

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

CURATED BY JENNIFER HARRIS

UNTIL 31 AUGUST 2014

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FREE ADMISSION