[T]iffany fabrile. 1913, inscribed "150A—Coll. L. C. Tiffany—Favrile." Height 6½ inches. Gift of the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, 51.121.15"

The meaning of these numbers, which appear on almost every piece of Tiffany glass, perhaps raises the most perplexing problem in its study. Do the numbers relate to the date of the object, the design, the artist, or the glassblower? No firm answer can yet be given, although on the basis of the Museum's documented holdings some conclusions can be drawn. The early pieces bear simple numbers, up to four digits, which were later augmented with the letters O or X. This scheme seems to have been continued until about 1900, when increasing production apparently demanded a more complex system. Thereafter the numbers were supplemented with other letters of the alphabet, offering a much wider range of combinations.

It has been suggested that the numbers refer to the date or order of production of the objects, but this hypothesis is countered by evidence from the Tiffany inventory. A piece dated 1903, for instance, is numbered 113A, while another dated 1910 is inscribed 46A. On the other hand, these datable pieces from Tiffany's collection do convincingly suggest a correlation between number and design. Four reproductions of antique glass, for example, all dating from 1912, bear the numbers 7238J, 7239J, 7247J, and 8319J; another vase, also simulating ancient glass, falls into the same numerical sequence with the number 7252J, despite the fact that it is dated four years earlier.

Two paperweight bowls (Figure 11, lower left, and Figure 13), inscribed R2413 and R2415, appear to be part of the same sequence as a related bowl (Figure 12), inscribed R2420, in the Joseph Heil Collection at the Museum of Modern Art; a number of similar instances might be cited.

Most (though not all) of Tiffany's productions are signed, and signed with one of two signatures: either a cursive signature like those in Tiffany's letters and the dedicatory inscriptions of his book, or a simpler, more rectilinear one that varies from a brief "L.C.T." to "L.C. Tiffany—Favrile." But while most Tiffany glass bears Tiffany's name, his precise contribution to its creation is uncertain. One noted writer on glass, Albert Christian Revi, takes a dim view of Tiffany's participation. "After one abortive attempt to establish a glass works," he writes, "Louis Comfort Tiffany engaged the services, on a shareholding basis, of Arthur J. Nash. . . . The elder Nash and
his son Leslie operated the factory at Corona, Long Island, and were responsible for all the designs, glass formulas and decorating techniques. . . . The Nashes, because of their superior development of Iridescent glass and other fine glassware brought the Tiffany works to first place in the production of artistic glass in America.” Elsewhere Revi writes: “Contrary to many reports, we have been told by a reliable source that Mr. Tiffany had no practical experience in glass making and did not personally sign every piece which bore the Tiffany trademark or initials.” Revi’s “reliable source” was the late Leslie Nash, who also claimed to have added a number of significant innovations himself to the Tiffany output, including the renowned peacock-feather glass, for the development of which, according to Nash, Tiffany awarded him a partnership in the Tiffany Furnaces.

During shortly before his death in 1958, Leslie Nash had in his possession what were allegedly the earliest pieces produced by his father at the Corona furnaces in 1893. One of these pieces, a vase now in the Revi collection (Figure 10) said to be the second piece of favrile “laminated” glass made by Arthur Nash in America, is practically identical in technique to some of the earliest pieces in the Havemeyer collection, especially the important piece bearing the label “Tiffany Fabrile Glass.” And recently several pieces of glass of a type generally found with a Tiffany signature have appeared with the inscription “Sample—Approved by A. J. Nash,” offering further support to the theory that it was Nash who was in charge of executing and possibly designing some of the glass produced by the Tiffany firm.

One must, however, remember that Louis Tiffany had developed special techniques for his productions in stained glass long before the arrival of the Nashes from England. As early as 1880, for example, Tiffany applied for patents on the metallic iridescent glass that has since become so inextricably associated with his name. Furthermore, the statements made by Leslie Nash stand in the sharpest contradiction to the impression given by Tiffany himself. He repeatedly stated that the development of favrile glass had resulted from his own experimental work in chemistry and glass blowing. The specific contribution of the Nashes goes unmentioned, not only in the writings of Tiffany but also in those of his contemporary critics.

One cannot argue, however, that Tiffany was himself active as a glassblower during the mature period of the Tiffany Studios. As René de Quélinois, who described himself as head designer and manager of the decorating section of the Tiffany firm, wrote, Tiffany’s “ideas for decoration and glass were mainly expressed by quick, rough, color memoranda that could only be understood or interpreted by the artists who surrounded him.” Prescribing in this manner the basic “taste” of the objects, Tiffany apparently.

encouraged the vast crew of artisans he supervised to employ a certain freedom in the interpretation of his designs. Perhaps the solution to the problem of authorship is that a great piece of Tiffany glass is as much a credit to the craftsmen who fashioned it from the molten state as to the man whose name it undoubtedly bears.

Tiffany's personal role in the Tiffany firm was largely that of the promoter—and an untiring entrepreneur he was! He saw to it, for instance, that the work of his company was well represented at the innumerable expositions of the period. The Tiffany Studios set up an elaborate display of a chapel and stained glass at the Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893, receiving for their efforts a total of fifty-four prizes. At the Exposition Universelle at Paris in 1900 the Tiffany Studios were awarded a Grand Prix, and Tiffany himself was made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor. In 1901 he sent exhibits to Buffalo, Dresden, and St. Petersburg, winning prizes at all three. Among the many other awards that helped advance the pedigree of the firm and its master were a Grand Prix and a special diploma at Turin in 1902, another Grand Prix at Seattle in 1909, and gold medals at the St. Louis Exposition in 1904, at Jamestown in 1907, and at the Panama-Pacific Exposition in 1915.

Meanwhile a constant stream of propaganda from the Tiffany Studios provided the public with educational sermons on stained glass, mosaics, and favrile glass, among other media, always offering, at the same time, the important information that the best of this work could be obtained, of course, from the Tiffany Studios. Reference has already been made to Tiffany's attempts to place his glass in museums throughout the world as evidence of its universal appeal. The many publications of the Tiffany firm, in fact, show the extent to which such propaganda could go. In 1897 the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston was credited with owning a collection of favrile glass. It apparently had none. In 1900 the Field Columbian Museum, now the Chicago Museum of Natural History, was mentioned as having purchased a collection of Tiffany glass. In reality it was there on loan from the Tiffany Glass and Decorating Company. In 1900 the Imperial Museum and the Fine Arts Society of Tokyo were both said to have purchased collections. In truth Tiffany had donated to them favrile glass and stained-glass windows, in recognition of which he was elected to membership in the Society. This honor, moreover, he repeatedly offered as evidence of his boundless success. Louis Tiffany was an advertising agent of the highest order.

Whereas at first Tiffany's productions were sold exclusively in the showroom of the Tiffany Studios and at Tiffany and Company, the growing interest in his work soon resulted in their wider distribution through local art and jewelry shops. Assuming the role of Tiffany's agent in Europe, Samuel Bing was instrumental in creating an international reputation for Tiffany. He opened his famous Art Nouveau Bing shop in Paris in 1895 with a show of Tiffany's work and subsequently offered a wide variety of favrile glass, selling selected specimens to the Kestner-Museum in Hanover, the Kunstgewerbe Museum in Berlin, the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, and a host of others. Indeed, when, in 1899, Bing organized the extensive exhibition of Tiffany's work at the Grafton Galleries in London, one paper informed its readers that "this blown glass . . . has so attracted the attention of European connoisseurs that in many of the museums in Europe . . . small collections have been gathered together as object lessons for the local craftsmen."

And object lessons they did in fact become. Even before 1900 the various publications of the Tiffany Studios "respectfully cautioned" an un­ wary public of the imitations of favrile glass that had begun to appear on the market. In America the tremendous popularity of Tiffany's iridescent beauties soon nurtured substantial competition. The Quezal Art Glass and Decorating Company of Brooklyn started marketing iridescent glass in 1902, and in 1904 the Steuben Glass Works of Corning, New York, presented its "Aurene" ware. The Durand Glass Company of Vineland, New

11. LEFT TO RIGHT: Paperweight bowl, Tiffany Studios, 1903, inscribed "Louis C. Tiffany R2413"; plaque, Tiffany Glass and Decorating Company, about 1894-1896; paperweight vase, Tiffany Studios, inscribed "L. C. Tiffany Favrile 8458C." Gift of the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, 51.121.24; Gift of H. O. Havemeyer, 96.17.51; Anonymous gift, 55.213.19
Jersey, and the Union Glass Company of Somerville, Massachusetts, soon followed. With few exceptions, however, the glass they produced lacked the inventive design and inherent quality of material that characterized Tiffany’s productions.

In Europe, too, a knowledge of Tiffany glass, acquired through international expositions, traveling exhibitions, museum collections, and magazine reproductions, prompted a host of enterprising glassworkers to market competitive imitations. Johannes Lötz Witwe, of Klostermühle, Austria, analyzed locally available specimens of favrile glass to produce a number of pieces designed to be close copies of Tiffany’s work; today, in proper perspective, they suffer considerably in comparison with their prototypes. The Anglicized mark “Loetz of Austria” that many of these pieces bear suggests that it was mainly an American market for which they were intended. Graf Harrach, of Neuwelt, Bohemia, made a number of copies of Tiffany’s flower-form vases, which had proved especially popular in Europe. Reproduced in Moderne Gläser, Gustav Pazaurek’s treatise on art nouveau glass, there is a veritable duplicate of a vase in the Havemeyer collection. A number of other Continental glasshouses also marketed uninspired imitations of Tiffany’s work, but in attempting to keep production costs low to meet competition, their glass was allowed to deteriorate to the chasms of turn-of-the-century taste and quality.

The many imitations of favrile glass that flooded the market even before 1900 constitute a fair barometer to the international popularity Tiffany’s productions enjoyed. When one considers that Tiffany was given a show at the decorative arts museum at Reichenberg, in northern Bohemia, as early as 1897, one realizes that his international reputation was already established at that time. Indeed, Tiffany’s works were perhaps the first by an American artist to be known and imitated even in the provincial regions of Europe. This makes it all the more gratifying that today, after several decades of ridicule and neglect, Louis Comfort Tiffany’s creative, high-quality productions are once again the subject of international appreciation as an important manifestation of art nouveau.