

Salisbury House & Gardens

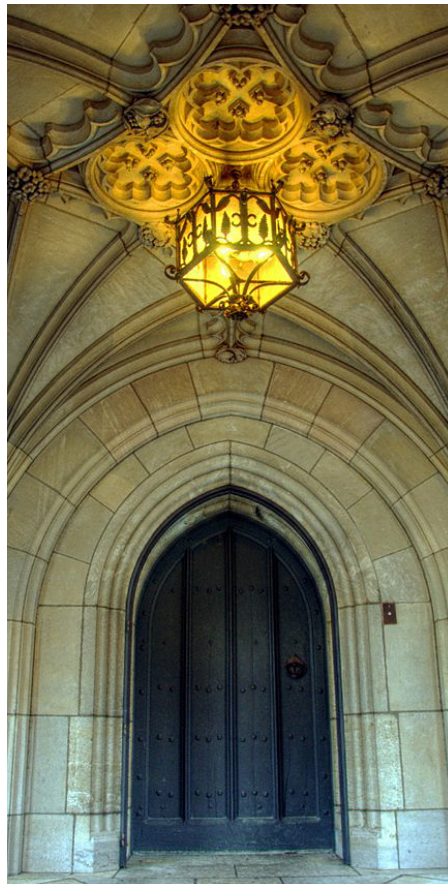
Des Moines, Iowa

Humanities Iowa: *You're new to Salisbury House & Gardens, so tell us a little bit about how you ended up as Executive Director of the Salisbury House Foundation.*

J. Eric Smith: I'm a recent transplant to Des Moines, coming here as a "trailing spouse" when my wife took a position that moved us closer to her home state of Minnesota. I'm originally from the Low Country of South Carolina, but I've spent the past 18 years in Upstate New York. I've got about 27 years worth of experience in the government, nonprofit, and higher education sectors, most recently at the University at Albany, so I'm grateful that the Salisbury House Foundation Board of Directors saw my skill set as relevant to its needs. I have also been a freelance writer for years, for a variety of print outlets, and have had a strong online presence since I put my first website up in 1993, and started my first blog in 2000. I'm still running a few websites on the side, including Indie Moines (indiemoines.com), which is mostly about our lives in Des Moines and around Iowa.

HI: *So how do you like Des Moines and Iowa so far?*

JES: I love them both. As state capitals go, Des Moines is a bit livelier than Albany was, and my wife, daughter and I have had a great time exploring the city's cultural attractions, while also trying to eat our way through the *Register's* 100 Best Restaurants list. During the first couple of months that I was here, I took advantage of some down-time and the amazingly mild winter to follow in the footsteps of some of our elected officials and caucus candidates by visiting all 99 of Iowa's counties. I finished the complete set with Benton County in early March, and just adored getting to see



the state and so many of its cities and towns that way.

HI: *What should folks know about Salisbury House & Gardens?*

JES: Salisbury House is an amazing historic property located in the middle of a residential neighborhood in Des Moines. Carl Weeks—who built the house in the 1920s with his wife, Edith—was a chemist and pharmacist who created an international cosmetics empire based in Iowa. Carl was also instrumental in the establishment of the Pharmacy School at Drake University, and Weeks Hall there is named in his honor. He's a very important figure in the business and cultural history of Des Moines.

Carl and Edith modeled their home after King's House in Salisbury, England, and it was something of a pioneering recycling and reclamation project, as it was built with many features from abandoned or demolished homes, roads, barns, shipping crates, out-buildings and who knows what else. The Weekses also were diligent in preserving the native oaks on their grounds, and our property constitutes one of the largest parcels of mature woodlands within the City of Des Moines today.

Carl and Edith were also avid and skilled collectors of books, art, historic documents, musical instruments, and decorative items, and most of what they amassed during their 30-odd years in the house remains here. It's pretty amazing how well the whole estate holds together to this day, and I feel that's because Carl and Edith really embraced culture over ostentation, and creativity over opulence for its own sake.

HI: *What's your favorite thing about Salisbury House?*

JES: As powerful as the architecture and the art are here, as a writer, I'm really drawn to our library most strongly. I've seen and held things here that are truly world-class and important, and I would like to see us tell this part of our story more widely.

The books and documents that Carl and Edith collected provide a rich repository for the study of world culture, and I think the library demonstrates their commitment to promoting and empowering a literate, engaged citizenry. Just listing names off the top of my head, we have signed books and documents by the likes of Abraham Lincoln, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Charles Dickens, Queen Elizabeth I, King Ferdinand of Aragon, Joseph Smith, D.H. Lawrence and many others of similar stature.

Carl and Edith also collected holy books from a wide range of spiritual traditions. We have an original edition of the *Book of Mormon*, numerous Bibles, including a folio from an original Gutenberg pressing, an 18th Century *Qu'ran*, hand printed and two illuminated pre-printing-press Catholic Books of Hours, among others. Carl was fascinated with Native American culture in both North and South America, and we have many works about the histories, traditions and beliefs of America's indigenous people, including an 1844 edition of George Catlin's *Catlin's North American Indian Portfolio*.

Our James Joyce materials resonate most deeply with me, since I love his creative vision and the magic of his language, inscrutable as it may be. We have reached out to several Joyce scholars,



and they share my sense that we have something special here. We're planning a Bloomsday event in June 2013, to celebrate Leopold Bloom's passage through Dublin on June 16, 1904, which Joyce documented in epic form in his novel, *Ulysses*.

We actually have a limited edition of *Ulysses* with illustrations by Henri Matisse, in fact, who couldn't be bothered to read Joyce's text, but illustrated it instead with engravings inspired by Homer's *Odyssey*. It makes Leopold Bloom's epic day all

ABOVE: from *Catlin's North American Indian Portfolio: Buffalo Hunt, under the white wolf skin and Buffalo Hunt, Chase*—chromolithographs by George Catlin, 1844.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Salisbury House entrance and a portrait of the Weeks family, ca. 1921.

the more magical to see it illustrated with images from Greek mythology!

HI: *How about the art collection?*

JES: We have works from a variety of eras and traditions—from Asia, Oceania, Europe, the Americas and Africa—so it's always interesting to see how these pieces share space together. In our Great Hall, just to cite one room's worth of examples, we have a Brussels Brabant tapestry dating from the mid-16th century hanging on our west wall, directly across from a huge portrait of two young boys, *The Brothers Labochere*, painted by Sir Thomas Lawrence in 1809. To the north, we have a striking Lawrence Alma-Tadema portrait called *The Chamberlain of Sisostris* from his Egyptian period, which hangs above a bronze bust of Rodin—not by Rodin—which was cast by Antoine Bourdelle. If you look to the right into the Common Room while standing in front of the Alma-Tadema, you meet the baleful gaze of Cardinal Rivarola, painted by Anthony Van Dyck, court painter of England's Charles the First. On the south wall are two large Italian alabaster urns from the late 1700s, which Carl had electrified in the 1920s, so they glow from within when they are lit. All of these items sit beneath an oak-beamed ceiling that was salvaged from the 16th Century White Hart Inn in Salisbury, where Shakespeare is believed to have watched his own plays being performed.

While you can't see it there today, Carl and Edith once had an important 20th Century work in the Great Hall called *Birth of Venus* which was modernist Joseph Stella's reinterpretation of Botticelli's famed painting for the cosmetics and nylons age. They kept the florid, sensual



Venus behind a silk curtain, for maximum dramatic impact when it was unveiled for guests. We still own the painting, along with another Stella called *The Apotheosis of the Rose*, which hangs in the Breakfast Room, where Edith's influence was very strong, we believe. *Venus* has been on tour and is currently in Cleveland. She will be coming home this winter and will be back on display in February. We plan to restore her to her place of glory.

TOP LEFT: *The Brothers Labochere* by Sir Thomas Lawrence, 1809.

TOP RIGHT: *Cardinal Rivarola* by Anthony Van Dyck, 1624.

BOTTOM: Salisbury House Common Room.

HI: *How did the House and its collections come to be a public attraction?*

JES: In the 1930s, Carl and Edith fell upon difficult financial times, and brokered an agreement with Drake University to donate the House and grounds to the college to support its art programs. Carl and Edith kept all of the house's contents and lived in the house as tenants until the early 1950s, when Edith's health began to fail, and maintenance costs on the house became prohibitive. At that point, Drake and the Weekses jointly sold the house and all of its collections to the Iowa State Education Association, who opened portions of the house to the public, while using other portions for their offices.

ISEA held the house until 1998, when the Salisbury House Foundation acquired it for the express purpose of restoring it and operating it as a museum. So we're in an interesting position today, as we've been a public attraction for over 50 years, even though we're actually a very young museum. We're working hard to provide an increased degree of academic and curatorial rigor in our research here, to correct or confirm some of the apocryphal stories that have evolved about the house and its builders over the past half-century.

It's exciting work, and I'm glad to have the chance to do my small part to turn Salisbury House into the world-class museum that I know it can and should be.



ABOVE: *Birth of Venus*, Joseph Stella, 1922.