Mrs. James Ward Thorne, American (1882–1966)

**Japanese Interior, Traditional, c. 1937**

Miniature room, mixed media
Gift of Mrs. James Ward Thorne, 1962.456

This work of art may be better examined by looking at it in slide form rather than the original. The object is a miniature room measuring only about 23 inches in length and 10 inches in height. It is built to the tiny scale of one inch for every foot. As small as it is, it accurately reproduces parts of a traditional Japanese house. It is one of 68 miniature rooms in the Art Institute designed between 1920 and 1940 by a Chicagoan named Mrs. James Ward Thorne.

Traditional Japanese architecture uses wooden panels and paper shutters in the construction of the exterior of the home. The interior employs fixed or sliding wooden screens covered with rice paper to act as flexible room dividers. This miniature includes a typical main room, or zashiki, and offers a view of an adjoining room on the left that would be used by the mistress of the house.

The sliding doors, called shoji, let light in and open onto a garden. Typically designed to be admired from indoors, the landscaping is considered part of the decoration of the interior room. The screens leading to the room on the left, decorated with flowers and scenes of nature, integrate the setting inside with the beauty outdoors.

The two recessed areas in the back are essential parts of the room’s design. The alcove on the left features artistically placed wall cabinets and shelves designed to hold art objects. The right alcove is made to display a single work of art like a scroll or a vase. New objects are continually chosen from the family’s fireproof storeroom to be brought
out and admired. Tatami mats made from straw always cover the floor. Each one is about three by six feet and is bound with cotton. The dimensions of a traditional Japanese room are measured by the number of tatami mats that will fit in the space.

The room to the left includes objects that the lady of the house would use to cleanse and dress herself. Kimonos are draped over a stand especially designed for that purpose. A gold dressing screen featuring delicate nature scenes is also included, located behind a mirror (not visible in this slide) and a low table. Subjects for screens often center around the beauty of Japan’s landscape and might feature paintings of mountains, rivers, and waterfalls.

The zashiki may seem bare and empty. Actually, this miniature room is considered cluttered by Japanese standards. The absence of furniture except for a single low table and a writing desk is typical. A lacquered box resting on top of the desk probably would contain brushes and ink for painting and calligraphy. If a certain piece of furniture was needed, like bedding (consisting of quilts that could be rolled up), it would be brought out, used, and then returned to storage.

The Japanese emphasis on simplicity and harmony extends to the country’s literature, artwork, and even cuisine. This exquisite miniature serves as a permanent reminder of the striking beauty to be found in spare Japanese architecture and interior design.
CLASSROOM SUGGESTIONS

[1] Each family creates a different lifestyle, with relationships, customs, and a home that are unique. Show students pictures of homes from around the world—from apartment complexes and stone cottages to homes on stilts and teepees. Discuss the factors that might determine the structure of a house: economics, weather, available materials, needs/use, etc. Have students consider the homes and other buildings in their neighborhood in light of the area’s weather, resources, and needs.

[2] Have students think about their family’s use of their home. What rooms are shared by everyone? What rooms are used by only one or a few people? If a newcomer to town entered their homes, what could this person learn about the family’s lifestyle and “personality?” If this newcomer entered the student’s bedroom, what could he/she learn about that person? How?

[3] Have students compare and contrast the contents of their homes versus that of this traditional Japanese interior. Are some furnishings or objects, despite stylistic differences, used in both cultures? Are some unique to only one of the cultures?

[4] Have students create their own miniature rooms using a shoe box, pictures from magazines, construction paper, fabric scraps, etc. Students must make decisions regarding floor and wall coverings, furnishings, and decorations. To supplement this activity, students can create written dramas about family events or incidents that take place within these miniature rooms.