



Detail of Peony
lamp (Fig. 4).

Clara Driscoll and the Tiffany Girls:

The Women of Tiffany Studios

by Margaret K. Hofer, Nina Gray, and Martin Eidelberg

While Louis C. Tiffany (1848–1933) was the artistic genius behind the creative endeavors of Tiffany Studios, the discovery of a cache of correspondence written by Clara Driscoll (1861–1944), head of the Women’s Glass Cutting Department, has revealed the substantial contributions of the women who labored anonymously to create Tiffany’s masterpieces. Hundreds of letters preserved at the Queens Historical Society in Flushing, New York, and the Kent State University Library in Ohio identify Driscoll as the designer of many of the firm’s iconic lampshades. They also bring to light the instrumental role of the so-called “Tiffany Girls,” the young women who worked under her supervision selecting and cutting glass for windows, mosaics, and lampshades (Fig. 1).

Born in 1861 in Tallmadge, Ohio, Clara Wolcott Driscoll was among the many young women who flocked to New York City in the late 1800s seeking respectable careers, particularly in the burgeoning field of industrial arts. After graduating from Cleveland’s Western Reserve School of Design for



Women in 1882, she attended the Metropolitan Museum Art School in New York City and was hired by Tiffany around 1888. In 1892 she was appointed head of the newly-formed Women's Glass Cutting Department, which eventually employed as many as thirty-five women. In addition to managing a large staff, Driscoll was responsible for creating designs for a wide range of objects and, in fact, designed most of the firm's lampshades and mosaic bases.

Little is known about Driscoll's activities during her early years at Tiffany Studios, although she may have been involved in designing windows and developing designs into full-sized cartoons for the glass cutters. When Tiffany formed the Women's Glass Cutting Department, hiring young women from art schools in response to a strike by the male-only Lead Glaziers and Glass Cutters Union, he placed

Fig. 1: "Tiffany Girls"
(Clara Driscoll at the far left) on the roof of Tiffany Studios, 1904-1905. The Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art, Winter Park, FL.
© The Charles Hosmer Morse Foundation, Inc.



Detail of
Arrowhead
lamp (Fig. 5).



Driscoll in charge. Women proved ideally suited to the work of glass selection and cutting. In 1894 Polly King, writing in the *Art Interchange*, noted: "In the field of pure ornament and pure color, for dexterity of handling and execution of detail, women are unsurpassed in this work, and really it seems rather strange that their adaptability to it was not noted long ago."¹ Initially assigned to work on windows and large-scale mosaics, the women's work evolved to encompass and eventually focus on leaded shades and smaller fancy goods, often encrusted with glass mosaic.

Driscoll and Tiffany's productive collaboration was fueled by a shared artistic vision, including a love of nature and an appreciation of beautiful materials. Glass was the material that fascinated Tiffany most, and Driscoll's designs took full advantage of the innovations in color, texture, and especially iridescence pioneered by Tiffany's glass-

makers. Although generally working independently, she flourished under the direction of "Mr. Tiffany" and regularly met with him for critiques of her ideas. Driscoll admired Tiffany's creative sensibility, and Tiffany had an abiding trust in her talent as a designer. However, like most Tiffany employees, Driscoll worked anonymously.²

Driscoll's experience in creating Tiffany's leaded-glass windows and mosaics formed a natural prelude to her designing lamps with leaded-glass shades and mosaic clad bases. Her initial forays into lamp design commenced about 1898. Leaded glass and mosaic had only occasionally been employed in some of Tiffany's earliest lighting designs; the major emphasis in the 1890s had been on fuel lamps with blown glass shades. Suddenly, in 1898, the new direction focused on lamps with leaded-glass shades. Whether or not this new emphasis was Driscoll's idea, she and her department became respon-

THIS PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT:

Fig. 2: *Dragonfly shade*, designed by Clara Driscoll in 1899, model 1462. Diam. 17 in. *Arrowhead base*, designed by Clara Driscoll in 1899, model 145. Courtesy McClelland + Rachen, New York.

Fig. 3: *Wisteria lamp*, designed by Clara Driscoll circa 1901, model 342. Diam. 18 in. The New-York Historical Society, gift of Dr. Egon Neustadt. Photography by Glenn Castellano.

NEXT PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT:

Fig. 4: *Peony shade*, designed by Clara Driscoll circa 1900-1904, model 1505. Diam.: 22 in. Base designed pre-1906, model 397. The New-York Historical Society, gift of Dr. Egon Neustadt. Photography by Glenn Castellano.

Fig. 5: *Arrowhead shade*, designed by Clara Driscoll circa 1904, model 1496. Diam: 20 in. *Cattail Pond Lily base*, designed pre-1905, model 225. The New-York Historical Society, gift of Dr. Egon Neustadt. Photography by Glenn Castellano.



sible for designing and executing almost all the leaded-glass shades with nature-inspired themes. One of the early lamps designed by Driscoll is the now famous *Dragonfly* (Fig. 2), an idea conceived in 1898.³ Although the Tiffany managers were skeptical that the expensive lamp would prove profitable, Tiffany declared it “the most interesting lamp in the place” and ordered examples to go on display in London and Paris. The lamp won a prize at the Paris⁴ World’s Fair in 1900, and mention of the prize in the *New York Daily News* in 1904 brought Driscoll a rare instance of public recognition.⁵

The now-iconic *Wisteria* lamp (Fig. 3) and *Peony* shade (Fig. 4) can also be firmly assigned to Driscoll. The *Wisteria* proved a popular model, and a steady influx of orders kept the Tiffany Girls extremely busy. In February 1902, Driscoll boasted to her family that a total of fifteen *Wisteria* shades had been ordered at \$350 each, and added: “all of which

goes down to my credit, it being my design.”⁶ She noted proudly in a letter dated March 16, 1905, that a total of 123 had been made, and the popular design continued in production for several more years. Indeed, the following year, orders for the *Wisteria* and other shades had outstripped the capacity of the women’s department, requiring some orders to be turned over to the men’s department, which was based at the factory in Corona, Queens.⁷

Clara Driscoll’s correspondence provides detailed descriptions of the lampshade design process. Though Tiffany himself encouraged her creativity, the Tiffany managers also pressured her continually to produce cost-efficient designs. Driscoll adopted an economical system in which multiple shades could be designed at one time on a single form. She described creating a plaster model of a fourteen-inch shade and dividing it into three parts in order to create three models of the

same shape: *Arrowhead*, *Geranium*, and *Daffodil*.⁸ Although these models do not seem to have been produced in great numbers, larger versions, such as the twenty-inch *Arrowhead* shade (Fig. 5), survive in quantity.

Beyond lampshades and bases, Driscoll also designed desk accessories, candlesticks, jardinières, and similar objects marketed under the general term of “fancy goods,” although she referred to them in her letters as “novelty items.” Tea screens—intended to protect the spirit burner under a teakettle—evolved from Driscoll’s work with leaded-glass windows. One tea screen (Fig. 6) incorporating apple blossoms and cobwebs is reminiscent of the Cobweb shade she designed prior to 1902. Trivets or “tea stands,” as they were called by the company, were another way of coupling the beautiful and the useful, qualities prized in that era. A richly textured Cypriote glass example features both a fish and a dragonfly (Fig. 7), two motifs that



appeared in Driscoll's early lamps. Swarming butterflies on a bronze inkstand (Fig. 8) recall her *Butterfly* lamp of 1898.

Clara Driscoll left Tiffany Studios around 1909 because of her impending marriage—company policy dictated that married women could not work there. She subsequently built a modest career painting silk scarves, but never again achieved the creative and managerial accomplishments of her years with Tiffany. By the time of her death in 1944, her remarkable achievements at Tiffany Studios were long forgotten. @

Driscoll's work is the subject of a book and exhibition, *A New Light on Tiffany: Clara Driscoll and the Tiffany Girls*, on view at the New-York Historical Society through May 28, 2007. For information call 212.873.3400, or visit www.nyhistory.org.

Margaret K. Hofer is curator of decorative arts at the New-York Historical Society; Nina Gray is an independent curator and scholar; Martin Eidelberg is Professor Emeritus of Art History at Rutgers University.

- 1 Polly King, "Women Workers in Glass at the Tiffany Studios," *The Art Interchange* 32 (October 1894): 87.
- 2 In one rare instance, a prize-winning lamp she designed was noted in a newspaper article. See "Women Who Make \$10,000 a Year or More," *New York Daily News*, April 17, 1904.
- 3 July 19, 1898, and April 6, 1899, Queens Historical Society (hereafter QHS).
- 4 April 6, 1899, QHS.
- 5 "Women Who Make \$10,000 a Year or More," *New York Daily News*, April 17, 1904.
- 6 February 12, 1902, Kent State University Library (hereafter KSU).
- 7 February 15, 1906, KSU.
- 8 October 14, 1904, KSU.

THIS PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM:

Fig. 6: Tea screen with apple blossoms and cobwebs, probably designed by Clara Driscoll pre-1906. Bronze and glass. H. 7½, W. 12½ in. Private collection. Courtesy of Lillian Nassau LLC, NY. Photography by Glenn Castellano.

Fig. 8: Butterfly inkstand, probably designed by Clara Driscoll pre-1906. Bronze and glass. H. 2½, W. 5 in. Private collection. Photograph by Glenn Castellano.

Fig. 7: Carp and dragonfly tea stand, probably designed by Clara Driscoll circa 1900–1902. Bronze and glass. H. 6¼, W. 6¼ in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Joseph H. Heil.