

Morse Museum new Tiffany wing opens Saturday

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This view across the new courtyard installed at the Morse Museum shows the glass enclosure that holds Tiffany's Daffodil Terrace in the museum's new wing. (photo by Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda/Orlando Sentinel)

When its 12,000-square-foot wing debuts Saturday, the Morse Museum of American Art will cement its stature as the world's premier location for admiring and studying the glass creations of Louis Comfort Tiffany.

And the Winter Park museum will finally be able to showcase some of the most dramatic items from its collection of Tiffany's celebrated Long Island estate, Laurelton Hall. Several of those were displayed at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art but never had a permanent home at the Morse.

"I used to call it Tiffany Central," said Tiffany expert Arlie Sulka, an "Antiques Roadshow" appraiser based in New York. "Now it's really Tiffany Central."

Among more than 250 treasures from Laurelton Hall on view in the \$5 million expansion will be: the restored Daffodil Terrace with its delicate glass flowers; a 13.5-foot-high mosaic-decorated marble mantelpiece; and the "Tree of Life" window, the last window designed by Tiffany, on display for the first time at the Morse.



This is the view as you enter the new wing of the Morse Museum, dedicated to Louis Comfort Tiffany's Laurelton Hall. The light blue ribbon in the floor represents a stream of water -- at Laurelton Hall, Tiffany had channels of running water in the house. The "water" leads to a "fountain," as it did in the original mansion's reception hall. (photo from the Morse Museum)

"Any time you do an addition, you create a buzz," said Ford Bell, president of the American Association of Museums. "They have a great message: If you thought the Morse was good before, just wait till you see it now."

The magnitude of the expansion project, which was two years in the making, is not lost on Morse Museum director Laurence J. Ruggiero. "It's an enormous step for us," he said. And perhaps for Park Avenue as well, where more visitors at the Morse could mean more business at nearby shops and restaurants.

New perspective

Since 1995, the Morse has been located on North Park Avenue, its third home. Established in 1942 by Jeannette Genius McKean at nearby Rollins College, the Morse first moved to East Welbourne Avenue in 1977.

The significance of the new wing, Sulka said, is how it gives perspective on Tiffany the man by spotlighting his most personal creation: his home. Laurelton Hall, built between 1902 and 1905, reflected Tiffany's passions for color, light, nature and the art of Eastern and Islamic cultures. The mansion burned in 1957, and the Morse is the largest single repository of material from Laurelton Hall.

Much of that material never had a place to be permanently displayed — until now. The wing, which specifically highlights Laurelton Hall's dining room, living room and reception hall, was designed with the Morse's objects in mind.

The result is a series of galleries that evoke the spirit of Laurelton Hall without trying to replicate it — an impossible feat, given the original hall’s size. The dining room alone was 1,800 square feet, the size of an average three-bedroom home.



The display case in the center of the living-room gallery looks like Tiffany's desk. The glass windows are illuminated by special lighting and diffusers put in narrow passages behind the gallery walls. (photo from the Morse Museum)

At the Morse, the 884-square-foot dining-room gallery has the original fireplace, carpet, side table and chairs. Visitors can stroll out from the gallery onto the famed Daffodil Terrace, just as Laurelton Hall guests stepped onto the terrace from the dining room.

“We have a series of vignettes that together create a story,” said George Sexton, who designed the expansion.

Some of the new Morse galleries are devoted to the study of Tiffany and contain wall panels putting his work in the context of his life and times.

“We’ve combined the best of an art museum with the best of a history museum,” said Ruggiero.

The painstaking research done by Morse curator Jennifer Perry Thalheimer, especially her efforts compiling a chronology of Tiffany’s life and works, will be a boon to art scholars in particular, he said.

‘Cultural destination’

“People in the museum community say this is a jewel and are constantly surprised more people don’t know about the museum,” said Sexton, a lighting- and museum-design expert who has worked on exhibits for New York’s Museum of Modern Art and the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. “This will bring a focus and attention on a national level.”



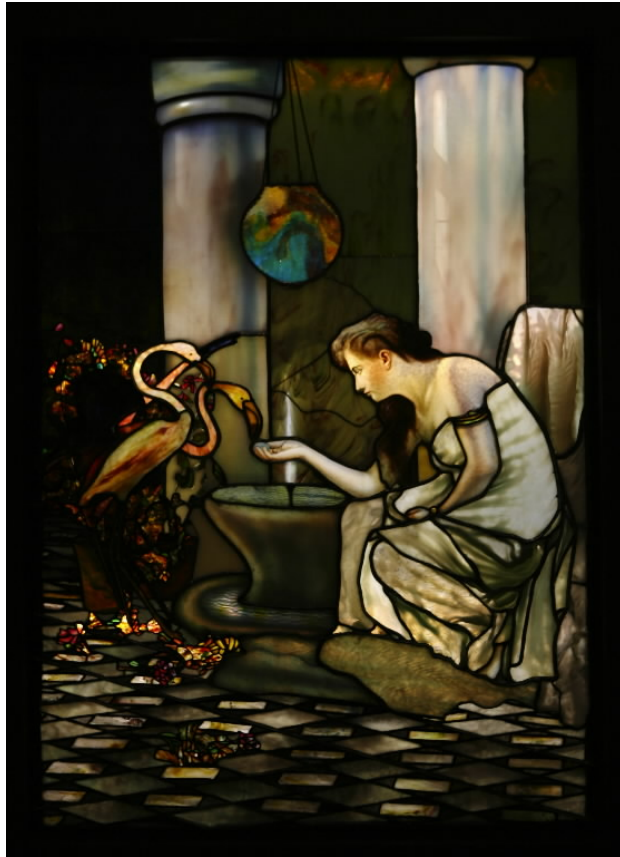
Looking through the Daffodil Terrace, Morse Museum visitors get a sneak preview of the dining-room gallery. The natural light from the large glass windows give this area a special glow. (photo from the Morse Museum)

The last major addition to the Morse — the installation of the Laurelton Hall chapel in 1999 — brought 75,000 visitors to the museum that year. Last year's attendance was 67,000.

Patrick Chapin, president of the Winter Park Chamber of Commerce, hopes more visitors will want to linger on Park Avenue.

“Being a cultural destination is a pillar of Park Avenue,” said Chapin, citing the arts offerings at Rollins College as well. A new marketing initiative for Park Avenue merchants, he said, will include the nearby arts institutions.

“The cultural component is going to be a big part of this campaign,” Chapin said. “The Morse is the cherry on top.”



Tiffany's "Feeding the Flamingoes" hangs in the Morse's living-room gallery. (photo by Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda/Orlando Sentinel)

Ruggiero is more focused on local visitors. Serving them is in keeping with the mission of Jeannette McKean and her husband, Hugh, who built the Morse's collection and established its funding, he said.

"We're fundamentally in the community trade," Ruggiero said. "We want people to come back. We want to make the collection a part of the life of the community."

Sulka, who met Hugh McKean while he was scouting for Tiffany works in New York, thinks he would be pleased.

"It's the culmination of the McKean's vision," she said. "I'm sorry they aren't around to see this. I'm sure this is what they always dreamed of."

Take a walk through the new wing here: [Morse Museum's new Tiffany wing](#)