

Louis Comfort Tiffany

The Home as a Work of Art

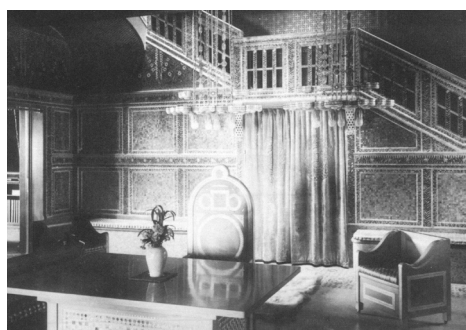


The fortress-like exterior of the Romanesque revival style Havemeyer house (demolished 1930) belies the opulence within. The entrance does not face Fifth Avenue but is placed discretely around the corner on the side street.

Louis Comfort Tiffany started out as a painter, but soon turned to the decorative arts at the suggestion of a silver designer at Tiffany & Co., the famous purveyor of stationary, jewelry, and other “fancy goods” founded in New York in 1837 by the artist’s father, Charles Tiffany. In 1879, he established the interior design firm Associated Artists with three colleagues whose specialties complemented his own: carved wood and furniture; fabrics, wall and ceiling papers; and textile design. This range of expertise allowed the firm to achieve its objective of

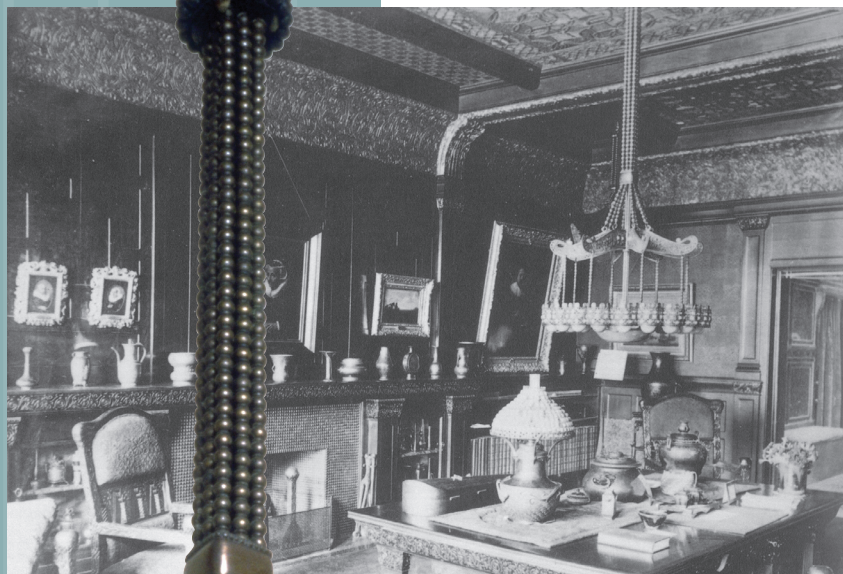


Peacock mosaic, detail.

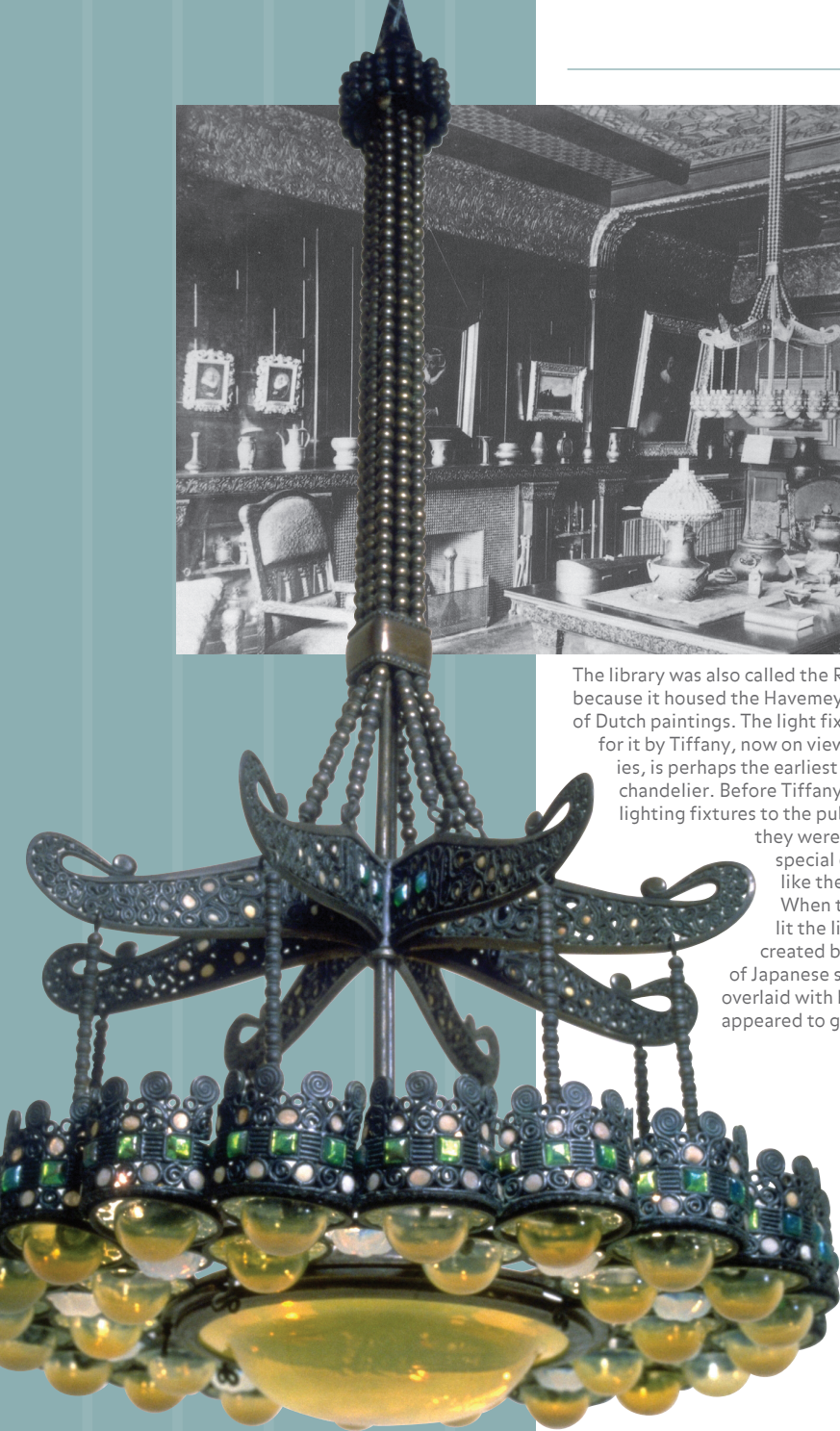


The grand entrance hall, one of the most sumptuous rooms in the house, was an important ceremonial space that provided visitors with their first impression of the residence. Every inch of its surface was covered with decoration; it included the dazzling Peacock mosaic and glass-encrusted firescreen, which was originally gilt. The stairway was modeled after the Doge’s palace in Venice.

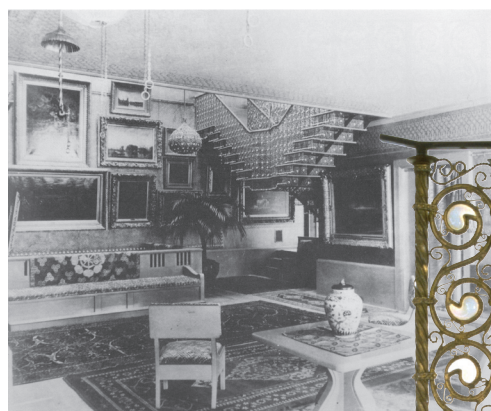
designing every aspect of the well-to-do home—from fixtures and floors to woodwork and wallpaper. The firm was dissolved in 1883, but Tiffany maintained his interest in designing “total environments.” One of his most ambitious projects was the interior of the New York City residence of the sugar magnate H.O. Havemeyer (1847-1907). The project, begun in 1888, took four years to complete.



The library was also called the Rembrandt room because it housed the Havemeyer's collection of Dutch paintings. The light fixture created for it by Tiffany, now on view in the galleries, is perhaps the earliest extant Tiffany chandelier. Before Tiffany began to sell lighting fixtures to the public in 1896, they were made only for special order clients like the Havemeyers. When the fixture was lit the library's ceiling—created by Colman out of Japanese silk brocades overlaid with heavy braid—appeared to glow.



Henry O. Havemeyer and his wife, Louisine, were avid collectors of both fine and decorative art, particularly nineteenth-century French paintings and Tiffany glass. When the Havemeyer family and their collections outgrew their original home in Manhattan, they decided to build anew on the corner of Fifth Avenue and East 66th Street. They turned to Tiffany and Samuel Colman (1832-1920), one of his partners from Associated Artists, to design the interior, giving them a virtually unlimited budget and complete artistic freedom. The Havemeyers' only requests were that their home be "original" and that it provide a sympathetic environment for the display of their immense collections. They were rewarded with a floor to ceiling design program that combined into a harmonious and sumptuous whole a profusion of different styles (Japanese, Chinese, Islamic, Byzantine, Celtic, Viking), textures, and exotic materials. Most of the elements were fabricated at Tiffany's own Tiffany Glass and Decorating Co., where skilled artisans created lighting fixtures, fabrics, hand-blocked wallpapers, rugs, glass mosaics, and cast bronze objects. The finished product both housed an art collection and was a work of art in its own right.



The second-floor paintings gallery contained one of the most spectacular and innovative features of the house: the "flying staircase," a portion of which is on view. It was suspended from the ceiling by chains and had a tinkling crystal fringe. One visitor famously likened it to a necklace. Natural light for the display of the paintings was provided from above by a suspended Tiffany leaded glass ceiling.



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All photographs of the interior of the Havemeyer house from A. Freynghuysen, et al., *Splendid Legacy. The Havemeyer Collection* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993).

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