

# 1

## THE UNCANNY DESIGN OF THE THORNE MINIATURE ROOMS

*K.L.H. Wells*

The Thorne miniature rooms are an extensive set of dioramas that depict period rooms on a miniature scale of one inch to one foot. They were created in the 1930s by Narcissa Niblack Thorne, better known as Mrs. James Ward Thorne, a wealthy Chicago socialite linked to the Montgomery Ward fortune.<sup>1</sup> Thorne began the miniature rooms as a series of ten European and American rooms, which she exhibited in 1932 at the Ackerman Galleries in Chicago and New York to benefit architects' charities. The following year, Thorne expanded the series to 12 rooms and displayed it at the Century of Progress Exhibition in Chicago. The event proved so popular that for the fair's second season, she expanded the series again to 27 rooms representing interiors from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries and displayed them in their own pavilion (Figure 1.1). On the heels of this success, Thorne created a more ambitious series of 29 French and English rooms, which were exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1937 and subsequently at the World's Fairs in San Francisco and New York. Finally, she created a set of 37 American rooms that went on display at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1940 before touring nationally during and after World War II.<sup>2</sup>

Thorne's miniatures are most often understood in the context of the period room, as a way to enable museums to display many more period rooms than they would otherwise have space for, and thus to offer a more complete survey of decorative arts.<sup>3</sup> However, Thorne's earliest intended audience consisted not of museum visitors but of unemployed designers and their potential patrons. While Thorne had been collecting miniature furnishings since childhood, she only began to make settings for miniatures in the context of her later charity work. Her first projects were elaborate dollhouses that were auctioned to benefit one of her main causes, the Chicago Women's Exchange, a prominent charity shop that helped women earn money by selling the handicrafts they made at home. The women's exchanges grew into a national campaign during the Aesthetic and