QUEST OF BEAUTY
LOUIS COMFORT TIFFANY'S LIFE AND ART
THE CHARLES HOSMER
MORSE MUSEUM
of American Art
WINTER PARK, FLORIDA
Louis Comfort Tiffany today is most famous for his vastly popular creations in glass, and yet his artistic vision left few mediums untouched. Tiffany was a painter, a decorator, an architect, a photographer, and a designer of pottery, furniture, enamels, and jewelry in addition to glass lamps, windows, mosaics, and vases. Nature was his muse, color his obsession, and exotic culture his bottomless well of influence. The teams of talented designers and craftspeople under Tiffany’s watch translated his all-encompassing vision into some of the most beautiful objects of the time. Late in his life, Tiffany elegantly summed up his long and prolific career as a “Quest of Beauty.”

1848–1878: Birth to Age Thirty
Tiffany was born in 1848 shortly after his father, Charles Tiffany, founded a modest venture in New York that grew to become the most prestigious silver and jewelry company in America—Tiffany & Co. Demonstrating early artistic promise, Tiffany as a teenager won an award for proficiency in drawing at his boarding school. The young Tiffany went on to study art in Paris, and teachers there helped seed an enduring fascination with the art and design of Eastern and Islamic countries.

Settling into adulthood, Tiffany found success as an artist. Named at age twenty-three as an associate of the National Academy of Design, he became a well-known and respected Orientalist painter of North African and Middle Eastern scenes, exhibiting often in New York and abroad. The time Tiffany spent painting only deepened his interest in color and light, leading him inevitably perhaps to the consideration of glass as a medium. As early as age twenty-four, he was studying the chemistry and techniques of glassmaking.

In 1872, Tiffany married Mary “May” Goddard. Together and with friends, Tiffany and May traveled in Europe and North Africa. Tiffany’s new home for his young family at the Bella Apartment House in New York City was also the first residence in which he practiced the fusion of Eastern and Western styles that would become the hallmark of his interior designs. Tiffany’s penthouse suite was an amalgamation of Oriental fantasy and nationalistic sobriety that brought together disparate elements into a grand, unified environment.

1879–1887: The Artist in His Thirties
Tiffany’s home in the Bella Apartment House was an early showcase for his talent, and it suggested to him the market for a fresh type of interior design. Using family connections and financial backing and partnerships with established artists and designers, he was able to make a smooth transition from artist to interior designer. While many wealthy Americans were looking to European historical models for taste and decoration, Tiffany provided a unique, artistic approach to interiors. Louis C. Tiffany & Co., Associated Artists (1881–83), the most widely recognized of his ventures, decorated the most respected homes, private clubs, theaters, and civic buildings of the day. With commissions such as President Chester A. Arthur’s White House and Mark Twain’s home in Connecticut, Tiffany and his associates quickly became tastemakers in America.

These interiors included windows, lamps, and lighting, and motivated him to apply for patents in his opalescent glassmaking techniques, which produced an unprecedented range of hues and three-dimensional effects in a single piece of glass.

In 1882, Tiffany began work on a fifty-seven room home on Seventy-second Street in New York City for the extended Tiffany family. Ladies’ Home Journal (November 1900) some years later would call it, “The Most Artistic House in New York City.” In this personal project, he developed a highly imaginative vision that mixed and mingled historical and exotic sources, creating a coherent, artfully blended interior. The decorations in Tiffany’s apartment included such splendid elements as the Magnolia leded-glass bay window and hand-carved teak doors from India, both now in the Morse collection, as well the innovative application of Japanese tsuba (sword guards) as ornamentation.

Tiffany made trips to St. Augustine, Florida, during this time hoping to improve his wife’s ailing health. Here he continued his quest of beauty, turning to the relatively modern invention of portable photography. From his many fine photographic studies of St. Augustine, he later executed paintings. May tragically succumbed to her illness in 1884.
In 1885, Tiffany opened the Tiffany Glass Company. He continued to design interiors and also increased production of the individual objects with which he adorned those rooms. In 1886, Tiffany was remarried to Louise Wakeman Knox.

1888–1900: The Artist in His Forties
Artistically, the next decade was dominated by two projects considered among the most important of his career: Between 1890 and 1893 he decorated the home of prominent New Yorkers Louisine and Henry Havemeyer and created the Byzantine-Romanesque chapel interior for the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

After a bankruptcy in 1892, Tiffany reorganized his business as the Tiffany Glass and Decorating Company, marking the beginning of a highly successful strategy for marketing and selling his designs to a broader audience. He developed, exhibited, and sold individual blown-glass vases, leaded-glass windows, and lamps.

The famed Paris art dealer Siegfried Bing (1838–1905), whose Paris shop L’Art Nouveau provided the name to the international decorative art movement, was among the first to see Tiffany’s art glass. As Tiffany’s sole representative in Europe, Bing helped expand Tiffany’s reputation internationally. Tiffany publicly debuted his first leaded-glass lamps at an 1899 exhibition of his works produced by Bing at Grafton Galleries in London. The 1900 Exposition Universelle Internationale in Paris is generally regarded as a high point of Tiffany’s career. He won a grand prix at the exposition, at which he unveiled his Four Seasons leaded-glass window, and was named a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor.

1901–1915: Age Fifty-three to Sixty-seven
In 1902, Tiffany incorporated his growing company as Tiffany Studios—the name that would be most remembered by subsequent generations. Tiffany Studios succeeded in turning art into a business of awesome proportion, producing objects desired by both the wealthy and members of the rapidly developing middle classes. Around this time he began experimenting with art pottery, the development of glazes garnering most of his attention. He unveiled several examples at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase International Exposition.

Tiffany’s father died in 1902, leaving him a fortune of more than $3 million. Louis became art director at Tiffany & Co., and though Tiffany Studios would always operate separately, the firm’s expanding lines now included jewelry, enamels, and fine metalwork, objects that were sold through and later produced at Tiffany & Co.

Also in 1902, Tiffany began construction of Laurelton Hall, a vast country estate on Long Island. On the 580-acre site, Tiffany erected an eighty-four-room, eight-level house, built conservatories and stables among other structures, and laid out sixty acres of carefully planned gardens. Tiffany designed every aspect of the estate. He decorated the interior with objects collected from around the world as well as with his own creations, including furniture, rugs, lighting fixtures, windows, enamels, desk sets, art glass, and pottery. Sadly, Tiffany’s second wife died in 1904 before her husband’s project was completed.

Charles de Kay’s authorized biography of Tiffany was published in 1914 at the summit of his career. With this first step, Tiffany began to move his focus from building his business empire toward establishing his legacy.
1848: February 18/19 Louis Comfort Tiffany born in New York City.

1871: January Elected Associate of National Academy of Design.


1878: June 18 Forms Louis C. Tiffany & Company.

1879: Before June—April 1881 Decorates Fifth Avenue home of New York pharmaceutical and chemical manufacturer George Kemp.


1882: October Commissioned by President Chester A. Arthur (1829–86) to decorate the Blue Room, East Room, a corridor, and the State Dining Room of the White House.

1884: January 22 First wife, May, dies of tuberculosis.

1885: December 1 Incorporates Tiffany Glass Company.

1886: November 9 Marries Louise Wakeman Knox (1851–1904) of Philadelphia.


1888: October 1 Organizes Tiffany & de Forest Decorators with Lockwood de Forest (1850–1932) to import exotic woodwork; dissolved November 29, 1882.

1889: December 4 Elected Academician of the National Academy of Art.

1901: August 21 Louis Comfort Tiffany dies in New York City.

1916–1933: Age Sixty-eight to His Death

The beginning of World War I as well as the 1913 New York Armory show of modern painting and sculpture foretold the end of Tiffany’s reign as an international design master. In 1916, Tiffany himself began reflecting on his life’s achievements and philosophy. His sixtieth birthday party at Tiffany Studios was a themed event called the “Quest of Beauty.” The next year he published articles on this quest in International Studio and Harper’s Bazaar.

Upon his retirement in 1918, he set out to give Laurelton Hall to the world, endowing the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation there as a study center for young artists, who were called “fellows,” and as a museum for his collections and personal works. Tiffany died January 17, 1933, at his Seventy-second Street residence only months after Tiffany Studios filed for bankruptcy. In the early 1940s, finances drove the Tiffany Foundation to move to New York City and sell Tiffany’s prized collections from Laurelton Hall as well as its buildings and property. A devastating fire finally gutted the house in 1957.

With the physical destruction of Laurelton Hall, it seemed that Tiffany’s quest had met its real end. Hugh McKean and his wife, Jeannette, however, who built the collections at the Morse, plus a growing number of former employees, Tiffany Foundation fellows, collectors and scholars, have made it possible to experience Tiffany’s quest of beauty through documents, old photographs, and most especially, through the magnificent artwork that remains.

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td><strong>May 1—October 30</strong> World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago. Exhibits chapel interior. Awarded 54 medals.</td>
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<td>1895</td>
<td><strong>December 26</strong> Inaugural exhibition at <em>L’Art Nouveau</em>, the Paris gallery of Siegfried Bing (1838–1905), with ten windows and twenty-one pieces of “Favrile” blown glass.</td>
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<td>1899</td>
<td><strong>May–July</strong> S. Bing exhibition of Tiffany’s works at Grafton Galleries, London. Debut of Tiffany leaded-glass lampshades.</td>
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<td>1901</td>
<td><strong>May 1—November 1</strong> Pan–American Exposition, Buffalo, New York. Designs central fountain for the inner court of the Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building. Wins a grand prize for enamels.</td>
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<td>1902</td>
<td><strong>February 18</strong> Charles Lewis Tiffany (b. 1812) dies of pneumonia, leaving his son nearly $3 million. <strong>February 25</strong> Incorporates Tiffany Studios.</td>
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<td>1902–5</td>
<td>Builds Laurelton Hall on Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island.</td>
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<td>1904</td>
<td><strong>May 9</strong> Second wife, Louise, dies of cancer. <strong>April 30–December 1</strong> Louisiana Purchase International Exposition, St. Louis. Debuts art jewelry and pottery.</td>
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<td>1914</td>
<td><em>The Art Work of Louis C. Tiffany</em> by Charles de Kay (1848–1935) is published.</td>
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<td>1916</td>
<td><strong>February 19</strong> Holds a breakfast and masque at Tiffany Studios entitled <em>The Quest of Beauty</em> to celebrate his sixty-eighth birthday and to show a retrospective exhibition of his works.</td>
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<td>1918</td>
<td><strong>July 30</strong> Creates Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation at Laurelton Hall to support artists and maintain the estate as a museum for his collections.</td>
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<td>1932</td>
<td><strong>April 16</strong> Tiffany Studios files for bankruptcy.</td>
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<td>1933</td>
<td><strong>January 17</strong> At age 84, Louis Comfort Tiffany dies at his 72nd Street home.</td>
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