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Letter of Recommendation: The Thorne Miniature Rooms

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One of the Thorne rooms — an English cottage kitchen of the Queen Anne period (1702-14), made in about 1937. It is 10 inches high. Credit James Casebere for The New York Times

Down a center flight of marble stairs in the front entrance hall of the Art Institute of Chicago, there is a real-life time machine. It bears no resemblance, however, to any such devices from fiction. There are no displacement spheres, quantum-leap accelerators or flux capacitors; it looks nothing like H.G. Wells's gilded time-sleigh with its gleaming dinner platter, crystal-knobbed control lever and plush velvet driver's seat. Indeed, this particular time machine doesn't even have space for passengers, a fact that becomes immediately apparent upon approaching it. There is only a roomful of wide-eyed drifters trying to project themselves, via intensely prolonged gazes, through a series of glass-paned portals, tilting their torsos and craning their necks as if trying to inhabit the miniature worlds beyond.

The institute's Thorne Miniature Rooms collection comprises 68 deftly dwarfed and obsessively detailed recreations, on a scale of one inch for every foot, of English, French and American household interiors ranging from the 13th to the 19th century. Each one is, in essence, a fully fixed and furnished moment from a bygone day. Adults peering in on these little dioramas become children again, and their children the suddenly more mature and seasoned guides to the Tom Thumb fantasies the rooms contain — the minuscule violin resting in an open case on the cushioned window seat of a circa-1800 English drawing room, for instance, or the swath of afternoon sunlight cast across a pair of glasses and a porcelain tea set on a late-18th-century Cape Cod living-room table.

The earliest dollhouses were, in fact, born of a most adult yearning: immortality. What is believed to have been the very first "baby house," as the dollhouse was formerly known, was built in 1558 on behalf of Duke Albrecht V of Bavaria. It was a diminutive 3-D enshrinement of all the owner's worldly belongings, of his literal and figurative station in life. Soon a fad among the nobility and rich, such distillate minidwellings were intended not for play but for study, as working models of how to properly design and manage a home. This is the tradition that was ingeniously revived in the 20th century by Mrs. Narcissa Niblack Thorne.

Born in 1882 in Vincennes, Ind., she married James Ward Thorne, the heir to the Montgomery Ward department-store fortune, while they were young, leaving her free to pursue her artwork. One story has it that her original inspiration was a miniature shadow box that she came upon in an Istanbul bazaar in the 1920s. It suggested to her a way to meld a childhood fascination — the many antique dollhouse miniatures that an uncle, Vice Adm. Albert P. Niblack, sent her in the course of his world travels — with her later love of all the grand and stately interiors from centuries past that she encountered during her own frequent travels to Europe and the major cities of the Northeast.

The Thornes' apartment on Chicago's North Lake Shore Drive was said to be overrun with miniatures. Mrs. Thorne compulsively collected over the years old royal dollhouse relics, a number of them purchased from her favorite Parisian antiques shop, a place she refused all her life to identify. By designing her own rooms, she now had a way to permanently house those remnants and bestow them to posterity. Beginning in 1930, she

scoured whatever reference material she could find on period architecture, interior design and decorative arts to flesh out the sketches and blueprints for the different quarters in which such pieces would have once resided. She then seized upon the ready availability during the Depression of some of the country's finest architects and interior designers. By 1940, Thorne and her team of skilled craftsmen made over 100 pint-size "period rooms." They constitute a beguilingly timeless bit of child's play: a series of lushly lived-in pasts, chambers haunted by distant presences you feel certain have just left the premises — or are poised to enter at any moment from a flower-strewn side garden, a rear entrance foyer or the top of a lovely front-hallway staircase.

I stopped off at the Art Institute while making a cross-country drive this summer. It had been over 30 years since I last saw the Thorne rooms, and yet the scene upon entering the exhibit was instantly familiar. Paintings and sculpture induce silence, furtive whispers at most; the Thorne rooms, a ruckus. Everybody wants in. Not just on sharing the universal thrill of seeing daily life represented on a Lilliputian scale — they want in on that life itself. This is the particular genius behind Thorne's rooms. It is not just their verisimilitude, but also the way they draw us in with enticing glimpses of spaces just beyond the ones recreated — an upward-winding staircase, a hanging coat in an adjacent chamber, a shiny silver cocktail tray on an outer balcony table, a mock city skyline twinkling in the distance. Somehow, these various doors, ajar on endlessness, inspire in us an altogether lofty and untenable urge to abide forever within a lavishly furnished shadow box.

"Listen to you," I overheard one woman saying to her husband, as he carried on about all the things he would plant in the tiny garden outside the latticework window of an early 18th-century English cottage kitchen. "Since when did you get such delusions of grandeur?"



Shaker living room (c. 1800).
Credit James Casebere for The New York Times



Cape Cod living room (1750-1850).
James Casebere for The New York Times



California hallway (c. 1940).
James Casebere for The New York Times



An English bedroom of the Georgian period (1760-75).
James Casebere for The New York Times



English entrance hall of the Georgian period (c. 1775).
James Casebere for The New York Times