

## Vignette

# Preserving Louis Tiffany's Interior Design: The Ayer Mansion



**T**he vignette *Preserving Louis Tiffany's Interior Design: The Ayer Mansion* provides an opportunity to see a few of the remaining furnishings from the Ayer Mansion—one of Tiffany's most notable projects. The donation of dining room elements from members of the Ayer family and the Campaign for the Ayer Mansion, Inc. invites comparison with and study of the continuum of Tiffany's furnishings from the late nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries.

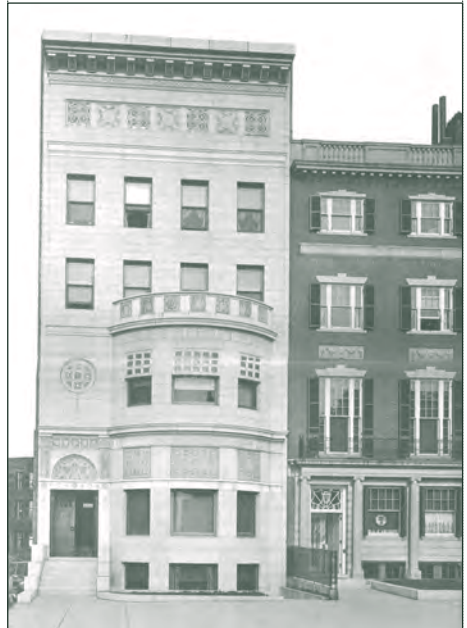
Before Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848–1933) established his reputation with glass art, he was a renowned interior designer and served as the artistic decorator for wealthy and powerful patrons. Tiffany modernized the White House for President Chester A. Arthur (1829–86) and updated the residence of author Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain, 1835–1910). Unfortunately, few of Tiffany’s house commissions survive today. Their stories, however, may be told through each surviving furnishing—what was called in Tiffany’s biography “a little missionary of art.”

## The Ayer Family

In the months leading up 1900, Frederick Ayer (1822–1918) and his second wife, Ellen Banning Ayer (1853–1918), decided to enter the new century by making their mark on Boston, relocating from Lowell, Massachusetts. An industrialist in the heyday of monopolies, Ayer amassed a substantial fortune, first investing in his

brother’s patent medicine business and later in dry goods, railroads, canals, mining, real estate, and textiles. Most notably, he acquired failing textile mills and combined them to form the American Woolen Company (1899–present).

The Ayers’ new wealth set the family apart from the established elites of Boston. Emphasizing this distinction was their modern mansion designed by Louis Tiffany. It was finished in the most current and artistic materials and stood out from the architectural traditions of “old money” Boston Brahmins.





Ellen Banning Ayer (1853–1918). Photograph courtesy of the Campaign for the Ayer Mansion, Inc.



Frederick Ayer (1822–1918). Photograph courtesy of the Campaign for the Ayer Mansion, Inc.



**Above:** The Ayer Mansion may be seen mid-block, prominent in its lightcolored façade. Courtesy of the Boston Public Library, Leslie Jones Collection.

**Left:** The Tiffany-designed facade of the Ayer Mansion in contrast with its neighboring house more typical of Boston's residential architecture. Photograph from *American Architect and Building News*, December 1901.

## The Ayer Mansion

Built between 1899 and 1902, the Ayer mansion's light-colored façade, adorned with mosaic panels and leaded-glass windows, clearly looked more to Vienna's trendy Secessionist style than to the red brick townhouses typical of Boston. The narrow entry hall featured the home's main staircase. The stair landing of marble and glass mosaic served as a *trompe l'oeil* arched theater, setting the stage for a social performance. The vaulted area doubtlessly drew upon the drama Tiffany commanded with his chapel for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition.

## The Dining Room

The dining room, one of only three rooms on the first floor, was thoroughly modern in appeal. It was placed prominently across from the front entry. Guests would traverse the entry hall, pause to climb a few steps—admiring a pair of illuminated Tiffany blown-glass vases to either side of them—before entering



See the chapel Tiffany created for Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition while at the Morse to get a sense of the theatrical architecture that inspired the Ayer Mansion.



One of a pair of blown glass vases inset into niches that illuminated the entrance to the dining room. Photograph courtesy of Greg Premru.



First floor of the Ayer mansion, looking across the entry hall to the pocket doors which led to the dining room. To the right is the *trompe l'oeil* theater landing and grand stair leading to the upper stories. © Damianos Photography

the pocket doors which led to their next visual experience.

Regrettably, no photographs survive of the Ayers' dining room as it existed, but records provide some insight into the furnishings and decoration. According to an inventory of the home conducted in 1903, the walls of the dining room were covered in "Old Blue Linen" embellished with a "Painted Mosaic Border, 10 [inches]

deep." The Ayers integrated artwork collected during their travels; the room's Orientalist decorations were densely packed and personalized the modern enameled furniture exhibited in this vignette. The clean lines and soothing tones of the tables and chairs from the dining room offer a glimpse into both private family moments and grand celebrations that once occurred.

Subtle in color and overall appearance, the tables and chairs are magnificent in their visual weight. The circular and square shapes of the tables look to the practice of Secessionist architects who emphasized geometric forms. These tabletops are anchored by the vertical columns of their legs and the spindles on the chair backs. More reminiscent of the

Ancient Egyptian use of banded columns are the light green horizontal lines encircling the legs, apron, and rails of the tables and chairs. Straddling a pronounced crest rail, a pair of carved, stylized poppies, a symbol of rebirth in Ancient Egypt, adorn the back post of each chair—an element repeated on various components throughout the Ayer house.



Around the same time as the Ayer Mansion, Joseph Milbank commissioned Tiffany for this dining room. The hanging glass lamps, chair backs, and overall form of the dining table were probably influenced by the look achieved in the Ayer Mansion's dining room. "Interieurs von L. C. Tiffany," *Dekorative Kunst*, vol. 3 (December 1901), p. 113.

## A Comparison of Tiffany Furniture—Ayer Mansion and Laurelton Hall Dining Sets

The Ayer Mansion dining room furniture resembles the dining set Tiffany designed for his country house, Laurelton Hall (1902–5), only a few years later. Both furniture sets effectively serve as a study of Tiffany’s design progression.

While the chief inspiration remained Vienna’s Secessionist style, Tiffany shifted his secondary appeal from Egyptian to Asian detail in his Laurelton Hall home. The weightiness of the Ayer Mansion dining set was lightened through gentle cabriole curves on the legs of



Laurelton Hall chair (left) compared to Ayer Mansion chair (right).  
(58-010:6 and 2022-001:2)

both the table and chairs in the Laurelton Hall dining set. The octagonal tabletops inset with molding below, and the squared-off crest rails of the chairs are more in keeping with Asian precedents.



Laurelton Hall dining room table (58-010:1).



Ayer Mansion dining room table (2022-001:11).

*Visit the Laurelton Hall dining room gallery at the Museum. The furniture sits adjacent to a mantelpiece reflecting Secessionist design, in the simple but very planar surfaces, embellished with jewel-like detail in the mosaic-clock surrounds.*

## Historic Preservation

The most challenging aspect in the research into Tiffany's work as an interior designer is that architecture—and its allied art, interior design—is created for a specific person at a specific time. Large houses designed to impress one generation become unsustainable for the next. Original design schemes and furnishings or other decorative elements rarely remain united beyond the lifetime of the original family.

While the Ayer family sold the home in 1924, it was not torn down. The mansion was retrofitted in the 1940s to serve as an office building, then an insurance company, and most recently a religious residence. Remodeling transformed the layout of the building until 1998 when a nonprofit organization, the Campaign for the Ayer Mansion, began to work with

the owners to restore some of the original character of the home. Dropped ceilings were removed, missing tiles were replaced, and by 2005 the Ayer Mansion was designated a National Historic Landmark.

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*Large houses designed to impress one generation become unsustainable for the next.*

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For over two decades the Campaign opened the home to the public for tours, lectures, and special events where Ayer family members reunited furniture with the home. Sadly, in 2021, the home was sold—ending its brief time of public admiration but providing an opportunity for the elements to migrate south to the Morse Museum as the “missionaries of art” they were destined to be.



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