



根付研究會

# NETSUKE KENKYUKAI

Study Journal  
Volume 2, Number 1, 1982





Oni Nembutsu chanting mantras.  
A tour de force by the So School  
great *Sosui*. Ebony, ivory, and  
boxwood. 20th century. Height  
2¼".



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# NETSUKE KENKYUKAI

Study Journal

Volume 2, No. 1 March 1982

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### Cover Description

*Red Man-Kirin or Shokuin?*

(See Letters) Wood, negoro lacquer with gold. 18th C. For fuller discussion see *Real and Imaginary Beings*, Okada and Neill, pp. 29-30.

Collection of Joseph Kurstin

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Netsuke Kenkyukai Society is a non-profit organization. The purpose of the Society, as stated in its By-Laws, is to promote the study of netsuke and their related appurtenances, the artists who created them and the society from which they evolved. Such study is accomplished through conventions, exhibits, lectures, workshops and the dissemination of written materials, photographs and its Study Journal, published four times a year.

Submission of articles and materials for consideration for publication in the Study Journal are solicited at the submitter's risk. Send to Netsuke Kenkyukai Study Journal, c/o Robert L. McGowen, 2400 First National Tower, Tulsa, OK 74103, U.S.A.

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# FROM YOUR EDITOR



Robert L.  
McGowen

**N**ETSUKE Kenkyukai has only one *raison d'être* and that is the study of netsuke. The Study Journal is perhaps the most important ingredient in such a study. Our President, James Hume, has laid a formidable challenge before us in demanding that we have a quality and informative product and we believe the contributions to this issue attest to

what can and should be done. The big question is whether or not we will be able to sustain and improve upon this fine beginning and our success will be wholly dependent upon the contributions, suggestions and assistance that our readers provide. Submissions of articles for publication in the Journal are solicited.

The Study Journal is intended to advance this fine art form and to assist collectors at all levels. As an art journal, the emphasis will be on scholarship, connoisseurship, research and dissemination of information. References to prices will be made only as an aid to collectors. Our agenda is to further the knowledge and appreciation of netsuke. Our hope is that the wealth of wisdom, learning and experience of netsuke collectors throughout the world will be shared in the pages of the Study Journal.

whit because he decides that a relief carving in a *manju* is the best medium for his treatment, or because he chooses bamboo for his material, or because he omits his signature. Compared with the top-priced "prizes" many fine and interesting netsuke are undervalued.

On a personal note I am dismayed that some dealers use my *Collectors' Netsuke* to support their valuations of netsuke bearing prominent signatures, while ignoring *Netsuke Familiar and Unfamiliar*, which is a comprehensive survey of the whole field with 45 distinct categories offering possibilities for various collecting goals from comprehensive to specialized and with netsuke ranging in value from expensive to inexpensive, albeit meritorious. The segment of netsuke treated in *Collectors' Netsuke* is very limited.

In its brief history the pendulum of netsuke collecting has swung in several directions. Now may be the time for a further swing to neglected types and individualized preferences. It is the duty of collectors to stand on their independent feet and to demand the types and pieces towards which they feel a personal predilection.

Raymond Bushell  
Tokyo

## LETTERS

I heartily endorse your avowed intention of publishing a Study Journal emphasizing art and scholarship while avoiding commercialism. This does not imply however that I view commercialism as a stigma. As collectors we all participate in the buying and bargaining, and sometimes in the culling of our pieces. The dealer's function is not to be denigrated. He gathers together his stock painstakingly and at his risk. We have only to select and reject.

The commercialism I deplore is the promotional emphasis on high-priced netsuke like those signed *Kaigyokusai*, *Tomotada*, *Masanao*, *Okatomo* and *Iwami*. In point of a balanced price scale, if not of inherent quality, the emphasis is a distortion. Is this small group of promoted "prizes" the only first class netsuke? Are all other types and classes secondary

and inferior? It is as though the pet shops of the world praised poodles as the "best" dogs to the exclusion of other types and breeds. The poodles would surely sell for record prices, with other dogs regarded as inferior, their merits as specific breeds ignored.

The dealers' promotion of the "in" netsuke may be understandable as an effect of the high cost of rent and salaries. Expenses can be covered by \$10,000 sales more easily than by \$1,000 sales. Some dealers say that it is the wishes of their clients which determine what they stock, rather than the other way round. Whether the impetus derives from the dealer or from the collector, prices are out of balance when categories such as *manju*, *sashi*, *kagamibuta*, masks, porcelain, lacquers and lesser known names and unsigned pieces are ignored. To continue with a canine metaphor it is as though the "best of show" are worth acquiring, though not the various "best of class." The talent of a fine carver is not diminished one

Best wishes and good luck for the coming year with the Kenkyukai and the expanded Study Journal. It was a pleasure and an honor to have the *Red Man-Kirin* chosen for the cover.

I would like to ask the members of the Kenkyukai to solve the mystery of the subject of this piece. The powerful portrayal of a demon-faced kirin wrestling with a huge snake has been called both "*Red Man-Kirin*" and "*Shokuin*". I am not sure that either is correct. Perhaps one of the readers has seen the subject depicted or can find it in Japanese or Chinese mythology.

Joe Kurstin



I am preparing an article on erotic Netsuke and welcome the cooperation of those who would share pictures, data or both.

President Hume is a most energetic gentleman and to everyone's amazement his efforts brought 48 folks together for an organization meeting of a Netsuke Kenkyukai Washington Chapter.

Lawrence E. Gichner  
3405 Woodley Road N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20016

Bob and I offer our congratulations and best wishes to Netsuke Kenkyukai on the new expanded Journal.

As an educational tool where collectors both beginners and advanced can find something of interest, the Journal will be an asset.

We applaud the attempt to lessen the thrust of netsuke collecting as "investing" and to emphasize the enjoyment of collecting netsuke as an art form in whatever price range a person can afford. Unfortunately, we have discouraged a number of beginning collectors with the thought that unless they can afford or wish to purchase the "great" pieces, netsuke collecting is not worthwhile. Collectors should buy any art object as

Letters, see page 34

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



James Hume

**H**OPEFULLY this new Study Journal finds you in the best of health and adds some enjoyment to your day.

Looking back on 1981 one can see that it was a year of change for our organization, laying out of new plans and programs for the future.

*Accomplishments for 1981 were:*

- A superb convention was organized by Victor Israel and held in Los Angeles in August.
- Membership was increased by over 25% in the last three months of the year.
- A new local study group Chapter was formed in Washington, D.C. - James Rose, President.
- Arrangements for the 1983 Convention to be held in Wash-

ington, D.C. were confirmed. L'Enfant Plaza Hotel - September 19-25, 1983.

- Plans were completed for a new expanded Study Journal, the results of which you have in hand.

*Objectives for 1982 so far are:*

- Continue to improve our Study Journal.
- Establish active local study group Chapters in:  
*New York City* (this has already commenced with Jerry Spiller as President).

*San Francisco.*

- Complete the formation of the *Netsuke Kenkyukai Foundation*, a tax exempt educational foundation dedicated to advancing the study, knowledge and education regarding the netsuke art form.
- Double the size of our Membership by the end of the year.

With your help we can reach our objectives, which I feel are realistic.

I look forward to meeting and working with many of you in the coming year.

Best wishes and happy collecting!

*James*  
James Hume

**A**LTHOUGH the response to our membership drive has been exceptional, I will continue to need your support if we are to achieve our goal of doubling our membership by October 1982. Since September 1981, our organization has grown by 25%, and by Convention time 1983, we hope to triple the membership. There are many netsuke collectors whom we have yet to reach.

We want to continue to work together as a team; your personal touch is so important. The dealers have been especially cooperative - keep up the good work. Please

## MEMBERSHIP CORNER



Adele Murphy

continue sending suggestions, comments, and most importantly, *names* of prospective members. I love to see those *checks* coming in on a regular basis.

Our President, James Hume, has inspired everyone with his enthusiasm, creativity, and hard work. Your participation in Netsuke Kenkyukai has encouraged and supported his efforts.

Please remember that back issues of our old style study journal are still available at \$2.00 per issue (issues 1-6).

Let's continue to grow, learn and share our love of these wonderful miniature works of art.

Again, thank you for your support.

*Adele Murphy*  
Adele Murphy  
Membership Chairman



C LICHES about collectors abound. You know them: Collectors are obsessed creatures who indulge in a fantasy occupation. Collectors are, at best, a little crazy; at worst, completely bonkers. And so on, all more or less true I suppose. But the cliché that I like best and that I think hits closest to the mark is, "Collectors have more fun than anybody."

Collectors *do* have fun. They *should* have fun. As Ray Bushell says in *Netsuke Familiar and Unfamiliar* (page 51): "What is the purpose of a collection if not to delight the owner and to make a personal statement of his interest in the art?" Why else use up all that time and money and nervous energy? But of late I find many netsuke collectors, particularly newer members of the flock, who seem to worry as much as they enjoy: "Did I pay too much?... Should I have let that piece go even though I knew I couldn't afford it?...I'm afraid if I don't hurry up, there won't be anything left...I couldn't afford *not* to get it, but I know I shouldn't have...My wife complains that I am spending too much—she wants some new furniture...Will the market stay up or go down? And if it goes down, what will that do

## The Making Of A Netsuke Collection

by Virginia E. Atchley

to my collection?...Should I believe so-and-so who tells me thus-and-so?...He is supposed to know, but does he?...Whose judgment can I trust?"

Relax. Collecting doesn't have to be a hot or cold, now-you-see it, now-you-don't performance, fraught with peril for the unwary at every step. Rome wasn't built in a day; neither is a netsuke collection. Of course, particularly at the beginning, the netsuke collector is heavily dependent upon qualified dealers, reputable auction houses, and the support of other collectors as he cautiously threads his way into an experience in which his enrallment is exceeded only by his ignorance. But he doesn't have to remain ignorant and dependent, and therefore apprehensive, any longer than he chooses. After the

first fine flush of discovery and initiation, it behooves him to make the effort and take the time to learn for himself. Only then will come his best satisfaction and his ultimate success as a netsuke collector. The opportunities for study are abundant today. Books about netsuke proliferate. Regularly published journals discuss in depth various aspects of the subject. There is a relentless procession of conventions, meetings, and symposia about netsuke, both in this country and abroad. Never before has it been so easy for a collector to learn, if he will, from the richness offered him.<sup>1</sup> And he can do no better than to look at as many private collections as possible. He will find most fellow collectors happy to share; they need only to be approached. There is no need to feel shy about asking.

The world of netsuke collecting has changed drastically these past many years, it is true. But the netsuke themselves have not changed. A netsuke that was desirable 50 or 250 years ago is still desirable today, whatever the price differential. What *is* a desirable netsuke? Herein lies the meat, the crux of the matter. Collecting netsuke differs fundamentally from collecting most other forms of Oriental art where historical and detailed scholarship is available. There simply is no scholarship, in any rigorous sense, concerning netsuke. They were not considered fine art by the Japanese, and their practitioners were almost wholly neglected. The collector's choice of netsuke is therefore an extremely personal matter, evolving from his own taste, preference, and knowledge. He has the advantage of an enormous diversity to draw from—a diversity still available (if not as abundantly as formerly) and augmented by much fine contemporary carving. Netsuke depict every



Fig. 1

1. This is not the place to present a detailed recommendation of books and articles for a suggested course of study about netsuke. Such will be offered in a later issue of this Journal.



known facet of Japanese life, history, and nature. They come big or small, intricate or simple, bold or subtle. The men who made them run the gamut from gifted or not-so-gifted amateurs to incredibly skilled professional carvers. Netsuke are fashioned in a variety of styles and from a wealth of materials. And always there lurks the unexpected, the surprise element, the sly and mischievous humor.

You need not therefore rely upon the whims of fashion, or submit meekly to the mesmerism of the new netsuke cult and the pronouncements of the latest high priests. Any netsuke collector worth his salt and with taste (if he hasn't any, he shouldn't be collecting) is—I repeat—well advised to study and to look and to make his own choices, use his own judgment, sturdily ignoring as best he can the snob values that, at one time or another, for one reason or another, attach to certain schools, to certain artists, to provenance. It is not easy to keep from being caught up in the beguiling euphoria of the marketplace; but experience teaches that it simply is wiser and better to be one's own man (or woman) in the fascinating pursuit of netsuke. We need constantly to remind ourselves that coolness, knowledge, sensitivity, and independent choice are the *sine qua non* of serious collecting in any field.

We cannot all own a Bury St. Edmunds ivory cross (read Thomas Hoving's *King of the Confessors* to witness the obsessive avidity of the pursuit of art at the professional level) or a Mark Severin kirin netsuke by *Masanao*. But we all can still acquire netsuke of

2. The examples which follow first appeared in an article, "Netsuke—Some Thoughts From The 1970's", which the author wrote for *A Sheaf of Japanese Papers*, published by the Society for Japanese Arts and Crafts, the Hague, 1979. Because they are as pertinent today as they were then, and because that publication had a somewhat limited audience, I asked for, and received the kind permission of the Dutch Society to use them again here.



Fig. 2

superb, if less prestigious, quality. Important as money is, it should not be the sole or even the major criterion. If a piece fills you with that got-to-have urge that swells through your very being, and if buying it won't automatically send you to the poorhouse, go ahead and get it. Some of the best pieces that many of us have we paid too much for but *bad* to have. Conversely, other netsuke that give us as much pleasure were obtained, by luck or astuteness, very reasonably. Collecting has a way of evening out over the

years. So don't be afraid to trust your own feelings and your own judgment. If you make a mistake, well—you make a mistake. We all do, we all have; we learn by our follies—they are perhaps our best teachers. And it helps to keep in mind that probably there exists no collector who doesn't permit himself at times some degree of self-deception or who is above a dash of chicanery when opportunity offers.

All of the above is fairly general. Now for a few specifics to flesh out some of the less obvious "hows" and "whys" of a good netsuke collection.<sup>2</sup>

Fig. 1 is an old netsuke, unsigned and with no apparent affiliation with any "school." Time and use have smoothed the marine ivory to a satiny finish and deepened it to a soft gold on the front, a rich brown-yellow in the back. The piece is functionally rounded, and the design is original: a seated horse and his groom are nuzzling each other affectionately. And, delightfully enough, here is a rare case where



Fig. 3a



Fig. 3b



the erosion of time has improved the carver's design rather than blurring it: the horse appears to have his eye closed in bliss as the smiling groom strokes his head. But the eye on the other side is wide-open, and close scrutiny shows that the left eye was once open too. Time and handling have rubbed it down to a mere line which pleasantly, and humorously, enhances the contentment the artist wanted to convey.

Time is not always so kind. Some old pieces are worn to the point where the original design is completely effaced. Except as possible "feeling" pieces to be carried around in one's pocket, these have little interest or value to the collector. Age alone is not enough. But Fig. 2, the *Rakan* seated in typical fashion on a rock, his robes and double gourd draped over his left shoulder, is a very old netsuke that, despite the nearly obliterated features of the face, still shows a clear and powerful carving. Moreover, the ancient and rare mammoth tusk ivory from which it was fashioned, and which age has caressed to a velvety sheen, makes it a most satisfyingly tactile netsuke.

The largely unrecorded history of netsuke allows the collector to indulge in his own speculations and hypotheses when the occasion warrants. This *Rakan*, for example, has a signature on the bottom which apparently was added at some later time. We know that the Japanese, learning that Occidentals had a preference for signed netsuke, often obligingly provided a signature. In a case as obvious as this, it can usually be ignored. But this "signature" is a single character, of nine strokes, reading *kore* or *ze*—no carver's name in itself. What is it supposed to mean? Possibly *Kore* for *Korenaga*, or *Ze* for *Zemin*? But the only recorded piece by *Korenaga* is in wood, *itobori* style, and *Zemin* not only worked late in the 19th century but did such totally different carving that even the most obliging Japanese



Fig. 4a



Fig. 4b

would scarcely suggest that this was his work. One tries again. *Ze* means "right" and "just", which certainly is a fitting description of the moral, upright *Rakan*. This at least is plausible and may well have been what the interloper had in mind when he elected to add his bit to the base of this ancient piece.

A small insignificant matter, one may shrug. Yes. But just such small facets pull netsuke out of the "status" category and induce the personal involvement that is an integral part of genuine collecting.

Figs. 3a and 3b show front and rear views of *Ono-no-Komachi* as an impoverished old beggar. This is a common subject in netsuke: the emaciated elderly poetess, her arrogant beauty long since gone, clad in threadbare garments, carrying a staff for support, a basket for alms, and a tattered straw hat slung across her shoulders. But in this carving the artist, *Minkoku I*, has succeeded in portraying the plight of his subject with an almost piercing poignancy. Her

body and legs are bowed from the infirmities of age, her unkempt hair droops around her sunken cheeks and imploring eyes, her brow is furrowed, her nearly toothless mouth is open above her scrawny neck. It is a face of age and anguish, a figure of despair. The lightly stained boxwood is worn just enough to add an overall softness. *Minkoku*, from 18th-century Tokyo, is not talked about much these days, but only the hand and heart of a true artist could fashion out of a piece of wood a carving as hauntingly tragic as this, and at the same time make an eminently functional netsuke, fairly small (6.5 cm.), well rounded, smooth to the hand.

Figs. 4a and 4b show the front and back of a netsuke whose subject is as unusual as that of Fig. 3 is common. Unlike the *Minkoku* piece, it is not carefully carved, but it compensates in bold design and impact for what it lacks in refinement. The unknown artist, probably early or mid-19th C., has created an upright mother cat,



# Symposium



## on Netsuke and Sagemono

To be held at the MUSEUM OF FAR EASTERN ART in COLOGNE (Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst) from 29th September until 3rd October, 1982.

For all enquiries regarding the programme of events, early registration and hotel bookings, please contact The Organising Committee at this address:

You are cordially invited to attend and participate in our forthcoming programme of lectures and workshops to be conducted in English, German and French (interpreters will be available for other languages) devoted to the study and research of Netsuke Art.

Mme. H. Meyer-Lindberg  
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dressed as a woman in *haori* and *geta*, a turban wrapped around her head and trailing down her back. Her kitten, sound asleep, nestles over her shoulder, as she carries home their supper, a large limp rat. Her tail swings confidently up her back beside the large *himotoshi*. The piece has verve, originality. It may even be unique, in the precise meaning of that word. If any other netsuke exists depicting the cat (a fairly rare subject in netsuke anyway) in a similar guise, the author has so far been unable to locate it.

Running only slightly behind *shishi* and dragons (and maybe tigers and *gama sennin*), rats and monkeys were among the most popular subjects in the netsuke genre. Apparently both the carvers and their clientele shared this preference. One almost tires of the surfeit of famous *Tomokazu* and *Ikkwan* rats, or *Kaigyokusai* monkeys, despite their intrinsic beauty. So to come upon a representation of either of these animals that is startlingly different from the norm is one of the deep satisfactions experienced by the alert collector. Figs. 5 and 6 are both carved from stag antler; both are unsigned. Fig. 5 shows a rat in-



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



tently gnawing on the sprouting crown of a *kuai* bulb. The unknown artist has made superb use of the most difficult part of a difficult material and has carved the details of the rat's head and paws and of the bulb's shredding skin with consummate and cunning skill. The beady little inset eyes of black coral, the greedy grasp of the front paws balanced by the supporting thrust of the back legs, the bold exposure of the spongy parts of the stag antler, the satiny luster of the smooth surfaces—these are the work of a master

sculptor in miniature, perhaps by the famous *Kokusai* himself. This netsuke, even more than most, has to be looked at closely and handled for appreciation of its warmth and its virtuosity.

Fig. 6 can lay claim to no such degree of skill. Here the carver has cut away the inner spongy core of his material, plugging the top and leaving the netsuke hollowed inside for use as an ashtray, if desired. It is an old piece, simple in design and detail, silky to the touch—no great netsuke but one of the charmers. This monkey is delightfully and deliberately funny. To look at him is to smile involuntarily. The black eyes are crossed, the feet awkwardly rub together, the hunched-over body leans forward in mock distress, one hand stretching down and clutching his backside, the other resting limply on his folded knee. This is a good example of the sly humor of the *netsuke-shi* who liked nothing better than poking fun at their subjects. It is a humor that is pervasive and charming, often downright comic, rarely if ever mean.

These netsuke have been selected at random to try to show graphically some of the thoughts expressed earlier in this article. It boils down perhaps to what collecting is all about, netsuke collecting in particular. Collecting in any field can be, and ideally should be, a fine art in itself. As such, investment and monetary value are not its primary *raison d'être*; nor does collecting equate with accumulating. It requires knowledge, a good eye, patience, and independent judgment. *And it can be fun*, particularly so in netsuke because of the wide range of subject and material, and because the dimly documented history of netsuke affords the collector a generous latitude in which to indulge his own tastes and preferences, and to look for the nuances, the subtleties that—as surely as age adds patina to ivory—add their own ingratiating patina to collecting.





Notice To All  
Oriental Art Lovers  
And Friends

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The Former Betty Killam,  
Now Betty Leavitt,  
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# Kokusai And His World

## PART I

by Paul Moss

“THE Yoshiwara in the Asakusa area of Edo was the district licensed by the Tokugawa government for prostitution. It was isolated on low-lying ground and had to be reached by a road along a dyke. Yet it became the centre of the city’s social life. Within it the great establishments became centres of entertainment, gastronomy and social meeting as well as providing a sexual and even romantic outlet for men confined in a rigid family system with early arranged marriages.” (Catalogue entry from *The Great Japan Exhibition, London 1981-1982*: no. 67, a painted handscroll, ‘Scenes In The Yoshiwara’, by the first important *Ukiyo-e* artist, *Hishikawa Moronobu*, who died in 1694.)



Fig. 1a



Fig. 1b

*Ozaki Kokusai* worked for his living as an entertainer in the Shin Yoshiwara, which could be described simplistically as the world’s biggest brothel. In the late Edo and Meiji period when *Kokusai* lived there (he died in about 1892) it held the same special status as described in the above passage, and dominated the Asakusa area. After the great fire of 1687, it was moved from the Nihombashi area and renamed the Shin (New) Yoshiwara. Courtesans were forbidden to leave without a special pass, and pleasure-seekers who wanted to visit had to enter through the main gate. Asakusa was the equivalent of a “Left Bank” district of Edo with a unique atmosphere; the “floating world” which provided the subject matter and cultural ambience for the popular woodblock prints of beauties and romantic assignations in the *Ukiyo-e* style.

*Kokusai*’s work as an entertainer in this setting entailed buffoonery and stand-up jesting,

This article and a second installment to appear in a later edition of the Study Journal has its origins in the workshop conducted by Paul Moss, of Sydney L. Moss, Ltd., London, in August 1981 at the Netsuke Kenkyukai Convention in Los Angeles. Paul advises that the second installment “will deal with *Kokusai*’s followers, not merely the usual ‘school’ members and will contain a couple of surprise conclusions.” At the author’s request, text and words have been left in his “English English.”



sometimes in the nude. Yet he was a serious man, as can be seen not only from his carving. The reason for this unusual bread-and-butter job is that throughout his life he had to support his son, the novelist *Ozaki Koyo*, 1868-1903. Interestingly, *Koyo*, who only outlived his father by some ten years and died tragically early of stomach cancer established himself eventually as one of the Meiji period's outstanding novelists with a rather backward-looking neo-classical style and nationalistic subject matter, rejecting Western progressive notions. *Kokusai* was also a deeply religious man. Almost as a challenge to the vast Yoshiwara pleasure establishment, there is another edifice which dominates the Asakusa area; the Kinryuzan temple, or Sensoji, dedicated to the Bodhisattva Kannon (it is known as the Asakusa Kannon). Again, see the *Great Japan Exhibition* catalogue, no. 128, woodblock triptych by *Ando Hiroshige*, "Precincts of the Kinryuzan Temple", dated 1854. It was and is one of the most popular religious centres in Edo, and is enormous. *Kokusai* was intellectually and emotionally a convinced Buddhist, and visited the temple frequently.

My hypothesis is that these diametrically opposed elements in the character of the Asakusa district – the shallow, attractive fast pulse of the "floating world" and the sober teachings of Buddhist impermanence – are reflected not only in the complicated Japanese cultural psyche, but specifically in the carving of *Kokusai*. I must digress initially at some length: it is not only interesting to suggest a personal and social context for *Kokusai's* creative work, but we should also consider questions of style and aesthetics, and of the background of existing schools of netsuke carving, all relevant to the emergence of *Kokusai's* new style of carving, *Kokusai-bori*.

Japan was and is an extraordinary country artistically, and even now the notion of a rarefied

aesthetic sensibility permeates to most levels of society, though it was modelled by an elite. Ordinary housewives cramped in tiny Tokyo apartments take tea ceremony or formal flower-arranging classes, devoted to this or that school, or aspire to owning an artist-potted ceramic piece. From Heian times, the Golden Age of the Tale of Genji, there has run through Japanese culture the notion that quietude and a height-



Fig. 2

ened sensitivity to art and nature are essential to civilised life, whether in the ideal of devoting one's perfectibility to the beauty of an illicit love affair or viewing the cherry blossom on the morning of its first flowering. Though common to most Eastern thought, in Japan the awareness of an aesthetic plane is more formalised and more widespread than anywhere else in the world.

There is an important aspect to this aesthetic, and that is its deep poignancy. I should characterise it in the title of a novel by *Yasunari Kawabata*: "Beauty and Sadness". The impermanence of natural beauty, and a profound appreciation of it while it lasts are the basic tenets, almost obsessions, of the Japanese aesthetic sense. Whether in a *Sotatsu byobu* screen portraying autumn flowers or fading maple leaves, or the fragile, mortal loveliness of an Asakusa courtesan in her striking finery, it is a reflective appreciation that is important, coupled with luxuriant celebration. Perhaps it is here that the two strains of Asakusa life which we have identified come together; a sense of impermanence and ultimate non-reality informs the awareness of the moment, rendering it more valuable and heightening the viewer's experience of it. The annual release of fireflies is a typical example.

This Japanese self-aware and formalised concern with beauty and form runs the risk of deteriorating at times into a self-conscious prettifying and the subordination of content to appearance. This has happened in all branches of Japanese art, and in netsuke carving not least. It is easy enough for an ignorant Westerner to complain that Noh theatre seems primarily to consist of pose-striking ritual and gorgeous costume, or that the music of the *koto* is inefably subtle and little else. But there is truth in the allegation, for instance, that the Rimpa school of painting, with possibly the world's most colourful impact of



striking design, climbed for Japanese art the very peaks of superficiality. Certainly, many netsuke are just cute little carvings.

Just as many Westerners find it difficult to reconcile the serene and contemplative aspect of Japan's cultural personality with the violent and cruelly blood-thirsty nature of much of its history, so there is a well-known split *persona* in its sense of the artistic. On the one hand there is the contemplative expression of such arts as the tea ceremony and its artifacts (an entire aesthetic of its own), of spontaneous Zen brushwork (ditto, and explicitly meditative) or, let us say, the rough virility of a *Minko* carving in fruitwood. Contrasted with this rustic approach is the splendour of kimono designs or of brocade mounts for *kakemono*, the sensational impact of stylised nature in a *Korin* screen design, or the effete elegance of a *Kaigyokusai* animal netsuke. Both of these channels of Japanese aesthetic flowering go right to the roots of its culture; the rustic approach is found in the *mingei*, or folk art tradition, of good, honest peasant stock; and the bright and garish celebration of colour is common throughout Asia, and can be seen today on the Ginza or in the plastic food in restaurant windows.

Art is not created in a vacuum; it is either a sign of the times or, where it is not, the expression of an individual artistic personality. We tend to call the former craft and the latter art. Netsuke carving was regarded as artisan's work; the only arts were considered to be painting, calligraphy, poetry and music. If there are exceptions to this rule, the only art netsuke are those which break the bounds to express something different. *Kokusai* was in every sense the exception, a difficult individual with a personal vision in a conformist society. But his carving was not only the surfacing of his own eccentric identity, it was also a

reaction to existing netsuke carving elsewhere. In this respect I would like to point out the characteristics of other schools of carving.

In her lecture at the 1981 Los Angeles Kenkyukai Convention, Virginia Atchley attacked the notion of carving schools, and argued quite justifiably that we should look at good netsuke in the context of a particular carver's work or, indeed, on the merits of



Fig. 3

the piece itself, signed or not, without trying endlessly to ascribe netsuke to some school and eventual master-type. Nobody could disagree that the lists of schools and pupils are in some cases meaningless in stylistic terms, and a lazy excuse for thinking about the carving. Just attribute a netsuke to some little-known Iwami carver, and we can all make a battery of assumptions about it, without stopping to think whether the man was a hack or a genius.

Yet, though the only great netsuke may be individual, art netsuke, there are still identifiable styles, each with a purpose and a meaning, and because a carver followed another's technique does not necessarily preclude him from having something serious to contribute within that *oeuvre*. Some great poets have written entirely within the constraints of the iambic pentameter, and possibly produced better results for the tight discipline. *Okatomo* worked in a Kyoto style established by the master *Tomotada*, but who would argue that he added nothing,

changed nothing, or had no discernible and worthwhile style of his own?

In art-historical terms, netsuke scholarship has been a fairly surface and anti-academic operation, and if it is to advance we do need to take seriously the influence of one carving style on another, and discuss why carvers, the artists and the artisans, carved what they did. We can call these areas of style schools, or styles, or influences; they varied, and some were loose affiliation. For the purposes of this argument only, and not as any serious analysis, there follows a very brief resume of suggestions. There are a whole range of areas to be considered in depth, such as the beginnings of netsuke as an art form; the impact of the obvious prime candidate for stylistic influence, the centuries-old traditions of Buddhist sculpture; and so on. But here are a few tentative ideas about specific netsuke schools and what they meant.

We can isolate a Kyoto school style, emanating from and expressing the taste of the old Imperial capital, concerned with a robust and three-dimensional naturalising form, and against that, at the same time, an Osaka school or style. Osaka was the town where the Imperial family and the noble retainers lived in retreat from the bustle of government, and the netsuke style is aristocratically elegant, concerned with two-dimensional line rather than bulk, and a stylised beauty enhanced early on by surface techniques such as staining and stippling. In this game, the animal carvers of the country schools present no problem. Art has to have a reason and to come from somewhere, and for the vast majority of netsuke carvers the idea of a style or a school to follow is perfectly applicable, since they mostly copied a successful type, perhaps with variations, perhaps not.

The term "school" has confused and annoyed us, though, because we can apply it literally and forcefully to the Edo (or





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Tokyo) carvers, and in a derogatory sense which seems to reflect unfavourably on our favourite Kyoto or Nagoya "school" carvers. Certainly, the Edo netsuke world was systemised in marketing and in production, and the emphasis was on technique. By the mid-19th C. the demand was popular, the market bourgeois and the subject matter escapist. Netsuke were small and funny and their materials were preferably semi-precious, appealing, clever or different. Netsuke and *inro* were for the most part sold through agents' shops, and rarely individually inspired or commissioned. Young carvers worked in literal school workshops, generally carving mask netsuke until adjudged competent enough to move on to the master's three-dimensional models. Generations carved the same model, and took a character from the master's name to incorporate into their own art name once they were considered sufficiently advanced. Meinertzhagen has published his extensive lists of the separate carving schools in Tokyo, mostly active in the 19th C. and representing complete genealogies of family carving trees. This is not to say that there was no individualism and no innovation in the various Tokyo schools, and that some masters did not produce wonderful work. Even a lot of mask netsuke are incredibly good. *Hogen Rakumin* had so much energy that he initiated two entire carving schools of his own. Many of the Nagoya carvers moved to Edo in about 1840 and adapted their wood animal-carving style to the legendary figure subjects demanded by the Tokyo clientele. The technically superb *So* school emerged, and many others such as the very fine *Ono* family established a distinctive delicacy of ivory type. The likes of *Hojitsu* and *Komin* were capable of sensational work and, to their credit, rarely produced the average pot-boiler which the Tokyo system encouraged. But even the master-

works of these top carvers hardly bear comparison with the inspirational works of art created by *Masanao* of Kyoto, or for that matter the great works of *Minko* or the early *Tametaka*, which created rather than served a market and a style.

Nonetheless, it was these run-of-the-mill market pieces which were successful in Edo. When the early European collectors were sent large packages or tea-chests of netsuke to choose from by agents in Japan, the highest in price were from the hand of such as the later *Ryukei*, or the *Tomochika* and *Minkoku* school types. *Kokusai's* netsuke were then sold at one-tenth of the price of these high-fliers, which today we look down on as decadent and derivative, not to say repetitive. In this respect, it is notable not only that *Kokusai* kept on at his chosen quirky models and materials, and made very few "normal" netsuke as money-spinners, but also that several mainstream Edo carvers made pieces inspired by his example in the *Kokusai-bori* style named after him. In fact, *Kokusai* started his carving life as a school pupil of *Gyokuyosai*, and was quite capable of producing fine and sweet ivory Edo netsuke. He did otherwise.

I mention in such detail these aspects of the Tokyo school system because they are significant in respect to *Kokusai*. He did everything differently. Asakusa was only a subordinate district of Edo, and having started working in an Edo ivory-carving school, he can only have been acutely aware of the system and its tendency to the mediocre. We must assume that his netsuke were sold, along with everyone else's, in the shops of agents, as those agents sent his pieces to Europe, but other than that he seems to have reacted against the Tokyo prototype entirely. He did not work in or establish a school (except during his technical apprenticeship); he took another job to live on and carved according to his own likes, not

market demands. He took no pupils, but influenced a circle who borrowed from his example. He eschewed the cute escapist subjects beloved of the merchant class and tired Edo businessman and carved weird Chinese Buddhist artifacts. He despised precious ivory, stained inlays and striking lacquer and carved the most difficult and worthless materials he could find; stag-antler for the most, probably bone as well, and sometimes the equally difficult and ugly *umimatsu*. By comparison, carving wood and ivory was like cutting through cheese. Although he had his chosen repertoire of subject matter and stylistic devices I think he almost never carved the same piece twice. A serious artist can only make a statement once, unless he fails to get it right the first time. (This is one point on which I would like to invite discussion – it would seem likely that since much of *Kokusai's* work was necessarily experimental, he might have a high proportion of not-particularly-successful results. On the other hand, if his influence was felt widely among disaffected Edo carvers who wanted to emulate him, some of the poorer pieces might well be copies, even though this is rendered less likely by the fact that his work was not worth a great deal. I would argue that school work is an implausible third alternative for the authorship of poor examples, since I don't think he had a school).

Apart from choosing to be deliberately awkward, which I do suspect was a strong element in *Kokusai's* character, there may be at least one other reason for his preferred use of stag-antler. He was a Buddhist, and the deer has been a revered animal to Buddhists since the Buddha preached in the Deer Park at Sarnath. (Obviously, the antlers are shed naturally by adult male deer each year, so no slaughter is involved, and the material is cheap and plentiful.)

The forms which *Kokusai* loved





OKATORI: Classic ivory netsuke of quails on millet by the late 18th century Kyoto school master. Signed Okatori. Length: 3.7 cm.

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to carve are also awkward; he liked to distort – partly as a reaction against the naturalism prevalent in Edo carving, and in the Shijo painting school flourishing at that time – but mostly because that was the essence of his art. Every natural line had to be stretched and exaggerated, or every straight line curled into stylised arabesques, or the most ordinary, prosaic object incorporated almost out of recognition into some fanciful design. He carved *manju*, not in the engraved or relief solid style that Edo had made its own, but defiantly in openwork, generally with ugly areas of stag-antler core or pitting at some prominent place in the design. He made bowls for *kagamibuta* as well, and pipecases, partly, one suspects, because it was less commercial work than netsuke, and somebody had to do it; it was in both cases, as with *manju* in *ryusa* style, an area where he could (and did) make his mark, such that I would consider the ultimate pipecases to be in *Kokusai's* style; and these forms, be they elongated and thin, or rounded and squat in medallion form, suited his stylisation and distortion down to the ground.

Figs. 1a and 1b illustrate a pipecase by *Kokusai* which, unusually, demonstrates his fondness for the medallion form within the confines of a relief pipecase design. The stylised, disgruntled *shishi* face above is straight *Kokusai* and could be a *manju* design. His nose is arabesqued into a *juji* (*reishi*) sceptre head and demonstrates *Kokusai's* sense of whimsy. The medallion below is esoteric enough in subject matter (sometimes *Kokusai* strikes one as Masonic in his choice of emblems) with a fish (a Buddhist fish?), a *tama* (the flaming pearl of Buddhism) and, again, a *juji* sceptre. For all the oddness of content, the design factor is upmost; by a masterstroke of off-centre placing, the piece works. It is signed with a square seal, *Koku*, on the reverse. *Kokusai's* forms are, I think, de-

signed not exactly to shock, but are warped out of the ordinary to make the observer double-take and look again. He is always playing with forms, to make his everyday subjects a little less easy of apprehension each time. You can never anticipate him. Fig. 2 shows another pipecase, this time with a typical rain-dragon, grasping in its mouth a spray of foliage. Like the foliage and the usual bifid tail of the dragon, his legs also end in the exaggerated whirlpool of arabesques beloved of *Kokusai*. But there is another joke (I think or maybe not); where the legs and tail coil to an end, their circle is pierced with a hole, maybe like the finger-holes of a flute. Or possibly for no reason whatever – one can't be sure.

The real clue to *Kokusai's* motivation lies in his use of subject matter. In marked contrast to the modernisation and Westernisation of Meiji Japan (from 1868, at any rate, the year of his son's birth and the initiation of the Meiji Restoration era), and in equal contrast to the world of the brothel and the beauties, he carved in archaic and uncompromising fashion the symbols of old-fashioned Chinese Buddhism, harking back doggedly to the days of a morality and a long-gone world he pines for. Fig. 3 is an example; again, the rain-dragon (*ch'ih-lung*) of Chinese Buddhism, with a *tama* in his mouth and a *bossu* (whisk) in his hand, with the outline on the reverse of an *uchiwa*, or stiff fan. Someone asked at the Convention workshop what the significance is of the upside-down heart-shape you see on so many of *Kokusai's* pieces, almost a signature. I hadn't thought about it at the time, and prevaricated. It's obvious, of course, when you think about it – the same heart-shape is shown twice on the pipecase in Fig. 1 – the head of a *juji* sceptre, carried by Buddhist priests in China (and by old Taoists too) and Japan, and a symbol of authority and longevity, based on the form of the *juji*, or *reishi*, fungus.

Other subjects used by *Kokusai* continue the Buddhist theme. He carved *mokugyo*, the dragon-headed drums in temples; broken rooftiles from old temple pagodas; old Chinese seals and other scholastic paraphernalia, animals with Buddhist associations, such as *shishi*, elephants, bats and owls, and religious symbols which may have had an even more hidden meaning. For example, he occasionally incorporated a variation on the character *Ban* (the Buddhist swastika, *wan* in Chinese, which means ten thousand and in Japanese is shorthand for the phrase *Banzai*, meaning long life to the Emperor – at this stage, in Meiji, that could have been tantamount to tacit political support for the traditionalist anti-military modernising group, which called for the elevation of the Emperor to something more than his figure-head position).

There are *Kokusai* pieces which do not demonstrate an avowedly Buddhist subject matter, and these pieces tend to be everyday countryside items such as the farmer's hat and sickle, an ear of millet or a weaving shuttle, and the like. They have in common an extreme simplicity of treatment and form, and perhaps again hark back to an uncomplicated life of simple values. Fig. 4 [4a, 4b] is not really a typical example of this type, since it represents an insect, possibly a silk moth, but it is carved in an extremely stylised and simple form. Possibly it harks back to China, or maybe to the timeless rural forms of production. The underside abandons any pretensions to insecthood and just curls in arabesques.

Finally, to the matter of signature. *Kokusai* nearly always signed with the single character *Koku* in a squared or rounded seal form, if he signed at all. His variations on this one character are endless, and one could illustrate a whole article with *Kokusai* signatures. Occasionally he did sign with the two full characters *Koku* and *Sai* in normal *kan* script, but he would



An extremely fine Baku from the Kyoto School executed in ivory. 18th Century. Unsigned. Height 5 cm. For a mirror image Baku see #218. M. Hindson Collection.



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Fig. 4a



Fig. 4b

only tend to do that when, for instance, he was signing a three-dimensional ivory piece. The use of the single character *Koku* in stylised seal form (the character itself and the seal form signature were taken up by his followers in

explicit recognition of his example to them) is another direct reference to archaic Chinese usage and represents an old-fashioned awkwardness. But again, and characteristically, *Kokusai* turns this unusual and obtrusive element of

his work into a design feature and proudly proclaims his strangeness. He not only distorts the character into all sorts of weird and beautiful shapes, so that one might again mistake it for something else altogether; on many occasions he uses a design feature, some inoffensive object or the entire net-suke as his seal signature. Fig. 3 is not signed as such, but to me there is no doubt that the *jui* head on the top represents a stylised *Koku* character. Fig. 4 is signed with an "anchor" seal a little like one I have seen on another *Kokusai* piece. There will always be another variation which takes everybody by surprise, or a different angle of looking at a piece which reveals that from this side it's not a bat, it's a *reishi* fungus, and the whole thing says "Koku". *Kokusai* is playing with us again.

(To be concluded)

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SESSAI UNKIN (1820-1879?)

An important, unusual netsuke in umimatsu of two dried sardines (iwashi). Signed *Hokkyo Sessai*. Echizen school. Ex Hull Grundy Coll. 11.75 cms.

Sessai's carvings, and an interesting book of their designs, illustrated by well-known painters to honour the carver, have been documented by Mary Hillier in an article "Book of Designs by Sessai Unkin" in *Oriental*

*Art Magazine*, Autumn 1975, pp. 252-258. She illustrates the piece quite similar to this one in the Hindson Collection (see also N. Davey, *Netsuke*, 1974, no. 820), and also the design, from the "Sessai Unkin Zu Fu" of a single umimatsu sardine, drawn by Kishi Chikudo.

Raymond Bushell illustrates a paler wood group in *Collectors' Netsuke*, no. 159. Both of these other published groups are smaller than the present example.

We would like to announce an exhibition, scheduled for late 1982 and prospectively entitled "Eccentrics in Netsuke." The accent will be on a scholarly catalogue, focussing on a few individual carvers with comprehensive discussion of their work in the form of contributory essays. Artists discussed will include *Hokkyo Sessai*, *Masanao* of Kyoto, *Kano Tessai*, *Kokusai* and friends, and possibly the early *Tametaka* and *Ogasawara Issai*; if I can get serious contributors and more pieces. Most pieces will be for

sale, though I hope to exhibit fine loan items to fully illustrate their work.

Please write if you would like to be put on the mailing list for catalogues – it should be a really worthwhile publication. I would also like to hear from anyone who has ideas on any of the above carvers, or others who deserve inclusion, and from anyone with fine examples of individual or eccentric netsuke they would like to sell. Thank you.

Paul Moss

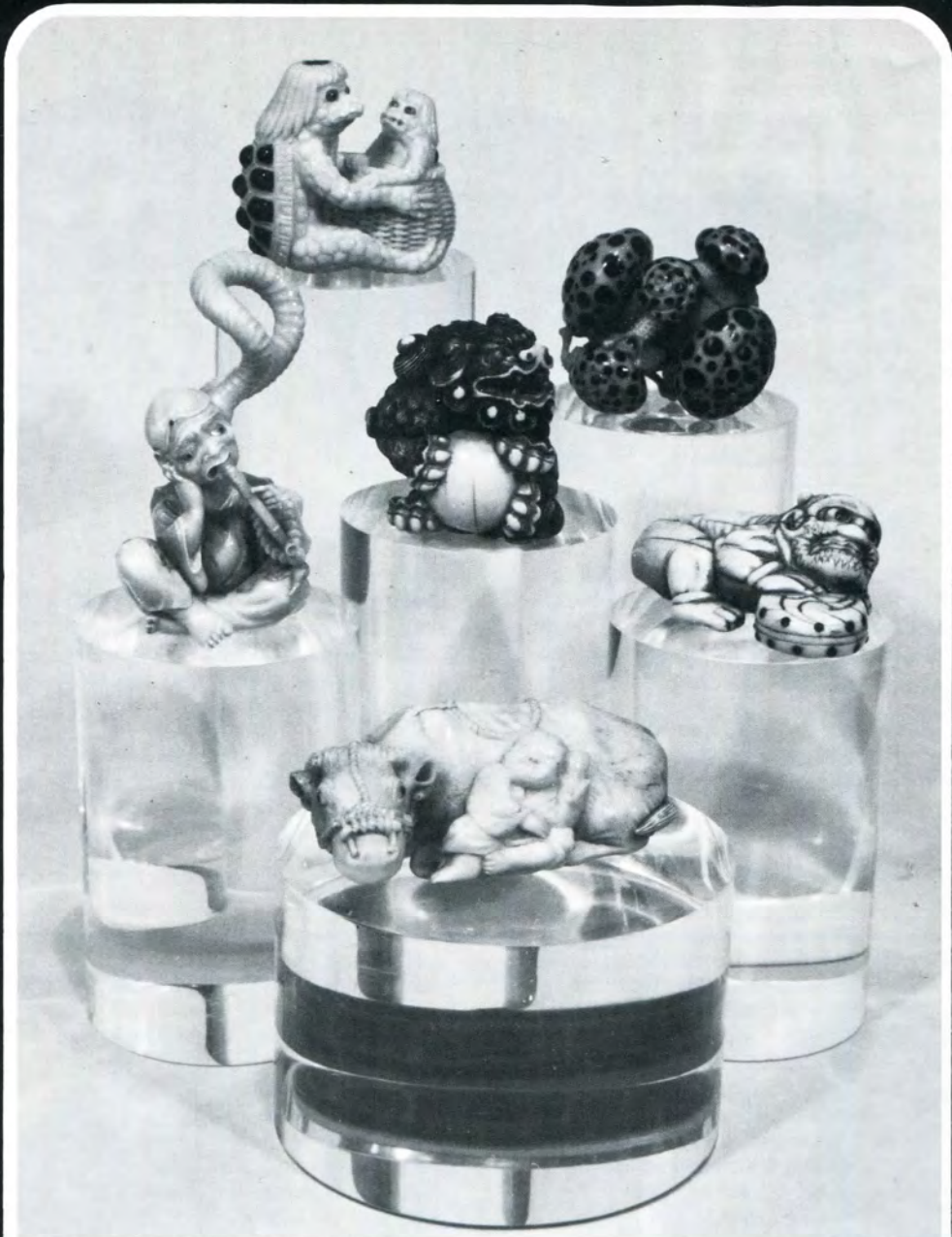
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Clockwise from the top: Ivory and tortoise shell kappa and young, signed Akihide; stained ivory cluster of snails, signed Shinzan; 18th c. ivory oni with drum, Kyoto School, unsigned; mid-19th c. ivory cow with a child, Edo School, signed Mitsuchika; ivory figure of Rokurokubi, signed Koraku. Center: 18th c. ivory study of a shishi protecting a large ball, Kyoto School, unsigned.

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Fig. 1

AT the Autumn Netsuke Seminar, held in Greenwich, Connecticut, on the weekend of October 16, 1981, and attended by a most congenial group of avid collectors and students of netsuke and related arts, well-known dealer and connoisseur Denis Szeszler held a workshop dealing with humor in netsuke. As is usual with Denis' workshops, it was both enjoyable and educational. Also, the participants brought to the workshop some very good points and questions of their own, a happy situation which reinforces the idea of the seminar: a lively discussion and learning process for all those involved, including even the workshop leader. Denis illustrated his points with many netsuke, which helped to make the subject come alive and provoked further commentary and enjoyment.

There follows here a summary of this workshop, in which I have tried to include as many points as possible, both those made by Denis, and those brought in by the other participants. For the sake of coherence and brevity (hopefully), I have not differentiated among voices, but, as the saying goes, you know who you are, and your comments and questions were much appreciated. They were an important factor in the success of this workshop.

## Humor In Netsuke

by Jerry Spiller

During the Edo Period of Japanese history (1603 to 1867), many aspects of life were strictly controlled by law. Sumptuary laws that dictated what different classes of society could own, display, and wear were among these. In a highly structured society the need for relief, a "safety valve," if you will, becomes important. Humor is generally recognized as a universal pressure-reducing device, and in this respect Japanese society was certainly no exception. Since netsuke and *sagemono* (suspended or "hanging" items worn on the person) were not regulated by law, they came to be a medium of expression, humorous, sexual, and otherwise, and can be appreciated in this way, in addition to being the great art form we consider them.



Fig. 3



Fig. 2

One of the ways the Japanese expressed humor in netsuke was through the use of animals. When you take an activity or role that is thought of as purely human and use an animal to depict the action or play the role, you can provoke a smile in the observer. One of the most obvious and perhaps the most often used example is the monkey. Being almost human in construction and behavior, the incongruity of placing a monkey in a human posture and endeavor provides the humor. The *Sambaso* dance is a popular example in netsuke art; in the *Sambaso* dance a man, by means of a mask, pretends to be a monkey. In one of the most common depictions found in netsuke, a monkey takes the role of the man, and the desultant monkey doing the monkey dance provokes a smile or a laugh in the observer. Fig. 1. In the piece passed around the room for observation, one could see the perplexed expression carved on the face of the monkey, as if he were asking, "Why am I doing this?"

Another way in which monkeys were depicted was in a paternal role, providing feelings of relief and calmness, as well as quiet humor, to the owner of a netsuke: monkeys are often shown taking care of their offspring in ways that are human, and not actually possi-



ble for them. A typical late 18th C. Tokyo (Edo) School carving of a monkey mother and child was shown as an example. The pair shown used a gourd as a pillow on which to rest their heads. Denis used this piece also to make the point that the Kyoto School netsuke of this period were stylistically similar to those of the Tokyo School, the most obvious difference being one of size: the crowded, urbanized Edo area produced netsuke generally smaller and more compact than those of the more open and provincial Kyoto environs.

There are, of course, facets of animal behavior which are funny by themselves, and these were also depicted abundantly by netsuke artists, albeit often with a shift in emphasis or aspect which again brings a smile to one's face. An early 19th C. piece was shown at this point. The well-carved ivory shows a monkey which has picked something from its fur, a very monkey-like thing to do. Yet so seriously does he examine his find (perhaps as one of us might scrutinize a new netsuke), that it cannot fail to amuse, which surely was the artist's intent. Fig. 2. Japanese humor in art often achieves its ends in this subtle way. A slight shift in emphasis or expression, an unexpected change in the way a traditional scene is reproduced, any of these may make the point.

Although the monkey, with its often close resemblance to man was the favorite way for the



Fig. 5

*netsuke-shi* to show animal behavior in an anthropomorphic fashion, many other animals were used as well. The frog, being ubiquitous in Japan, is one of these, and its activities provided a source of observation and study. We saw a 19th C. wood netsuke which shows two frogs in a *sumo* wrestlers' pose. The large leaf of a water plant is their "wrestling mat," their loin cloths are other leaves, and a smaller frog as spectator or referee watches from one side. Fig. 3.



Fig. 4

According to Japanese mythology, certain animals are able to transform themselves into human form at will, and to go about doing human things in this form: one is the fox, another is the badger (*Tanuki*). These animals are therefore often shown humorously in netsuke, engaged in animal and/or human pursuits, looking at times more human, at times more animal-like. We saw a wooden carving of a badger which has fallen asleep curled around an empty sake bottle, the drunken animal a gently humorous comment on one of *Tanuki's* and man's favorite pursuits. Fig. 4.

After viewing more examples of anthropomorphic humor in netsuke, we turned our attention to the area of study characterized by Denis as the most popular. This is, of course, *shunga*, or the erotic. As Denis commented, the erotic is amusing as well as arousing, and its portrayal in Japanese art has a long history. Few *netsuke-shi*, from the most rudimentary folk artists to the most refined and sophisticated Meiji carvers, failed to avail themselves of this subject at some time in their work, and often made wry commentary on the foibles of their fellow man in this most human of concerns.

Because of the public nature of netsuke usage (*i.e.*, they were worn to be seen by others) and the feeling of the Japanese that the erotic is a private part of life, the depiction of the explicitly erotic in them was sometimes hidden from view by mechanical means, *e.g.*, a cover or sliding section. More often, however, the ingenuity of the artist expressed itself in the netsuke as subtlety, suggestiveness, or symbolism. In a discussion of symbolism it should be noted that some symbols are so covert or, due to the cultural differences between Japan and the West, so unrealized, that a certain level of awareness must be reached before they are discerned and appreciated. To give examples of the above, it can be safely said that whenever mushrooms or fungi are



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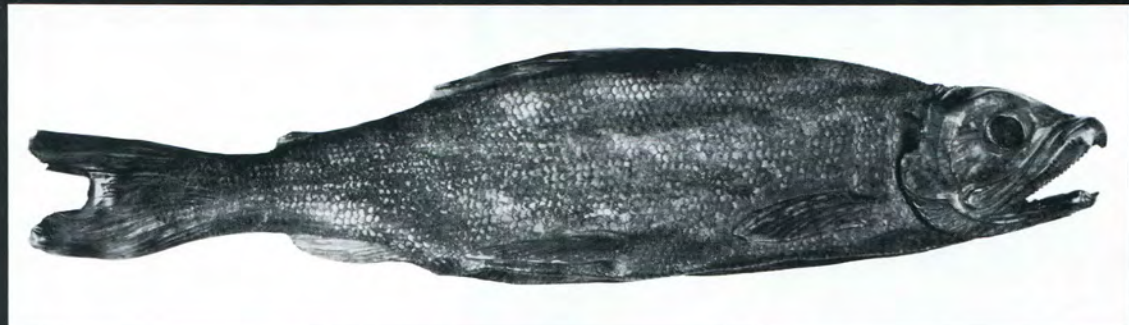
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shown in a netsuke, the symbol for a phallus may be inferred, even if only as a secondary meaning, and the same connection may be made between the clam or similar mollusk and the female genitalia.

Some examples of *shunga* netsuke which we saw and discussed follow:

*Fukurokuju* and *Jurojin* are two of the Seven Household Gods of Japan, and both are usually shown with very long, and occasionally phallic heads. Sometimes the artist will emphasize this feature so that, while the depiction is still subtle, no doubt remains as to his intention. Fig. 5.

The goddess *Okame* (*Uzume*) provokes a knowing wink however she is portrayed because her legend in itself is somewhat bawdy. She is said to have performed an erotic, boisterous dance in order to tempt the Sun-goddess *Amaterasu* out of the cave to which she had retired thus plunging the world into darkness. She is often shown in netsuke grasping or fondling the long nose on the mask of the deity *Saruta Hiko*, thus giving a doubly erotic note to the piece.

Sometimes we can be apprecia-



Fig. 6

tive of the humor in a netsuke and yet remain puzzled by the piece itself. We saw an excellent example in the workshop. It is an ivory carving of an elephant and monkey, itself a rather unusual combination. The elephant is shown having pulled one arm of the monkey so that it is elongated

completely out of scale, and, in what appears to be magnificent revenge, the monkey's other arm has disappeared into the buttocks of the elephant. Fig. 6. What, if any, the symbolism of this piece might be remains a mystery to all of us who have seen it, although this in no way detracts from our enjoyment of it.

As the degree of humor and the interpretation of the erotic element in many of the pieces that we see are in the eye of the beholder, so is the amount of amusement we feel on examining the more commonplace or more subtle subjects and treatments in the art of netsuke open to individual interpretation. For example: *kappa* are almost always funny, because they are ridiculous looking creatures, and it depends largely on the imagination and artistry of the *netsuke-shi* just how funny we find them. Fig. 7; the *oni* may be shown as malevolent, or humorous, or both; etc. Legends known to have humor in them will bring forth a smile if any part of the story is depicted to the initiate. This last is an important point because it brings me to a summary of the particular subject of Denis' workshop, and also to a general statement by me about my enjoyment of netsuke.

Humor is one of the large themes which run through netsuke: sometimes it is the main point of a piece, and again it may be a secondary or even more subordinate point of the depiction of the subject. Among the intriguing things about Japanese art, and netsuke in particular, are the various levels on which it may be enjoyed. One may love a piece for its craftsmanship, or its subject, or its singular conception, or its inventive use of materials, or all of these and more. One may want to run home to the reference shelf to search out a myth, or to decipher a signature, or simply to sit and touch and feel a beautiful object. The important thing is to enjoy, on whatever level we are able, and to learn.



Fig. 7





A rather domesticated 18th century ivory shishi grooms an uplifted paw. A bold but cleverly expressive Kyoto school piece. (inlaid eyes, mint condition, price available on request)

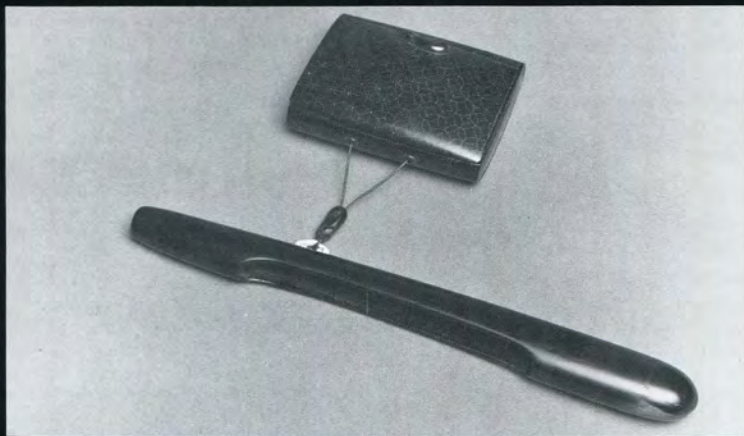
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THE purpose of this article, and the ones that follow, is to introduce you, the reader, to your fellow collectors who have been a part of the netsuke world for many years. Not only do they have interesting and exciting experiences to relate, but their advice and knowledge may prove beneficial. It is hard to find more gracious persons than those devoted to collecting this art form. They generously share time as well as their collections with those who express an interest. Their abundance of information, acquired through years of experience and research, is also available for the asking. And lastly, it is hoped these word portraits will serve as an introduction to future acquaintances with kindred spirits.

On a recent trip to California, I had the good fortune to visit with Dave and Sandy Swedlow. If you are thinking the name Swedlow sounds familiar it is probably because Dave is indeed that Swedlow whose company manufactures a top line of acrylic furniture known as "The Swedlow Group." Just ask any interior decorator. He is also pioneering the manufacture of many other products in acrylic for commercial uses as well as decorative functions – from pure sculptural forms to art panels for homes and buildings. This is all done by a process he invented called "electraforming," a procedure that creates a mold to reproduce any art design. The designs originate from works in glass or metal, or possibly an original drawing. Whatever the source, it is next translated into acrylic. The finished product has the brilliance of glass, without its breakability, and sparkles with jewel-like magnificence. Is this the art of the future? Many believe so. But even more interesting is this man, whose mind is so multi-faceted that he has conceived and created furniture and art of tomorrow, today, is equally at home in the world of netsuke and other Asian antiquities.

When one first meets Dave

## Portrait of a Collector

Dave and Sandy Swedlow

By Joy Epstein



Swedlow there emerges a handsome man of medium height with beautiful silver hair. But it is not long before you are aware of a wonderful smile, which lights up the entire face. Even his eyes twinkle with genuine warmth. He also possesses remarkable patience. On the day of this interview he was home from his office early (home is a small picturesque southern California seaport town). He was continually interrupted by telephone calls, friends dropping by, maintenance men working in the home who needed questions answered, and even two frisky dogs. He took it all in stride, always managing to continue our conversation about netsuke and *inro*. Patience and energy – what a combination.

Now meet Mrs. Swedlow – Sandy to her friends. This beautiful lady draws admiring glances wherever she goes. A blue-eyed blond, with a size six figure, and a smile as warm as her husband's. This brainy gal, originally from Texas, is as knowledgeable in netsuke, *inro*, and *ojime* as any collector around. Her intellect, coupled with an exquisite sense of beauty and taste, is clearly reflected in the Swedlow Collection.

Dave and Sandy – definitely a team. I had originally thought to

do this article only on Dave, but that was impossible once one has seen husband, wife, and netsuke collection together. It is obvious they have an equal input into the selection of pieces complemented by a mutual interest for this art form. It all began when Dave made a trip to New York in the late 1950s. He tells of that first small piece spotted in a New York shop – a group of mice beautifully carved in ivory. He thought about that piece for one year and finally purchased it. The carving was an *okimono*, not a netsuke, but it stirred his interest and his natural curiosity took over. It wasn't long before he entered the world of miniature sculpture called netsuke. Shortly thereafter he received a call from the same dealer who sold him the mice. Now he had an entire collection of netsuke, ninety pieces in all which had to be sold as a unit. The thing Dave remembers most about that collection was that it was comprised of "lots and lots of masks!" He bought the group and has been collecting ever since. Has his taste changed over the years? Yes. As a beginner he was drawn to the ivories, but as time went on he discovered the beauty of wood, lacquers, and metals. On the other hand, Sandy enjoyed all types of materials from the start. As to subject matter, their taste encompasses a broad range: animals, flowers and vegetables, demons and creatures from Japanese folklore and mythology, all those pieces they consider "unusual and exquisite." But is there one favorite subject? Sandy laughingly admits that Dave has a special spot for Shoki and *oni*. He adores the delightful imp and is under its spell! They travel extensively and wherever they go continue to search for the next unique addition. They usually agree on their acquisitions, but they are also flexible if either one has a "special" feeling for a particular piece.

I asked Dave and Sandy what was the worst thing that has happened to them as collectors. Both



felt it was not knowing quality and their subject in the early stages of buying. If they could have devoted more time to studying the field of netsuke, they would have acquired a better collection in that early period. But Dave is quick to add that because of his initial mistakes he went on to seek out netsuke dealers from around the world who were "scholars and teachers." They have formed close friendships with some of this group and it has been one of the most rewarding aspects of collecting.

Today the Swedlows own one of America's finest and most important collections. They continue to study the art and are devoted to teaching and encouraging the new collector. Sandy believes that Dave's interest in netsuke and *inro* is just as eager today as it was twenty-five years ago. In those early days he did not have many persons with whom to share his interests. However, a group of netsuke enthusiasts gradually devel-

oped in southern California and in 1974, under Dave's leadership, they organized the first netsuke and *inro* "convention" in the United States in connection with the "*Shinsa*" held in Newport Beach, California. What excitement! What prodigious effort went into the production of that three day wonderment. Dave and his super committee persuaded collectors from all over California to loan their netsuke for an exhibit - another remarkable first. The two hundred and fifty persons attending were treated to seminars, entertainment, and exhibits of several other forms of Japanese art including *inro* and *ojime*, lacquers, prints, and "sword furniture." The *Shinsa* was an unqualified success. It was to become the model for all those conventions that followed. The Swedlows feel that conventions are the great learning forum. They create a school for students of every level, inspire the collector, and provide the necessary growth for this art

field. However, Dave and Sandy express one cautious note of this subject - too many conventions defeat the purpose, audiences become indifferent to too much exposure and attendance begins to fall. They see this trend developing today.

In closing, I asked the Swedlows for some advice for the beginning collector. Their answer was to view netsuke whenever possible, study the subject, and make up one's own mind about which subject and artists to collect. Or to put it simply, "collect what you truly love." They have certainly done this, starting with their favorite artist, *Tokoku*, followed by *Minko*, to *So School* artists in general, and *Kaigyokusai*. And while tomorrow may bring another artist to add to their list of favorites, their enthusiasm and love of netsuke and *inro* inspire the listener.

Dave and Sandy Swedlow - sparkling personalities - a beautiful partnership.

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IN the *Shoku Nihongi*, an accounting of ancient court history, there is the first recorded citing of *mon*. It describes the banners of the Emperor *Mommu* in the year 701, the most explicit early example of fixed designs used as a denotation of person and status in Japan. These designs were the basis of the Heraldic System and took their first origins from the influence of the symbolic emblems and badges of the T'ang court costumes. The two characters for *mon* (the Chinese ideograph), when broken down, literally translate, "thread-markings" or embroidery. In Japan, considerations of weaving and dyeing brought further modifications of conception that varied the designs immediately from their Chinese predecessors.

As the Heraldic System gained in importance, there were four basic ways that a new family crest or *mon* developed, and of course, in each instance, a new variety of design.

One) Through marriage, new branches of old families set up semi-independent lines and it was

## Parallels in Japanese Art and Netsuke

Mon and the Japanese Heraldic System

by Cynthia (Sachi) Wagner

to their advantage to display their origin, as if to announce their lineage. They therefore varied their crest only slightly from the most prestigious branch of the family.

Two) From the Kamakura through the Momoyama period (1186-1615), sometimes known as the feudal period, we see the development of the greatest number of sub-clans. Obscure vassals who rose to power as warriors, would directly appropriate a crest from an enemy defeated in battle (martial spoils). Warriors also deliberately adopted emblems closely resembling that of a great

noble family, such as the "Four Great Clans", *Fujiwara - Tachibana - Minamoto* and *Taira*. A contradiction perhaps, that men who broke tradition (rebeling against the nobles) so valued these symbols of continuity and legitimacy, grasping as it were, at vestiges of social status and respect.

Three) A member of the Imperial House or a Lord could also bestow the legitimate use of his family crest on a vassal for great bravery or service above and beyond the call of duty, in the act of protecting his liege, much the same as we would award military medals of honor in this country. These crests were displayed on almost every conceivable part of the warrior's equipment.

Four) The last notable circumstance of the appropriation of a new *mon*, although arising less frequently, was the adoption of a crest very distinct from a parent line as an expression of independence or sometimes even animosity.

The use of crests as a mark of identification evolved through a period of over 400 years prior to the Tokugawa peace (1615). This provided ample opportunity for a family to become associated with a number of different crests, many of which had good connotations and were not likely to be discarded. So therefore a family regularly had two or three different emblems other than their official mark, at their disposal, known as substitute crests or *kaemon*. The Japanese by tradition have a fine sense of encroachment, so the use of a substitute crest was sometimes necessary diplomacy, such as when a new *daimyo* came into power who displayed a crest too similar to one's own. In such an instance one simply adopted the use of a substitute crest for the duration. This avoided embarrassment and possibly even punishment. There are accounts of individuals being publicly stripped of emblomed garments, considered pretentious by the new ruling *daimyo*.



A cryptomeria and lacquer purse by *Koma Kansai*, which displays the Imperial Chrysanthemum and Paulownia crests. These crests were primarily used by the Imperial family from the beginning of the Kamakura period.





The *kagamibuta* attached to this powder flask is silver in ebony and depicts the wisteria crest of the *Gosekke* or 5 main branches of the *Fujiwara* clan. The *Fujiwara* held the position of *kampaku* or regent to the Emperor.

But besides their heraldic significance (which aided in a gesture toward stability in a period of high feudalism) there is the significance of *mon* as an element of pure visual delight. The Japanese gift from composition is derived from a long evolution of conventions of customary practice. There was no formal body of rules, just an ingenious designer's perspective, tempered by adherence to traditional elements of design. For example, objects combined in an emblem were always intrinsically harmonious. This differs from, for

instance, the European arms crests, where different designs were combined to show martial allegiance. In a parallel situation of two *daimyo* wishing to show support and respect for each other in battle, they would actually exchange crests. They also would use neither man nor the parts of human anatomy in their crests as was the custom of European heraldry. A further demonstration of the effects of custom on these designs, was the existence of a hierarchy of values that were almost the opposite of the west. "A

world where the stillness of nature, the inanimate form, speaks strongest to the heart." Dower's quote best expresses the Japanese preference for the inanimate world of nature as the primary source of crest subjects, followed by small physical objects and then by geometric forms. Very few animate subjects were used, those being predominately birds and insects.

The fact that crests were rendered monochromatically with a badgelike nature, made discretion easier and drew more importance to line and grace of balance, a fine aesthetic concern. These designs were unique and graphically superior, lending themselves to prolific use in art and craft, which made available endless opportunities to have one's ancestry publicly declared. This brings us to their adaptability to netsuke design and their frequent application to all forms of *sagemono*. A netsuke could actually be a three-dimensional crest, such as was popular in the *ryusa manju* of the Asakusa school (see *Netsuke*, Neil K. Davey, pgs. 174-185). Also, illustrated as no. 624 on page 204 of Davey's book, there is a three-dimensional rendering of the *aoi* leaves by *Masabiro*. The *aoi* or hollyhock is the holy emblem of the Kamo Shrine (Kyoto), adopted out of respect by the *Matsudaira* clan. And finally, note the helmet of the Kajiwara Epira Genda Kagesuye by *Masatsugu*, (illustrated on page 227, no. 702 of the same book) a commemorative and martial emblem used by the General's descendants. If you refer to these photos, you will see some very clear examples of *mon* in netsuke.

In this article it has been my desire to expose you, the reader, to the world of Japanese crest design, so that with an educated eye you can begin to see more fully and enjoy this influence in the netsuke and *sagemono* you may hold in your collection or have the opportunity to see elsewhere.



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# Q & A FORUM

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IT is planned that the Q & A Forum will be a regular feature of your Journal, wherein readers will have the opportunity to ask or suggest questions and, more importantly, provide answers or viewpoints. The responses will be assembled, reviewed and finally treated by a panel of advisors consisting of Sharen T. Chappell, Richard R. Silverman and Denis Szeszler. While recognizing that some questions may have simple answers, many will require a fuller treatment and

there may be differing views and no absolute truths. The success of this department will depend on the contributions which our readers provide to the dialogue. *Please contribute.*

**Question:** What about those items that are often called a "child's" or a "doll's" netsuke? Which are they most likely to be? Did little girls wear them as well as little boys? Starting at what age?

**Answer:** Children's netsuke were very small - miniature net-

suke. Those that we most often see are dolls or depict fairy tales. These netsuke were carved to the taste of children and so many of them were dolls. Rarely would a small girl wear one. No one really knows at what age children started wearing them but if we are to go by today's festival of "Shichi-gosan" then they would have been dressed in kimono to go to the temples at the ages of 3, 5 and 7.

**Question:** How frequently did women wear netsuke? Any partic-



Richard Silverman, well known to collectors around the world, holds degrees from Brandeis University and the University of Michigan Law School and has done additional graduate study. A native Ohioan, he studied art in his early years at the Toledo Museum of Art. After an educational post in Bangkok, he served as a Professor in the Aoyama Gakuin University College of Law in Tokyo from 1965 until 1980. He is the Regional Director of the International Society of Appraisers for California and Japan, is a member of numerous societies devoted to Japanese art, and serves as an advisor to the Japanese Department of Sotheby Parke Bernet, Los Angeles. A prolific writer and frequent lecturer, Richard is a recognized authority on contemporary carvers.



Sharen Chappell has degrees in communications, English, and education and a long-time interest in Oriental art. Her own study and collecting of netsuke began twelve years ago. Since then she has written numerous articles and presented workshops and talks in the United States and in London.

As president of Netsuke Kenkyukai from 1977-1979, she was responsible for forming the Netsuke Kenkyukai slide library, commencing a regular Newsletter, and organizing the successful Minneapolis NK convention and Minneapolis Institute of Arts exhibition of netsuke and *inro* in September, 1979.

Sharen is now in partnership with her friend, Edie Kurstin, and is a member of the Netsuke Dealers' Association, Inc. and the International Society of Appraisers.



Denis Szeszler, born in Budapest, started studying art as a child. After primary studies in Budapest and Vienna, he graduated at the head of his class from the School of Industrial Arts in New York, received his Bachelor of Foreign Arts, *cum laude*, from Pratt Institute, and completed the requirements for a Ph.D. in aesthetics at New York University. He has specialized in Oriental art since his college days and has published articles and lectured on numerous facets of the antique arts of Japan and China. A dealer, he is a member of the Appraisers Association of America, contributing editor of *The Antiques Dealer* (the national magazine for the antiques trade), and is currently president of the International Netsuke Dealers Association, Inc.



ular group of women? At the sash in the rear, or only in the bosom?

**Answer:** Women rarely wore netsuke. Again, there isn't enough firm evidence to answer this question with authority but from all I know I would think that most of them would have been worn by the courtesans and geisha of the entertainment quarters. They would have almost always worn them in their bosoms attached to the pouches slipped within the upper folds of their kimono.

*For a rather complex starter question for which readers' responses are sought:*

Biblical scholars have concluded that the Synoptic Gospels were not necessarily the product of the single hand of Matthew, Mark or

Luke, but instead grew out of or are based upon documents which have not been located but whose existence is attested to by a commonality of textual materials and language. The community of scholars has given these unknown writings specific names, *viz.*, the M Document, etc.

Many netsuke are unsigned and while it is often possible to attribute a particular carving to a particular artist, based on a similar signed model or a common style, there are many unsigned netsuke for which no attributions are made. While assignment to a particular school or period may be done, there appear to be few, if any, instances where the works of an artist who never or rarely signed his work have been collated or

grouped. This is an area of scholarship, research and effort which cries to be done. It should be particularly applicable in the case of the early figures – *Tobori*. To illustrate, can we identify works as being from a single knife by the common manner in which the garments of the figures are treated? Or by the presence of a special design of the pouches? Or the treatment of the hair, etc.? If so, could we not assign these works to Carver K and those to Carver J? Your Editor thinks this can – and should – be done. A specialist in tall figures believes that no common links can be found. What do you think? Is it worth the effort? Has anyone tried? Is anyone willing to undertake such a study?

---

#### Letters from page 5

something they enjoy and can afford and if we approach netsuke collecting from this point, whether prices rise or falter, the collector can still enjoy his pieces and know that, in fact, he did make a good investment.

In stressing the educational aspects of netsuke collecting I believe we will encourage a number of people who have been interested but reluctant to become involved due to the commercialization that they have encountered.

Again, our best wishes on the new expanded Journal and the direction Netsuke Kenyukai is taking.

Marsha L. Vargas  
Los Altos, CA

---

I recently had the pleasure of spending the evening in the company of James Hume, the new President of Netsuke Kenyukai. He impressed me with his enthusiasm and his plans for the future of the organization. Indeed, he

was so persuasive that, upon awakening the next morning, I realized with a start that I had enlisted in his army. Casting aside a long-standing policy of never volunteering, I realized that some things will, unfortunately, simply not get done by themselves.

So here I am, resolved to go forward, with Mr. Hume's enthusiasm as an example, to form a New York Chapter of Netsuke Kenyukai's local study groups.

It is, after all, long overdue for collectors and students of netsuke in the metropolitan New York area to have some sort of organization around which to gather to study, compare, and even socialize. Although we New Yorkers have a reputation for being somewhat apathetic "joiners," we have an even more justly deserved reputation for getting things done once we decide to do them, and I hope to be able to draw on the vast pool of talent and scholarship available in this area.

All of which brings me to the

main point of this letter, *i.e.*, to ask for help. If any of our readers, whether collectors, dealers, neither, or both, have any interest in joining this group, or any suggestions they would like to put forward, I would be most happy to hear them. I want our local group to be enjoyable, informative, non-pressuring, and I will do everything I can to make it so.

So come on everyone, let's do it. Write to me at the address below, or call me at (212) 877-1804, and let's get going.

Jerry Spiller  
146 West 74th Street  
New York, N.Y. 10023

P.S. I have heard that the Netsuke Dealers Association is sponsoring the first-ever New York Convention next October. There is a great deal that a local group in New York can do to ensure that this will be the best, most enjoyable Convention ever held, and I think it is in the best interests of all of us to do so.





Our Dutchman is a serious subject; in spite of other opinions.

We can't be responsible for this obvious lack of respect. The contemporary artist Meikei has our colonizing Hollander with his intentions exposed. Who can fault the traditional Japanese audience for their collective sneer? Posed with a gold cross behind his back and fingers crossed, one is hard-pressed to believe his oath of non-vehemency. However, we are smitten by his powerful form and amusing interpretation. Standing five inches tall, he should be taken very seriously indeed! At times, it is important to rise above the opinions of others.



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Ivory seated kirin, signed *Yoshimasa*,  
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