Japanese Traditional Interior
Thorne Miniature Room

c. 1937
Mrs. James Ward Thorne
(American, 1882–1966)

Japanese Traditional Interior, c. 1937

Miniature room, mixed media

Interior: 10 1/2 x 23 3/4 x 15 1/2 in.
Gift of Mrs. James Ward Thorne, 1962.456

Japanese Traditional Interior 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 30 craftsmen. All but two of the rooms depict European or American Styles from 1600 to 1940. The rooms are the result of Mrs. Thorne’s extensive travels in Europe and the United States, her collecting of miniatures, and her careful study of actual rooms to copy. The Japanese and Chinese interiors were perhaps constructed in recognition of the important influence of Asian design on European decorative styles.

In traditional domestic architecture the Japanese characteristically use wooden panels and paper shutters as the chief building materials for the exterior, and fixed or sliding panels of wood and rice paper as dividers in the interior. Such dividers offer the convenience of flexibility in the arrangement of interior spaces. This miniature room is the zashiki, or main room, of the traditional Japanese home, and also the adjoining room customarily used by the mistress of the house.

Essential elements of the main room are the two recessed areas at the back. The alcove to the left houses artistically arranged wall cabinets and shelves for art objects. The alcove to the right is traditionally used to display a single work of art—a scroll or vase—chosen to be enjoyed for a day from a stock of such treasures kept in a fireproof storeroom. The floor of the main room is always covered with tatami, or straw mats, each of which measures about three by six feet and is bound with cotton borders.

The simple and harmonious structure of Japanese architecture is apparent in spite of the somewhat excessive number of objects placed in the Thorne room. The translucent shoji (sliding doors) which give easy access to the garden at the right and the floral motifs painted on the sliding screen doors that divide the zashiki from the room at the left, integrate the architecture with the natural setting outside. In the room at the left three kimonos hang over a traditional stand, and the articles necessary for a woman’s toilette await use on the low table. The mirror and stand were made out of metal alloy (a mix of more than one metal) specifically for this miniature room by a Japanese artist.

The absence of furnishings other than the lacquer writing desk and low tables in the main room is typical. Other accessories, including bedding, are brought into a room as the occasion demands. The writing desk in the zashiki, the screen in the adjoining room, and the stone ornaments in the garden area are among several objects in this interior modeled after items depicted in E.S. Morse’s Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings, published in 1961.

This miniature room measures 10 1/2 x 23 3/4 x 15 1/2 inches.
Japanese Art and Life

Japan is a string of islands in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Asia. There are four main islands and hundreds of smaller ones. In the interior of the larger islands are steep mountains and rounded hills. The millions of people in Japan live primarily in the valleys and in the narrow plains across the seacoast.

Japan is one of the oldest civilizations in the world. The Japanese emperor comes from a line of sovereigns that goes back about two thousand years. Over the centuries the country’s capital has been moved from the city of Nara to Kyoto, and finally to Edo, now called Tokyo.

Inside Japanese castles, palaces and traditional homes, rooms are bare and uncluttered. The floors are covered with tatami (straw mats), as seen in this room. Each mat is about six feet long and three feet wide. The size of a room is described according to the number of tatami that will fit in the space. The walls are made of paper, and sliding screens—wooden frames covered with thick paper—separate the rooms. Shoji (sliding doors) lead to the garden, which is planned as part of the room decoration and is meant to be enjoyed from indoors. This room displays all of these decorative components.

Japanese gardens are considered an art form and are designed in imitation of mountains, ravines, waterfalls, clouds, and oceans. Some gardens are made only of moss; others are entirely of sand, gravel, and rocks. In a Zen rock garden (Zen is a sect of Buddhism that emphasizes simple living and worships no images), rocks of different sizes and shapes are carefully arranged on finely raked white gravel. Alongside the garden is a porch where people sit and contemplate the outdoor compositions. Some people imagine the rocks as islands in an ocean; others might see them as mountain peaks above the clouds.

A separate building can often be found in a Japanese garden; it is for the tea ceremony, a custom started in China and brought to Japan by merchants and scholars who visited China. Tea was thought to cleanse the body, purify the mind and encourage right thinking. Every step of the tea ceremony, even the order in which people enter the building through its low door (so they must stoop to a humble position) takes place in a prescribed manner. Special green tea is prepared, mixed, served, and drunk according to strict rules. Simple cups and pots are used to show that beauty can be found in simple objects. The tea bowls are deliberately uneven in shape and often show marks of the potter’s hands. Also used in the tea ceremony are an iron kettle, a clay incense container, a water pot, and a tray for sweets.

Conversation during the tea ceremony centers around the arts. Two very popular art forms in Japan are painting and calligraphy (graceful writing), both of which are done with a fine, pointed brush. A slight difference in pressure varies the thickness of the stroke, and the angle at which the brush is held determines the hardness or softness of the stroke. Many Japanese paintings were made on scrolls, long sheets of paper that were kept rolled up. The scrolls contain pictures and calligraphy, both done with the same black ink. The ink is made from lampblack, a finely powdered black soot, or from the black residue of burnt pine needles, which is then compressed to form a black ink stick. Water is dropped onto a stone and the ink stick is rubbed on the stone to make ink. Further drops of water can be added to control the thickness of the ink.

Another popular art form is the woodblock print. To make a woodblock print, the artist first draws his composition with brush and black ink on very thin paper. The drawing is then laid face down on a smooth block of wood. The design on the paper is cut into the wood with a sharp tool, coming out in reverse. The background is chipped out and printing ink is put on the raised surface. A piece of paper is placed on top of the inked block and rubbed, transferring the design onto the paper. If a print is one color only, a great number of prints can be made from the same block, which makes them more affordable. Colored prints require a carved block for each color. These prints are typically used for books, calendars, and as decorations for homes.

Many different subjects can be found in Japanese art. Screens often depict the landscape of Japan with its beautiful mountains, rich valleys, rivers, streams, and waterfalls. Japanese lords, generals, priests, and monks are depicted in sculpture and on scrolls, and stories of Japanese history and everyday life are painted. Religious figures are also popular subjects. Many sculptures depict Buddhist gods with their supernatural powers or Buddha sitting in deep thought. (Buddha grew up in a palace in northern India. He was protected from misery and pain, until one day he wandered from his palace and saw a suffering man, a sick man, and a dead man. He decided to give up his life of luxury and devote himself to helping other people. After many years of prayer, fasting, and teaching, he reached enlightenment and founded the Buddhist religion. The name Buddha means the enlightened one, he who knows all things.) In summary, Japanese art reflects the history and beauty of the islands and the beliefs, customs, and lifestyles of the people.
Classroom Activities and Discussion Questions

• Each family has 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 nomadic-type dwellings. Discuss 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.

• 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 s/he learn about the child? How?

• Imagine you are shrinking down to fit in the Japanese interior for the day; what would you choose to do while you are so small? Anything is possible. Who have you brought along with you for the day? What are you wearing? How did you come into this room? Since you have the whole day to spend here, what will you do first? Look around and find five favorite things. What would you change in the room? Why? Do you hear anything? Look outside the door. What do you see? What is going on?

• What kind of social event would be held in this room? Who would be invited? Would there be music involved?

• How does the room meet needs for shelter, food, light, and warmth. Is the room mostly practical or for show? How was the room used—for relaxing, for work, for entertaining? What is functional in the room? What is decorative? Are some objects both functional and decorative? How are the walls and floors treated? Have students look around the school and make a list of what they see that is decorative and what is functional.

• Have students compare and contrast the contents of their homes versus those of this traditional Japanese interior. Are there some furnishings or objects that, despite stylistic differences, are used in both cultures? Are there some that are unique to only one of the cultures? Look at the seating arrangement. Does this look comfortable? Discuss why it is placed where it is in the room. Would you move it? Why or why not? Would you like to have this seating arrangement in your home?

Alternative: Doors and windows vary. Look at the doorways and windows in this Japanese room. (Are there windows?) Sketch them. Look at doorways in your schoolroom or home or at rooms in different magazines and sketch them. How are they different and how are they the same?

• The Thorne Miniature Rooms are on a scale of one inch to one foot. This means that a table, for example, that was normally two feet high, four feet long, and three feet wide would be reduced to two inches high, four inches long, and three inches wide. In the classroom, have students measure desks, chairs, or tables. Have them figure the ratio of one foot to one inch to determine the size, if it were to be placed in a miniature room. Using posterboard or cardboard, have students make a miniature of one item they measured and compare the two sizes.

• Have students produce an interior of a room with posterboard. Use magazines, scrap wallpaper, or other decorative paper to make an interior that includes flooring, window decorations, and furniture. Have students make a screen and use it to create different spaces for private or social use. (See Japanese Screen poster packet). To supplement this activity, students can write dramas about family events or incidents that take place within their miniature rooms.

• Research other types of Japanese art such as woodblock prints, ink landscape paintings, kimonos, and porcelains. Include ikebana (flower arranging), tea ceremony, and performance such as Kabuki. See the Arts of Asia Teaching Manual for descriptions, slides, and classroom activities for this project.
Related Resources for Teachers

*The Japanese Collection at the Art Institute of Chicago.* Orientations, v. 23, no.6 (June 1992).


Related Resources for Students


