New York Landmarks Conservancy

# Common Bond

## Tiffany Stained Glass Windows

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# Tiffany Stained Glass Windows

*Through artistic innovations and marketing savvy, Louis Comfort Tiffany revolutionized and dominated the American stained glass business throughout the late-19th and early-20th centuries.*

Thousands of houses of worship across the country are enhanced by the beauty of Tiffany stained glass windows. So many in fact, that the name Tiffany has become synonymous with the art of stained glass. But who was Tiffany and why did he become the most prolific and well-known American artisan of stained glass windows? Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933) revolutionized and revitalized the American stained glass industry through marketing savvy and artistic innovations. His showmanship and the design and production capabilities of his New York City-based companies enabled him to dominate a market, especially for religious institutions, which he himself inspired. A man of wealth and strong artistic convictions, he was a leader in reinventing stained glass technology in America with his windows becoming the rage in thousands of American houses of worship, public and commercial buildings, and private residences. Today, Tiffany windows are often the most valuable artistic objects in a religious building and reflect the social history of the congregation.

Courtesy of the Jay Gould Memorial Reformed Church

**Jay Gould Memorial Reformed Church, Roxbury, New York** (Henry J. Hardenburgh, 1894) contains a beautiful collection of Tiffany windows that are distinguished by its semi-translucent "opalescent" and drapery glass.

Louis Comfort Tiffany was the eldest son of Charles Comfort Tiffany, a jewelry and silver merchant who headed Tiffany & Co., the New York City shop which continues today as a world-famous purveyor of luxury objects. The younger Tiffany studied in Europe and began his career as a painter, but soon turned to the applied arts, especially textiles and wallpaper. His first business, Associated Artists, was the premiere "artistic" interior decoration business in New York in the 1880s.

At the same time, Tiffany became increasingly involved in glassmaking, forming Louis C. Tiffany & Co. in 1883. Tiffany considered the prevalent mode of painting on glass and applying tints as "dull and artificial" compared to the medieval method of coloring molten glass with metals and other chemicals. Tiffany and other artists, principally the painter and glass innovator John LaFarge, developed a whole new industry of glassmaking in America based on creating a spectacular array of effects with glass alone, rarely using paint. Both experimented and developed a new method of manufacturing semi-translucent "opalescent" glass that simulated painted effects.

Tiffany's wealth enabled him to assemble manpower, materials, and facilities for production on a vast scale, outpacing competitors like LaFarge. His army of glassmakers, including workers recruited from Europe, manipulated glass and pushed its chemistry to create new processes and effects that were subsequently patented. The firm eventually offered more than 5,000 colors and varieties of glass. Tiffany's other innovations included:

- layering (or plating) multiple pieces of glass to add depth to images of streams or to create misty, ethereal quality of skies
- wrapping glass in copper foil to depict the organic lines of flowers and foliage, and using lead came to highlight architectural lines
- creating "drapery glass" by pouring, gathering, twisting, pulling, and folding glass to simulate garment folds, feathers, and the like
- melding tiny colored glass chips with solid sheets to produce a

shimmering "confetti" effect, often used on clear or colored backgrounds to render foliage
- studding glass with jewel-like fragments

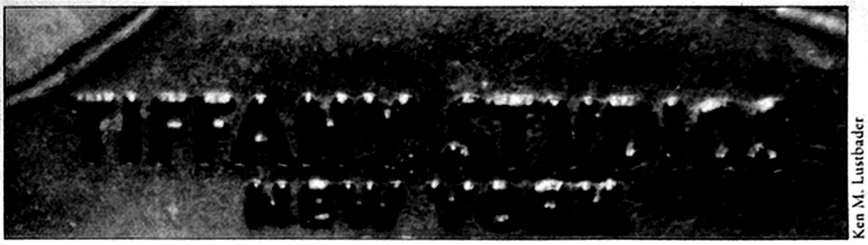
Under various names, the business spanned 50 years and produced thousands of windows around the country, with the majority ecclesiastical, for nearly all denominations. Tiffany's work coincided with the construction of a vast number of new houses of worship in America as the population grew and settlement expanded. At many churches, members memorialized loved ones by commissioning stained glass windows. In older buildings, clear glass or existing stained glass was replaced by the new style of windows.

The firm made four types of windows. The costly *landscape* window was rare among religious commissions but is considered his supreme achievement in stained glass. In *figurative* windows for the ecclesiastical market, Tiffany uncharacteristically followed theological standards of imagery and used paint to depict faces, hands, and feet. Other types of windows, *floral* and *ornamental* (often mosaic), were less expensive, and common in domestic interiors.

Tiffany's cabinet shop produced wooden frames, including ornately carved Gothic structures. There was even an Ecclesiastical Department that manufactured a complete line of liturgical furnishings, including altars, retables, cyboriums, and more. Some religious institutions commissioned Tiffany to produce not only stained glass windows, but also the painted decoration and finishes of the interior, as in the Willard Chapel in Auburn, NY.

During their heyday, Tiffany windows were prestigious symbols. An average three-by-five-foot piece cost $700 when Tiffany's own artisans were paid $3 a day. The large "St. Paul Preaching to the Athenians" memorial window in the Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn, NY cost a colossal $5,000 in 1893.

## How to Identify Tiffany Windows



Ken M. Lustbader

Tiffany's vast output and the popularity of his work often result in mistaken attributions of windows to Tiffany. Some of Tiffany's top designers and artists worked independently or for other studios, using similar glass and plating it in layers, just like Tiffany. Building archives such as guides, congregational histories, and records of memorials are the primary place to search when seeking to identify the maker of a window.

- Look for a signature on the glass, as some windows were signed. However, whether the window is signed or not has little bearing on the importance of the window. Many of Tiffany's best are not signed, while other pedestrian Tiffany windows are signed.
- Look for the use of copper foil.
- Look for the floating of lead with solder, usually on the interior surface.
- Examine how cloth and clothing are depicted. Tiffany almost always used drapery glass. While others used drapery glass, many artists would delineate drapery in the second layer of plating by using lead lines and varying the color.
- Faces are often a tip-off, as the studios differed markedly in the style and quality of painted features. Faces on different Tiffany windows frequently resemble each other. In addition, many Tiffany faces have a lost the surface paint that makes the glass appear to be faded.
- Consult the partial lists of works in major books such as *Louis C. Tiffany: Rebel In Glass* and *Masterworks of Louis Comfort Tiffany* (see **Resources**).
- A consultant with detailed knowledge of late-19th-century American stained glass makers can often make an attribution based on stylistic and technical features.

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Between 1900 and 1910 window production peaked, followed by the public's gradual loss of interest as the novelty diminished. At the same time, Tiffany's control of his companies diminished, effecting quality. Furthermore, the Tiffany style fell into disfavor in the 1910s when tastes grew more academic. The increasing number of Beaux-Arts trained architects applied strict historical principles, subordinating stained glass to the design of the building. Ralph Adams Cram, the primary exponent of the Neo-Gothic mode, insisted upon medieval-style windows. Tiffany refused to change his art. Between 1920 and 1930, his work was rejected, eventually leading Tiffany Studios to fall into bankruptcy in 1931 along with the other studios which specialized in similar window styles.

The great trove of ecclesiastical stained glass produced during the American Renaissance (1876-1917) has suffered from fire, theft, vandalism, and deterioration. Fortunately, the revival of interest in Tiffany windows, beginning in the 1950s and 60s, has brought back its status and encouraged restoration.