

# NETSUKE AND OTHER MINIATURES



Few art forms have had such enduring popularity among collectors as Japanese *netsuke*.

The Gallery began its own collection of the miniature carvings one hundred years ago and is marking the centenary with the display *Netsuke and other miniatures from the Art Gallery of South Australia*.

*Netsuke* were initially made as functional toggles to secure small containers, known generally as *inro*, which were worn suspended from Japanese men's belts during the Edo period (1615–1867). To appreciate the significance of *netsuke*, it is necessary to understand the social conditions that prompted their emergence. During this period the shogunate implemented strict sumptuary laws forbidding the general populace from wearing lavish clothing. *Netsuke* became the one aspect of dress through which a male could express his individuality.

In the late nineteenth century, many Japanese men began adopting European dress, so unemployed *netsuke* carvers turned their skills to creating miniature ornamental sculptures, known as *okimono*, for the Western art market.

The display features the themes of auspicious animals, myths and legends,



above: Japan, *Okimono, Karako playing 'blindman's bluff'*, late 19th century, ivory with inlaid semi-precious stones and lacquer; 6.8 cm height; M.J.M. Carter AO Collection 2004

opposite above: Masanobu, Japan, active 19th century, *Manju netsuke, Shoki, the Demon Queller*, 19th century, ivory, mother-of-pearl, 4.4 cm diameter; M.J.M. Carter AO Collection 2004

beliefs and superstitions, and everyday life, reflecting the vast diversity of subjects depicted in *netsuke* and *okimono*.

The earliest private Adelaide collections were inspired by a worldwide fashion for Japanese art, sometimes derisively described as 'mikado-mania'. Many gifts and bequests to the Gallery, from such important local identities as William Milne (1849–1905) and Sir Samuel Way (1836–1916), included *netsuke*. Among early twentieth-century donors were Adelaide women Amy Mary Lea and Sarah Crabb, reflecting the interest among female collectors of the period in this essentially male art form.

The display is a special tribute to the generosity of Max Carter, AO, who in 2004

presented the largest single gift of *netsuke*, *inro* and *okimono* to the Gallery. It included 145 objects dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and documented important carvers such as Masanao and Tomotada of Kyoto.

*Netsuke and other miniatures from the Art Gallery of South Australia* is curated by Jennifer Harris, the author of a new Gallery publication of the same name.

James Bennett  
Curator of Asian Art



Seiko, Japan, active late 19th century, *Okimono, Bird caller and child*, late 19th century, ivory, 11.5 cm; Bequest of Miss Amy Mary Lea 1923