

ART REVIEW

Spiritual Landscapes of the Gilded Age

Louis-C. Tiffany Works at Museum of Biblical Art

By KYLE CHANDLER

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In 1880, according to a frequently cited report, 4,000 churches were under construction in the United States. This Gilded Age frenzy of ecclesiastical building created a terrific demand for designers who could make houses of worship that were also theaters of spiritually inspiring beauty. And every church seemed to require at least one spectacular stained-glass window to transport the faithful into imaginary realms of transcendental bliss. The man who most famously fulfilled that need was [Louis Comfort Tiffany](#) (1848-1933).

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Stained-glass window by Tiffany, showing a knight in armor.

Louis C. Tiffany and the Art of Devotion at the Museum of Biblical Art samples the Tiffany Studios' enormous production of stained-glass windows as well as all kinds of other church-related objects, including crosses, chalices, candlesticks, baptismal fonts and chandeliers. Presenting these along with watercolor studies, old photographs and other documentary materials, and with a haphazardly organized but informative exhibition catalog, the show serves as a revealing lens through which to view a crucial period in the history of religion in America.

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Organized by Patricia C. Ferguson, the museum's acting director and director of curatorial affairs, the exhibition's main attraction is a selection of its small- to medium-size windows, bas-reliefs and glassware. They are not the most impressive of Tiffany productions, as his most ambitious ones are still part of the fabric of churches all over New York City and in places farther afield, from uptown New York to Richmond, Va., and beyond.

The ones here are of three types: landscapes, semiabstract cruciform compositions and figurative illustrations of biblical scenes. All are made of opalescent glass, a material that Tiffany and his competitor [John La Farge](#) developed through extensive experimentation that enabled variations of color, luminosity, shading and texture unknown to stained-glass artisans of previous times.

The landscape windows are the most compelling. They were designed by [Agnes Smedley](#) (1867-1934), from Flushing, Queens, who spent her whole working life in Tiffany's employ. (Tiffany himself exercised strict editorial oversight but generously credited his designers for their efforts.) In a style related to Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts, her windows picture peaceful vistas through groves of trees and blooming foliage to brooks and still waters, moonlit and luminous, fair-weather skies. Bordered in graceful cartoon outlines made of lead and filled in by jewel-bright pieces of opalescent glass, they promise peace to troubled souls without any obvious Christian symbolism.

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In the more abstract works like one based on an [antependium](#) — a traditional type of banner that hangs from the front of a lectern or altar — the profuse ornamental patterning and the illuminated-colored glass still exert much visual magnetism.

The figurative windows, however, are fatally infected by Victorian sentimentality. In one based on a popular painting by the British artist [George Frederic Watts](#), the Christian knight Calahad — in a full suit of armor, posing with his white horse to meditate on his quest — is a veritable doll. In "Lycia Entertaining Christ and the Apostles" there is a glimpse of dramatic intrigue. A pretty young woman in antique robes approaches three bearded men, one of whom raises his hand as if to shoo her away. But while it is interesting for its use of so-called "depot glass" to depict folds in the characters' robes, it is, like mass-market Bible illustrations, a pale reflection of the sort of Renaissance-type painting it derives from.

Viewers may also notice that there are no representations of Jesus crucified or undergoing other agonies of the Passion. The dark side of the Christian mythos — its preoccupation with sin, suffering, judgment and redemption — is missing. This is ecologically noteworthy. In his catalog essay Peter W. Williams, a professor of comparative religion and American studies at Miami University in Ohio, explains that the rise of Tiffany's church-decoration business coincided with the emergence of a new kind of house of worship, which he calls the "evolutionary church."

Influenced especially by the Protestant denominations that were Tiffany's main clients the evolutionary church featured interior design based not on ecclesiastical precedents but on a secular institution: the theater. It had, Mr. Williams observes, "slanted floors, 'open seating' (rows of individual seats rather than pews), a prominent pulpit and a platform with seating for officiants and a choir or other musical ensemble."

In keeping with its theatrical setting the evolutionary church had its star players in celebrity ministers like [Henry Ward Beecher](#) of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn and [Phillips Brooks](#) of Trinity Episcopal Church in Boston, who "were expected to prepare elaborate sermons as the core of the service and to deliver them in an arresting style."

Such churches often expanded to include space for educational programs, kitchens and dining rooms, and bowling alleys and basketball courts to attract the younger set. They were as much civic institutions as religious ones, and, in keeping with can-do-American optimism, the windows Tiffany created for them were not designed to put the face of God into the hearts and minds of either the faithful or the doubtful.

Nothing in the exhibition or catalog suggests that Tiffany himself was particularly devout. He and his designers looked to religious art of the past for visual motifs — especially to Byzantine and Medieval sources — but he was not deeply interested in the particular symbolic meanings of his borrowings.

A more critic might say he participated in the degradation of art into decoration and religion into entertainment. He was the god of art and business. But no one can deny that he oversaw the production of some exceedingly beautiful things.

"Louis C. Tiffany and the Art of Devotion" remains through Jan. 20 at the Museum of Biblical Art, 1819 Broadway, at 104th Street, (212) 498-3300, [muba.org](#).

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