

LOUIS COMFORT TIFFANY

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Photograph of
Louis Comfort
Tiffany, about 1888

PARAKEETS WINDOW

At the time of its creation over 125 years ago, Louis Comfort Tiffany's *Parakeets* window was touted as a revolutionary breakthrough in the production of stained glass and a triumph in American art. Today it is considered one of the masterpieces in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Yet for several decades, the window hung quietly in a house in Denver, Colorado, where it essentially disappeared from public view. The house changed hands from owner to owner, but the window remained, its location known to only a few people. Much like the fireplace mantels and the staircase banister, the *Parakeets* window was simply another decorative element of the building.

The story of this colored glass window—from national and international recognition to years of obscurity and a return to the limelight—parallels the public reception of the art of its maker, who had one of the most recognized names in American art at the turn of the twentieth century. It is a story of artistic ambition and experimentation, of nationalist pride and promotion, and of the capricious nature of public opinion and the art market. A careful study



Parakeets window, 1889,
designed by Louis
Comfort Tiffany and
made by the Tiffany
Glass Company

of the fabrication, imagery, and life of the *Parakeets* window offers an intimate look into the legacy of Tiffany, as well as the nineteenth-century revival of the lesser-known medium of stained glass, which some argue was the United States' first major contribution to the international art world. As Tiffany himself wrote, "If there is any one art which has been developed here and has received the stamp of American genius, it is that of making ornamental and figure windows in colored glass."¹

Measuring approximately seventy-seven inches tall and thirty-nine inches wide and composed only of colored glass held together with lead and copper strips, Tiffany's *Parakeets* window depicts a globular glass fishbowl suspended by chains from the branches of a blossoming pink cherry tree. Inside the fishbowl, colors and reflections swirl, suggesting the forms of orange- and red fish swimming in water. The fishbowl is surrounded by six colorful birds with green bodies, yellow necks, and reddish-orange heads, shown in a range of poses. The background shows a cloudy blue sky in the upper section above abstracted greenery, dappled with sunlight below. The central pictorial panel is surrounded by a frame of square glass tiles in varying tones of green and sits above a ventilator panel, which opens inward to allow for air circulation, with the same border design encompassing two large panes of glass in abstract, swirling colors.

The public debut of this window was in mid-February 1890 at a two-day exhibition of new work by the Tiffany Glass Company held at its New York studios at 333–335 Fourth Avenue (now Park Avenue South).² Although the event may sound fairly routine today, at the time it was big news. The exhibition, which celebrated the completion of thirty-five stained glass windows, even warranted mention as far away as Indiana, as reported in the *Indianapolis News*. Susan M. Ketcham, the paper's correspondent,



Photograph of Louis Comfort Tiffany's dining room published in *Artistic Houses*, 1883–84

playbook to gain attention and recognition for his work. He did not just allow but may have initiated (and likely manipulated) extensive journalistic coverage of the interiors he created between 1878 and 1880 for his own home at the Bella Apartments at 48 East Twenty-Sixth Street, near Madison Avenue. He completed several high-profile early commissions as well, such as those for the Madison Square Theater (1879–80), the Union League Club (1880–81), the Veterans Room in the Seventh Regiment Armory (1880–81), and a handful of public rooms at the White House (1882–86), most of which incorporated his work in glass.¹⁹

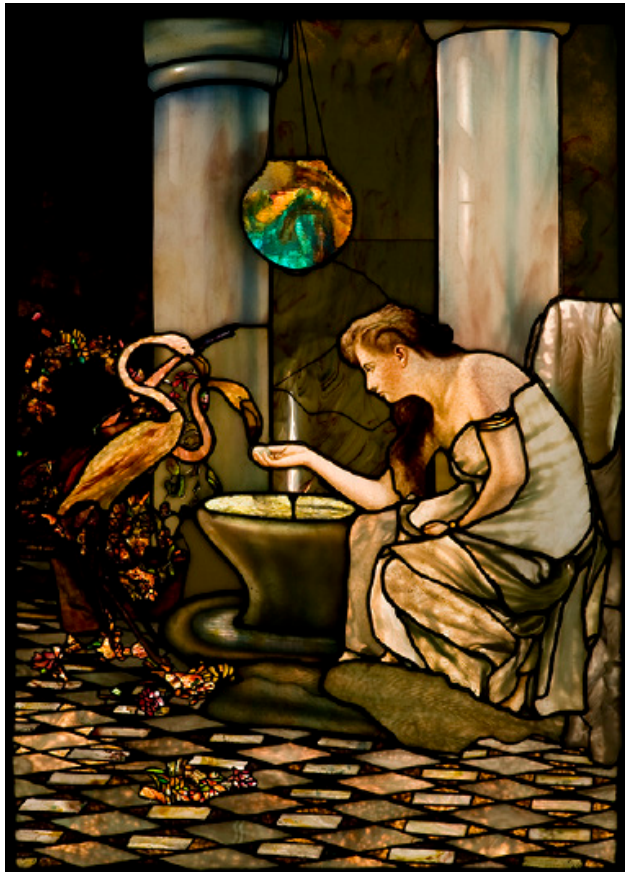
By the middle of 1881, he had hit his stride. Almost overnight, he seems to have secured his reputation as an artist *and* an interior decorator. One smitten journalist gushed in August 1881 that Tiffany had already “in various ways done as much as any other artist to help along the

true art progress of the country. He has not considered it beneath his dignity to work where-ever he could do best service for art. He has lent his genius to decorative art in all its branches.”²⁰

It was during this leap into the decorative arts in the mid-to-late 1870s that Tiffany started to experiment with colored glass. It is not known exactly what inspired his interest in glass. It probably came as an extension of his studies of color and light in oil and watercolor, and his exposure during his travels to the use of colored glass in both European and Islamic decoration and architecture.²¹ At first, glass was one of many materials that he used in unconventional ways to decorate an interior. By 1875 Tiffany was experimenting with glassmaking at Francis Thill's glass house in Brooklyn, and by 1878 he had built a glass house to produce his own material and hired the Venetian glassmaker Andrea Boldini to run the operation. Although that first glass house was destroyed by fire, as was the second, built a short time later, Tiffany was not deterred.²²

He dropped his plans of running his own glass house and found other ways to secure a regular supply of high-quality glass. In March 1881, Tiffany signed a contract with the glass manufacturer Louis Heidt of Brooklyn in which he agreed to purchase at least \$200 worth of glass a month, in exchange for exclusive rights to all of Heidt's flat glass production and, more important, the promise that Heidt would not share any secrets of their joint experiments.²³ In securing this agreement, Tiffany leveraged his access to capital to shut out, or at least hinder, his competitors.²⁴ That same year, money from his father also allowed Tiffany to buy two buildings at the corner of Twenty-Fifth Street and Fourth Avenue (now Park Avenue South), and to steadily build an atelier of artists, artisans, and scientists, as well as the much-needed business managers to keep it all afloat as he got carried away with the pursuit of beauty.

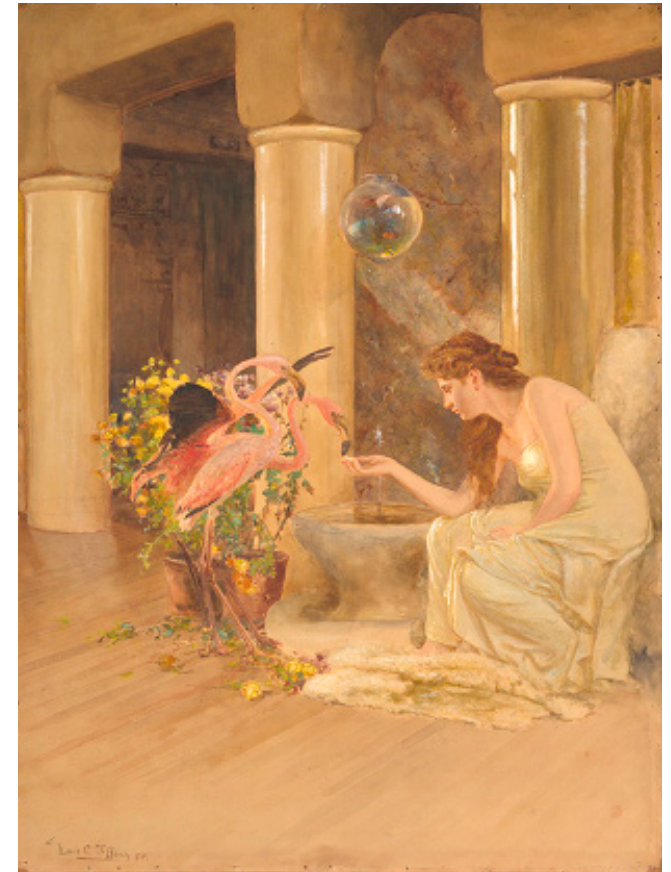
Maiden Feeding
Flamingoes in the Court
of a Roman House
window, about 1892,
design attributed to
Louis Comfort Tiffany and
made by the Tiffany
Glass and Decorating
Company



offering more stability to the window construction in addition to providing the increased sense of depth.⁵⁴

In marked contrast to the *Flamingoes* image, the design of the *Parakeets* window shows very little attempt at spatial perspective. In *Parakeets*, the cropped, flattened composition and intense color harmonies are reminiscent of the popular Japanese woodblock prints, or *ukiyo-e*, collected by Tiffany and many of his peers in the late nineteenth century.⁵⁵ Tiffany was far from alone in his appropriation of Japanese art, a fad that developed into a style called

Taming the Flamingo
(also known as *Feeding*
the Flamingoes), 1888,
painted by Louis Comfort
Tiffany



japonisme in the 1870s and 1880s. Japonisme reflected Western interpretations of Japanese art, ranging from exotic symbolism to a deeper engagement with Japanese aesthetics. Tiffany would have been exposed to Japanese art and design not only at international expositions but also in the collections of his wealthy clients and friends, as well as at his father's silver company. Both Tiffany & Co. and the company's head designer, Edward C. Moore, built large and important collections of Japanese ceramics, metalwork, textiles, and lacquerware to serve as inspira-

(detail)



the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries interested in the symbolism and challenges of depicting goldfish bowls.⁶⁶

The final major motif of the window, the parakeets themselves, adds a distinctly American flavor to the composition. The six parakeets surrounding the fishbowl are shown in various poses, their postures possibly indicating their personalities or attitudes. Several near the rim of the bowl appear more actively engaged: one peers curiously into the fishbowl, as the other two spread their wings. The three beside and below the fishbowl are more subdued: two lazily look toward the fishbowl with no sign of movement, while the third bows its head, perhaps grooming itself or eyeing something to eat. Every view of the para-

Carolina Parrot, plate 26
in John James Audubon's
The Birds of America,
1824–38, engraved by
Robert Havell Jr., after
Audubon



keet is offered—front, back, side—as if presenting a study of the species.

In fact, Tiffany borrowed the colorful birds from an actual study of the species by John James Audubon, the great American naturalist, ornithologist, and painter of the early nineteenth century. Audubon's famous image of Carolina parakeets, or the *Carolina Parrot*, as he called the species, was first published as a hand-colored engraving in *Birds of America* in 1826.⁶⁷ At the time of his death, Tiffany owned a later edition of *Birds of America*, called the Bien edition, published between 1858 and 1860 by Lockwood & Son with chromolithograph plates of the same images.⁶⁸ Tiffany surely admired Audubon's remarkable accuracy and detail, as well as his ability to portray the natural character-