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## “Tiffany Favrile Pottery And The Quest Of Beauty” Sheds New Light On Tiffany’s Operations

BY REGINA KOLBE

NEW YORK CITY — Several years ago, when Dr Martin Eidelberg brought to light the role played by Clara Driscoll and the “Tiffany Girls” in the Louis Comfort Tiffany studios, it exposed an unknown chapter in the design impresario’s history. Eidelberg’s new research on Tiffany Favrile pottery yields yet another layer of insight into one of America’s great decorative arts stories.

In the recently published book, *Tiffany Favrile Pottery and the Quest for Beauty*, Eidelberg sets straight mistakes and misconceptions that have accompanied the modern understanding of Tiffany ceramics. The book is revealing across the board, categorizing and listing, for the first time, the shapes and glazes of more than 400 forms, as well as hallmarks and their meanings. An associated exhibition featuring 60 rare examples culled from private collections is currently on view at the Manhattan gallery Lillian Nassau, LLC.

According to the scholar, “Tiffany vase’ has been generically used to describe iridescent glass made at the turn of the century.” It was one of these so-called Tiffany vases Eidelberg saw as a child that inspired his 60-year-long interest in the subject. A few years and exhibitions later, Eidelberg came under the tutelage of Lillian Nassau, founder of Lillian Nassau, LLC, and one of the first dealers of Tiffany glass. In 2007, he collaborated with Arlie Sulka, the current owner of Lillian Nassau, LLC, to publish *Tiffany Favrile Glass and the Quest of Beauty*.

The second project in that continued collaboration has resulted in the more recently published tome.

The pottery, which many scholars mythologized as having been hand-thrown on the wheel by Tiffany himself, stimulated a rethinking of the issues and entirely new research.

Luckily, in the 1960s Eidelberg had been able to interview 95-year-old Julia Munson, who had worked in Tiffany’s enamel department and remembered some of the people in the pottery. Ultimately, Eidelberg’s inquiries took him to Philadelphia, Corning, N.Y., St Louis, Japan and Denmark. A century’s worth of closely guarded secrets were culled from scattered notes, business records and formula books.



The green glaze imitates the color of spring on this vase with cyclamen. Courtesy of a New York private collection.

Eidelberg explained, “In the 1960s and 1970s, most of the Tiffany scholarship was a dreary repetition of a few known facts. In the last ten to 15 years, new archival material has come up. First, all material saved by Leslie Nash, son of Arthur J. Nash, Tiffany’s head chemist and manager, was bought by a Japanese collector and went to Japan. A few years ago, letters written almost every week for almost ten years by Clara Driscoll came to light. The final break was finding and reading the memoir written by Edith Wilhelmine Lautrup, the first manager of the pottery, who later returned to her native Denmark.”

The pottery story begins in 1900 when Louis Comfort Tiffany had already made his name as a colorist, a painter, designer of decorative arts and a horticulturist. His studios were synonymous with Favrile glass vases, radiant leaded-glass windows and elaborate mosaics. His exhibit at the Paris World’s Fair of 1900 was the toast of the fair.

Yet Tiffany, by then, was on the prowl for new interests. Ceramics, particularly the highly organic forms produced by the Scandinavian manufacturers, appealed to him.

In the United States at that time, the Rookwood Pottery and the Grueby Pottery were the most prominent art potteries. Artus Van Briggie Pottery, Adelaide Alsop Robineau and dozens of other small studios were still destined to make names for themselves. Needless to say, none had the cachet or the resources of a Tiffany.

In secret and with highly controlled news leaks to stir commercial interest, Tiffany and his craftsmen began to experiment with pottery. As though to whet the public’s appetite for art pottery, he showed the most avant-garde of Parisian pottery at his annual 1901 spring exhibition.

Meanwhile, in the design studio in Corona, Queens, N.Y., preparations for production were under way. Arthur J. Nash, who had been head of the glass blowing division and later the enameling department, emerged as both chief chemist and manager. His ability to source formulas, such as the “vellum” or dulled surface matte glaze that became the vogue of the Arts and Crafts style, made him indispensable.

These formulas were kept in notebooks that never left his person until they were passed on to Nash’s son, Leslie. It was not until a decade ago that the books were opened to scholars.

While the clay mixture was not porcelain, it was a composition rich in kaolin, the deciding component in porcelain. The marketing department promoted the earthenware ceramics as “semi-porcelain” and “porcellaneous.”

Historical misrepresentations attribute some of the first master pots to the hand of Tiffany. They also alleged that only he could scratch his LCT on the base. Tiffany, however, was not a hands-on artisan

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This substantial cabbage-form vase is a highlight of the Lillian Nassau exhibition. Its predominately red, multicolored glaze is a triumph of Arthur Nash’s manipulation of the chemistry of glazes. Courtesy Lillian Nassau, LLC, New York City.



Artichoke vase in the form of bud in a popular green glaze. Both Arthur Nash and son Leslie kept their formulas hidden from assistants and from Tiffany himself.



This squat creamer with water lily pads and buds is only 3 inches tall, yet it makes a strong statement. Courtesy of a New York private collection.

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A Chinese trumpet-form vase shows the influence of modern Orientalism.



Coupe with water lilies and frogs stands 6½ inches high. Courtesy of a New York private collection.



A covered jar with high-relief grapes.



Vase with poppies in the Old Ivory glaze that compounds the organic experience.

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and had instead a large staff charged with carrying out his ideas of color and form.

Edith Wilhelmine Wessel Lautrup, a Danish immigrant who had worked at Bing & Grøndahl, was the first head of the pottery department. The design staff consisted mostly of women.

After three years of closed-door experimentation, Tiffany offered up to the public a line of pottery lamp bases. Coupled with the Favrile glass shades that were generally used with fuel lamps rather than the now-familiar leaded glass shades, the first ceramics had a purely functional form. They were squat with a low center of gravity to prevent tipping and their wide mouths accommodated the fuel canisters.

Most of the pottery bases were unadorned, although early design features included a Romanesque motif, a lion decoration and, the most organic of all, a mushroom garden. Other varieties were distinguished by glazes, each of which had been dictated and tested according to the instructions of Nash.

As the collection evolved, lamp bases grew to be as tall as 12 inches. Among the most popular of these was a three-handled version similar to popular Japanese imports then on the market. More intricate designs, such as a bulbous form with conventionalized night-blooming cereus and reticulated forms coupled with bronze and glass or simply dramatic in their glazes, also entered the catalog.

But it was not until the St Louis World’s Fair of 1904 that anyone outside of the Tiffany Studios saw a line of pottery vases. On the fair’s application form, Tiffany described “the variation and blending of colors and the depth of the glaze” on the vases. The press was quick to call the new glaze “Old Ivory,” and to describe it as a “yellow-tinged, clear glaze, which, when it wells up in crevices, merges into an opaque black.” The effect was strong on chiaroscuro. Critics loved it. Park Avenue matrons were wild to own it. Only one reviewer dissented.

True to the best merchandising strategies, the run-up to the first pottery exhibition went on until 1905. That gave the maestro ample time to show at the

Paris Salon of the Société des Artistes Français. Here, Tiffany introduced a cylindrical vase decorated with trumpet blossoms and a covered bowl with Virginia creeper.

Charles de Kay notes in Tiffany’s biography that the designer considered himself first and foremost a colorist and was quite taken with the process of the glazes. Of the pottery he kept for himself at Laurelton Hall, most are relatively simple forms covered with irregularly streaked glazes or bursts of vivid color.

In the beginning, glazes had been applied locally to achieve a pictorial effect. This soon gave way to bleeding glazes that offered unpredictable color formations. These share a heritage with Far Eastern glazes, as well as the works of French artists featured in Tiffany’s first in-store exhibition in 1901.

Arguably, the most popular glazes were Old Ivory and the moss greens. The latter were generally accented with a second, darker green. Later, the combination of a light apple green with a deeper hue evolved. This was sometimes used on undecorated models where the color variations provided surface interest.

One of the most spectacular mixes was a bubbly red and green glaze, similar to those used by Adrien Dalpayrat, the French ceramist. Mostly reserved for simple shapes, it nevertheless gave a spectacular effect to vegetal shapes, as on a vessel resembling a cabbage. Equally as stunning was a rich turquoise and ultramarine blue combination. Among the more

subtle glazes was a rich caramel streaked with dark brown.

Influenced not only by the Scandinavian and French makers, Tiffany’s aesthetic extended to the Oriental ceramics. His personal collection spanned examples as ornate as highly painted Chinese porcelains and as spare as Japanese tea jars. Also of interest to him were European ceramics taken from Oriental types. The echo of their clean lines resonates throughout the pottery form.

There was another aspect to Tiffany pottery that made it both for and of its time, and that is the imitation of nature. Ferns, jacks-in-the-pulpit, Indian pipes, tulips and crocuses, cherries, trumpet flowers, hollyhocks and lilies all offered inspiration to the designers. Everyday vegetables, such as artichokes, beets, eggplant, cabbage and corn, cast in clay never looked so good.

Some of the designs were based on those previously executed in enameled copper. There is a tall corn vase that is taken from one in enameled copper, and a jack-in-the-pulpit ceramic vase is a copy of an enamel version. A cylindrical vase with ferns, a pieced vase with skunk cabbage, a bowl with tomatoes were all based on enameled copper models.

Occasionally, the pierced designs that were eminently doable in enamel had to be corrected for clay. For instance, the thin and wiry branches on a reticulated bowl of Virginia creeper had to be consolidated in clay form to maintain its shape in the kiln.

Innovation, however, did exist.

Both Alice Gouvy and Lillian Palmié’s nature study watercolors, as well as dried specimens, covered the atelier walls. From concept to clay, the process included low relief or three-dimensional sculpted forms. While the women designed, men did the heavy work of grinding the clay, making the mixtures, stoking the fires.

The Tiffany ceramic aesthetic was universal. The parallels between Bing & Grøndahl and certain Tiffany ceramic vases, such as one with arrowhead plants and a snake, have not escaped notice. Likewise, a Tiffany vase with unfurling fern heads suggests appropriation.

To stay au courant, Tiffany added metal mountings to the pottery in accordance with the latest European fashion. These were marketed as bronze but were, in fact, fashioned of copper. In some cases, silver plating was used.

From the start, Tiffany pottery was promoted as “Favrile Pottery.” The term had been coined by Nash and was derived from the Latin *fabrilis*, meaning handmade. The company used it as a general trademark for all the Tiffany Studio products. The pieces were not cheap. Most vases sold for around \$40, the equivalent of \$1,000 today.

Tiffany Pottery Favrile Exhibition, the associated exhibit showcased at Lillian Nassau, LLC, is on view through January 31. The gallery is at 220 East 57th Street, 212-759-6062. *Tiffany Favrile Pottery and the Quest of Beauty* by Dr Martin Eidelberg is available at [www.lilliannassau.com](http://www.lilliannassau.com).



The elements of earth and sea come together in the undulating form of this fish bowl. While the form and fish indicate water, the glaze is earthy.



A lamp base in a matte green glaze with a frieze of incised poinsettias that has a wide mouth for the burner and would have been fitted with a favrile glass shade.



Vase with crocus, 7 inches high.



A tall green vase with wisteria seed pods is embellished with multiple hues. Courtesy of a New York private collection.