

**Svjetlosna čarolija**

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Muzej grada Rijeke

# MAGIC BUILT WITH LIGHT

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The beauty of light in combination with glass, the least material of all the materials and one that turns fire into ice, was discovered long ago and still captures our attention with unlimited possibilities of coloristic experience in the interspace of the real and the imaginary. Though perceived by our eyes, such experiences remain beyond the ken of our mind, which is inclined to ascribe to them the properties of "another and different world". It is by no means an accident that the builders of early Christian basilicas glazed their windows with the oldest specimens of stained glass, whose mystic beauty helped to ennoble the venues of spiritual encounter with the holy. The technique remains as modern and topical today as it was when it was first discovered. At the same time, lamps have become objects of daily use, but objects with the largest number of cult meanings – from the symbol of wisdom and piety in Christianity to fairy-tale sur-reality of Aladdin's world – while never losing its place as an unavoidable item in the equipment of our homes.

This is confirmed by the opus of Željka and Boris Rogić, which demonstrates supreme workmanship in a happy union

with the classical view, in the best possible meaning of the word, of artistic design of glass. It may or may not have been an accident, but the fact is that the tradition of glass making in Croatia began in Rijeka, where Željka and Boris Rogić work. The well-known merchant, Andrija Ludovik Adamić, an important initiator of various cultural projects in Rijeka in the nineteenth century, when the city evolved into a major urban centre in this part of the world, owned and operated the now forgotten glassworks in Mrzla Vodica in the Gorski Kotar highlands, established in 1827, which was one of the first manufacturing plants of its kind in Croatia.

The flourishing of the domestic glass production, coupled with the romantic idea of revival of applied arts and crafts and the Secession ideal of total design, representing not only a work of art but also a way of life, and even more than that, favoured the reawakening of interest in the artistic design of glass objects.

Another unjustly forgotten shaper of our tradition of glass design was Ivan Marinkovic. Upon his return from a period of study in Switzerland, Germany, France and Hungary, where he mastered the skill of decorative design of stained glass objects as works of art, Marinkovic established a stained-glass and mosaic studio-workshop in Zagreb in 1909, which remained active until 1962. The workshop won an excellent reputation for its masterly stained-glass windows of its own design or that of well-known painters and

architects, such as Vilko Gecan, Marijan Trepse, Viktor Kovacic, Dioniz Sunko, and others.

This is the context in which we must view the twelve-year long activity of the Rogić Studio in Rijeka. This studio seeks to revive and keep alive Croatia's long tradition of glass design, relying on the strong awareness of its importance for the enhancement of our living space and lifestyle. As the graduates of one of the most prestigious Tiffany schools in Europe, Željka and Boris Rogić demonstrate their mastery of stained-glass design with their perfect replicas of famous Tiffany lamps. This part of the Rogićes' opus, which we might call Hommage a Tiffany, is well-known from their several major exhibitions held over the past ten years or so. Their first independent exhibition was held at the Governor's Palace in Rijeka in 1989, followed by the exhibitions staged at the Poreč Regional Museum (1990), the Museum and Gallery Complex (now the Klović Exhibition Complex) in Zagreb (1993), and the Hrvatsko Primorje Maritime and Historical Museum in Rijeka (1995). Each of their objects is an original work of art, both in terms of its form and in terms of the materials employed. For instance, the Rogićes use exclusively the so-called art glass, supplied by the American companies such as Kokomo, Chicago Art Glass, Uroboros, and other equally reputable companies whose products are characterized by particular colours and textures. Speaking technically, this is non-categorized glass, which differs from ordinary, batch-produced glass at first sight: each plate is a unique piece with unrepeatable combinations of colours, hues, and surface structures. It is only such top-quality glass that makes possible the highly

demanding decorative arabesque motifs of a peacock's tail or a dragonfly that open kaleidoscopically to display the full spectrum of colours and hues in a rich variety of light effects. Apart from lamps, the Rogićes' opus includes also a body of "small architecture", various items of interior design which enrich the living space with new values. To stand before a mirror with iridescent lines and colours of intertwining stylized roots, plants, leaves and fruits reflected in polished glass facets is indeed an unusual experience: in addition to a reflection of one's own image, the mirror offers an idea of a ritualized, sensuous experience of space and the newly discovered artistic ideal of the Secession Gesamtkunstwerk. Similar effects, transforming the living space, are produced also by decorative glass surfaces serving as doors on furniture items, walls, ivy-like decorations entwining glazed surfaces.

It is interesting to note that the mirrors designed by the Rogićes as both useful and decorative objects eschew the usual distinction between the frame and the surface, combining the two elements into a single whole. The perfect workmanship applied in the making of such objects is preceded by a process whose every stage is equally vital – from the initial idea and its articulation in meticulously worked out models to the execution which fuses imagination and sensibility with decorativeness. The sharpness and clarity of the drawing helps to preserve a perfect balance between nature and stylization, surface feel and a fiery abundance of figural and floral motifs, faithfully reproducing the firmness and density that we find in nature. This is certainly not just a skilful use of "quotations" from the

history of design (favoured by the post-modernist sensibilities), ranging from Charles R. Mackintosh's mixture of puritan strictness and lyrically sublimated functionality to magical forms inspired by the world of Tiffany, in which fantasy turns into reality. The proof of this statement is to be found in the artists' recent orientation towards new ways of creative expression in the stained-glass technique. Many of their creations are to be found in the interior spaces of business and housing buildings in the region of Rijeka, but special mention ought to be made of the increasingly numerous stained-glass windows in sacral buildings in the Northern Adriatic. Not infrequently, such a choice brings to the fore the unbreakable ties of memory: when the Croatian immigrants from Kornič on the island of Krk, who have for generations lived in New York, recently built the Church of St. James in their native village, they commissioned stained-glass windows of the kind which they knew from New York churches built around the turn of the century and based on Tiffany's models. Tints, the cycle of history is closed once again, but not for good. Each such cycle is the beginning of a new story, waiting to be recognized.

The phenomenon that now goes under the name of Tiffany owes its name to Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848 - 1933), an artist who was equally successful as a designer and a businessman, rising meteorically to fame with his lamps, stained-glass windows, decorative and utilitarian objects such as vases and glasses of fantastic shapes and even more fantastic colour effects. This controversial style of the turn of the century has in the meantime been adopted by Postmodernism, which found in it a num-

ber of shared features, proclaiming the absence of a dominant trend the main trend. In this situation, the value ascribed to Tiffany art has continued to grow, as is borne out by the prices that Tiffany vases and lighting fixtures fetch at international auctions. These have multiplied over the past decades, reaching the heights that not many collectors or museum managers can afford. After all, the value of artistically designed glass has always been highly appreciated, if one is to believe the testimony of the historian Pliny, who reports that the Emperor Nero paid a dizzying sum of money for two drinking glasses made in fantastic colours.

The Tiffany story is a typical American story, the unstoppable chronology of success: Louis's father, Charles Lewis Tiffany (1812 - 1903), left the family-run provincial workshop as a 25-year old man and with a thousand dollars in his pocket arrived in New York, where he established a company called Tiffany and Young. At first, his business was confined to importing jewellery from Italy, France and Great Britain, and in 1850 he began to make his own jewellery and silverware. In the eighteen-eighties he was the proud owner of some of the most valuable diamonds in the world. His son, Louis Comfort Tiffany, studied painting and came into contact with the then fashionable "oriental" style in art, which - together with the traces of Impressionist and Symbolist influences - was crucial for the development of his new style.

His early experiments with decorative windows date back to 1873. In 1878 he used opalescent glass and in 1881 obtained a patent for the lustrous Lüsterglass, for which he soon became

famous. In 1883 he took part in the Daffodil Stained-glass applications in business premises renovation of the White House, and in 1885 he decorated the Lyceum theatre in New York, where Thomas A. Edison had just installed his revolutionary electric lighting for Tiffany's lamps. In 1892 the company was reorganized under a new name, Tiffany Glass and Decorating Company, with a separate department specializing in church and mausoleum windows and mosaics. All products of the company were identified with numerical and alphabetical signs and the registered trademark Favril, which soon became synonymous with most varied colour effects and types of glass. In 1893 Tiffany opened his first workshop on Long Island (Corona) for the manufacture of glass using the traditional glass-blowing techniques and seeking to achieve the characteristic glistening and shimmering effects of antique glass which had been lying buried in the ground for thousands of years. The success was nothing short of sensational. It is no wonder, then, that many critics have compared its beauty and technique with the renowned Venetian glass in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Together with the refined elegance of translucent and unusual forms, Tiffany's glass shared with the Renaissance Venetian glass also the technique of gold leaves in the glass Window with a family coat-of-arms mass, producing characteristic glimmering effects, as well as the Millefiori technique of blowing variegated filaments into the glass mass.

A major link in the chain of success which spread from America to Europe was Samuel Bing, the celebrated art dealer. At the world exposition in Paris in 1900, Tiffany exhibited two windows,

one of them The Four Seasons made with small pieces of glass like precious stones, whose strong colours proved hugely popular with the Expo visitors. Bing's Paris gallery exhibited Tiffany's glass side by side with Rodin's sculpture, Beardsley's, Bradley's and Mackintosh's posters, Lalique's jewellery, Crane's, Morris's and Voysey's wallpaper and fabrics, Gallé's and Van de Velde's furniture. The new style was named Art Nouveau.

The art of Art nouveau found in Tiffany's art its perfect expression and reflection, a combination of experimental technological potential and a reinterpretation of traditional forms, in a world which leaves behind the boundaries between the so-called fine arts and so-called applied or decorative arts, fusing them into one - one new, modern beauty. His true starting point was the authentic artistic transposition of the natural world, looking for the essence of the organic, instinctive, fantastic and mystical. The line was a symbol of creative endeavour, and glass was its ideal medium.

Although, as already said, the present day dominant trend in design is that there is no dominant trend, the new aesthetics' most characteristic feature is the abandonment of rationalism in favour of the emotional and instinctive forces, subconscious and other marginal sources of inspiration, ranging from various historicists to science fiction. The Art nouveau style is among the most topical styles in this regard. Linearity appears here in its original meaning of generally understood symbolism of elementary creativity. The central place in the designer's focus of attention is occupied by

forms taken from nature, especially their changes, such as the rhythmical fluttering of leaves, undulating movement of waves, iridescence of colour on the butterfly's wings, curling hair.

Combinations of glass and metal produce artefacts whose structure and decorative inventory capture the viewer's attention with the sensibility of form and the wealth of evocative sophistication. It should be stressed that decorativeness is not just a means employed to achieve superficial effects - rather, it stems from the technology itself. In other words, decoration follows the form, in contradistinction to the exhausted formula of functionalist aesthetics which holds that form fully reflects its function. Postmodernism relishes in the inversion of form, which expresses imagination in the first place. Form is treated as a sign. One of the fundamental questions has to do with the recognition of the plurality of reality, both internal and external, which cannot be reduced to one single meaning.

Tiffany's statement to the effect that lighting fixtures are just a by-product of stained-glass design should by no means be taken literally. Lamps express best the artists' and the public's constant fascination with the beauty of antique glass, with Byzantine, Chinese, Islamic and Carolingian art, and above all the obsessive fascination with the beauty of nature as the ever-present feature of twentieth-century design. For Tiffany, there was no doubt: the aim of each artist is to discover the spirit of beauty. He believed that the artist's best training was studying and touching objects. That is why his own art collection was always open to his

co-workers, artists and students, and his luxurious residence of Laurelton Hall is still remembered for the costume dance evenings on different art history themes.

The inventory of lighting fixtures bearing the celebrated Tiffany trademark, now available again in Croatia thanks to the persistent effort of the Rogić Studio, consists of an impressive number of one thousand items - five hundred models of bases and stems and the same number of light shades. Many of the items are interchangeable, making possible new combinations of forms: bases of patina bronze in a variety of shapes reminiscent of flower bouquets and lamp shades ranging from quite simple bell-shaped forms to the Nautilus shell. Lamp shades are usually made of reticular glass obtained by heating a reticular metal frame and blowing cast or lead glass into the openings in a spectrum of colours and multitude of shades, producing effects like drops of rain, with edgings and friezes in the shape of acorns, lilies, abstract ornaments, tortoise shells, glass pellets in rainbow colours on glass so thin that it looks like a membrane. The most frequent floral motifs in the decorative inventory are those of poppies, roses, tulips, magnolias, narcissus, dandelion, dogwood, peony, groundsel, honeysuckle, apple blossom, water lily, lotus. It is noteworthy that these forms are not just a decorative pattern for a work of art - rather, the work of art is their expression and reflection: a flower in full blossom, day and night, winter and summer.

All of the objects thus made share the impeccable quality of execution, both in totality and in every detail. The lamp bases are made exclusively of top-grade bronze, and the lamp shade joints are

made of copper foils, which are more secure than the previously used lead joints. Each item is a single original piece, finished by hand, with the same amount of attention paid to each detail. The first in the series of now famous lamps inspired by floral motifs was Wisteria in 1901. Probably the most original design was the lamp called Water lily, consisting of eighteen bronze stems, which won the Grand Prix at the First International Exhibition, of Decorative Art in Turin in 1902.

Although the Rogičes lack the kind of support that Tiffany enjoyed at the turn of the century in the person of Samuel Bing, whose gallery opened in Paris in 1895 and inaugurated the new style of Art nouveau, which secured Tiffany's meteoric success in Europe, they have persevered for more than twelve years now and achieved a notable success. The Rogičes share one more characteristic with their famous predecessor and "a rebel in glass": like him, they are prepared to take radical steps in life. Louis Comfort Tiffany was seventeen years old when, in defiance of his parents' wishes, he boarded a ship for Europe and decided to seek his luck in art. The Rogičes' decision upon the completion of law studies, to study the complex technology of stained-glass making and design in Zurich was just as

radical, because the readiness of the public in Croatia to accept such art was anything but certain.

From a historical perspective of one hundred years (since the appearance of the first catalogue of Tiffany's table lamps), we can now say that such objects have become part of our lives, recognized as utilitarian objects and as works of art which find their place in museums and galleries. Equally, it is now more obvious than ever that we are living in the world of Postmodernism, which constantly re-examines itself and its values. We are reminded that the milieu is the ultimate reason for the emergence and existence of forms and that – despite the hollow clamouring of modernists for more than a century – the so-called fine art and the so-called applied art are equally true.

