



SCULPTING NATURE:
THE FAVRILE POTTERY OF L.C. TIFFANY

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THE CHARLES HOSMER
MORSE MUSEUM
of American Art

WINTER PARK, FLORIDA

This is the first exhibition to our knowledge devoted exclusively to the pottery of Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933). It marks the 100th anniversary of Tiffany's introduction of his ceramics in St. Louis at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904 and a rekindling of interest in this relatively little known and largely unstudied area of Tiffany's work.

Tiffany's pottery is always interesting and frequently very beautiful. Relative to the widely appreciated Tiffany glass – his windows, blown glass, and lamps – the pottery is rare. It is believed that the total pottery production of Tiffany Studios is around 2,000 pieces. Given this, its fragility and, until recently, its relative neglect by collectors, the number of pieces extant is doubtless small. The Morse, with its collection of more than 90 examples, is the largest known repository of the remaining Favrite pottery, as Tiffany called his ceramics.

The Museum's exhibition is drawn from the collection built by Jeannette McKean (1909-1989), who founded the museum in 1942, and her husband Hugh McKean (1908- 1995), director of the museum until his death. The couple assembled over a period of almost 50 years extensive holdings of Tiffany objects – what is today the world's most comprehensive collection of the designer's work. Mr. and Mrs. McKean bought their first piece of Tiffany pottery – a vase of Oriental influence from the artist's own collection – in 1955 when it was still virtually unknown. They continued collecting until Mr. McKean's death, and the Museum continues to collect today.

The idea of this exhibit is to provide an opportunity for the public, collectors, experts, and others interested in this fascinating episode in American decorative arts to see a large group of Tiffany's ceramics and to prompt further appreciation and study of Tiffany's Favrite pottery. All evidence suggests that Tiffany himself had a great affection for pottery and that for a period of time was greatly absorbed in its creation at his own studios.

**SOURCES AND THEMES –
AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH
TO TIFFANY ART**

Although contemporaneous movements and styles of the late-19th and early-20th centuries such as Art Nouveau, Arts and Crafts, and the Aesthetic Movement provide groups of ideas and formal characteristics that are useful in understanding Tiffany's work,



Fig. 1: Vase, Water Lilies, c. 1904. Glazed white clay. Incised (on underside): LCT / 7. Etched: P 1304 / L.C. Tiffany – Favrite Pottery (66-031).

this exhibit is organized instead by what moved Tiffany. We present here several ideas that not only help explain Tiffany's ceramics and their sources but also help link all the many mediums in which Tiffany worked and connect Tiffany's work to his times. These are the wells of influence tapped by Tiffany and a host of other artists of the period.

In Tiffany's pottery, four formal and thematic characteristics are at work: naturalism – interest in the use of artistic illusion to represent the natural world; historicism – the use of historical styles; exoticism, which at the time was generally synonymous with Orientalism – the use of exotic forms and images; and abstraction – the movement away from realistic images to simplified forms that either reduced natural representation or abandoned the natural world altogether.

These ideas were part of Tiffany's conscious approach to artistic creation. They were part of the creative milieu of virtually all artists and designers of the period in whatever style or within whatever movement they worked.

NATURALISM

The largest group of ceramics in the exhibition and the group that inspired the exhibition title, "Sculpting Nature," is made up of those pieces in which naturalism predominates. In these pieces, one is struck by Tiffany's ability to produce what amounts to representational sculpture, often nearly life-size, of the natural world. In every case the actual function of the piece is left far behind while the aesthetic qualities of the pieces as sculpture are so far advanced that Tiffany's artistic achieve-



Fig. 2: Vase, Milkweed, c. 1904. Glazed white clay. Initialed in glaze (on underside): AG. Incised: LCT P (76-013).

Fig. 3: Vase, Artichoke, c. 1904. Glazed white clay. Incised (on underside): LCT / 7 (80-015).





natural world becomes apparent. The celery vase, for example – or if you will, the celery sculpture – when viewed at eye level, becomes not only stalks expanded and interfolded at the base with leaves spreading out at the top, but a Corinthian column. This impression is promoted by the manipulated silhouette, the shiny white, clear-glazed surface, and the classical stillness of the design (fig 4).

Thus, Tiffany has first and foremost represented a specific object with verisimilitude but then also makes a reference to history – specifically antiquity.

HISTORICISM AND EXOTICISM

The next two groups in the exhibition are made up of pieces that are most clearly associated with history – the idea of historicism, including classical and medieval history – and the exotic, based on sources that are often historical but which were new to European and American mainstream art in the latter 19th century. These include ideas and forms from Oriental sources – Japan, China, North Africa, ancient Assyria (Iraq), and Persia (Iran)– as well as early Irish decorative art (fig 5).

The use of such a wide variety of sources was not unique to Tiffany at the time. A general interest in the exotic reflected new travel and trade opportunities. Commodore Matthew Perry's opening of Japan's ports in 1854 after

Fig 4: Vase, Celery stalks, c. 1904. Glazed white clay. Incised (on underside): LCT Etched: P. 1343 L.C. Tiffany – Favrite Pottery (74-026).

ment in pottery is universally comprehensible.

Tiffany's ceramic garden includes fruits, vegetables, flowers, grasses, and even occasionally fauna. Celery, peapods, corn, tomatoes, artichokes, mushrooms, apples, dogwood, honey-suckle, nasturtium, milkweed, lilies, cattails, leaves, reeds, and vines are depicted in highly recognizable, quickly-comprehended images (figs. 1, 2, 3).

It is readily seen as nature and often something more. Upon examination, Tiffany's masterful manipulation of the

Most of Tiffany's pottery has the sturdy simplicity found in his personal work in all fields. His love of the modest and at the same time the lovely forms in nature is shown in his use of weeds, cattails, pussy willows, and grasses.

Hugh F McKean (1908-1995),
Director of the Morse from its founding in 1942 until his death



Fig 5: Vase, Celtic encircled birds, 1904. Glazed white clay. Incised (on underside): LCT / 7 (87-027).

two centuries of isolation had a profound impact on the Western world in the latter 19th century.

Tiffany's interest in Japanese and Chinese art is evident from his personal collections of this material as well as his work itself. His special interest in Persia and North Africa became a hallmark of his design in every medium in which he worked.

Looking at his pottery, Tiffany's historicizing is clear to audiences even modestly informed on history and geography. In several roughly formed cups that are decorated with figures set in arches, Tiffany borrows directly from medieval examples. A vase decorated with lions formed of raised dots borrows from Assyrian sources that were widely represented at English and German potteries; the mottled glazes forming subtle asymmetrical patterns on ceramics of simple shape can be traced to Japan (fig 6); the



Fig 6: Vase, c. 1904. Glazed white clay. Incised (on underside): LCT / 7 4655 Etched: P. 247 L.C. Tiffany Favrite Pottery (96-002).



Fig 7: Vase, c. 1906. Glazed white clay. Incised (on underside): LCT / 7. Etched: P. 1371 / L.C.T. Favrite Pottery. Paper label: Tiffany Studios Favrite Glass Registered Trademark (95-013).

simple abstract rounded global shapes and delicate finishes to many pieces owe much to the Chinese (fig 7).

ABSTRACTION

The last group of objects in the exhibition reflects what might be the most forward-looking characteristic of Tiffany ceramics and Tiffany's work in general. In his abstract pieces, the original object – the flower or the plant, for example – disappears either to a large extent or entirely. The result is an unidentifiable or only vaguely recognizable natural phenomenon. Though not entirely free of the suggestion of an exotic or historical source and even of the original object that lies behind it, ceramics such as these achieve a distance from the world we see with our eyes and reflect the "purer" theoretical world of form (fig 8).

This approach becomes crucial to the development of the abstract art that achieved primacy for a time in the latter 20th century. In Tiffany one sees this tendency in Laurelton Hall, in various windows, and in this group of ceramics as well.

SUMMARY

Although these ideas of naturalism, historicism, exoticism, and abstraction

It should be remembered . . . that the original was handmade; that each cast from a mold was carefully and meticulously carved, trimmed, and finished by hand; that each could have its own glaze; that glazes are complicated and tricky; that many of the effects in Tiffany's glazes are as sophisticated as those in his Favrite glass; and that each finished piece is therefore unique.

Hugh F McKean (1908-1995),
Director of the Morse from its founding in 1942 until his death



Fig 8: Vase, 1904. Glazed white clay. Incised (on underside): LCT Etched: P. 1375 L.C.T. Favrite Pottery. Paper label: Tiffany Studios Favrite Glass Registered Trademark (2003-014).

are never enough to fully explain Tiffany's work, they do help to distinguish aspects of the very rich and complex universe of Tiffany's ceramics. They also in varying degrees are part and parcel of all of Tiffany's work, making them useful for appreciating the depth of Tiffany's genius and the immensity of his achievement in the decorative arts. In the end Tiffany's ceramics offer a particularly good introduction to his entire oeuvre as well as a splendid aesthetic feast in themselves.

Production History

Pottery was one of the last mediums Tiffany would explore, although he had long held a keen interest in ceramics. In 1878, as a young designer and painter, he taught a course in pottery at the New York Society of Decorative Arts.

His attention turned then to glass, but as early as 1898, he quietly began experiments with decorative ceramics at the Corona factory in Long Island. In 1900, he was fascinated by the avant-garde ceramics exhibited at the Paris Exposition Universelle and came home determined to do something of his own according to press reports at the time. The next year he arranged an exhibition of French pottery in the Tiffany Studios showroom – the only known exhibition there of work other than his own.

The debut of his own line of pottery was keenly anticipated: "It is claimed that Mr. Tiffany, the maker of beautiful Favrite glass, is experimenting in pottery," *The Ceramic Studio* announced in 1902, "and it is probable that he is not following beaten paths and that we will see sooner or later some striking and artistic potteries come of out of his kilns."

In 1904, at the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition in St. Louis, he unveiled three examples of his pottery. In 1905, his ceramics went on sale to the public.

For this line, he took the name that had become his mark of quality in glass: Favrite, a derivation of an old English word meaning handmade.

Tiffany pottery was produced at Tiffany Furnaces, Inc. in Corona



Fig 8: LCT conjoined monogram.

(Queens), New York. The LCT monogram appears on all Tiffany pottery (fig 8), and frequently the words, "L.C. Tiffany Favrite Pottery."

The Tiffany & Co. *Blue Book*, a customer catalogue, described Favrite pottery in 1906 as "entirely different from anything heretofore shown in table lamps, vases, jars and other pieces, now in process of manufacture."

In 1914, after generating one of his smallest production lines, the manufacture of ceramics at Tiffany Furnaces had all but come to an end. Tiffany kept 84 examples of pottery (marked "A-Coll" for artist's collection) at Laurelton Hall, his home on Long Island, as well as a collection of 41 Favrite pottery tiles. Curiously, his work in ceramics merited only one mention in his 1914 official authorized biography, *The Art Work of Louis C. Tiffany*, which was commissioned by Tiffany's children and written by Charles de Kay.

"Glazes on pottery claimed much of his time in certain years," de Kay wrote, leaving much interpretive work for future scholars.

Hidden in relative obscurity for most of the 20th century, Tiffany's ceramics are now considered highly sophisticated and in great demand among connoisseurs and collectors.

