

ART &amp; DESIGN

# The David Parr House's Hidden Gem in Cambridge, England

Antiques

By EVE M. KAHN    APRIL 7, 2016

The David Parr House in Britain is a sort of time capsule: a tiny brick 19th-century rowhouse turned museum that has scarcely changed in the nine decades since its best-known owner died. A decorative painter who specialized in Gothic Revival designs, Mr. Parr started experimenting with artwork in his home in 1887. For 40 years, he embellished the walls with vines, flowers, simulations of wood grain and snippets of Victorian verse.

Starting on April 18, small groups of visitors (by appointment only) will be allowed into the two-story structure on the outskirts of the Cambridge University campus. A few hundred people have already visited the house, which can accommodate only a half-dozen people at a time. This fall it will most likely close for a few years for conservation and stabilization. (The public will be allowed in occasionally to observe conservators at work.)

Mr. Parr made a living as an artist for F. R. Leach & Sons, which decorated churches and stately homes based on designs by luminaries like William Morris and the architect George Bodley. In 2013, his descendants sold the house to a nonprofit group.

The museum's curator, Tamsin Wimhurst, said she has not yet fathomed why Mr. Parr painted so determinedly as a hobby while working all day on sites as elite as **St. James's Palace** in London. A son of a Cambridge laborer, he was orphaned at age 7 and apprenticed to the Leaches as a teenager. Mr. Parr and his wife, Mary Jane, raised three children in the rowhouse, and he recorded each mural project in a neat notebook.

After his death in 1927, a granddaughter, Elsie Palmer, moved into the house to care for Mrs. Parr. Mrs. Palmer and her husband, Alfred, raised two daughters amid Mr. Parr's painted aphorisms, reminding them to "seize the moments as they fly" and "know to live and learn to die." The family even preserved the ghostly outlines of Mr. Parr's unfinished wall designs, but Mrs. Palmer did brighten one hallway by covering foliage murals with cream-colored paint.

A common reaction among visitors, Ms. Wimhurst said, is a feeling of "real emotional attachment" to Mr. Parr's work and Mrs. Palmer's stewardship.

Elsewhere, related artifacts have turned up. Members of the Leach family have been scouring their diaries and letters, looking for mentions of Mr. Parr. When the Leach studio was demolished, Ms. Wimhurst salvaged some tools, watercolors, tiles and oak paneling.

The story of Mr. Parr's rowhouse, she said, "is actually just getting bigger and bigger."

## Tiffany Lamps Show

The first collectors of glass works by Louis Comfort Tiffany, starting in the 1930s, invested in museum displays at a time when those iridescent products were unfashionable and routinely left in trash heaps. Institutions are learning more about the maverick collectors.

On Sunday, the Queens Museum will open the exhibition "A Passion for Tiffany Lamps," organized by the Neustadt, a nonprofit institution in Long Island City created by the Austrian-born collector Egon Neustadt. Soon after Tiffany's death in 1933, Dr. Neustadt, a Manhattan orthodontist and real estate

developer, began amassing lamps, chandeliers and windows as well as glass sheets and spheres left on the Tiffany factory grounds in Corona, Queens.

Dr. Neustadt had studied medicine in Austria, but in 1925, after moving to New York, he first worked in a bank and as a shoe salesman. By the 1930s, he was publishing scholarly articles about orthodontics, and was married to his office nurse, Hildegard Steininger. The couple filled their Manhattan apartment and Connecticut house with Tiffany objects. He classified them by pattern and shape, using terms like “transition to flowers” and “irregular upper and lower borders.” Lindsay Parrott, director of the Neustadt, said his approach reflects “his neat and tidy medical mind.”

He also wrote poetry; his ode to Hildegard’s taste for Tiffany works is titled “The Choicest Lamp.” After her death in 1961, at age 50, he had her portrait on glass incorporated into a Tiffany window.

Ms. Parrott is working on a book about the Neustadts. Little is known about Hildegard’s background except that she attended convent schools and briefly worked as a nanny. Dr. Neustadt’s family was Jewish; his relatives fled Austria to avoid Nazi persecution.

The Neustadts’ competitors in collecting Tiffany glass works were Hugh and Jeannette McKean, who founded the Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art in Winter Park, Fla. In the 1930s, Mr. McKean took art classes at a school on Tiffany’s property on Long Island, called Laurelton Hall. In the 1950s, when the estate burned down, the McKeans salvaged chunks from the ruins and reassembled them in Florida. Current shows at the Morse Museum document Tiffany glass that McKean family members received as wedding presents and Mr. McKean’s original lively labels for the galleries. He praised one vibrant floral window that causes “some bounce in your step” and provides an antidote to contemporary art that “reflects a conviction that life is a shambles.”

Arlie Sulka, the owner of the Lillian Nassau gallery in Manhattan, a Tiffany specialist that opened in 1945, said she has kept her records of Neustadt and McKean acquisitions, as well as sales to members of the Beatles, the Beach Boys and Led Zeppelin.

## Wallpaper Archive

The archives of wallpaper and fabric designers can be fragile; manufacturers and designers often pay little attention to old renderings, which historians appreciate as documentation of popular tastes. Boxes of sketches and swatches from Joann Nelsen, a textile and wall coverings designer on Staten Island, who died in 2013 at age 76, have been rescued as a donation to the library of the New York School of Interior Design.

Ms. Nelsen's friends retrieved them from her home, an 18th-century fieldstone farmhouse that she bequeathed to the Preservation League of Staten Island. (It has been sold to benefit that nonprofit group.) She designed bed linens, upholstery and wallpaper for companies including Schumacher and First Editions, patterning them with bouquets, acrobats and Constructivist and Navajo zigzag designs. Nora Reilly, the archivist at the New York School of Interior Design, described the work as "really joyful."

A version of this article appears in print on April 8, 2016, on Page C26 of the New York edition with the headline: This Old House Hides an Artistic Treasure.

—4

© ARTICLES REMAINING

[Subscriber login](#)