Peering through Tiffany glass

Two shows at Winterthur highlight the studio's luminous decorative arts.
last year, Winterthur, that bastion of early American decorative arts, hosted an exhibition that doubled its annual attendance. The show, of costumes from the television series Downton Abbey, had only the most tenuously connection to what Winterthur has always been about. But interest in antiques is down, along with their prices, and Winterthur, except for its wonderful gardens, has always been a forbidding place for many. The Downton exhibition added showbiz and lifestyle to the mix and was big at the box office.

It was an almost impossible act to follow, but the new exhibitions “Tiffany & Company: The Color of Luxury” and “Tiffany: The Color of Luxury” are another attempt to brighten Winterthur’s tradition of connoisseurship with a little bling. In this case, it is an odd coupling.

“Tiffany & Company: The Color of Luxury” is a traveling show based on the holdings of the Neustadt Collection of Tiffany Glass in New York City, and it was curated by Linda Frisby, director of the collection. It features five large windows and a lot of lamps. “Color of Luxury” is a much smaller show organized by Winterthur. Its ostensible purpose is to draw up the confusion between Tiffany & Co., the jeweler and luxury goods merchant founded in 1837 and still in business, and the Tiffany Studios, founded in 1878 by Louis Comfort Tiffany, son of the founder of Tiffany & Co. Their businesses were distinct, but they shared not only a name, but also the services of Louis Comfort Tiffany, who was for many years the design director of Tiffany & Co. Still, most people interested in the subject know Tiffany.

A hollyhock hanging shade bursts in pink and white:


TWO AT WINTERTHUR

> Tiffany Glass: Painting with Color and Light
> Tiffany: The Color of Luxury

Through Jan. 5 at Winterthur, 5125 Kenned Pike (Route 52), Winterthur, Del. Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tuesday through Sunday. Admission: $20; seniors (62 and over) and students, $18; children (2 to 10), $5; Infants, free. Information: 800-448-3883 or www.winterthur.org

The show — a solid if conventional decorative arts exhibition — can be sold as an examination and celebration of luxury. It shows wedding silver and diamond clips from the movie Breakfast at Tiffany’s, the signature blue box, and a chart of the popularity of Tiffany as a first name for girls. (There’s no surprise that it peaked in the 1980s.)

Incongruously, there is one important thing on display here, an early oil painting by Louis Comfort Tiffany, who was trained as an artist. It shows the obsession with subtle, ambiguous color that is also apparent in his glass. But the glass is much better. Tiffany began working in glass in 1875 and opened his studio in 1878. Most of the work in the show dates from the early 1900s and is generally not the work of Tiffany himself but of people he trained and to whom he entrusted key roles in what had become quite a large enterprise. A couple of sizable landscape stained glass windows are attributed to Agnes Northrop, who designed them for the studios for nearly 50 years. There are also two variations of the dragonfly lamp shade, an iconic Tiffany creation original designed by Clara Driscoll, who headed the department that selected and cut the glass. There is also quite a bit of unworked leftover glass on display, much of it manufactured by Tiffany Studios under the direction of chemist Arthur J. Nash.

The glass was manufactured in sheets that often contained two or more colors, either mixed or fading gradually into one another. This combination of colors is a single small piece of a lamp or window, brings a mixture of color and realism to the design, much as the impressionist painters’ use of bits of seemingly incongruous color made their work seem more immediate and subjective.

Lamps were not made by the jewelry company. In fact, the purpose of the second show is not to clear up the confusion but to exploit it so the main uses, such as dense foliage, draping fabrics, or rippling streams. Tiffany’s patented Favritel glass seems to shimmer with an iridescence that, Tiffany said, was meant to evoke the wing of a butterfly or the neck of a pigeon.

Sometimes Tiffany’s artisans fused two pieces of glass, placing color beneath color and achieving a sense of great depth. The show’s labels emphasize the close attention to nature. For example, in a hanging lamp with a hollyhock motif, the pieces of glass that make up the petals are white on the outside, pink in the center, just as on a real flower. But drama is often more important than verisimilitude: Dragonflies do not have bright red eyes, as they do on one of the lamps shown here.

The world is full of cheap Tiffany knockoffs, so it is a pleasure to be able to look carefully at the details that give the real works their brío. A panoramic window showing one of the dragonfly lamp shades is almost an encyclopedia of the effects that can be achieved with different kinds of glass, though it is more of a technical knockoff than an aesthetic high.

In a window called The Reader, one can enjoy the chaotic vegetation behind the subject, the flow of her sleeve, in which purple seems to come through the brown, the explosive crystalline quality of whatever is she has in her hair. The only thing I can’t enjoy is her face, full and inexpres, rendered in vivacious paint. Perhaps, though, this window was based on a painting, it is better to look at it as a piece of decoration, probably for a library. It was meant to be diverting, but not distracting, let alone emotionally moving.

Although stained glass windows and lamps are the most celebrated (and portable) part of Tiffany Studios achievement, it was really a full-scale interior design firm, one that did over the White House for President Chester A. Arthur and helped create a riverboat fantasy for Mark Twain in Hartford. These windows and lamps were only one element of a larger aesthetic. Henry Francis du Pont, founder of Winterthur, bought several hundred rugs from Tiffany. Tiffany did represent a way to live for a specific, often newly prosperous, late 19th- and early 20th-century clientele.

The glass exhibition brings attention to the size and complexity of Tiffany Studios and includes an excellent selection of lamps and windows, but it does not try to deal with the total look that Tiffany Studios sought to provide. Winterthur’s “Color of Luxury” exhibition purports to provide a context but is a mostly irrelevant and trivial one. It makes me wish for an exhibition that truly shows us how Tiffany believed his rich and powerful clients ought to live. It could have been at least as spectacular as Downton Abbey.