

Autumn Landscape — The River of Life, 1923–1924

Louis Comfort Tiffany, son of the founder of the New York City jewelry store that still bears the family name, took no interest in his father's business. Instead, he trained as a painter in Paris, and upon returning to New York decided to channel his talents into the decorative arts. "I believe there is more in it than in painting pictures," he declared. By the 1890s, Tiffany was exploring the possibilities of colored glass, a medium that had remained virtually unchanged since the Middle Ages. In the late nineteenth century, it was experiencing a revival, owing to the large number of churches under construction in prospering American cities. Gradually, stained glass made its way into secular settings, with biblical subjects giving way to naturalistic motifs and woodland themes. These luminous windows worked like landscape paintings to introduce a sense of natural beauty into an urban home. Their dense designs had the added advantage of blocking views of dirty streets and back alleys that an ordinary window might reveal.

Autumn Landscape was commissioned by real estate magnate Loren Delbert Towle for his Gothic Revival mansion in Boston. The window was meant to light the landing of a grand staircase, and, by presenting a landscape view that receded into the distance, it would offer the illusion of extending a necessarily confined space. But even in domestic interiors, stained glass never entirely lost its religious overtones. Tiffany divided this

composition into lancet windows reminiscent of a medieval cathedral. In keeping with the American landscape tradition, the theme of *Autumn Landscape — The River of Life* also invites a spiritual interpretation. Tiffany generally reserved the traditional subject, in which a mountain stream flows through the rocks and cascades into a placid foreground pool, for memorial windows in churches and mausoleums; here, the season enhances the symbolism of a lifetime winding to a close, with the sun sinking low on a late autumn afternoon. As it happened, the window did become a memorial of sorts, for the Boston client died before it could be installed in his residence. *Autumn Landscape* was subsequently sold to the Metropolitan Museum of Art where, divorced from its intended setting of a private interior for the privileged few, it became a work of art available to the public.

Tiffany's ambition was to use glass to create the effect of oil or watercolor painting, without resorting to the application of enameled decoration. To this end, he developed new techniques for producing and manipulating colored glass, and he eventually achieved a range of visual and tactile effects that would have been impossible with paint alone. *Autumn Landscape*, one of his later productions, makes use of nearly every method in Tiffany's extensive repertoire: mottled glass for the dusky sky; confetti glass (with thin flakes of colored glass embedded in the surface) for the shifting colors of the autumn foliage; marbled glass for the boulders; rippled glass for the foreground pool. To deepen the color and enhance the depth of the distant mountains, Tiffany applied layers of glass to the back of the window, a technique called "plating." But as he would have been aware, the full effect of the window depended on the intensity of the natural light that shone through it to magically alter the landscape throughout the day and the year.

As a window that resembles an elaborately framed easel painting, *Autumn Landscape* fulfills the aesthetic movement's mission of introducing art into daily life. Like his contemporary James McNeill Whistler, who is often regarded as the movement's leading American exponent (see 11-B), Tiffany concerned himself with the entire range of a room's decorative effects, weaving them into a single, harmonious design. He found countless ways to give his art a practical purpose, designing everything from books to furniture; however, in any medium, he said, his primary consideration had always been simply "the pursuit of beauty."



13-B Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848–1933), *Autumn Landscape—The River of Life*, 1923–1924, Tiffany Studios (1902–1938). Leaded Favrile-glass window, 11 ft. x 8 ft. 6 in. (335.3 x 259.1 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Robert W. de Forest, 1925 (25.173). Photograph © 1997 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to look closely at this stained glass window, examining the scene depicted and how it is put together.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE **E | M | S**

Ask students what they see first in this window.

They will probably see the sun in the center.

Why is our attention drawn to this area?

It is the lightest part of the window and contains the strongest contrast of light and dark.

E | M

Where did Tiffany repeat colors in this window? Locate where he has used these hues.

Red: *It is found in the trees, top left and lower right.*

Blue: *It is located in the sky, mountains, and stream.*

Green: *This color is found in the pond, in the left center tree, and in the gold trees on the right.*

E | M | S

How would this window feel if you ran your fingers over its surface?

It would feel rough in some areas and smooth in others.

Where do you see rough textures? *These are found in the trees and rocks.*

Where do you see smooth textures? *They are located in the pool and the light sky.*

Tiffany used a variety of techniques to create special textures and colors of glass. Point out these areas.

Mottled glass: *It is located in the dark parts of the sky.*

Confetti glass: *We see it in the foliage.*

Marbleized glass: *It is found in the boulders.*

Rippled glass: *It occurs in the closest pool.*

E | M | S

What time of the day is depicted?

Because the sun is near the horizon, it is early morning or late afternoon.

Why will this art look different at different times of the day?

The light shining through it will be different depending on how high or low the sun is in the sky and whether it is a bright or overcast day.

INTERPRET **E | M | S**

Stained-glass windows are commonly seen in churches, but this window was created for a stairwell in a man's private home. Why would someone rather have a stained-glass window in a house than clear glass?

The window is beautiful, and provides privacy or blocks unsightly views.

M | S

On which side of a house—north, south, east, or west—might you want to install this window, and why?

The south side would receive light all year; the west side, in the afternoon and evening; the east, in the morning; and the north side would never receive direct light.

S

How would this landscape make the space of a small stairwell feel larger?

Instead of a wall at the top of the stairs, the window would open up a deep vista and make the inside space look as if it continues outside into the landscape.

S

Because the man who commissioned this window died before it was installed, it seemed like a memorial for him.

Why are autumn scenes and sunsets often featured in memorials to the dead?

Sometimes a year is a metaphor for a lifetime. The autumn of a person's life refers to a later stage of life and the sunset marks the end of a day.

Describe the mood of this scene.

It is very serene and peaceful.

CONNECTIONS **Historical Connections:** the Gilded Age; the Great Depression

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald (secondary)

Arts: arts and crafts movement; Art Nouveau; aesthetic movement