GALLERY 11
“Middletown” Parlor, 1875–1900 (c. 1940)
by Mrs. James Ward Thorne

Of course, looking for hidden treasures in the Thorne Rooms is a bit like looking for stars on a clear summer night. But this room, which Mrs. Thorne claimed “you feel as if you were visiting your grandmother,” is particularly full of tiny treats. Presidents abound in pint-sized pictures: the photograph to the left of the fireplace is of Abraham Lincoln and his son Tad, while the one on the center table features Ulysses S. Grant. Perhaps the most surprising detail is the toy steam locomotive on the floor to the right of the table—it’s actually made of solid gold! This spectacular toy was given to Mrs. Thorne by her friend and fellow miniatures enthusiast Colleen Moore, whose ever-popular “Fairy Tale” castle is displayed at Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry.

GALLERY 211
Saint Romanus of Antioch and Saint Barulus (1638)
by Francisco de Zurbarán

Shot through with arrows, brutally stabbed, or burned at the stake—Catholic saints often met with gruesome ends, and it was often these horrific scenes of martyrdom that artists chose to depict. After all, such images of suffering were clear and powerful messages of religious devotion and moral fortitude. While not readily apparent, this portrait of Saint Romanus makes reference to his martyrdom. A deacon from Caesarea in Palestine, Romanus was taken prisoner in Antioch and initially sentenced to be burned. However, Emperor Galerius, who was in Antioch at the time, demanded that Romanus’s tongue be cut out before he was thrown in prison and strangled. If you haven’t already spotted it, yes, that’s his tongue Romanus is holding in his right hand.

GALLERY 237
Spice Box Shaped as a Skull (17th century)
German or Dutch

This surprisingly complicated box and macabre pendant unfortunately conceals some of its most fascinating details on the interior. If you could press the tiny spring-loaded button on the top of the skull, you’d find a back section divided into four compartments and a panel engraved with the names of four aromatics: “Negal” (cloves), “Muscha” (nutmeg), “Canel” (cinnamon), and “Schlag” (schlagwasser, a mixture of brandy, primrose petals, and violets, thought to be a cardiac stimulant). You may not be able to see these hidden delights, but you can see the tiny openings for the eye sockets, nasal passages, and missing teeth. Not just anatomically correct, these perforations allow the fragrances of the secreted spices to waft out and work their medicinal magic.
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GALLERY 137

Mask (Banda or Kumbaruba) (mid-20th century)
Baga or Nalu

This massive horizontal headdress, representing the human beast known as Banda or Kumbaruba, makes a powerful impression. The mask’s great size—five feet long—and harmonious graphic decoration are visually unifying. Yet, a closer look reveals that this being is in fact composed of several different creatures. Starting at the front of the mask and moving upward, you will find crocodile jaws; a human nose, eyes, and a woman’s braided coiffure; the body of a snake (looped in a circle); the tail of a chameleon (down the center); and finally the horns of an antelope, with antelope ears adorning each side. In keeping with the beast’s appearance, the dancer who wears such a mask in performance imitates the movements of various animals—a diving bird, an undulating fish or snake, and a kicking bull or antelope. Today Banda performances occur for entertainment or to honor special guests, but they were once reserved for only the most sacred occasions.

GALLERY 169

Still Life—Strawberries, Nuts, &c. (1822)
by Raphaelle Peale

Like the Thorne Rooms, still-life paintings are often loaded with delightful details, and this painting is no exception. Not only is each object meticulously executed and the composition on a whole painstakingly balanced, but each element holds symbolic significance. For example, it has been convincingly demonstrated that Peale’s strawberries were not wild but rather a very new hothouse variety, a choice that indicates Peale’s fascination with mankind’s burgeoning power to shape the natural world. Perhaps a more easily read detail for non-horticulture experts is the painting within the painting—the miniature scene depicted on the Chinese export porcelain creamer. Portraying a sailor along the shore supporting an anchor and releasing doves into the air, the scene symbolizes the hope and promise of the new American republic.

GALLERY 393

Dancing Girl (1940) by Paul Klee

While canvas is the most common and traditional material artists use for oil painting, within the Art Institute’s collection one can find a great variety of painted surfaces—cardboard, copper, cloth, metal, and wood to name a few. For his depiction of a girl dancing in the rain, Paul Klee made a rather unusual choice. As the label indicates, it is “oil on cloth”—but not just any cloth. The artist, known for his unique and whimsical style, used his own handkerchief. If you look closely, you can make out the edges of the handkerchief, but how exactly do we know it was indeed Paul Klee’s? The artist’s embroidered initials can be found in the circle at the lower right.