

IN SEARCH OF TIFFANY'S MYSTICAL CATHEDRALS OF LIGHT



A more detailed analysis reveals the ability of Željka and Boris Rogić to modify and change the canons in accordance with their own talent and temperament and yet remain faithful to the "Tiffany model".

This art represents a return to the childhood of light - to the time when light transformed itself into "matter" through Gothic stained glass and at moments of direct encounter with such glass built a cathedral of light within the cathedral of stone. That time has been referred to as the Dark Ages, but never before or since has light been so "real", so carefully and ecstatically "formed". This mystical light of Gothic stained glass windows has reached our civilization through the works of the great Tiffany, who built his own homely, intimist cathedrals-lamps in the semidarkness of Vuillard-style interiors: from these small temples of light, light radiated again the ecstatic brilliance of Gothic windows. And we could experience again what F. Conti had written about Gothic masters: "There was such beauty in this light that even the Gothic glaziers and architects - otherwise used to such scenes - often remained awe-struck".

This return to light in our time is not unexpected: we felt confident at one point that our technological civilization would eliminate the need for personal isolation, but in fact the opposite has happened - the fast rhythm of life has intensified our isolation and our need for it, and hence also for the hermetically closed domicile. Modern man finds himself in the confinement of solitude and at moments of "relaxation" before his TV set he needs, more than ever before, that "sense of a sanctuary" in which - alienated and separated from nature - he will find refuge from his civilizational frustrations and anxieties.

Of course, these Tiffanyesque miniature "cathedrals" cannot give answers to all open questions. They have not, after all, been erected to substitute for churches, but they are spaces in which modern man can relax and return to his childhood kaleidoscope of light, the toy of his dreams, now lost in a dusty attic together with other mementoes of childhood. A temple is always built for an invisible deity in man, and these new Gothic cathedrals with stained glass windows were built by Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933) for a solitary (non)believer hermetically closed in the "civilizational cans", banished from the Eden of childhood, in which everything, including light, possessed the irresistible charm of a first experience of the world, the first encounter with the yet undiscovered and unknown reality. In the late evenings and feverish nights, modern man could withdraw into the isolated solitude of such "cathedrals" to communicate with the "deity of his childhood".

It was this "mystic moment" of isolation and withdrawal that Željka and Boris Rogić grasped, accepting what is perhaps the most unusual challenge in the contemporary visual arts - to embark upon a search for Tiffanyesque mystical cathedrals. To many people, including some directly involved with applied arts, the unique professional orientation of the husband and wife Željka and Boris Rogić from Rijeka means very little, almost nothing, and yet it belongs to one of the fundamental pursuits in contemporary applied art - one that may already at this stage be labelled "modern tradition". What are, then, the most important facts about Tiffany and his opus that one would need to know in order to appreciate his decisive influence on the course of modern applied art and to understand what Željka and Boris

Rogić are trying to introduce into contemporary Croatian art?

Everything in L.C. Tiffany's work is explained by his early adoption of Jugendstil, some of whose premises were harbingers of the art of our own day. It will clearly take many more analyses and revisions of Jugendstil (known under different names in different countries: Art Nouveau, Modern-Style, Secession, etc.) before it is recognized for what it was - a major turning point as the century began, from which art took a "short cut" towards modernity. Jugendstil did not only open the door for the so-called "pure art", anticipating abstract art within it, but also - with its "ambition to achieve synthesis and functionality" - paved the way for modern design. Tiffany's choice of the concept "reflecting the spirit of a new approach to art" inexorably led to a certain Hermetism and from the start imposed upon his artistic practice an ascetic severity, subjecting it to a set of postulates designed to ensure that the Hermetism was maintained to the point of self-denial. Things could not change even when, later, Tiffany's followers took over his legacy. And this is precisely the point from which one must start in trying to analyse the artistic practice of Željka and Boris Rogić.

Everything said so far was a necessary preface to our attempt to answer two questions of principle: What is the possible artistic concept for which the historical example of this great precursor of modern design remains topically important today, sixty years after Tiffany's death? To what extent can the Rogićes make their creative contribution while producing a "literal" and "irreproachable" replica of Tiffany? There is no need, I believe, to stress the crucial importance of the answers to these questions for the work of the artistic couple from Rijeka. Without such answers, their effort would exhaust itself in perfect craftsmanship, deprived of any historical anchor in its

own time.

First: with the appearance of anachronism at the Venice Biennale in 1984. in the shape of Calvesi's *Arte allo specchio*, tradition was renewed as "historical quotation". Without conformism, Tiffany's lighting fixtures can indeed be understood as "historical quotations", on which one of the fundamental propositions of anachronism - a concept belonging to present-day art - can be said to rest. Nobody who is not a formalist could think about this in any other way. Understood in this key, Tiffany's example is no longer seen as something out of its time and place, but rather as something that has been successfully "transplanted" into the "flowerpot" of present day trends. It is important to bear in mind this fact, for it enables us to understand the Rogićes' decision and to view their work in a clearly defined historical context.

Second: faced with a rich offering of contemporary artistic trends, Željka and Boris Rogić have opted for a concept whose methodological rigour clearly suits their artistic temperament. They are fully aware that their "room for manoeuvre", in the sense of an individual and creative (re)interpretation, is severely limited - but it is not eliminated and their works are certainly not mere replicas. Strict canonical concepts requiring complete stylistic and thematic subordination on the part of their adherents are not unknown in the history of art: in ancient Egyptian art, for instance, the canons were so strict and immutable that any departures and personal variations were practically ruled out. But the strict rules of the "school", "trend" or "inviolable canon" have never prevented a true artist from making his own creative contribution. His talent and personality have always found their secret paths to a work of art. And when a "perfect replica" is mentioned, I sense that Željka and Boris Rogić have found their secret path to Tiffany's example. And this encourages me to

seek the answers to the two questions raised above.

The present exhibition offers some thirty lighting fixtures made by the Rogičes. Looking at them, we recognize the strict Tiffanyesque model, but in each exhibit we recognize also the creative contribution of two unusually gifted personalities. The initial impression of a "perfect replica" proves to be, on a closer look, merely an external reliance on the model and adherence to its rules, without which the model would not exist. But a more detailed analysis reveals the artists' capability to modify the "canons" in ways that suit their talent and their temperament, and yet remain "within the model". The strictness of the model could point, at least initially, to the wrong conclusion that what we have here is a mere replica, leaving no room, for free expression and denying all individuality; however, this is just an illusion, and the longer we look the more aware we become that the "deity of creation" inhabits the Tiffanyesque "home cathedral", and we are faced with that inexplicable secret of a seed that - sown in the rich soil of talent - will bear fruit which will have all its genetic characteristics but also a wholly individual shape and taste.

The extent to which the "Tiffanyesque technique" is just a question of discipline and adherence to a particular methodology is seen very clearly in the Rogičes "free stained-glass compositions". Even when the artists produce compositions outside the strict canons of Tiffanyism, inventively handling local Rijeka motifs and depicting Mediterranean scenes, they remain within the Tiffany model. If Tiffany had painted these scenes, he would have painted them in precisely this way. The same holds true for the items that are not included in Tiffany's catalogues and in which the artists have not felt

obliged to obey the rules of the model (mirrors, bank-style lamps, wall lamps, etc.). The diploma that the Rogičes earned after a period of study at the Tiffany centre in Zurich, one of the few centres teaching the Tiffany technique, is fully justified with a display of craftsmanship shown by the two artists from Rijeka, who demonstrate here standards of execution that fully match those set by the great American artist himself. The Rogičes confidently tackle even the most complex projects, such as the Lotus lamp made with 1.344 pieces of stained glass masterfully executed in what is a very demanding technique. The degree of perfectionism is well illustrated by the Rogičes' care to use materials for their lamps from the same American glassworks that supplied glass to Tiffany's studios.

The Tiffany-school discipline is indelibly present in all of Željka and Boris Rogić's works, and in them we can easily identify their fascination with the great model, observance of its strict rules, and obsessive exploration of the secrets of the "Tiffany technique". All of this, as already noted, creates the semblance of a "dogmatic" approach and an inability to depart from the rigid model. But the viewer's illusion is, for the artists, Ariadne's thread enabling them to find their way out of the labyrinth of canon and slavish imitation of a model or trend. The final answers are to be found, as usual, exclusively in creative invention and individuality.

The presence of Željka and Boris Rogić in the Tiffany circle is by no means accidental: their works of great technical perfection draw to an equal measure on ambition and emotiveness, stemming -naturally - from the pure wellspring of exceptional talent.

Hommage à LC Tiffany
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Jezuitski trg 4, Zagreb