

### Strand 1: Keynote Speech

#### **“Before We Break the Glass Ceiling, Let’s Find Out Who Designed It!: Some Thoughts About Women and the Art Nouveau”**

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When I was asked to deliver the “ponència marc” for this set of papers exploring the role of women as artists, artisans and patrons of the Art Nouveau, I was at a bit of a loss: My own scholarly work over the years has involved modern and contemporary architecture, with a research focus on Catalan “Modernisme”, and I confess that I had trouble coming up with even a handful of women artists whose work might be considered “Art Nouveau”. Of course I could name Frances and Margaret

MacDonald, associated with Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Herbert McNair in the Glasgow School (about whom we will hear more later in this session), and, thanks to the researches of my friend Marcy Rudo, I knew something about Lluïsa Vidal, the Catalan “modernista” painter whose work was sometimes confused with that of Ramon Casas. But that was pretty much it... Faced with addressing a group of scholars whose research expertise directly engaged women agents of the Art Nouveau, I was at even more of a loss as to what I might say. In the end, I decided to approach this talk as an opportunity to pose some questions, and, in posing them, to learn something.\*

Since none of the papers in today’s sessions addresses women in the United States, I thought I would consider some aspects of art production in my country, looking at several “case studies” which can illuminate the agency of women in the creation of a decorative arts movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that heralded and intersected with an Art Nouveau aesthetic. Along the way I will bring to light a number of important, if forgotten, names. For the question is not, why have there been so few women Art artists associated with Art Nouveau practice, but rather, why have their names been lost to us? This is a question, of course, that has resonance well beyond America and the Art Nouveau.

A good amount of research on women artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has produced a history of exclusion and marginalization. We know that women were denied access to serious art education and academies, architecture schools and certification, and that they were

excluded from workers' guilds and unions as well as the cafés and studios where ideas about art were discussed and debated. This might be considered the "glass ceiling" approach, evincing the social limits to women's possibilities as a way of explaining their relative absence from the history of art and design. But I think a more heartening line of research in recent years has been that which has sought to bring to light the careers of those exceptional women who were able, to some degree, to subvert and overcome those restrictions, finding in the American Arts and Crafts movement, alternative roles and institutions which served to empower themselves and other women.

We need to remember that right up to the turn of the century, the cult of domesticity defined the role of most women, especially middle-class women, as centered in the home, charged with creating there a beautiful and tranquil space for shared familial leisure; a place where children could be reared and educated and a sanctuary where the husband could return in peace from work in the public sphere. The work of the wife was concerned with everything that revolved around the family and homemaking, including the ornamentation of the domestic space with taste and creativity, employing the arts of embroidery, lace-making, painted china, handloom weaving, and so forth— amateur arts and crafts that benefitted the economy and harmony of the family but which generally brought no remuneration to the maker. These "domestic" or "minor" arts were generally part of the education of young girls. Constituting qualities wanted in a good wife they came to both embody and maintain the feminine stereotype, as well as a gendered hierarchy of the arts.

Professional careers for women in America were still rare, limited essentially to work that could be seen as an extension of the domestic sphere such as that of the teacher or nurse. Significantly, however, precisely because of its close association with the arts of the home, the Arts and Crafts movement, from the late 1870s to well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, constituted a "middle ground" wherein talented and creative women could enter the realm of remunerative employment without running the risk of social opprobrium, maintaining an appropriately safe relationship to feminine domesticity. This was, after all, a time of impending social change, when suffragists were actively

campaigning for voting rights and college educated feminists, the “new women” with professional aspirations were seen as a growing threat to family life and, indeed, to the patriarchal hold on social, economic, and political power. While to a certain extent it reified the “femininity” of women’s handicrafts, such a “middle ground”, provided a stimulating community of shared creativity, a halfway house for middle class women’s emancipation.

In the U.S., remunerative employment became a pressing issue in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when, as a result of the hundreds of thousands of deaths in the Civil War and the subsequent loss of fortunes in the Long Depression of the 1870s, many middle class wives, daughters and sisters found themselves bereft of the financial support they had depended upon from their deceased or ruined male relations.

The “middle ground” of Arts and Crafts professionalization was, as I have indicated, initially staked out by a few exceptional women who, without taking a political stand, sought a different way of being in the world and, more importantly, sought to help their less fortunate sisters to achieve a degree of self-confidence and self-sufficiency, using and developing their artistic handicraft skills to achieve professional wages and acknowledgement.

One such remarkable woman was Candice Wheeler, a masterful embroiderer who became one of the first American women to produce textile designs for American manufacturers and served as a role model for women at the turn of the century as both “career woman” and designer. While attending the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876, Wheeler, like many other American women, had been impressed by the exhibition of embroidery from the British Royal School of Art Needlework -- recently founded, according to their promotional material, “to provide suitable employment for gentlewomen and to revive the craft of ornamental needlework”. The embroidered work from designs by leaders of the English Arts and Crafts movement was stunning, but what impressed Wheeler even more was the idea that women could be paid for handiwork that might be done at home. With this in mind she founded the Society of Decorative Art of New York City, to provide an outlet where middle class

women who needed to support themselves, could do so through the sale of needlework, painted china, and other decorative, home-based arts. Wheeler rallied high society allies to buy and commission custom-made wares, and classes in art and design were added to the program in order to elevate the quality of the craft work. Wheeler's friend Louis Comfort Tiffany was one of the teachers at the school, encouraging a growing sense of professionalism on the part of the women. Outposts of the Society were set up in a good number of cities across the country to similar end.

Joining forces with Tiffany at the beginning of his career, Wheeler was instrumental in creating the profession of interior decorator, collaborating on such projects as the drop curtain for the Madison Square Theater, the Veteran's Room at the Park Avenue Armory, or the Blue and Red Rooms for the White House. In a division of labor typical of the period, Wheeler supervised a crew of women embroiderers to produce all of the textiles and wall patterns, while Tiffany and his male associates designed furnishings, mosaics, ironwork and glass. In 1883, Wheeler left Tiffany to establish her own all-woman firm, "Associated Artists", which she ran something like an art school, training young women in textile embroidery and pattern design with the goal of creating "a uniquely American style," with colors and patterns modeled on American flowers and responding to the qualities of American light. Associated Artists produced silks and large scale embroidered tapestries, collaborating with Tiffany and others, until 1907. She also produced a less expensive line of printed textiles, on denim and chintz, inventing a technique of multiple, offset printings to create shadowed three-dimensional effects.

Also at the Philadelphia Centennial exhibition was a display of china painting by members of the Cincinnati Pottery Club, another of the traditionally sanctioned areas of amateur, home-based, "feminine" artistic endeavor which gave rise to professional careers in the field of art pottery. The founder of that Club, Mary Louise McLaughlin, was taken with the British and French ceramic displays at the fair and returned to Ohio determined to discover the secrets of underglaze slip decoration that was used in the faience pieces she admired. A tireless experimenter, she was able before long to reproduce the underglaze technique, applying the decoration into the wet clay before it

was fired, rather than painting over the hard glazed surface. This method, which she baptized “Cincinnati Limoges”, would become the standard method for American art pottery through the turn of the century, and stimulated a craze for these wares in the decorative arts. In the 1890s, her dogged experimentation with clays produced a variety of milky white porcelain, the first achieved in the United States, which she called Losanti Ware, indicating that its decoration had been influenced by thoughtful study of the Art Nouveau. McLaughlin was also one of the first women to getting her hands dirty by working and molding the clay herself. Prior to this, a gendered division of labor had reserved for men the throwing and shaping of pots, while the decorators were primarily women.

In 1880, another Cincinnati potter, Maria Longworth Nichols, with money from her wealthy father, set up her own pottery, on the grounds of home, using the underglaze techniques that McLaughlin had developed. This pottery, Rookwood, the first manufacturing company in the U.S. founded by a woman, became the largest and most important of more than one hundred art potteries in the country during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In 1881 Nichols began the Rookwood School of Pottery Decoration to train women for more professional work in the enterprise. When, several years later, she hired a male friend to manage the business end of things, he closed the school in order to replace the women amateurs with men trained in the profession. While Rookwood pots were always shaped and fired by men, the designs and decoration were assigned to both men and women. Over the years a formidable number of women designer/decorators were employed by the pottery producing (to my taste, at least) some of the most beautiful pieces and, in many cases, those which most obviously predicted or partook of Art Nouveau design.

At the 1900 Paris International Exposition, Rookwood took the Grand Prix in Ceramics, and Siegfried Bing, who had been interested in the pottery since his visit to America in 1894 to survey the state of the new arts in the U.S, undertook exclusive European representation, showing Rookwood pieces in his shop, l’Art Nouveau Bing, and placing their ceramic ware in important decorative art museums across the continent.

Another prize-winning American firm which was exclusively represented by Bing in

Europe and promoted as Art Nouveau was, of course, Tiffany. On his visit to the U.S., Bing seems to have spent much time in the company of Louis Tiffany, as a guest in his home and on visits to his glass factories in Queens. Bing admired Tiffany's freshness of approach to the favrile glass windows, the mosaics, the vases and other decorative items he saw there. But the remarkable thing about Bing's report on his trip is that never once does he mention the fact that Tiffany's glass workshops employed an extraordinary number of women. Although remarked upon in the American press at the time as an indication of Tiffany's progressive practices, only in the past 10 years have we come to understand more clearly the role of women in the production of Tiffany's art glass, and more specifically the crucial contributions of Clara Driscoll who headed up the Women's Glass Cutting Department and was responsible for the design and execution of most of the iconic Tiffany lamps produced from 1897 to 1909. Unlike the women previously discussed, Clara was not heralded in her day and then forgotten. It was Tiffany's policy to imply that all products produced by Tiffany & Co. were personally designed by him, and executed under his direct supervision--his name alone should appear before the public. Thus the creative artists he employed, including several male designers, were seldom acknowledged in brochures or other company materials and worked anonymously.

Had it not been for the discovery, just 10 years ago, of two separate collections of Clara's voluminous correspondence with her mother and sister, she might still be unknown. As it is, her weekly letters written over the turn of the century --truly a scholar's dream!-- have not only clarified her role in the design and making of Tiffany art glass, but also have brought to light a community of women artists and artisans, "the Tiffany Girls", as they were called, whose collaborative way of working gave rise to a vital creative environment where each contributed to the whole according to her abilities and talents. Among themselves they developed a bond of sisterhood which sometimes carried over into jolly weekend excursions.

Clara Driscoll was educated at the Western Reserve School of Design in Cleveland (yet another Ohio native) and then, at age 27, moved to New York City to attend classes at the newly founded Metropolitan Museum Art School where, as the only woman in the

department, she specialized in architectural decoration. Her first job out of school was with the Tiffany Glass Company which she joined in 1888 and where she would spend her entire work life, until marriage, in 1909, forced her retirement. (Despite his “progressive” stance, Tiffany had a policy that he would hire only unmarried or widowed women, and there were two gaps in Clara’s tenure, one for an early marriage from which she was widowed, and one later for an unsuccessful engagement.)

In 1892 when she rejoined the expanded Tiffany Glass and Decorating Company, a small Women’s Glass Cutting Department with 6 female employees was established under her direction in the newly established workshop/studio space adjacent to the company’s office in Manhattan. This department, which grew to 35 women by 1894, marked a radical change in Tiffany practice – until this time only men were allowed to both select and cut the glass. The women’s department was founded in a year when the Lead Glaziers and Glass Cutter’s Union, to which all of Tiffany’s male workers belonged, went on strike to demand higher wages and reduced working hours. As women were not allowed to join the union, this may have been a shrewd, even cynical response on Tiffany’s part. But the official line was that Tiffany preferred women workers for these tasks because their fingers were more nimble, their eyes more sensitive to color and they possessed an innate taste for decoration. They also were seen to take direction and criticism more easily.

As with other areas of decorative art design that we have seen, there was a gendered division of labor at the Tiffany Company. The glass was produced by men in the factories that Tiffany had established in Corona, Queens. It was then brought into the city where the women were entrusted with designing, selecting, cutting, assembling and foiling the glass. The men would then do the heavy lifting, transferring the foiled glass back to the workshops for soldering, the final glazing, and, eventually installation in the case of windows, ceilings, or large glass mosaic panels.

From 1897 on, Clara continued to oversee the production of leaded windows and mosaics, but she also introduced new product lines, including leaded lampshades, mosaic-clad lamp bases, and small *objets de luxe*, taking advantage of new deep colors



and textured, iridescent surfaces developed in the glass-blowing department, and the bronze foundry established at the Corona plant around 1897-8.

The lamps became Clara's special domain and though she always identified herself as the designer, they were collaboratively executed with help from the Tiffany Girls. Teams of women worked together, laying out potential designs on plaster lampshade molds and considering the effect. She especially valued the input of her close friend and artistic partner Alice Gouvy, whose skills at drawing from nature she admired and took inspiration from.

In April 1904, the *New York Daily News* ran an article on New York's most highly paid women, indicating that Clara Driscoll was one of the few who made over \$10,000 a year. Research in the Tiffany records, however, has revealed that her wages were \$35 per week, a mere fraction of that amount. Her stature within the firm was far greater than her pay scale which lagged well behind that of her unionized male colleagues. By the standards of the time, however, Driscoll was a successful career woman with creative autonomy and managerial responsibilities beyond the reach of most of her female peers. In this "middle ground" of the decorative arts and crafts she was able to break into the realm of professional accomplishment, but at the price of anonymity. If, as Virginia Woolf famously said, "anonymous was a woman", Clara Driscoll was a prime example.

At a time when it was still not expected that women would enter, much less excel in, the workplace, the metaphor of the "glass ceiling" seems historically premature. Yet the material abundance of Art Nouveau glass ceilings, begs the question, knowing what we do: how many other anonymous women were involved in their creation, possibly even in their design? Research that retrieves for us the names of such women artists and artisans highlights their contributions and enriches our histories. Such retrieval is the valuable research that informs the papers that we will hear today.

\*I have especially learned from two excellent studies: Amelia Peck and Carol Irish, with Elena Phipps, *Candace Wheeler: The Art and Enterprise of American Design*,





*1875-1900*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: 2001; and Martin Eidelberg, Nina Gray, and Margaret Hofer, *A New Light on Tiffany: Clara Driscoll and the Tiffany Girls*, New York Historical Society, 2007.