The Quest of Beauty: LaFarge and Tiffany and American Stained Glass

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John LaFarge and Louis Comfort Tiffany spent most of their lives engaged in a bitter rivalry. This enmity seems to have motivated them to stretch their artistic limits and that of the stained glass medium that each used. Although they had much in common, their personalities were incompatible and their attitudes toward business management were different. These differences had as much to do with their relative success as their artistic talent.

When Tiffany and LaFarge began their work in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Victorian admiration for the middle ages had established medieval stained glass as the ideal model for a window.[1] Colored, transparent glass was cut to pattern, heavily painted with opaque enamels, and fired in a kiln before assembly with channeled lead strips.

Nineteenth-century church windows in the United States were usually manufactured in England or Germany or assembled in America by immigrant artisans in traditional designs, often with imported materials. After the Civil War, building construction surged. Domestic colored glass became plentiful and cheap. Architects mixed and mingled a variety of building styles for which independent glaziers, as well as studios established by English and German glassworkers, created a variety of decorative windows to embellish new homes and businesses.[2]

John Frederick Lewis Joseph LaFarge was born in New York City on March 31, 1835, to wealthy and cultured French émigrées (Figure 1). He was raised a Roman Catholic in a continental lifestyle that taught him to appreciate artistic and intellectual pursuits.[3] After receiving a Master's Degree from Mount Saint Mary's College in Maryland in 1855, LaFarge toured Europe. He visited Gothic cathedrals and sketched the works of the masters in the world's great museums. In France he studied briefly with Thomas Couture.[4] On his return he studied painting in Rhode Island with William Morris Hunt.[5]

Louis Comfort Tiffany was born February 18, 1848, also in New York (Figure 2). The Tiffanys proudly traced their roots back to the Massachusetts Bay Colony of the 1600s. Louis' father, Charles, had established the Tiffany Jewelry Company in 1837. Unlike the LaFarge family, the Tiffanys were no-nonsense Congregationalists who adhered to strict puritan principles.[6] Refusing to attend college or join the family business, young Louis studied painting in New York with George Inness. In Inness' studio he met Oscar Wilde, whose aesthetic views would become a major influence on Tiffany's art.[7]

LaFarge was an established painter by the time Tiffany began his artistic career. LaFarge first exhibited at the National Academy of Design in 1862. The watercolors of LaFarge reflect his interest in Japanese art. Henry Adams says that, like Whistler, "LaFarge's work exhibits many of the features of French art (of the time): Impressionism, a love of the primitive and exotic, a decorative bent, a desire for new forms and colors, and a wish to re-evaluate the fundamental nature of expression and sensation."[8]

Tiffany was also attracted to Eastern art. After exhibiting a painting at the National Academy of Design in 1868, the nineteen-year-old went to Paris to study with Leon Bailly—who introduced him to a new world of oriental pattern and color. Tiffany later traveled to North Africa where he became intrigued with Islamic textiles.[9]

While in Europe Tiffany was attracted by the twelfth- and thirteenth-century stained glass of Chartres. He was especially struck by the fact that the color was *in* the glass rather than painted on it, as with most post-medieval church windows. He was also fascinated by the lack of naturalism in the window designs. The question of whether stained glass windows should depict natural scenes or have a distinct pattern related to the nature of the colored glass forming them was one that bothered Tiffany the rest of his creative life. He apparently never resolved the question, because his stained glass work wavered between the two extremes.[10]

LaFarge returned often to Europe. His first interest in stained glass resulted from the five or six months he spent with Edward Burne-Jones at the William Morris Studios in London. Burne-Jones was the designer of many great stained glass windows executed by the Morris firm. In the Morris Studios LaFarge learned the techniques of stained glass window construction.[11]

Upon his return to America LaFarge gathered all the information he could on the manufacture of sheet glass. His son recalled his father telling him about lengthy trips to Brooklyn, probably to Thill's Glass Works, where he would "toil for hours and days in experiments in the chemistry of glass."[12] Also experimenting at Thill's was Louis Tiffany.[13]

By 1875 LaFarge was putting together stained glass windows in his New York studio with glass produced in Brooklyn. One impression he had from his sojourn with Burne-Jones was that the English designers were hampered by their detachment from the actual fabrication of their windows.[14] LaFarge was determined to be personally involved in every facet of the design and construction of his windows, often building, dismantling, and rebuilding windows himself until he was satisfied with the result.

At the same time Tiffany was also designing windows. His early work mostly combined flat decorative areas of color, "the shape determined partly by the glass and partly by imagination."[15] Both men were unhappy, however, with the limitations of the available sheet glass and continued to experiment with new types of glass.

LaFarge's search for the perfect glass was held up when he was commissioned by the architect, H. H. Richardson, in 1876, to decorate Richardson's seminal masterpiece, Trinity Church in Boston. LaFarge filled the interior with a series of brilliant murals. He also installed a semi-grissaille window; the window, now lost, was filled with a complex

wheelwork pattern of soft grays, olive greens, and painted white glass.[16]

Working himself to exhaustion at Trinity brought LaFarge an unexpected bonus. In a letter from about 1881 to S. Bing, founder of a gallery called L'Art Nouveau in Paris, LaFarge described his discovery of the potential use of opalescent glass while he was confined to bed.

> ... When looking at some toilet articles made of what is called opal glass, in imitation of china, I noticed the beauty of quality which accompanied this fabric. I also saw that, when placed alongside of colored glass, what we call pot-metal ... that the opalescent quality brought out a certain harmony due to the suggestion of complementary color. It seemed to me then that all that would be necessary to obtain the density in glass which we made by painting ... would be the having material of this kind.[17]

The first commission completed by LaFarge incorporating opalescent glass was in 1877 for the William Watts Sherman house in Newport, also designed by Richardson. The set of windows is reminiscent of William Morris' work, showing a strong oriental influence. LaFarge cut the opalescent pieces of glass from decorative boxes and other domestic articles.[18] Pleased with the results, he continued to work on developing a way of producing opal glass in sheets. He also shared the results of his discovery with Tiffany.

Tiffany's first successful effort in combining pot-metal glass and opalescent glass was completed in 1878, several months, at least, after LaFarge's windows for Watts Sherman.

In 1879 LaFarge applied for a patent for the manufacture of opalescent glass, which was granted in 1880.[19] LaFarge claimed in letters that he gave Tiffany permission to use his new discovery only after much pressure from Tiffany's father, who offered financial backing which was never forthcoming.[20]

LaFarge's son recalled that his father was "head over heels in an unfortunate suit with Tiffany." It is probable that LaFarge did not apply for his patent until after he became embroiled in the dispute with Tiffany. The suit was settled out of court for an undisclosed amount and—in 1881—Tiffany went on to obtain two patents of his own, one of which involved a very subtle variation on the process LaFarge had previously patented.[21] From that time on it was Tiffany who was most often associated with the distinctly American use of opalescent glass in windows.

In their early work both men emphasized the inherent properties of the glass. Tiffany's pebble windows and LaFarge's abstract designs for doors drew critical acclaim. John Ruskin wrote of Tiffany's work, "No man who knows what painting means can endure a painted glass window which emulates a painter's work. But he rejoices in a glowing mosaic of broken colors; for that is what the glass has the special gift and right of producing."[22]

After 1880, the Tiffany-LaFarge relationship was marked by hostile business competition. Pleasing the client became the primary goal of both men, and each sought architectural and client patronage in order to have advantage over the other.

Through an agreement with the fashionable decorating firm of Herter Brothers, LaFarge formed a company to supply stained glass windows for the mansions of such men as J. Pierpont Morgan, Cyrus Field, and William Vanderbilt. The most important job was a series of triptychs he designed for Vanderbilt. One of these, now at Biltmore in Asheville, North Carolina, depicted *The Fruits of Commerce,* a classical allegory glorifying the Vanderbilts' business acumen. This led to a $100,000 contract to decorate the home of Cornelius Vanderbilt II.

Tiffany established the firm of L. C. Tiffany and Associated Artists in 1879 to provide complete decorating services. From the mellow perspective of a speech given on his 68th birthday Tiffany said that his sole creed had always been "the Quest of Beauty," but in 1879 he told an associate that the firm "is a real thing . . . a business, not a philanthropy . . . we are going after the money there is in art."[23]

Tiffany went after more than just the money. He also grabbed public attention. In 1882 Tiffanywas awarded the contract to decorate the White House for the paltry sum of $15,000. He completed the job in six weeks with much publicity.[24] Later in his career Tiffany employed writers to promote him and his studios. More than twenty articles in national publications were planted by Tiffany's publicists.

Although LaFarge completed a glorious set of windows for Trinity in Boston in 1883 and had many commissions for murals and stained glass, he suffered continuing financial problems. The Vanderbilt jobs had put him deeply in debt due to cost overruns which created animosity from his financial backers. In 1885 The LaFarge Decorative Arts Company declared bankruptcy and LaFarge was forced to move his family to a smaller house, selling many of his books and paintings.[25]

LaFarge never seemed to acquire the knack of managing his time and money. His stained glass was in demand, but his insistence on maintaining personal involvement in its production limited the number of windows his firm could produce; his perfectionism led him to frequent overruns in time and money. He often became frustrated with lucrative commissions, abandoning them before completion, forfeiting payment. When he had money he spent it on fanciful schemes and projects, or traveled until the money was gone. He often became so obsessed with the particular window he was designing, technique he was trying to develop, or picture he was painting that he neglected all of his other interests.

After his return from a trip to Japan in 1886, LaFarge's stained glass career took a subtle turn. He began producing more church windows and fewer for private commissions. His style grew more illusionistic and pictorial with less emphasis on the properties of colored glass. With a few exceptions, much of his later work is sentimental and routine.[26]

One of those exceptions is a window he designed for Trinity Church, Buffalo, New York. He sent this window to the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889 and was awarded a first class medal and the insignia of the Legion of Honor.[27]

According to his biographer, Hugh McKean, Tiffany was irked by his rival's success. He designed the *Four Seasons* window (Figure 5) to outshine LaFarge. Filled with Art Nouveau naturalism, the window was a triumph at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 and received a gold medal at the 1900 Exposition Universelle. Each season is represented by appropriate flora within a separate cartouche. There is no paintwork at all. Many pieces of glass were manufactured to fulfill specific functions in the composition. McKean sees the window as derivative of the Impressionists: "Tiffany is thinking as a

painter. But whereas the Impressionist painters used pigment to simulate light, Tiffany is painting with light itself."[28]

With the construction of his own glass manufacturing houses in Corona, New York, Tiffany had under his control the full process of design, glass making, and window construction, as well as his lucrative lampshade and table glass business. Although he still supervised glass manufacture and retained approval rights on window designs, Tiffany's artistic role diminished as the century closed.

Hampered by his own poor management, LaFarge continued to blame Tiffany for his troubles. He had been eager to decorate the new Lyceum Theatre about 1885, but was dropped from consideration when the better capitalized Tiffany offered to do the job for a percentage of the profits. The architect, Stanford White, had always favored LaFarge for his projects until they had a creative dispute over the work on New York's Church of the Ascension. After 1888 all work for the firm McKim, Mead and White went to Tiffany.[29]

In 1909 LaFarge joined 200 painters, sculptors and architects at the awards banquet of the Architectural League of New York. The League's president, C. Grant LaFarge, awarded his father a medal for mural painting. LaFarge shocked the audience with his bitter acceptance speech.

> This recognition from the architects comes very late in life ... A friend once told me I would never get a dollar's worth of work from ... the great firm of McKim, Mead and White and for 22 years [they] never gave me any work. I don't know why. Perhaps there was a business reason. But I could not see a reason why they should try to prevent a man from earning a living, especially in the name of art ... I receive this recognition ... when it is useless to me as a help to live on, and I accept it with some reticence of thanks. I take it as meaning that I shall be able to continue in my errors. It is gratifying to have it presented by my son.[30]

LaFarge's weakness and charm is that he was more a dilettante than a professional; but his accomplishments, writes Henry Adams, came from a consistent set of values, "the creation of a single artistic mind, even if an opalescent one." LaFarge's failings lie, Adams says, not in his technical inconsistencies but in "the outmoded ideas to which he clung ... like many of his generation, LaFarge never quite finessed the transition between the idealism of the early nineteenth century and the harsh realities of the twentieth. His art conveys a sense of unfulfilled promise."[31]

At his death in 1910 newspaper headlines proclaimed LaFarge one of America's great artistic geniuses. His family wished he had spent more effort on his painting. In a speech to the Stained Glass Association of America in 1944 another son, John, a Jesuit priest, recounted the cost of LaFarge's involvement in stained glass.

> Stained glass was the crucifixion of my father's flesh ... we, his children, often speculated on what might have been his career if he had not centered so much of his activity on stained glass. If we ask the question, was LaFarge's glass worth the price he paid for it in sweat, labor, in anxiety and even illness, indeed, over a whole lifetime ... I cannot answer.[32]

A poignant postscript to LaFarge's difficulties with Tiffany is the fact that many of LaFarge's finest works have been falsely credited to Tiffany in later years. Just 19 years ago one of LaFarge's favorite peacock windows was sold as a Tiffany, and, so attributed, was the centerpiece of an exhibition at the Villa Stuch in Munich.[33]

After 1910 Tiffany designed few windows. His studios turned out commissions designed by staff artists or reproduced from old patterns. One by one Tiffany's standards of excellence and rules of design were dropped. As the Depression began, stained glass became unfashionable and unaffordable. In 1932 L. C. Tiffany Studios declared bankruptcy. Louis Tiffany died in 1933 at the age of 85.

Weber Wilson writes that Tiffany's position in the opalescent versus painted window battle was so strong during his lifetime that he kept the voice of the opposition quiet. After his death the forces defending gothic-style architecture and ornament "swept in and claimed victory over a decimated artistic outpost about which most people no longer cared."[34]

A reader of the *Ornamental Glass Bulletin* once asked, "Are glassmen business men with a working knowledge of art or are they artists with a working knowledge of business?"[35] That is a question one could well ask of Tiffany and LaFarge. LaFarge limited his scope by his lack of business skill. Tiffany lost credibility as an artist by his gift for organization and management.

Both men made vast contributions to the development of the American style of stained glass art. For all their differences it seems they needed each other in a perverse way. By their creative and business accomplishments they spurred each other on, for as John LaFarge told his children:

> The fascination of the window is its utter and changeless permanence combined with its equally and ever-shifting changeableness and variation. There is ... a Divine character to that very thing.[36]

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1 George Seddon, *Stained Glass* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1976) 150-51.

2 H. Weber Wilson, *Great Glass in American Architecture* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1986) 65.

3 James L. Yarnall, "Chronology," *John LaFarge,* The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; The National Museum of American Art, Washington (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987) 239.

4 Henry Adams, "The Mind of John LaFarge," *John LaFarge,* 29.

5 Yarnall 241.

6 Robert Koch, *Louis C. Tiffany, Rebel in Glass* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1982) 5.

7 Koch 6.

8 Adams 71.

9 Koch 7.

10 Hugh F. McKean, *The Lost Treasures of Louis Comfort Tiffany* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1980) 3.

11 Yarnall 41.

12 John LaFarge S. J., "The Spirit of John LaFarge," *Stained Glass* (Winter, 1944) 107.

13 McKean 3.

14 Helene Barbara Weinberg, "The Early Stained Glass Work of John LaFarge," *Stained Glass* (Summer, 1972) 5.

15 McKean 3.

16 Weinberg 9.

17 Yale University Library, "John LaFarge, Reply to Mr. S. Bing regarding my work...." *LaFarge Family Papers*, typescript, circa 1891, 7-8. Quoted by Helene Barbara Weinberg, *The Decorative Work of John LaFarge*, Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1972 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977) 348.

18 *LaFarge Papers*, Yale, 7, 349. "I amused myself by replacing ones of the pattern that had ordinary pot-metal with these pieces of opal cut from various boxes and such-like. The effect of contrast of solidity with relative thinness and the play of complementary tone suggested by the opal along side of the other colors was so pleasant that I felt convinced that here was a possible new departure which would at least give me a handsome new material..."

19 Helene Barbara Weinberg, "John LaFarge and the Invention of American Opalescent Windows," *Stained Glass* (Autumn, 1972) 5.

20 Weinberg 10.

21 Weinberg 11.

22 Koch 58.

23 McKean 101. (no further attribution)

24 McKean 107.

25 Adams 63.

26 Adams 63.

27 Henry A. LaFarge, "Painting with Colored Light: The Stained Glass of John LaFarge," *John LaFarge*, 214.

28 McKean 83.

29 Koch 70.

30 "John LaFarge and His Medal," *The Ornamental Glass Bulletin* (January, 1909) 3.

31 Adams 71.

32 John LaFarge, "Spirit...," 109.

33 Henry LaFarge, 214.

34 Wilson 103.

35 F. M. Hayes, Letter, *The Ornamental Glass Bulletin* (February, 1916) 56.

36 John LaFarge, "Spirit...," 108.

Figure 1. Photograph of John LaFarge, n.d.

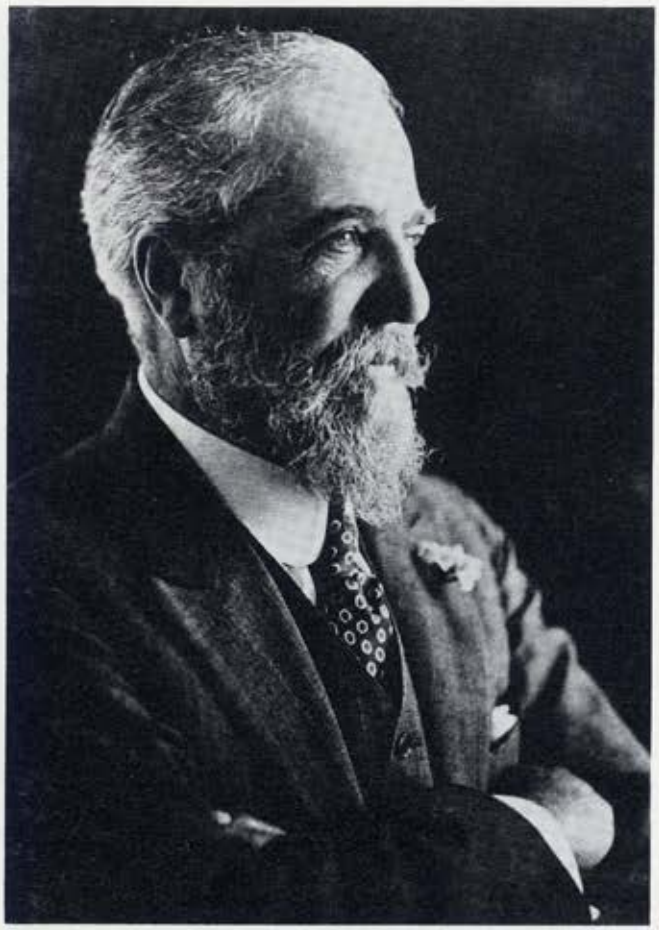

Figure 2. Louis Comfort Tiffany; from the collection of the Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art, Winter Park, Florida, through the courtesy of the Charles Hosmer Morse Foundation.

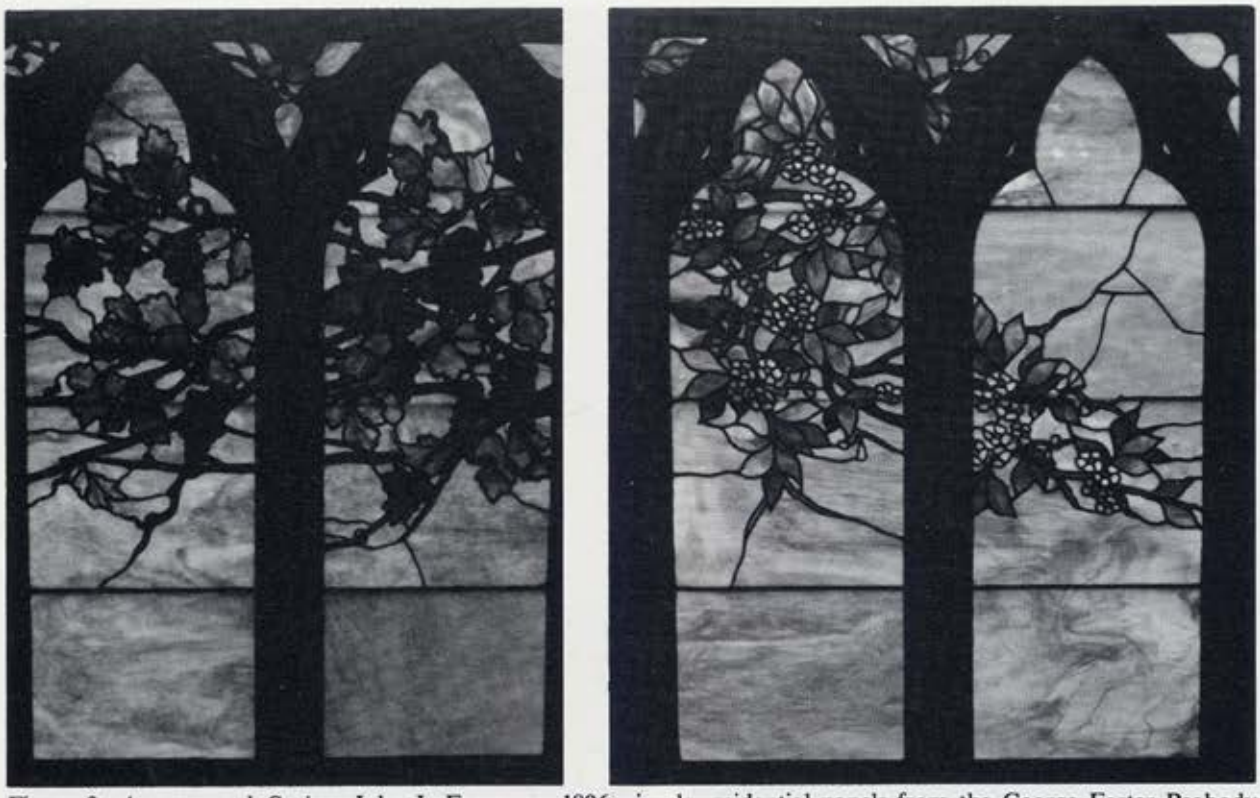

Figure 3. *Autumn* and *Spring*, John LaFarge, *ca.* 1896, simple residential panels from the George Foster Peabody House, Bolton Landing, Lake George, New York, now installed at the Hunter Museum of Art, Chattanooga, Tennessee; gift of Mrs. Arthur Hays Sulzberger.

Figure 4. Details of Figure 3 panels *Autumn* and *Spring*, John LaFarge, Hunter Museum of Art, Chattanooga, Tennessee; gift of Mrs. Arthur Hays Sulzberger.

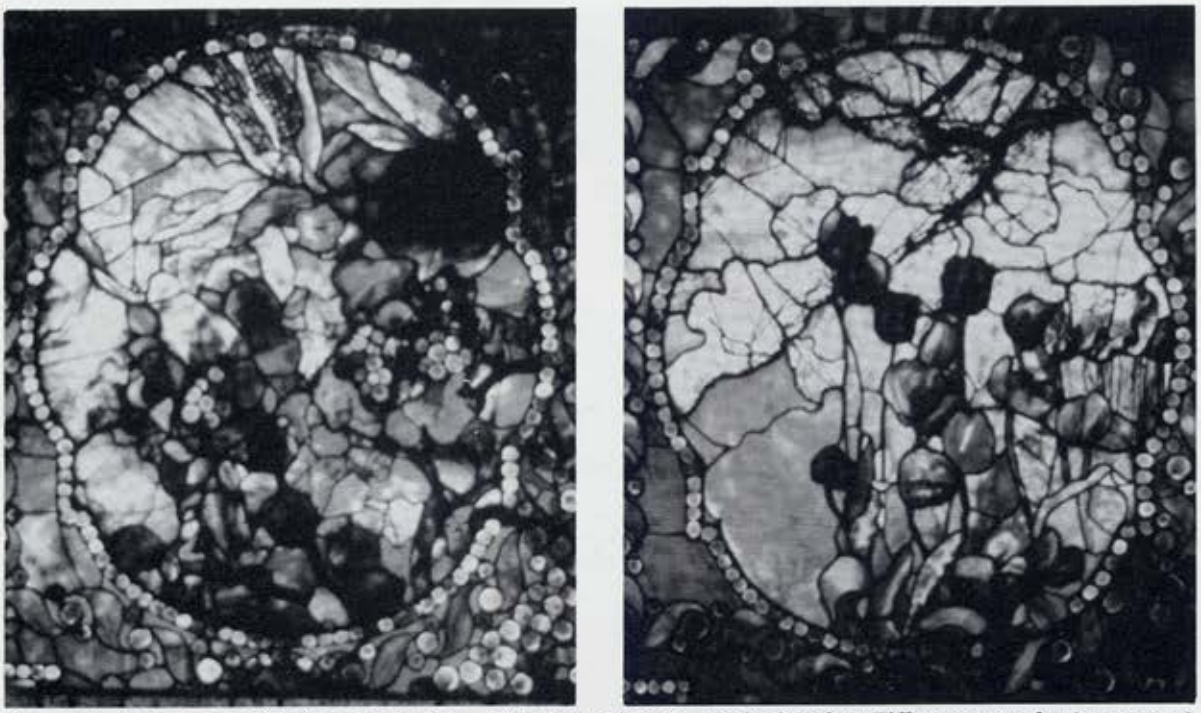

Figure 5. Autumn and Spring panels from *The Four Seasons,* Louis Comfort Tiffany; part of a large panel exhibited in Paris, 1890. From the collection of the Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art, Winter Park, Florida, through the courtesy of the Charles Hosmer Morse Foundation.

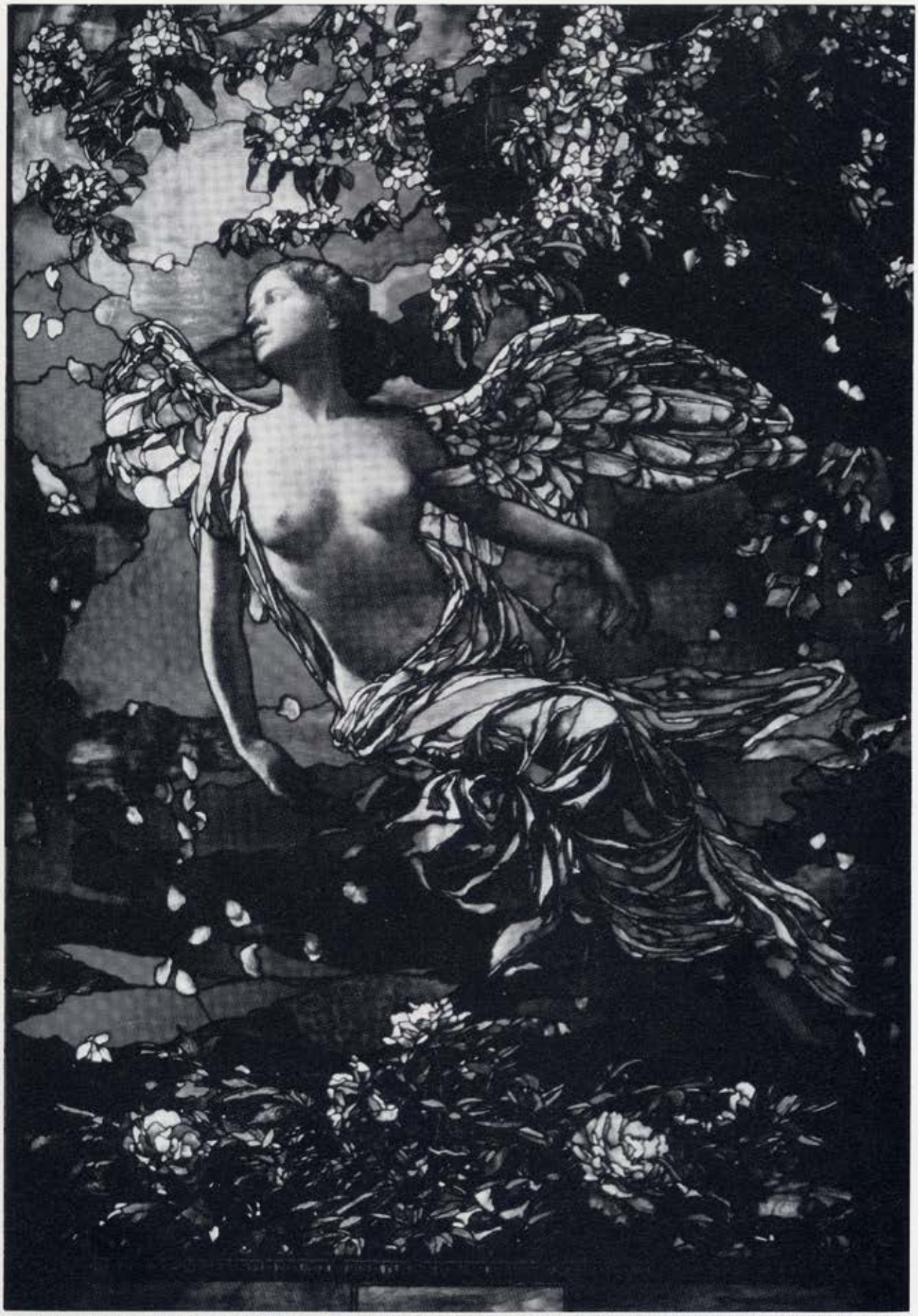

Figure 6. *Spring,* John LaFarge, 1902, opalescent glass, painted glass, and lead; made for William C. Whitney House, Westbury Long Island, New York, but never installed. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art; given by Charles S. Payson. (Cover illustration.)