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# THE PEACOCK

## A Symbol of Immortality

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## OR OF ETERNAL CHANGE

The symbolism of the peacock in Louis Comfort Tiffany's work is certainly not unambiguous, though it is primarily a continuation of the view of the peacock as a symbol of immortality, following Eastern as well as Western traditions. Tiffany's art and iconography, as a typical products of the fin-de-siècle, relied on an eclectic mixture of different mythological and cultural systems, often introducing ancient symbols into new concepts of meaning.

It is in this perspective that we should view the altar with the motif of the peacock, exhibited for the first time at the World Fair (Columbian Exposition) in Chicago in 1893. The altar, more precisely, all the equipment for the chapel, was bought by the rich widow Celia Whipple Wallace in 1896. As her gift, it was placed in the crypt of the New York cathedral consecrated to St. John, where it remained in liturgical use until 1911. That year, Tiffany's rival, the architect Ralph Adams Cram, was commissioned to redesign the cathedral in Neo-Gothic style, and he used the opportunity to remove Tiffany's masterpiece. Five years later, Tiffany took the altar into his possession again and installed it in his residence at Laurelton Hall on Long Island, proclaiming it to be a "shrine of art, and not a liturgical place". Potter and Jackson, the authors of a monograph study of Tiffa-

ny's opus, analysing the decorative design of the Havemeyer Mansion, stressed the "fascinating combination of the greatest cultures of the East and the West", and "the creation of a fully harmonious blend of styles - ranging from the Venetians to the Vikings", which clearly shows that, to understand Tiffany's symbolism of the peacock, it is advisable to examine the use of the symbol in both its Eastern and its Western version.

According to the Dictionary of Symbols by J. Chevalier and A. Gheerbrant, "the peacock is the emblem of the Burmese solar dynasty. The KUMARA (Skanda) riding on the peacock (well-known depiction in Angkor Wat) is identified with the Sun's energy. Skanda's peacock kills snakes (representing carnal inclinations and time). But the identification of the snake with the element of water confirms the peacock's kinship with the Sun and the element of fire. The peacock is a symbol of beauty and the power of transformation, because it is believed that the beauty of its plumes derives from the natural transformation of the poison that it absorbs killing snakes. Undoubtedly, it is a symbol of immortality." The peacock receives the same interpretation in India, while "in the Buddhist Jatakas the peacock is a form of Bodhisattva teaching the renunciation of

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the worldly inclinations", and "in the Chinese world, the peacock expresses the wish for peace and prosperity". According to the same source, "in the Christian tradition, the peacock symbolizes the solar wheel, and is thus a symbol of immortality; its tail plumes are reminiscent of the starlit skies". In his Dictionary of Iconography, Liturgy and Symbolism of Western Christianity (Liber, Zagreb, 1979), Anđelko Badurina mentions the peacock's feather as a "symbol of St. Barbara, in connection with her birthplace, the city of Heliopolis".

It should also be noted that, according to the abovementioned Dictionary of Symbols, "in esoteric legends the peacock symbolizes wholeness since its spread tail unites all colours. It expresses the identity of the whole and its instability, since the wholeness appears and disappears with the peacock's spreading and closing of its tail." As I have already noted, when Tiffany made his altar at the end of the nineteenth century, as well as

now in postmodernism, when, using the same technique, the Rogićs recreated it, the symbol of the peacock inevitably assumed the dualities characteristic of those periods, both of which marked the rethinking of the cultural and civilizational codes valid thus far. Equally, as one attempts to analyse the symbolism of the peacock, one might not forget the popular notion of the peacock as representing arrogance and vanity, owing to its readiness to show off the beauty of its plumage. Overemphasising the peacock, which in the Christian iconography appears only as an accompanying symbol in the depiction of Christ's birth and resurrection, Tiffany consciously juxtaposed the profane and the sacral symbolism of the peacock, almost anticipating the present-day postmodernist principle of "double encoding".

As luck would have it, the function of Tiffany's altar with the motif of the peacock has changed - from profane to sacral and back - thus additionally highlighting the transformations of the usual symbolism of the peacock. Through its complexity of associations and visual harmony, rich beauty and multiple associative layers, Tiffany's elaboration of the motif of the peacock and its modern derivative made by the Rogić couple represent high-water marks of the art of glass-cutting.

