

LOUIS COMFORT TIFFANY  
REFERENCE FOR HIS WORKS AT THE KIA

In a corner of the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts' (KIA) permanent collection is a small array of glass objects by Tiffany -- Louis Comfort Tiffany, including three mosaics. Since the turn of the last century, people's lives have intersected with the name and work of Tiffany. We can find Tiffany mosaics in cities of all sizes and in every sort of building -- from theatres, stores, museums, libraries, schools, clubs, banks, and hotels, to places of worship and private homes.

TIFFANY'S PLACE IN THE WORLD OF ART

The art world of Louis Comfort Tiffany spanned several design periods -- the American Aesthetic Movement, Arts and Crafts Movement, and Art Nouveau. He was a painter, entrepreneur, interior decorator, and arbiter of taste during the Gilded Age of great industrial wealth in America, from the 1870's through the 1920's. Over his long lifetime Tiffany's reputation evolved from that of an innovator to an old fashioned, fussy artist. His workshop of fine artists and craftspeople -- he was one of the earliest to employ and pay women on the same standard as men -- produced thousands of objects from entire walls to the smallest of treasures that would fit in the palm of a hand. Tiffany's vast output also epitomized the dichotomy of art versus industry, a problem at the heart of the arts and crafts movement in general.

Tiffany's works bridged a period in art that has been described as an "ambiguous moment." The whole world, including art, was beginning to be psychoanalyzed, industrialized, motorized, and electrified. The worldview was being challenged in all corners as the din of modern life arrived and made its impact felt on the modern aesthetic.

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1848, Louis Comfort Tiffany was the son of Charles Lewis Tiffany, founder of the Tiffany & Company jewelry store in New York City. He was exposed from birth to luxury goods and the designers and craftsmen who created them. In 1866 he began painting studies in the studio of George Innes and then continued his art studies in Europe.

While in Paris he developed a taste for Near Eastern and Islamic art and visits to Spain and North Africa further developed his interest in Moorish design. Tiffany later attributed his inspiration to create in the medium of mosaic to the extraordinary interiors he saw in Byzantine churches and their dazzling mosaics. He was named an associate of the prestigious National Academy of Design at age twenty-three and became a well-known and respected Orientalist painter of North African and Middle Eastern scenes.

By the late 1870s, while receiving recognition as a painter, he began to be restless with his works on canvas. Various influences are cited for his turn to the decorative arts, for while widely recognized for his paintings Tiffany was not satisfied, as he was too aware of his shortcomings as a painter. He also had a desire to reach and influence a wider audience than could be reached through art shows and the galleries.

During this period, Tiffany became keenly interested in the effects of color and light and began studying the chemistry and techniques of glassmaking. He experimented with stained glass and worked on methods of coloring glass and forming textures with molten glass and applied for patents on metallic iridescent glass (later called FAVRILE). This experimentation solidified his move into decorative work as his major profession. Soon Tiffany's trademark was the extensive use of glass mosaic and colored glass picture windows. His later experiments in blown glass would lead to distinctive decorative wares and, after 1900, his name began to be associated with art glass even more than with mosaic or stained glass. Tiffany's research, creativity, and highly developed aesthetic elevated glassmaking to an art form of new brilliance and beauty.

Tiffany considered himself as America's "first industrial artist." He saw no reason why art and everyday life could not intertwine. His unique glass works made his name ubiquitous at the turn of the last century; but as tastes changed, the craze for "Tiffany glass" as a badge of culture and good taste waned.

Louis Comfort Tiffany died in 1933 at the age of eighty-four.

#### MOSAICS IN PARTICULAR

The use of decorative colored glass can be traced to mosaic art, which reached its zenith in the Eastern Roman Empire. In mosaic, the glass is embedded in the binding material and the light is not transmitted but reflected. The first small sparkling but opaque bits of glass found were used in jewelry and decorated furniture and homes, set in floors and "painted" on walls as murals. Mosaics changed from a minor to a major craft with the coming of Christianity as they embellished the first Christian churches. After reaching its artistic height with the great Byzantine interiors completed between 400-800 AD, interest in mosaics steadily ebbed and their extensive use in interiors waned in the ensuing centuries.

In the late 1880s Tiffany noticed that a demand for mosaics seemed to be growing in conjunction with the public's interest in exotic themes. His mosaic technique began to blossom utilizing iridescent glass, mother-of-pearl and transparent tesserae (small glass squares) backed with gold or metal leaf.

Louis Comfort Tiffany's tour de force of mosaic artwork was installed at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. It was a splendid Byzantine-inspired chapel designed and executed by The Tiffany Glass and Decorating Company. An immediate international sensation, it brought the already successful forty-five year old accomplished artist and designer to new heights of popularity and respect.

Some examples of the types of glass incorporated by Tiffany and his craftspeople into his interior mosaics and glass windows included: smooth finish opalescent; translucent with hammered finishes; flashed glass, translucent with ripple finish; and opalescent with a granite surface.

The three examples of Tiffany mosaics on display from the KIA's permanent collection are: *Turtleback*, a large mosaic arrangement of opalescent turtleback pieces surrounded by smaller glass pieces and "jewels"; *Moorish*, a small segment of a flower-like mosaic pattern; and *Blue Spectrum*, a demonstration of color variations available in blue glass.

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