
Koopman Rare Art

Directors Choice – Timo Koopman The Mokumé Tiffany Bowl



An Extremely Rare 19th Century Mokumé Tiffany Bowl Circa, 1880 - Koopman Rare Art Collection

This week Director's Choice focuses on an incredibly rare piece of Tiffany silver commissioned whilst the firm was under the direction of Edward Moore. This fascinating bowl uses a technique called Mokumé, which means "wood grain," and is the term used for a Japanese metalwork technique which combines and manipulates a metal laminate of different coloured metals (gold, silver, copper, and other alloys) to create the appearance of wood grain. The pattern results from punching through the metal layers and then compressing them into a single plane.

Edward Moore and this fascinating technique were also featured earlier this year in the 'Collecting Inspiration: Edward C. Moore at Tiffany & Co.' Exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

The bold colours, striations, and patterns of Mokumé are one of the singular achievements of Tiffany & Co. and the American aesthetic movement. Initially made by 17th-century Japanese sword makers, Mokumé is a lamination of layers of different coloured precious

metals that, when finished, is patinated for further effect.

Under the direction of Edward C. Moore and lead silversmith Charles Grosjean, Tiffany's silver department invented a method to laminate precious metals and pushed the colouration further than had been done before. This was achieved through an oxidizing process called "pickling", it was used to bring out the colours of the different metals.

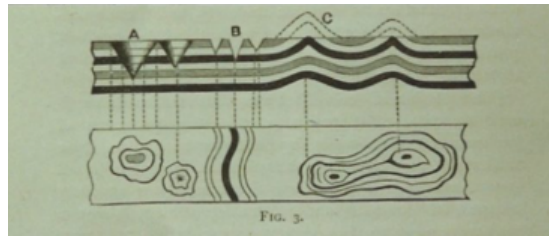


Diagram of mokumé technique of laminating and working mixed metals to produce a wood grain effect. W.Chandler Roberts-Austen, The Colours of Metals and Alloys (London: Richard Clay & Sons, 1887). E. C. Moore Library, Tiffany Archive, Parsippany, NJ.

Tiffany's artistic director Edward C. Moore (1827–1891) introduced decorative silver objects inlaid with areas of mixed coloured metals as early as 1878 and is credited for the bold use of mokumé in the 1889 Tiffany exhibit. An avid collector of Far and Near Eastern metalwork, Moore amassed over 900 reference books concerned primarily with metallurgy and design for use by Tiffany artisans.



Tiffany & Co. Mokume Clock, c. 1880

Tiffany's method used four layers of:

fine (pure) copper,

fine gold,

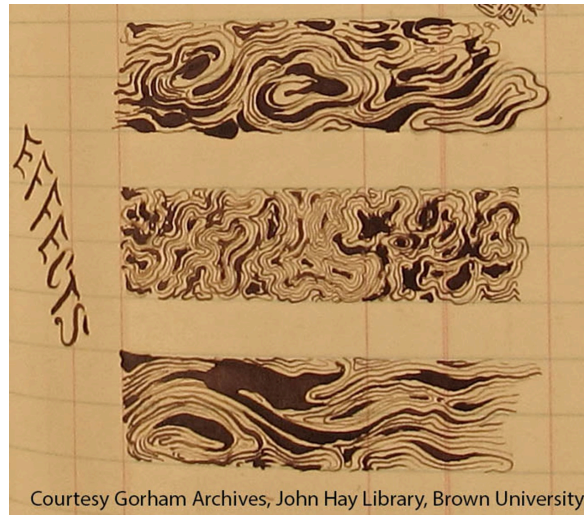
fine silver (925/1000 sterling silver was occasionally used), and

an "Alloy," which typically included gold and silver.

These layers were carefully soldered together then rolled to a thinness of 1/8 of an inch. This layer was cut into three pieces, which were soldered to each other and hammered

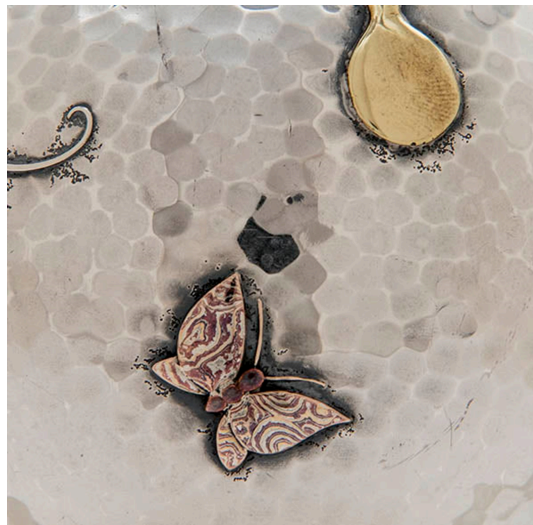
and rolled thin again. This process was repeated until the Mokumé was 36 layers thick.

Mokumé was annealed but never pickled, unless masked by protective varnish.



Tiffany & Co. Mokume patterns, courtesy Gorham Mfg. Co. Archives, John Hay Library, Brown University

After creating these micro-layers, silversmiths would cut the piece to shape and then drill, carve, or gouge the surface to create patterns. "Drilled Metal gives a succession of circles...which may be used for butterfly wings or cut with a chisel breaking up the circles produces a pleasing effect." Other motifs, such as imitation of tortoiseshell, could be created as well.



Mokume butterfly on Tiffany & Co. mixed metals tea caddy.

Lastly, the Mokume was patinated to give it the final colour. Different alloys produced different colours after the final patination. For instance, pure copper patinated red, Lake

Superior copper patinated brown to red. When the copper was alloyed with iron, it produced a reddish-brown and purple mahogany like colour. After the final bath, the Mokume work provided a "veneer" like effect.

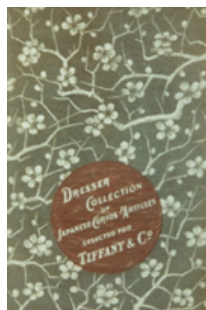
Occasionally, brass was used as one of the layers. While difficult to solder because of its alloys, it "renders a greater contrast in colour than is supposed, producing a greenish tint that is of a very delicate nature."



Tiffany & Co. Mokume detail

Tiffany's Mokume was the most difficult to create and most exotic of the mixed metals made during the aesthetic movement in the United States; it produced colours and patterns unlike anything made before or after. Today, when seen with its original shades of black, red, green, silver, and gold, it remains an extraordinary achievement of silversmithing.

In the mid- to late 1850s, Japan was opened to commercial trade by Commodore Matthew C. Perry and several treaties. Many consumers were seeing Japanese crafts for the first time at World's Fair exhibitions in 1862 (London), 1867 (Paris), and 1876 (Philadelphia). Charles L. Tiffany, master merchant and tastemaker, was impressed by the craze for the Japanese aesthetic and hired British designer and lecturer Christopher Dresser in 1877 to import Japanese goods to sell at Tiffany & Co. Dresser travelled to Japan to study the techniques of Japanese metalwork, ceramic glazes, and other objects. While in Japan, he purchased over nine thousand objects for Tiffany & Co.



Catalogue cover from Dresser Collection of Japanese Curios and Articles Selected for Tiffany & Co., 1877. Tiffany Archive, Parsippany, NJ.

Rumours that Dresser also brought back Japanese artisans to work in the Tiffany workrooms were strongly denied by Tiffany in its 1889 Blue Book, which proudly stated that Tiffany's designers and workmen were all Americans trained by the house of Tiffany.

Transmission of the Japanese Aesthetic to Tiffany & Co. The celebrated opening of Japan to the West by Commodore Matthew C. Perry in 1854 is well documented. Not only were commercial ties established, but the communication of the Japanese aesthetic had an enormous influence on Western culture. The public was first introduced to Japanese arts and crafts at the London exposition of 1862, through the exhibition of the collection of Sir Rutherford Alcock, the first British Consul to Japan. Capitalizing on the West's enthusiasm for its culture, the Japanese government exhibited at the Paris exposition of 1867, and in years following embarked on an aggressive marketing campaign to supply eager markets. By the Centennial exposition of 1876 in Philadelphia, Japanese firms had successfully

opened retail outlets in New York and in Europe. New collectors avidly acquired Japanese objects (figures 8- ha) and became students of the Japanese aesthetic. This enthusiasm was fanned by an outpouring of art books and periodicals covering all aspects of Japanese culture.



Portrait of Edward C. Moore (1827-1891). Tiffany and Company, Parsippany, N.J.

In the years following the Civil War, Tiffany's reputation had grown from its founding in 1837 as a shop for "fancy goods" to an international concern selling extravagant and highly creative jewellery, silver and miscellaneous objects to a rich and powerful clientele. Tiffany was able to satisfy every need for those whom money was no object and for whom the art of accumulation had become a passion. At the helm of the company was Charles Louis Tiffany (1812-1902), a master merchant and tastemaker who was well known for his love and appreciation of beautiful things. Acknowledged as a designer, he brilliantly helped to shape and market various trends of fashion. By 1867, Edward C. Moore was artistic director of the silver workshops, and it was his genius that guided Tiffany in the creation of the innovative silver which enriched its reputation and its coffers. Trained by his father, silversmith John C. Moore, Moore and his father worked for Tiffany exclusively beginning in 1851, building a staff of over five hundred designers and silversmiths by 1860. In 1868, in recognition of both his artistic and managerial talent Moore was made head of the silver department and an officer of the company. Moore's skills were a perfect match with Charles Tiffany's talent for marketing, and both understood the importance of winning medals at international exhibitions to ensure the continuing prosperity of the House of Tiffany. The Paris Exposition of 1867, the year of Tiffany's first participation in an international exposition, offered Moore an opportunity to study Japanese metalworking techniques firsthand, and probably inspired him to begin his own collection of Japanese arts and crafts. The depth of his appreciation of Oriental culture is documented by his collection and library of art books and periodicals which he made available to Tiffany's designers and silversmiths for use in instruction and training.



Illustration from The Jewellers' Weekly (New York: June 6, 1889). Tiffany Archive, Parsippany, NJ.

Tiffany & Co. exhibited an extraordinary mixed metal vase at the Paris 1889 Universal Exposition. Created from a layered block of 24-karat gold, silver, and copper, it was 32 inches high, priced at \$5000, and the largest known object ever made using the Japanese technique of mokumé. "The most remarkable triumph of Tiffany & Co. is perhaps their laminated vase," wrote a journalist in The Jewellers' Weekly. The press was fascinated with how it was made and wrote about the process in great detail. Now altered from a vase mounted on a block of golden ebony to a lamp base with a hole in the bottom, it remains a tour de force in metalwork.



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020 7242 7624 / info@koopman.art



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12 Dover Street
W1S 4LL, London
United Kingdom

Phone: +44 20 7242 7624

Email: info@koopman.art

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