A Tiffany Treasure Comes to Light: Design Notebook Tiffany Treasure Comes to Light
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Design Notebook

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IF ALL the Tiffany glass that our mothers and grandmothers claim to have thrown out were suddenly recovered, it would create an aurora borealis of golden luminescence. Everyone, evidently, got rid of the stuff in cartloads — wisteria lamps, favrile vases and bowls, punch sets and wine goblets in numbers that would have put Tiffany Studios into mass production — dumping it all on cue with the advent of correct 18th-century revivals and the Art Deco geometry of the 1920's.

Cycles in taste are as inexorable as the seasons. The fact that those shimmering objects that delighted turn-of-the-century collectors and connoisseurs were given to the junkman a quarter of a century later makes one think. What lovely things are we throwing away today? Where are yesterday's taste-makers now? Would Helen's face launch any ships from Weehawken? Beauty is not only in the eye of the beholder, but in the times.

A few oddballs (I am among them) have continued to fancy the sinuous forms of Art Nouveau and the silken iridescence of Tiffany glass through the nadir of their popularity. But this attachment was strictly outside of approved attitudes and esthetic fashions. Even after World War II, a rosy peony shade, a flaring jack-in-the-pulpit vase or a ruffled favrile dish could still be bought for a small sum in a thrift shop by those who were vulgar or unknowing enough to want them.

Now families are split apart by the possession of one remaining piece the junkman forgot. Collectors vie for rarities and museums fill cases with the glowing, exotic forms that were so disdained. Tiffany has come full circle to the position of status and cult object, enshrined by record auction prices.

It is not surprising, then, that when the Metropolitan Museum of Art opens its renovated American Wing and new addition in 1979 and 1980, Tiffany work will have an honored postion. The designs and artifacts of Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933) and the Tiffany Studios, a happy and profitable alliance of artist and artisans that flourished (and furnished) from the 1880's to the 1930's, are already well represented in the Metropolitan's collections.

But the museum has just acquired a prize — still in the packing cases — which will have pride of place in the new construction. The loggia of Tiffany's own home, Laurelton Hall, will be incorporated into the south court wall of the new American wing being designed and built by Kevin Roche and John Dinkaloo, as a feature of the glassed-in enclosure at the west side of the museum, facing Central Park. The museum's vice director for architecture, Arthur Rosenblatt, plans to use several architectural elements from the American collection in this way.

The loggia was the main entrance to the house, which was built near Oyster Bay, on Long Island, from about 1903 to 1908. It consists of a four-column arcade (actually two full columns and two half-

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columns) about 23 feet high and 24 feet long, of vaguely Eastern and Art Nouveau character. As with all of Tiffany's work, however, the design coalesces into something quite different, original and enchanting.

The three stepped arches, suggesting Islamic prototypes, are enriched with tiles of blue iridescent glass and geometric motifs. The ceramic capitals on granite columns are crowned with poppies — budding, in full bloom, and wilting languidly. Three faceted, cone-shaped lanterns suspended on iron chains between the arches are of bronze and opalescent blue and gold glass. Even viewed briefly in the packing cases — before being stored for the completion of the building, and after 20 years away from their original site — the luminous blue tiles and rich red poppies are alive with style and color.

Behind this poppy portico there were glass doors through which one entered the house. Since the reconstruction will be against a blank wall, the museum will take a little artistic license and substitute another lovely Tiffany piece from its collection for the doors — a superb wisteria window created for a New York house of the same period. The skill with which this glass is designed and executed, layered and tinted in subtle gradations to suggest distant mountains, sky and water, is art and craft at its best. The sinuous dark stem of the wisteria vine carries blossoms of an extraordinary blue.

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The loggia has been given to the museum by Jeannette Genius McKean and Hugh Ferguson McKean in memory of Charles Hosmer Morse. The window, an earlier acquisition, is on permanent loan to the museum from the Charles Hosmer Morse Foundation, as a gift from the McKeans.

Mr. and Mrs. McKean (he is the former chancellor of Rollins College and she is a painter) were two of the impassioned collectors of Tiffany work whose sanity was questioned by more conventional art lovers. If acquiring masses of out-of-style decorative objects were not enough to make them suspect, they also collected windows, architectural elements and parts of Tiffany buildings, such as the loggia from Laurelton Hall and the Columbian Exposition Chapel of 1893.

Much of their collection has been stored in and around Winter Park, Fla., where the McKeans live. Some of it was shown in an exhibition they sponsored last year, when Marilynn Bordes, the Metropolitan's associate curator of American decorative arts, fell in love with the loggia. The McKeans have recently opened the Charles Hosmer Morse Gallery in Winter Park, where a selection of their treasures can be seen.

Laurelton Hall must have been a curious place. Completely designed by Tiffany, without an architect, it was large, sumptuous, beautifully landscaped, and full of exotica in turn-of-the-century taste, which ran to garden courts, inglenooks, asymmetry and cluttered, sensuous disarray.

The house was described in a contemporary newspaper account as a "mingling of the perfume of the Orient with the horse sense of America." Tiffany lived well and traveled extensively, and his home was filled with his personal collections of ancient, Oriental and American Indian art. There must have been many beautiful things and some splendid effects, of which the loggia is an example.

The building's major weakness, according to the art historian Robert Koch in his book "Rebel in Glass," "was that it failed to achieve a synthesis of structure and form." But the total impression, he tells us, "was theatrical and overpowering."

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Tiffany lived at Laurelton Hall for about 10 years, and in 1918 set up the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, to which he deeded the house. Under this arrangement, he was in residence during the summer, but Laurelton Hall was used as a place for young artists to live and work. Hugh McKean was a student there in the early 1930's.

The foundation finally gave up Laurelton Hall in the 1940's when the upkeep became prohibitive. Parke-Bernet sold all the things in the house at auction in 1946 for a fraction of their original cost or value. Laurelton Hall itself was sold in 1949. The house and 60 acres, which had been valued in 1910 at nearly $2 million, was broken into parcels that went for a total of $65,000. The lot that included the main building brought $10,000. In 1957, the house burned. The loggia, which survived almost intact, was acquired by Mr. McKean.

A restoration of this sort is, of course, a transformation. The poppy portico survives as an artifact, not as part of a house or of anyone's life or taste. But those who will stand beneath the glowing tiles and blooming flowers will have some sense of the Tiffany style, and the fidelity and beauty with which these ideas were carried out by craftsmen at a time when such things were possible on a generous scale. Laurelton Hall is art and history now, not home and hearth.

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