

STYLE & TRAVEL



Nina Smiley admires the vessels bought more than 100 years ago by her husband's great-great-uncle.

OBJECT OF DESIRE | Japanese decorative vases

Great-Uncle Albert's Asian Art

There's no shortage of history at Mohonk Mountain House, a 259-room hilltop resort in New York's Hudson Valley that has been owned by the same family—the Smileys—since 1869. Among the past guests: John D. Rockefeller and William Howard Taft.

Many of the owners' most treasured artifacts—original Victorian furnishings, century-old guest ledgers, massive crystals—are tucked into what is known as the “family parlor,” a room the Smileys use for important meetings and family gatherings and that is mostly off-limits to hotel guests.

Nina Smiley, Mohonk's director of marketing and of “mindfulness programs,” whose wedding took place in the parlor 40 years ago, particularly cherishes a set of 21 colorful Japanese vases. Mohonk founder Albert Smiley bought the vases in 1901 at the Pan-American Exposition, a World's Fair held in Buffalo, New York. Family lore says that Mr. Smiley, enamored with Asian art, bought the entire contents of the Japan pavilion, which also included an ornate tea

set that now sits on a wooden cart in the parlor.

Mr. Smiley wasn't a wealthy man. He was a Quaker school master when he paid \$28,000, his entire life savings plus hefty loans, to purchase 280 acres to build Mohonk. His affection for Asian art was part of an overall international outlook. From 1895 to 1917, Mr. Smiley convened an annual Conference on International Arbitration to encourage the peaceful resolution of international disputes. Also hanging in the parlor is a Bahá'í prayer rug given to Mr. Smiley in 1912 by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, then the leader of the faith, and a conference participant.

One of the vases is as tall as Ms. Smiley. Her favorite is bright blue and adorned with flying birds.

“This one captures the timelessness, the graciousness of the birds and flowers,” she says. “There's a sense of meditative presence.” Indeed, Ms. Smiley, a meditation practitioner since the 1980s, sometimes holds private meditation sessions in the family parlor. She also offers a recorded guided meditation for guests and

employees that can be accessed by any house phone in the resort.

Ms. Smiley, 62 years old, is married to Mohonk's current president and chief executive Bert Smiley, a fourth-generation owner named after the founder, who was his great-great-uncle. Nina and Bert Smiley, who both have Ph.D.s from Princeton University (she in psychology, he in economics), were lured back to the family business in 1990.

While the family parlor remains a bit of a time capsule, the rest of the hotel has slowly moved into the modern era. A spa and the resort's first bar opened in 2005. (For decades, dancing and alcohol were forbidden, reflecting the values of founder Albert Smiley and his twin brother Alfred.) Guest rooms got air conditioning in 2006. While there is now Wi-Fi throughout the property, most guest rooms still don't have television sets.

Warm-weather activities revolve around hiking, horseback riding and swimming in the lake—just as they did more than a century ago.

—Andrea Petersen



Photos of Albert Smiley, founder of New York's Mohonk Mountain House, and his wife Eliza, left. One of the vases he bought from the Japan pavilion at the 1901 Pan-American Exposition, right.