

# Exhibit highlights Tiffany's lasting impact on American church design

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NEW YORK (RNS) Louis C. Tiffany is perhaps best known for his intricate glass lamps, but a new exhibit at the Museum of Biblical Art reveals a spiritual side to the master designer and craftsman whose studio single-handedly shaped the image of American churches.

"Louis C. Tiffany and the Art of Devotion," which runs through Jan. 20, 2013, centers on the religious memorials and decorations that Tiffany and his firm created for American congregations for about a half century, beginning in the 1880s.

"We know Tiffany for his lamps, but what we overlook is that Tiffany was most prolific for his work in houses of worship," said curator Patricia Pongracz, the museum's acting director.

Several Tiffany leaded-glass windows take pride of place in the exhibit, but MOBIA also features mosaics, church furniture and other items. Pongracz said the current exhibit is a first in examining the ecclesiastical tradition of what was once one of the nation's most famous design "brands" – and is still a cherished name for lovers of American decorative arts.

In a recent walk-through of the exhibit, Pongracz said that, in Tiffany's life (1848-1933), the devotional side of his firm's work was well known.

Tiffany lived in a time of a quickly growing, and increasingly urban, United States. Church expansion – some 4,000 new churches were built between the 1880s and 1910 – was an integral part of the era, which played out under the still-haunting shadows of the U.S. Civil War.

"People were turning to the power of cultural memory, and where did they find it? In churches and synagogues," Pongracz said.

The growing ascendancy of well-heeled Protestant churches in urban areas meant that middle-class and well-heeled congregations had the money to pay for the superbly crafted stained-glass windows, altarpieces, mosaic floors and other decorative work created by Tiffany's firm.

The Protestant Tiffany knew no sectarian boundaries; his words are also found in Roman Catholic and Jewish houses of worship.

"This happened at a time when it was thought to be important for a congregation to invest in their church building," Pongracz said, "and people really did put money into these buildings."

Tiffany's ruling aesthetic was sometimes called "The Gospel of Good Taste." That was supported by a canny business sense, with Tiffany displaying religion-themed work at hugely popular world fairs, such as the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

As an accompanying essay by art historian and curator Jennifer Perry Thalheimer notes, "demand from churches for decorative art was so great that Tiffany designated an entire department of Tiffany Studios for the creation" of church art. By the time of the 1893 exposition, Thalheimer notes, Tiffany's studio "had established itself as the premier ecclesiastical design firm."

The result? Thousands of older churches and religious institutions in the United States have a Tiffany piece of one kind or another. One of the best examples of Tiffany work is at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Paterson, N.J., which boasts 12 Tiffany windows and a Tiffany altar rail.

Yet the very placement of such treasures inside worship spaces makes them largely unknown to a wider public. That's a key reason why, even today, there is no complete catalog of Tiffany's devotional works. "People have talked about producing a census, but that's a daunting task," Pongracz said.

One thing the current exhibit provides is the chance to see some of the famed Tiffany craftsmanship up close. The layered glass in some of the pieces - like "Lydia Entertaining Christ and the Apostles" and "The Righteous Shall Receive a Crown of Glory" are so skillfully done that the depicted folds of clothing "have a real billowing effect," Pongracz said.

When asked if she has a favorite in the exhibit, Pongracz chose a baptismal font that displays noticeable Islamic influences with its blue and white coloring that reflects the time Tiffany spent in North Africa.

While it is important to appreciate the religious character of the Tiffany artifacts, the MOBIA exhibit also affirms the pieces for their sheer aesthetic pleasures.

"The notion of beauty," Pongracz said, "the craft of making something beautiful, elevates us all."