Shaker Living Room
(c. 1800)
Mrs. James Ward Thorne Miniature Room; 9 x 21 3/4 x 24 5/8
1942.498

The utopian sect commonly called Shakers, because of the physical gyrations its members engaged in as part of their worship, was founded in England by Quaker Ann Lee. The sect immigrated to the United States in 1774, settling first in Watervliet and New Lebanon, New York, and later establishing communities in New England, Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky. Leading a highly regulated existence in which equal status was accorded to women and men but celibacy and separatism were imposed in the conduct of daily life, the Shakers numbered more than 6,000 at their peak around the middle of the nineteenth century. Striving for self-sufficiency, their communities developed innovative agricultural and crafts techniques, first to meet their own needs and, after the mid-19th century, to respond to outside demands as well. Several extinct Shaker communities are now museums open to the public.

In establishing guidelines for Shaker craftsmanship, Joseph Meacham, Ann Lee's successor as head of the sect, enjoined that "all things be made...according to their order and use," and "be faithfully and well done, but plain and without superfluity." These qualities are, indeed, the hallmarks of the originals of the furniture included in this miniature room. The interior includes a communal living
room, a study through the door at the right, and a bedroom at the left. While the main room gives the sense of order and harmony typical of a Shaker environment, the Shakers actually furnished their rooms far more sparsely and included many more built-in elements.

Shaker furniture is distinguished by its fine materials, flawless workmanship, and utilitarian design. A typical piece is the side chair next to the settee (or seat for two people), with its turned back posts topped by egg-shaped finials and slat back. Perhaps best known of all are Shaker rocking chairs, an example of which can be seen to the right of the central doorway. Also typical is the secretary or desk -- commonly built into the wall -- with its clean, geometric lines and turned wooden knobs. Such pieces were constructed of pine, maple, or ash with a natural finish or, in later years, stained red, yellow, blue, or green. The simplicity and efficiency of Shaker furniture, made by dedicated craftsmen who considered the work of their hands part of their service to God, have exerted particular impact on modern American furniture design.

This Shaker interior, with its 134 objects, is one of 68 miniature rooms in The Art Institute of Chicago. Assembled between 1920 and 1940 on the scale of one inch to the foot, the miniature rooms were the creation of Chicagoan Mrs. James Ward Thorne and a team of thirty craftsmen. Her inspiration for the design of the miniature rooms was threefold: a passion since childhood for collecting miniatures; the appearance in American museums in the 1920s of full-scale period rooms for educational purposes; and the simultaneous growing fashion among wealthy Americans for building
and furnishing residences in various historical styles. Mrs. Thorne traveled extensively in Europe and the United States, collecting miniatures and studying actual rooms to copy. Together, the 68 rooms depict highlights from the history of architecture, interior design, and decorative arts in Europe and the United States between 1600 and 1940.

Adapted from Miniature Rooms: The Thorne Rooms at The Art Institute of Chicago, 1983.

QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

1. Shakers are credited with inventing many household objects that we use today. Have students research these objects and explain how they are in keeping with Shaker design and philosophy.

2. Compare the Shaker desk (or secretary) from c. 1800 with the Boston desk and bookcase from 1735-50 (slide 2). How do materials, design, and decoration differ? How is each desk a reflection of its owners’ values?

3. Have students create a miniature room for an early eighteenth-century Boston home that includes the desk and bookcase from 1735-50 (slide 2). Research will be necessary on homes and decorative arts of the time. The miniature room can be constructed
with a shoe box and simple materials such as cardboard, construction paper, and markers. Ask students to design the room’s contents on a set scale, such as Mrs. Thorne’s scale of one inch to the foot, to ensure the room’s harmony.

4. See “Furniture: Form and Function” and “Living Spaces: Then and Now” activity sheets in “Sample Lessons” section.
LIVING SPACES: THEN AND NOW

Grade level: elementary
Work of Art: Shaker Living Room (slide 5)

Compare the following two rooms:

Shaker Living Room (slide 5)
Each student's living room or all-purpose room

1. List the pieces of furniture (e.g. chair) in each of the living spaces:

   Shaker Living Room
   Student's Room

2. Which pieces of furniture do both living spaces have?

3. Which pieces of furniture are unique to only one of the living spaces? What can those pieces of furniture tell us about the Shaker lifestyle or about our lifestyle today?

4. Examine a piece of furniture that both living spaces share. What material is each made of? How was each made? What can the materials and processes tell us about lifestyles and values, industry, and technology?

5. Are both living spaces designed for the same purposes? For relaxation? For work? For entertaining? List 3 items in each room that are clues to how the room is/was used.

   Shaker Living Room
   Student's Room

Adapted from work by Museum Classroom Participants from Beasley Academic Center, Howland School of the Arts, and Armstrong School

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