

Tiffany's Legacy

The Tiffanys, father Charles and son Louis Comfort, have exercised an astonishing influence over American ideas of amenity. In 1866, the elder Tiffany devised the pronged setting for diamond solitaires that is still standard—and of course bears his name. It was he who introduced the English stan-



Tiffany's "Medallion Window," ca. 1892.

dard for sterling silver to America, thereby giving proper place settings a weightiness that must be measured on a social not a laboratory scale. **Louis Comfort Tiffany**, in turn, designed those glass lampshades that seem to be in a permanent state of opalescent, Art Nouveau revival. These and the endlessly varied vases, bowls, pitchers, and stained-glass windows that the younger Tiffany also designed give us our clearest images of domestic luxury in turn-of-the-century America.

The Tiffany look has not been uninterruptedly popular. For all the underlying sympathies between Art Nouveau and Art Deco, the latter's streamlined gleam had sent Louis Comfort Tiffany's designs into eclipse by the time of his death in 1933. Now the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco has opened an exhibition of nearly 250 objects from his studios, all of them selected from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Hugh F. McKean, who bequeathed it to the Charles Hosmer Morse Foundation of Winter Park, Florida.

The San Francisco exhibit helps put the younger Tiffany's uniquely influential career in proper perspective. When he was still in his teens, Louis Comfort announced to his father that his interest was art rather than manufacture and merchandising. He would create paintings, not design luxury goods. After study with the preeminent American landscapist, George Inness, he went to Paris for instruction in the studio of Léon Bailly. Tiffany's early work played such confident variations on Hudson River School themes that he was made an Associate of the National Academy at the age of 23. At 31, he decided to give up his professional career as an artist and devote himself entirely to design. Yet, as the de Young

exhibition shows, he continued to paint. Over the seasons, Hudson River School influences gave way to those of Impressionism, especially in its domesticated American forms.

As a painter, Tiffany always produced elegant variations on the initiatives of others. Only in design were his high-style instincts innovative. An understanding of this may have provided one motive for his decision to stop painting professionally. He mentioned another motive himself—money. When he was gathering several colleagues into a design group to be called Associated Artists, he extended this invitation to his friend Candace Wheeler: "You had better join us. It is the real thing, you know; a business, not a philanthropy or any amateur educational scheme. We are going after the money there is in art, but the art will be there, all the same." Painting may have been the finest of the fine arts, but it was a chancy business at best. So on to the manufacture of salable goods.

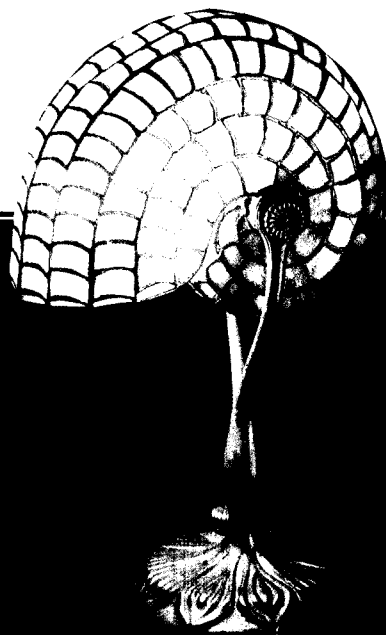
In 1881, the Associated Artists redid the interiors of Mark Twain's mansion in Hartford, Connecticut. The following year, President Chester A. Arthur asked the group to spruce up the White House. The fee was small but the prestige immeasurable, so they took the job. Hugh F. McKean's recent book, *The "Lost" Treasures of Louis Comfort Tiffany*, gives an ample account of before and after. Evidently the White House looked like the wrong side of the tracks before Arthur moved in. Tiffany and his friends favored patterned wallpaper, heavily ornamented but severely angular furniture, and sudden, dramatic expanses of emptiness. With especially adventurous clients, these emptinesses were grand and the contrasting patches of detail a bit eye-boggling—intricately figured wall

hangings over elaborately curlicued wallpaper designs, for example.

Among the equals who made up the Associated Artists, Tiffany was always the leader. Over the years, he reorganized his business affairs several times, always giving himself more effective control and a larger production capacity. In 1894, he became a director of his father's firm, Tiffany & Company. When Charles died in 1902, Louis Comfort became a vice-president. The son's own organization, Tiffany Studios, remained independent, with a showroom of its own, though most of the Studio products could be seen at the Fifth Avenue shop of Tiffany & Company as well. And he continued to design interiors, nearly all of which have disappeared in the course of demolition or subsequent remodeling. For the most part, only photographs remain. Even Laurelton Hall, Tiffany's mansion in Oyster Bay, Long Island, has burned to the ground.

The designer's current prestige rests less on a vision of domestic elegance than on the details—vases, lampshades, desk sets—with which that elegance was to be accented. To look at one of his sinuous, exquisitely unnatural forms in Favrile glass (a shimmering substance of his own invention) is to see a self-sufficient work of the designer's art. At the same time, it is to see an emblem of social and aesthetic aspirations that are, simply, beyond us now. Interiors can be lush, these days. They can be expensive, but they never flaunt their style with the absolute self-confidence of a Tiffany interior. The designer ensconced his most favored clients in a fantasy of the utterly original, of a return to high style's Garden of Eden. That cannot be recaptured.

Nonetheless, this exhibition is rife with pleasures. If the sight of fake-Tiffany lampshades had jaded your eye, the cure is here. Donald L. Stover, who organized this show, has included two dozen of these bronze and glass extravaganzas. The best of them break up their spots of glowing color into patterns so artificial they suggest a new order of nature—one in which the blind forces of evolution have joined with extremes of tastefulness. Tiffany's version of Art Nouveau's writhing, organic



The "Nautilus Lamp," patented in 1899.

forms is always energetic, yet never exudes that aura of tendril-like sexuality that envelops so much French and Belgian Art Nouveau. Tiffany knew his clients for the Victorian Americans that they were—and that he was, as well.

His designs are often exotic, hardly ever lurid. Some have entered the vocabulary of American form forever. See especially the flowing, subtly irregular "Floriform" vases, with their translucent suggestions of sunlight caught in

the petal of a flower; the bronze-based student lamp with its etched glass shade and its witty combination of the practical and the helplessly fragile (a student's dream); and of course his stained-glass windows. The contemporary world has no place for them, with their play of flat pattern and deep, shimmering light. When Tiffany turned to stained glass, it had become—quite literally—a pale imitation of its medieval self. With his technical finesse (always an essential ingredient of his aesthetic), he restored most if not all the medium's rich palette, and even added some colors unknown in the days of the Gothic cathedral. The greens he brings to the depiction of landscape often have the look of the never-before-seen. At their best, these windows have the intensity of dreams bursting into color. Many of them spend most of their time hidden away. Donald L. Stover has assembled more than 30 of them for this exhibition, where they give off as quietly dazzling a glow as they ever did in the sites for which they were intended. It is through these windows, if anywhere in this show, that one can sense Tiffany's vision in full. ■



Four door panels, ca. 1905, designed for the Heckscher residence in New York City.

Exquisite Von Stade

Twelve years ago **Frederica Von Stade** was plucked out of the Metropolitan Opera's national auditions before the finals. She was just too good. Within three seasons, having worked her way past the bit parts, she sang Hansel and Cherubino, then packed her bags and set off to expand her horizons. Her ineffable Cherubino—a dreamy, aristocratic adolescent—drew her to San Francisco, Paris, Glyndebourne, Salzburg, and the world of Solti, Karajan, Strehler, and Ponnelle where she belongs. Brilliantly managed, choosing repertoire with discernment and foresight, she has become one of our distinctive operatic and concert artists—never losing the fresh, tranquil, almost childlike response to her music that made her an irresistible auditioner.

Six years ago, Frederica Von Stade made her first solo record, *French Opera Arias* (CBS M-34206, \$9.98). In this repertoire, her gentle mezzo soprano, exquisitely poised singing, and fluent French simply blend into the music. As the insouciant page boys of Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* and Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*, she rockets through intricate fiorituras to secure high C's, and phrase after phrase melts in her mouth. When she dips into the mesmerizing introspection of Shakespeare's enamored Béatrice, in an aria from Berlioz's *Béatrice et Bénédict*, time seems to stop at the words, "*Il m'en souvient...*" (I remember). This is a unique disc. The very least the French—and everyone else—could do was honor it with their highest recording prizes. In the five years since that album, Von Stade has recorded 14 complete operas, six solo recitals, and an assortment of

masses and symphonic works for five major labels.

The operatic characters she has recorded and the personas she adopts in recital are mostly pensive girls (Cinderella and Mélisande) or coltish boys (Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier* and Hansel). They all seem young, innocent, quietly accepting of pain. Sometimes Von Stade's reserve and detachment are alluring and fascinating, as in her stunning recording of *Pelléas et Mélisande* with Herbert Von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic (3-Angel SZX-3885, \$29.94) or her uncanny Octavian (4-Philips 6707030, \$39.92).



Sometimes, as in many of her live and recorded recitals, this unreachability can anesthetize a song and annoy listeners who naturally expect a more specific personal statement from this most musical and musicianly of singers. Von Stade seems to connect strongly and simply with her characters, but she doesn't always share or explore those connections with her audience.

Von Stade makes her mark in the French repertoire, where her private world and not-of-this-earth sound are very much *chez eux*. Her latest release, a digitally recorded Ravel disc with the Boston Symphony (CBS IM-36665, \$14.95), features a performance of *Shéhérazade* that holds its own in close comparison with recorded versions by

Jennie Tourel, Régine Crespin, and Janet Baker, each equally at home in French music. Von Stade, never quite abandoning herself, floats through Tristan Klingsor's three poems of Asia with suggestive inscrutability—liquefying consonants, evoking hot, languid evenings with high pianissimos and delicious portamentos, fading in and out of human form. Her soft call of "*Entre!*" to the elusive hero of "*L'Indifférent*" is erotic in an utterly unself-conscious, almost childlike way.

In her recent recording of Monteverdi's *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* (3-CBS M3-35910, \$29.94), however, Von Stade's liquid consonants, unvarying tone, and never-ending rapturous line lead to some longeurs, abetted by conductor Raymond Leppard's uncalled-for efforts to enliven Monteverdi with anachronistic trombones and electric organs. Many of Von Stade's lines, so limpidly sung, need to be urgently declaimed, and she shies away from urgency. Yet her portrayal of Ulysses' long-suffering wife is promising, because in probing the love and pain of maturity for the first time Von Stade shows us a new dimension of her art.

Frederica Von Stade's voice is not large, and she can't refine it much further. The repertoire for the voice is limited, and she's already made a respectable dent and a lasting impression in it. How can she grow? Like the character in Schumann's song cycle *Frauenliebe und -leben*, she can live a woman's life and love and share her deepening sense of joy and sorrow with us. Then she'll be an artist who can never stop growing—even if she were to sing only one song. ■