

Thorne Rooms

Thorne Rooms are among America's most well-known miniature diorama groups. The KMA's rooms are historically important not only as vivid records of European and American period interiors, but also as some of the earliest works created by renowned miniaturist Narcissa Niblack Thorne (1882-1966) of Chicago.

Born Narcissa Niblack in Vincennes, Indiana, Mrs. Thorne loved doll houses as a child and collected 18th-century "sample" furniture. As an adult traveler, she searched shops across the United States and Europe for antique miniatures.

By 1930, Mrs. Thorne had compiled an enormous quantity of miniature furniture and accessories. She decided that her treasures could be most effectively displayed in a series of rooms built to the same scale as the miniatures—one inch to one foot. She intended these rooms to be vital teaching tools about the evolution of European and American interior design and culture.

Thorne Rooms Created and Exhibited

During the 1930s and 1940s, Thorne commissioned cabinetmakers to create several series of miniature rooms from her own drawings. Since the KMA's rooms are among her earliest, they contain many of the miniatures she collected during extensive travels in Europe. They also contain elements such as painted and stained woodwork, papered walls and textiles done by Mrs. Thorne herself. For later rooms, her assistants often handled these details and created new miniature furnishings to scale.

During her career, Mrs. Thorne created nearly 100 miniature rooms. They received international attention following several exhibition tours. In 1933-1934 they were displayed at Chicago's Century of Progress Exposition. In 1939 they traveled to San Francisco's Golden Gate International Exposition, and in 1940 they were displayed at the New York World's Fair. The following year, Mrs. Thorne donated 68 of the rooms to the Art Institute of Chicago, thereby establishing the largest collection of miniature rooms in the world.

A Gift to the Dulin Gallery of Art

In 1962, IBM, which had purchased 29 Thorne Rooms, gave nine of the earliest works to Knoxville's Dulin Gallery of Art, the KMA's predecessor. In addition to the 68 rooms at the Art Institute of Chicago and the nine owned by the KMA, the rest are in the collections of the Phoenix Art Museum (20), the Indianapolis Children's Museum (1), and the Kaye Miniature Museum in Los Angeles (1).





Narcissa Niblack Thorne (Vincennes, Indiana 1882-1966
Chicago)

Spanish Foyer, 17th Century, circa 1930

Miniature room

31 1/2 x 45 inches

This foyer shows the influence of the Moors who conquered Spain in 711 A.D., bringing with them Islamic style art and architecture, which is apparent in the beautiful arches and wrought iron chandeliers. The Moors were the medieval Muslim inhabitants of al-Andalus, or what we know as the Iberian Peninsula, which includes present day Spain and Portugal.



Narcissa Niblack Thorne (Vincennes, Indiana 1882-1966
Chicago)

Majorcan Kitchen, circa 1930

Miniature room

27 x 35 inches

Majorca is an island midway between North Africa and the southern coast of France. It is part of the Balearic Islands and was colonized by Spain. Majorca is known for its colorful pottery and glazed tiles called majolica, which have been made there since the time of the Moorish occupation. This kitchen would have been part of a farmhouse as is evidenced by the tools and the farmer's wood shoes that were to be worn outside. The arched windows and decorative tiles above the bench suggest Moorish influences. The ceiling is high to keep the room cool and the large fireplace is similar to the one in the *Early American Kitchen*.



Narcissa Niblack Thorne (Vincennes, Indiana 1882-1966
Chicago)

Spanish Bedroom, 16th Century, circa 1930

Miniature room

26 x 36 inches

This room reflects the Spanish Renaissance style that combines Gothic, Italian Renaissance, and Moorish influences. The room is grand, emphasized by the beamed ceiling and brocaded walls. The bed curtains served both aesthetic and functional purposes as they looked attractive and kept the bed's occupants warm at night. The furniture also reflects a mixture of stylistic influences and objects. The headboard was made from an antique gold mantilla hair comb embellished with ivory, coral, and mother-of-pearl. Spain's Catholic heritage is reflected in the kneeling bench under the crucifix.



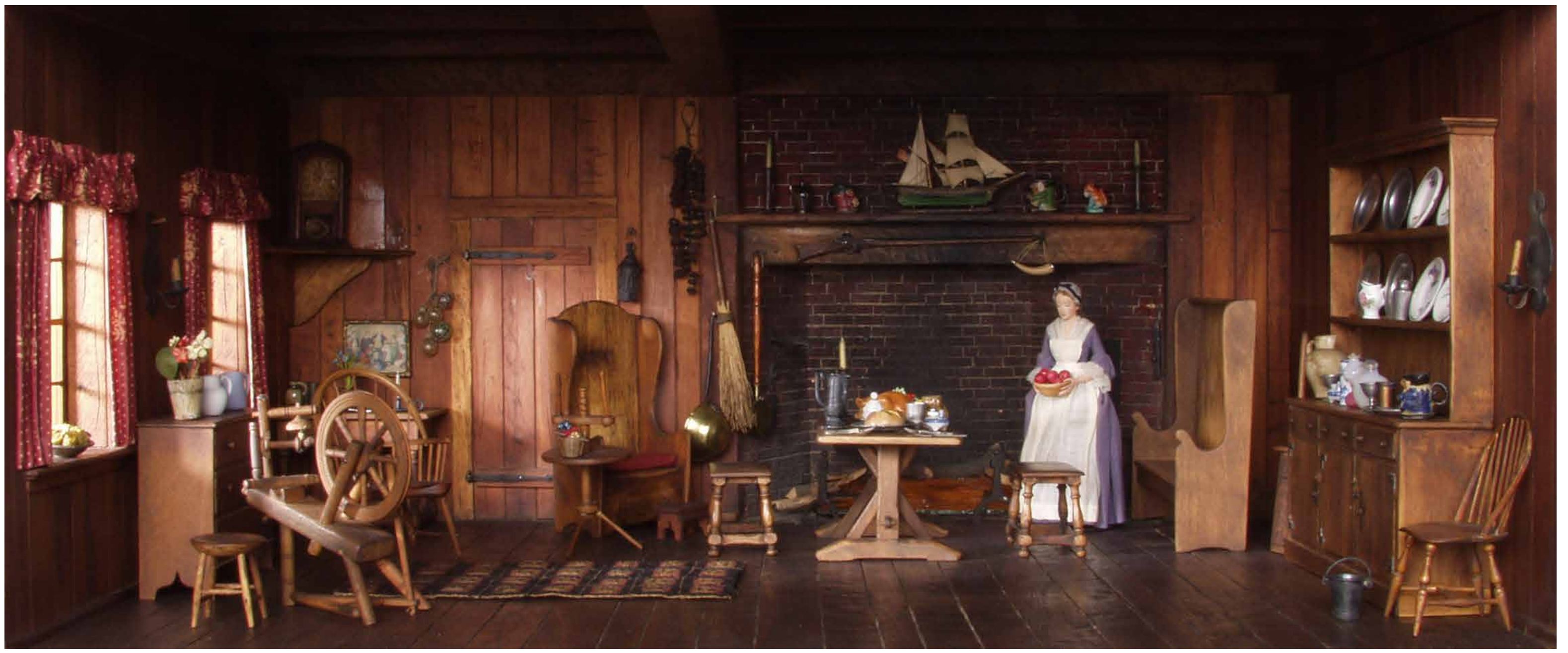
Narcissa Niblack Thorne (Vincennes, Indiana 1882-1966
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Victorian Parlor, before 1934

Miniature room

25 3/4 x 33 1/2 inches

The portrait of Queen Victoria, whose taste dominated fashion during her long reign, 1837-1901, sets the tone for the Victorian design of this parlor. Victorian design was dominated by heavy decoration including patterned carpets, comfortable furniture, knick-knacks, and decorated surfaces. Parlor furniture usually comprised a gentleman's chair with high back and arms and a lady's chair, which was low at the sides to accommodate hoop skirts. This furniture is from a period British dollhouse. The marble mantle is typical of the style. Other distinctive Victorian elements include the "gas" chandelier with crystal prisms and the wax flower arrangement under a glass dome. The newspaper rack holds one of the few exact copies of the 1924 *London Times* printed for the Queen's dollhouse.



Narcissa Niblack Thorne (Vincennes, Indiana 1882-1966
Chicago)

Early American Kitchen, circa 1930

Miniature room

16 x 29 1/2 inches

For protection against long New England winters, early American settlers built houses with low-beamed ceilings, small windows, and solid doors. Walls and floors were constructed of unpainted planking, and furniture was pine or maple. A large fireplace for heating and cooking was the main feature of a colonial kitchen. The high-backed chairs provided a shield against winter drafts. Most colonial homes had a flax-wheel for spinning linen thread from which cloth was woven. Many New England homes had glass "witch's balls" hanging beside the door to keep out evil spirits.



Narcissa Niblack Thorne (Vincennes, Indiana 1882-1966
Chicago)

English Dining Room, circa 1930

Miniature room

16 1/2 x 25 inches

All the furniture in this room was copied from 18th century Thomas Chippendale furniture in British museums. Chippendale, England's most celebrated cabinet and furniture maker developed a style called *chinoiserie* based on imported Chinese luxury goods. Those goods included porcelain, silk, lacquered cabinets, and hand painted wallpapers entering England on British trading ships. Straight legs, pagoda tops, and fretwork trim as seen in the curio cabinet and hanging shelves characterized this style. During this period of intense trade with China, tea drinking became popular in England. Indian tea had been in England since the 17th century, but the importation of Chinese teacups and saucers popularized the art of tea in England.



Narcissa Niblack Thorne (Vincennes, Indiana 1882-1966
Chicago)

New England Bedroom, circa 1770, circa 1930

Miniature room

18 x 29 inches

This bedroom is based on a late 18th century room from Salem, MA. The mahogany furnishings are copied from pieces in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. There were no closets and very few bathrooms in 18th century homes. Washstands with mirror, basin, and pitchers were provided for bathing. The four-poster bed is dressed in summer linens and the slipper stool at the bed's end could be used for prayers. Over the bedside table is a mourning painting, typical of the period, of two women weeping beside a gravestone. The petit point rug was made in Czechoslovakia.



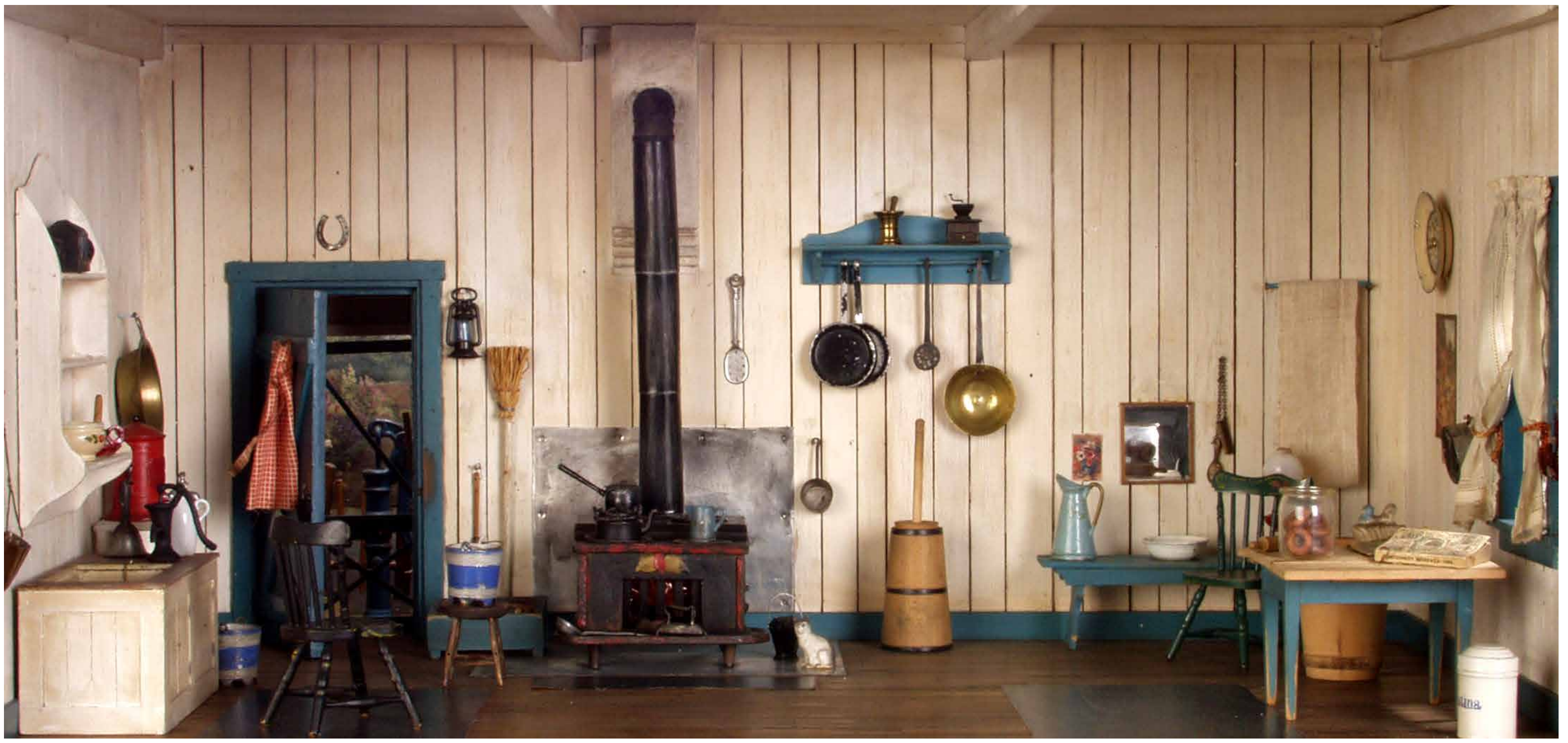
Narcissa Niblack Thorne (Vincennes, Indiana 1882-1966
Chicago)

Federal Dining Room, circa 1930

Miniature room

18 x 29 inches

In 1748 the ruins of Pompeii were fully excavated, accelerating a classical revival in art and architecture. This room reflects America's Federal Style Period of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The hand painted wallpaper's Greek and Roman ruins help characterize the style. Scottish born American furniture maker Duncan Phyfe was the principal designer of the Federal Style. After moving to New York City in 1792, Phyfe's skills led to such a demand for his products that he eventually employed over 100 carvers and cabinetmakers to make furniture for America's wealthy elite. He introduced factory practice to furniture making. All the furniture in this room is a copy of Duncan Phyfe design. The mantel is a replica of a design by Boston architect Charles Bulfinch.



Narcissa Niblack Thorne (Vincennes, Indiana 1882-1966
Chicago)

American Summer Kitchen, circa 1930

Miniature room

17 1/2 x 29 1/2 inches

Many 19th century American farmhouses had summer kitchens to keep the main house from overheating. This one has "modern" conveniences such as an indoor sink with hand pump to bring in water, and a coal burning stove whose stovepipe would remove the smoke from the room and vent it outside. The towel above the washbasin is designed to roll so that each person can use a dry spot. The whitewashed walls helped make the kitchen a bright place in the summer and a horseshoe above the door is a symbol of good luck.

