

WRITING EMPTY ROOMS

Inspired by the painting of Walter Gay

GRADES

6–12



INTRODUCTION

We start with silence. Two dark wooden doors — are they mahogany — are open. Tentative. As if someone has just come in or perhaps just left beyond our sightline. Above them a detail carved in relief creates a ribbon-like effect. The room is a present to be unwrapped; more potential than place.

Everywhere we look are lavish light-reflecting surfaces: a hanging lamp, two gold inflected Chinese vases, a polished floor. The vases in particular signal the eye of a connoisseur. Had they traveled to China, bringing these back as stylish souvenirs? Or are they a simply a sign of sophisticated shopping? Gilded good taste?

In this loosely painted impression of the interior of his brother's house in Boston, painted in 1902, the artist Walter Gay creates an opening into more than a room. There is mystery here and we fill it with our own story.

As we practice social distancing and shelter in place, we feel the tug of absent friends and family, and this empty room takes on a poignancy. Despite the richly painted scene, it is not presence but absence that we feel. We wait.

INSPIRATION

Walter Gay's painting *Interior of His Brother's House in Boston* invites us to consider empty rooms. Here are what two writers have written about empty rooms:

Hisham Matar from *A Month in Siena*: "Perhaps each one of us carries, along with everything that has happened, a private genealogy of rooms. Somewhere there is a collection of dining tables, a long line of beds, an assembly of chairs, countless doors we have opened and shut, a library of drawers into which we have placed the mundane as well as the valuable. Gathered in some imaginary museum, such a personal architectural inventory might be a compelling portrait of a life or the lives of several individuals, whose trajectories, whether by fate or chance or deliberate intent, had been intertwined with one another as firmly as a vine with a trellis."

Amina Cain from *Indelicacy*: "The room is almost bare, except for a chair she's standing next to, in front of her a table, and beyond the table a furnace. Two white doors, closed, lead to other rooms, other feelings, or else a continuation of this one. I am always fooled by these suggestions of other rooms we might go into, but never can, never will. Another space, but it is closed to us, even if it feels open. Thought of in a different way, if it is all suggestion, what is in the room is ours."

ACTIVITY

Write about a room you know well. The room may now be empty, but was once full. It may be one you are experiencing now or one you remember. Who and what was there? What did you do? What are you missing now?

OR

Sketch the room you are remembering, either empty or full, or a version of both.

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Walter Gay, *Interior of His Brother's House in Boston*, ca. 1902. Oil on canvas. SBMA, Anonymous Gift for the Preston Morton Collection.