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What's in a Name?: Representations of Tiffany & Co. in Cartoons and Comic Strips

Cristina Vignone
Tiffany & Co. Archives

Cristina Vignone is the Assistant Archivist at the Tiffany & Co. Archives, where her responsibilities include maintaining and managing the company's historical design, manufacturing, and business records. She holds a Master of Archives and Public History degree, with a concentration in Archives, from New York University and a Master of Library and Information Science degree from Long Island University's Palmer School of Library and Information Science. Cristina is Vice President of the Archivists Round Table of Metropolitan New York, Inc. and is also a member of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference (MARAC), the International Council on Archives (ICA), and the Society of American Archivists (SAA), where she is active in the Business Archives Section (BAS).

Cristina.Vignone@Tiffany.com

ABSTRACT The Tiffany & Co. Archives contain the historical design, manufacturing, and business records of Tiffany & Co., the internationally-renowned jeweler founded in New York in 1837. Among the Archives many collections are clippings books that contain cartoons and comic strips which make reference to the company, beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing to the present day. This material is largely satirical and hyperbolic, humorously connecting current events to Tiffany by using the brand's association with luxury jewelry, stylish design, standards of excellence, and commitment to quality. The cartoons and comic strips also use Tiffany to convey general ideas about the unattainability of luxury, referencing the company's lack of sales, its wealthy and famous customers, its role in romantic gift giving, and its attraction to jewel thieves. This article will share a

selection of the cartoons and comic strips, offering commentary on how these forms of illustration and other popular culture mediums communicate the above ideas regarding Tiffany & Co. and other luxury brands.

KEYWORDS: cartoons, comic strips, luxury, jewelry, popular culture

On August 27, 1957, a cartoon appeared in an American newspaper called the *Wisconsin Journal*, published in Milwaukee, that depicts a woman and a man standing before a wall of words (Figure 1). The male figure scratches his head, pondering the text featured beneath the illustration, which reads: "What's in a name? Lots of value if it's one that sticks in the public's mind" Upon closer inspection, that wall of words is really a wall of names. Included are the Moonlight Sonata (one of Beethoven's most popular compositions), Sadler's Wells Ballet (one of the world's leading dance venues located in London, England), and the Ziegfeld Follies (the popular theatrical revue productions staged on Broadway in the early part of the twentieth century).

The great majority of the "names" in the illustration are actually brand names – those names given by a maker to a company, a product, or



Figure 1

Quist, Einar V. *Milwaukee Wisconsin Journal* [Milwaukee] 1957. Photo Credit: Tiffany & Co. Archives.

range of products – and many are still recognizable to twenty-first century readers. The Ritz, on the right side of the cartoon, signifies the Ritz-Carlton hotel chain. Corvette, on the bottom left, is the shortened name of the Chevrolet Corvette sports car. Kodak, in the center, represents the Eastman Kodak Company, which dominated the photographic film industry in the twentieth century. Tiffany, of course, is the colloquial name for Tiffany & Co., the internationally-renowned jeweler founded in New York in 1837. Beneath the cartoon are two more sentences related specifically to Tiffany. The first states that “When we think of expensive jewelry, Tiffany immediately comes to mind” and the second rhetorically wonders “Who could estimate the value of that name alone?”¹

This article will explore that very question and others by analyzing the appearance of the Tiffany name in similar cartoons and comic strips. It will discuss how these two largely satirical and often hyperbolic mediums have humorously connected current events to Tiffany by using the brand's association with luxury jewelry, stylish design, standards of excellence, and commitment to quality. It will also examine how cartoons and comic strips use Tiffany to convey ideas about the unattainability of luxury referencing the company's lack of sales, its wealthy and famous customers, its role in romantic gift giving, and even its attraction to jewel thieves.

“Oh, these terrible hard times!”

Cartoons and comic strips have long-served as vehicles for communicating social commentary to the masses. The earliest forms of these mediums date to the sixteenth century but the popularity of cartoons and comic strips solidified in North America in the nineteenth century when Richard F. Outcault's *The Yellow Kid*, which was featured in the early 1890s in both Joseph Pulitzer's *The New York World* and William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*, became the first regularly-appearing newspaper comic strip.² While much scholarship explores the way in which cartoons and comic strips reflect particular ideological, social, religious, and political criticism, the two mediums are also important records for examining representations and criticism of the luxury world.

The Tiffany & Co. Archives, which contains the historical design, manufacturing, and business records of Tiffany & Co., preserves clipping books that contain cartoons and comic strips which make reference to the company, beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing to the present day. The earliest cartoon in the Archives' collection is a Frank Bellew creation. Bellew was a popular American cartoonist in the nineteenth century, working for publications that include *Frank Leslie's Illustrated*, *Harper's Monthly*, *Harper's Weekly*, and *Harper's Bazaar*.³ In one of Bellew's cartoons women with impeccable posture, wearing fashionable dresses and donning elaborate hairstyles, stride confidently into a doorway whose adjacent window identifies it as a Tiffany store (Figure 2). As they transport themselves from the bus-



Figure 2

Bellew, Frank. Unknown Source [New York] c. 1875. Photo Credit: Tiffany & Co. Archives.

ting New York street, filled with equally well-dressed men and women traveling by horse and carriage, into Tiffany, Bellew's intention for the cartoon becomes clear through a simple five-word caption: "Oh, these terrible hard times!"

Although undated, the cartoon's actual content can assist in attributing a date. Bellew's career extended through the Panics of 1857 and 1873 in the US, recessions characterized by bank failure and years-long depressions. Analysis of the fashion, hair, and hat styles on display in the cartoon suggests that Bellew likely published this cartoon at some point around 1875.⁴ At that time the Tiffany flagship was located at 15th Street and Union Square, placing it and other luxury retailers – including B. Altman, Lord & Taylor, Arnold Constable, W. & J. Sloane, Gorham Silver, and Brooks Brothers – firmly in what was known as the Ladies Mile shopping district of Manhattan.⁵ Here, Bellew literally uses the Tiffany store to communicate the detached quality of luxury: the women depicted voice sympathy for America's "terrible" economic reality but are nevertheless ready – and financially able – to forget it to shop.

This is not the only cartoon in the Archives' collection that uses Tiffany to broadly mock luxury goods consumption in difficult economic and political times. Skipping forward a century to the 1973 US oil crisis when gas prices quadrupled, *The New York Post* ran a John Pierotti cartoon in which a bewildered man stares into a Tiffany window displaying a gallon jug of gasoline alongside rings and a necklace set with oversized jewels, suggesting that Tiffany – a known purveyor of



Figure 3

Pierotti, John. *The New York Post* [New York] 1975. Photo Credit: Tiffany & Co. Archives.

high-priced jewelry – was now also selling high-priced gasoline (Figure 3). The same idea appeared nearly thirty years after in 2001 in a Jim Borgman cartoon showing a street filled with gas stations named after recognizable luxury brands: Gucci, Armani, Versace, Coach, Cartier, and Tiffany. A decade later, the notion was again repeated in a Mike Smith cartoon depicting a “Tiffany & Co. Gasoline” station, with two pumps sitting underneath chandeliers, as a couple driving by assert “Considering the prices, you knew this was inevitable.”

“Probably got flaws in ’em.”

Less tied to specific historical moments are the cartoons and comic strips saved in the Archives that use Tiffany to convey general ideas about the unattainability of luxury, particularly for criminals and opportunists. A 1928 cartoon by an unidentified artist and from an unknown source explores Tiffany’s attraction to jewel thieves. Two prisoners sit together in jail as one proclaims “Gee, how I long for just a look at Tif-

fany's jewelry display." A similarly-themed 1944 cartoon by *The New Yorker* cartoonist Chon Day features an inmate musing to his cellmate "There's not much use our making too definite plans for the future, Joe. Who knows? Tiffany's may not even be in business when we get out." A 1942 Richard Decker cartoon from *The New Yorker* depicts two shrewd garbage men outside of the Tiffany store sifting through metal cans filled with sparkling gems as one shockingly says that they "Probably got flaws in 'em" (Figure 4).

Tiffany's unaffordability is also communicated through mentions of the company's lack of sales. Alex Hallatt's *Arctic Circle* comic strip, which follows a group of animals living in a small town within the Arctic Circle as they navigate life in the twenty-first century, has Howard – an intellectual snow bunny – ask Gwen – a shopaholic penguin – why she plans on "glamping" when she responds "I'm setting up my tent in the Tiffany's store – they've got a sale on tomorrow!" In a *The Fusco Brothers* comic strip that was published on Christmas Eve in 2010, J.C. Duffy's character Gloria asks her boyfriend, Lance "Do you think Santa will be making a stop at Tiffany & Company tonight ...?" to which Lance responds, "Sorry to disappoint you, Gloria, but I spotted Santa's sleigh in the parking lot of Kmart & Company earlier," a big box depart-



Figure 4

Decker, Richard. *The New Yorker* [New York] 1942. Photo Credit: Tiffany & Co. Archives.

ment store known for its discounts, which is startlingly juxtaposed with Tiffany the luxury jeweler.

Tiffany's inaccessibility as a luxury brand is perhaps most strongly represented in cartoons and comic strips through its role in romantic gift giving. In 1956, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* ran a cartoon of a showgirl boasting to her smiling coworker that she "met a man who has to pass Tiffany's on his way to the office every day!" while another colleague grimaces behind her back with jealousy (Figure 5). A year later, in a Barbara Shermund cartoon, a nurse explains to a male visitor carrying a bouquet of red roses that the female invalid he is about to see "keeps calling for Tiffany's!" (Figure 6).

In Stan MacGovern and Jack Raymond's *Silly Milly* two women in two separate strips are fooled into believing that their pearl necklaces are from Tiffany. The first, Near-Sighted Nellie, visits "Tiffany's Fish" market where she shouts, "I want a pearl necklace!" and an oyster salesman complies, saying "Ok-lady-but y'gotta string em yourself!" In the second, Silly Milly reacts badly when she learns that oysters produce pearls at the Bronx Aquarium, shouting "and you said they came from Tiffany's!" Perhaps the most blatant example is Hilary B. Price's *Rhymes with Orange* cartoon which depicts Cupid drawing his bow while wearing a "Full Diaper" labeled "Hallmark," "Godiva,"

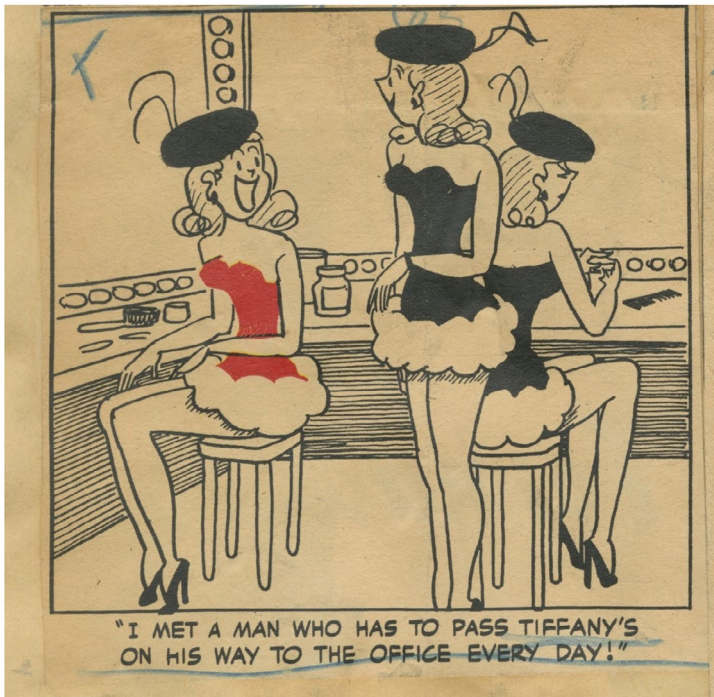


Figure 5

Unknown Artist. *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. [Cleveland] 1956. Photo Credit: Tiffany & Co. Archives.

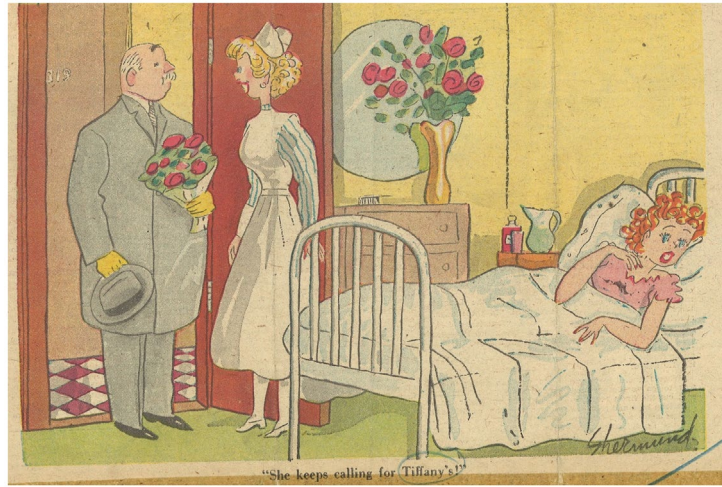


Figure 6

Shermund, Barbara. Unknown Source [Unknown Location] 1957. Photo Credit: Tiffany & Co. Archives.

“1-800-Flowers,” and “Tiffany,” a mix of brands that together form the perfect Valentine’s Day gift.

“Woolworth dimes and Tiffany dollars”

A number of cartoons in the Archives’ collection provide indications of how the general public perceives the stereotypical Tiffany customer: female (and often engaged in a heteronormative relationship), wealthy, fashionable, interested in exclusivity, and perhaps a little materialistic. The earliest cartoon of this type is an illustration with accompanying text of “Woolworth dimes and Tiffany dollars” from 1939, which compares Woolworth – a retail company founded in 1878 in Utica, New York, that pioneered the five-and-dime business model – with Tiffany (Figure 7).⁶ At the time, Woolworth had many stores, while Tiffany had just one. Woolworth did not advertise, while Tiffany did “with restraint.” Inclusive Woolworth displayed an array of its wares in its shop windows, while Tiffany practiced “marvels of restraint” indicative of its exclusivity.

This final point of difference is the subject of the illustration. Men and women in various states of casual dress crowd around a Woolworth window displaying wares sold for “Nothing over 10” cents. Alongside it is a Tiffany display window, large and empty but for a single necklace that a well-dressed couple – the man with a top hat and cane, and the woman donning a fur-trimmed coat – carefully inspect without any competition on the street.

An almost identical cartoon was published in 2011, comparing the hoards outside of an unemployment office with a single woman passing in front of Tiffany and Gucci on Fifth Avenue in New York. “Standard & Poor” are labeled on top, a play on the American financial services

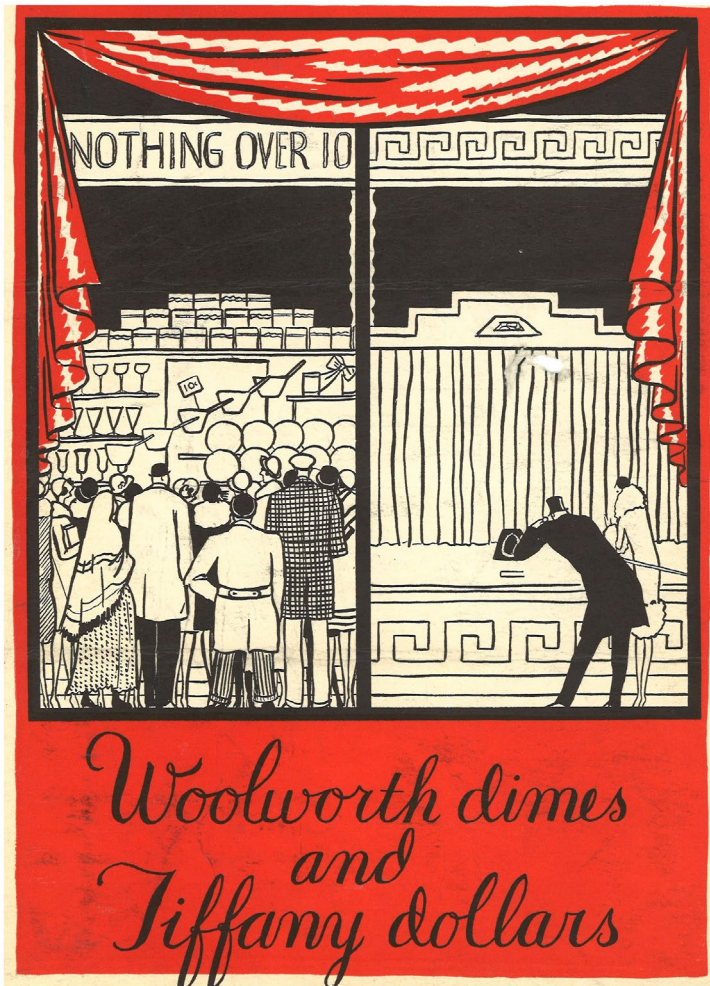


Figure 7

Unknown Artist. Unknown Source [New York] 1939. Photo Credit: Tiffany & Co. Archives.

company known as the S&P, which indexes US stocks. The cartoon is likely also an illustration of the difference between the lives of the 1 percent, a statistic referring to the wealthiest people in the US, and the 99 percent, for which joblessness was a widespread problem in 2011.

In 1942, when the US was embroiled in World War II, the *New Yorker* ran a Helen E. Hokinson cartoon that again poked fun at the stereotypical Tiffany customer (Figure 8). While browsing the store, a matronly woman knowingly assures her younger companion that “There must be something at Tiffany’s a young ensign could use on a minesweeper.” Many of Hokinson’s cartoons feature women like the character depicted here, which she classed as her “Best Girls”: the wealthy, plump women of upper middle class America who pass time with gardening, visits to beauty salons, and shopping, determined to



*"There must be something in Tiffany's a young ensign
could use on a minesweeper."*

Figure 8

Hokinson, Helen E. *The New Yorker* [New York] 1942. Photo Credit: Tiffany & Co. Archives.

remain fashionable and informed despite their age.⁷ The comedy of these characters arises from the juxtaposition of their concern for status and propriety with their naivety. By placing one of "Her Best Girls" in Tiffany, Hokinson suggests that the women who shop there were detached enough from reality to believe that a member of the armed forces would benefit from a gift bought at a luxury jeweler.

Nearly twenty years later, another cartoonist depicted two similar women in Tiffany debating the morality of a purchase of a glittering necklace: is it a sin of the flesh, or the natural desire for adornment? Their entire comportment – bejeweled, shawled in fur stoles, and donning elaborate hats – suggests they believe the latter is true and will go home with their new Tiffany purchase. This theme carried through to the later part of the twentieth century when in 1991 *New Yorker* cartoonist Stuart Leeds poked fun at the film *Breakfast at Tiffany's* by literally drawing three options available to Tiffany clientele: juice, toast, coffee, and an emerald brooch for \$78,000; eggs, toast, coffee, and a ruby necklace for \$186,000; and French toast, juice, coffee, and an eight-carat diamond ring for \$327,000. Those wealthy enough to dine at Tiffany could make use of the gold toothpick the store sold in 1956, which was mocked in a cartoon by Bill Pause of the *New York World Telegram* that illustrated an article about "polite society's" acceptance



Figure 9

Pause, Bill. *New York World Telegram* [New York] 1956. Photo Credit: Tiffany & Co. Archives.

of the trend toward using toothpicks in public if the picks were solid gold (Figure 9).

“Sigh, our supply fund was spent at Tiffany’s.”

Tiffany’s widespread recognizability also made it the embodiment of all things luxurious, expensive, and unattainable in the 2000s when corporate accounting scandals were regular media fodder in the US. A Signe Wilkinson cartoon from 2002 depicts a businessman, briefcase in hand, gazing at a Tiffany window display of “sterling cuffs” for “the man who had everything,” while Brooks Brothers advertises a “100% cotton 2002 fall fashions buttoned-down meets locked-down” striped prison uniform, and Bachrach Studios promotes “Executive photo portraits” that are really mugshots. Jack Ziegler created “Cuffwear, 2004,” a cartoon in which a man models handcuffs designed by various recognizable brands: “Cartier’s Execucuff,” “The Cuffmuff from Ronco,” “The Wal-Mart Plastic Perp,” and “The Incarcerator from Tiffany,” which glows because it is bejeweled.

This somewhat indirect use of Tiffany as a byword for luxury and a store frequented by the extremely wealthy became increasingly blatant as more scandals materialized toward the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. Television personality Martha Stewart’s convic-

tion and home imprisonment in 2005 was translated into a cartoon showing her shopping at a Tiffany store and pointing to her ankle as a salesman tells her “Sorry Ms. Stewart, but we don’t really do an electronic bracelet.” When American financier Bernie Madoff admitted to a massive Ponzi scheme that defrauded investors of millions of dollars and was sentenced to 150 years in prison, cartoonist Signe Wilkinson drew Madoff and his wife shopping for handcuffs labeled cufflinks at Tiffany. As Madoff admires a pair on his wrist, the salesman inquires “And a pair for Mrs. Madoff?”

The greatest number of cartoons and comic strips in the Archives’ collection pertain to American politician Newt Gingrich, who served as the 50th Speaker of the United States House of Representatives from 1995 to 1999 and in 2012 was a candidate for the Republican Party presidential nomination. It was while Gingrich was campaigning for the position that Politico, an American political-journalism company, reported on he and his wife’s \$500,000 debt to Tiffany. His spending excess was in direct opposition to his fiscal conservatism and therefore became the perfect content for cartoonists.

A Jeff Danziger cartoon suggests most campaign staffers resented Gingrich’s spending in a cartoon in which he returns to his office where “Drop Dead” and “Also Tiffany Called” are written on a chalkboard of a ransacked office. Mike Luckovich depicted Gingrich wearing “Not Mitt” earrings – a reference to opponent Mitt Romney, who would go on to become the Republican Party’s nominee for President of the United States in the 2012 election – while saying “They’re from Tiffany’s ...” in a cartoon that followed the tenth Republican debate on November 12, 2011.

A cartoon a few days later depicted Gingrich at an airport carousel, posing the idea that “the guy with the most baggage wins” as he reaches for a suitcase labeled “Tiffany bill.” His widely-criticized proposal to create a permanent colony on the moon was fodder for another cartoon in which a forlorn astronaut at the “President Gingrich Moon Colony” says to his colleague “Sigh, our supply fund was spent at Tiffany’s.” Another reference to the colony shows Gingrich himself on the moon, with a Tiffany shopping bag among his few belongings.

Breakfast at Tiffany’s, “Diamonds Are A Girl’s Best Friend,” and Tiffany Case

Equations of Tiffany with luxury, stylish design, standards of excellence, and commitment to quality do not begin or end with the cartoons and comic strips examined here. Similar references to Tiffany abound in other popular culture mediums as well, including film, television, music, and literature, all of which have been documented in the Archives’ collection. Much like with the cartoons and comic strips, commonalities arise in analysis of the references to Tiffany in these mediums.

Mentions of Tiffany in movies and television shows broadly communicate to viewers that it is an ultimate jewelry shopping destination, particularly for special gifts given to loved ones and for engagement

rings. Tiffany's Blue Box has appeared as a prop in many films and television shows and both mediums have also satirized Tiffany, parodying it together with other luxury brands. Tiffany's New York store on Fifth Avenue has also featured prominently in movies and television shows, perhaps most notably in the 1961 film *Breakfast at Tiffany's* starring Audrey Hepburn.

Artists across various musical genres, from the 1860s through to the present day, lyrically reference Tiffany as the only reputable place to purchase jewelry or use it as a synonym or adjective for luxury, style, love, and excellence. In the nineteenth and early-twentieth century in particular, artists incorporated Tiffany into lyrics about love, engagements, and gift giving. By the mid-to-late-twentieth century, lyrical mentions of Tiffany most often occurred in the broader context of materialistic purchases, including those from other luxury brands. The American Film Institute ranked Marilyn Monroe's rendition of "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend" from the 1953 film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, with its line referencing Tiffany, as the twelfth most important film song of all time and at least two songs that mention Tiffany – The Eagles' *Hotel California* and Selena Gomez's *Good For You* – appeared on Billboard's Hot 100 list.

References to Tiffany appear frequently in all forms of literature as well, including poems, fiction, satirical and moralizing novels, short stories, and mysteries. In nineteenth-century literature the most popular Tiffany subject was its diamond jewelry – rings, engagement rings, pins, and earrings – but references to the experience of luxury and excellent customer service when shopping at the New York store are also common. In twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature, Tiffany is most often represented as a gift emporium for engagements, weddings, baby showers, and other special occasions. Two books by Edith Wharton – *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* – feature references to Tiffany trinkets and stationery. F. Scott Fitzgerald's second novel *The Beautiful and Damned* references a Tiffany tea set and Ian Fleming's *Diamonds Are Forever*, the fourth novel of his James Bond series, features a character – Tiffany Case – named after Tiffany.

More research can be done to broaden this examination of popular culture references to Tiffany. Are there references to Tiffany in other mediums, including video games, online media, theater, and radio? How, if at all, is Tiffany represented in non-American cartoons, comic strips, television shows, films, literature, and music? Do those references appear more frequently in certain countries than others, or at certain time periods? What other brands are represented, and do they appear as often as Tiffany?

The Archives' collection and storage of all of these references, from the company's inception through to the present day, reveals how the public perceives Tiffany as a brand and luxury goods in general. When analyzed over time, they suggest both continuity and changes in that perception as well as fluctuations in the brand's relevancy, all of which is directly related to the political, economic, and social context of the time in which the references were made. New references to Tiffany are

created – and collected by the Archives – every day, helping both the brand and researchers of luxury understand how popular culture mediums inculcate distinct notions about Tiffany and luxury in the masses.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. The colored pencil underlining the word “Tiffany” in this cartoon appears in other cartoons represented here and throughout the Archives’ clipping books. These marks are original to the materials and were likely made by former Tiffany employees as the books were assembled to draw attention to references to the company in the collection’s numerous clippings.
2. In her article “Why Comic Studies?” Angela Ndalians argues that comics – which are older than film, television, and video games – deserve serious study and analysis as a medium. The genesis of peer-reviewed journals (*Comics Journal*, *International Journal of Comic Art*, *European Comic Art*, *Mechademia: an Annual Forum for Anime, Manga and the Fan Arts*, and *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*) as well as the proliferation of comics-related programs at universities (under the disciplines of Literature, Art History, Cinema Studies, Media Studies, History, and Political Science) in recent years has legitimized the field of Comic Studies.
3. According to an artist profile in *The Art Union* (“Caricature in America,” p. 85), Bellew was considered the oldest comic artist of New York, “an indefatigable worker, fecund of ideas, and ready in their execution.”
4. My thanks to April Calahan, Special Collections Associate and Curator of Manuscripts Collections at the Gladys Marcus Library Special Collections & College Archives at the Fashion Institute of Technology, for her analysis of the fashion on display in this cartoon and her assistance with supplying a date for it.
5. Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel, *The Landmarks of New York*, p. 796.
6. *Ibid*, 569.
7. Richard Merkin, “Helen Hokinson,” p. 85.

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