



根付研究會

NETSUKE KENKYUKAI

Study Journal
Volume 2, Number 2, 1982



Seated dog. Wood, 18th century, unsigned, Kyoto School. Exhibited in "Commanding Assemblage," at INCS Convention IV, 1981. Illustrated in Hurtig's *Masterpieces of Netsuke Art*, no. 409, and *INCS Journal* Vol. 9/1, p. 30. Featured in film documentary, "The World of Netsuke." H. 2 3/4".



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NETSUKE KENKYUKAI

Study Journal

Volume 2, No. 2 June 1982



Cover Description

Stylized Dog. Ivory, signed
Bishu, a contemporary artist.
Copied from a 300 year old
Namban screen in Japan.
Richard Silverman Collection.

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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

WE are justifiably proud and greatly appreciative of the many accolades which we have received regarding the first issue of the new and expanded Study Journal. However, as I grow older I find myself griping more, so forgive me when I express disappointment that, with a single exception, no contributions to the Journal have been volunteered following our plea in the last issue nor (with but one exception from the same reader) were there any responses for the Q & A Forum. With old age, I also worry. Please help my longevity by submitting materials for consideration.

Dr. Jay Hopkins presents a very informative article in this issue regarding the restrictions imposed on the early ivory carvers and we are pleased to publish a short but powerful advocacy of the *manju* by Raymond Bushell.

In the last issue we stated that this would be an art journal with only minimal discussion of prices. However, prices and the investment side of collecting continue to be a prime topic of discussion. Two articles in this issue deal with this aspect. We regard them as excellent presentations of their respective points of view and hope that they will serve as a final catharsis in the matter.

President's Message



James
Hume

IN the last issue I indicated to you some of our most important objectives, some of which are already behind us. You can be proud that your Netsuke Kenkyukai is already the largest organization of netsuke collectors in the world. We have already heard from many of you who like what we are doing and our approach to the Study Journal—thank you for your thoughtful support.

It is our intention to continue to improve the Study Journal and hopefully you will find that this issue reflects certain of those technical improvements. We want to expand both the number of pages and the amount of color. This will, of course, increase our costs so we will have to look into ways in which we can increase our revenue

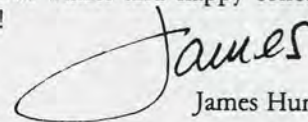
to make this possible. Some of the ideas already suggested or considered are:

- Increase the price of membership – we want to keep the cost of membership down so that with the exception of a nominal increase anticipated in 1983 this is not the area to concentrate on.
- Increase the number of members – this is a most important area of increasing our revenue to which each of you can contribute. Sign up, recommend or even sponsor a new member.
- Expand Advertising – we will continue to keep a reasonable balance between the advertising and the editorial content, consequently additional advertisers can only be accommodated through an expanded Journal (a “chicken and egg” situation). We turned down prospective advertisers for the last issue but over the next few issues we hope to be able to accommodate more ad space with a proportionate increase in editorial content.
- Start a Classified Ad page at the back of the Study Journal to enable individuals to make contact with other readers. There may be some pitfalls associated with this idea.

- Sell our publication or memberships to museums, art institutes, etc., who may have a budget for such items. Where do we start? How do we get a comprehensive and accurate mailing list? Who will volunteer for the job and what about the costs?
- Find some benefactors who would be willing to make a financial contribution beyond the price of membership. If there are any potential benefactors out there please let me know!

What do you think of the foregoing? Do you have any other ideas to offer? I'd appreciate hearing from you on any thoughts you may have.

Best wishes and happy collecting!


James Hume

LETTERS

Your first issue of the Kenkyukai Journal is an outstanding achievement and you deserve to be very proud of your efforts.

Helen Hurtig
INCS Journal
Honolulu, Hawaii

In publishing Virginia Atchley's fine article, as well as letters from Raymond Bushell and Marsha Vargas, the Netsuke Kenkyukai Study Journal is singing my song. No netsuke that gives pleasure to the owner is a mistake or a poor investment. New collectors should enjoy their purchases and resist intimidating warnings that they will be sorry later because they have failed to select the finest work of the most famous carvers sold by the best-informed dealers.

With regard to one small facet of Mrs. Atchley's Fig. 2 (p. 7, Vol. 2, No. 1), could the *Rakan* be sitting on a gravestone? If so, could the single character be a Buddhist invocation? I have an early 18th C. unsigned ivory *Sotoba Komachi* with the same general appearance as Fig. 2. *Ono No Komachi* is seated on a worn gravestone on which the artist carved what seems to be a Buddhist invocation, a single character. (See Sotheby's catalogue, June 23, 1976, #221,

for a similar invocation on a gravestone.)

This is not a "classical" netsuke, but it has given me many hours of pleasure as a small work of art and as a subject for study. At first I had to learn whom it represented and what ideas and emotions the carver intended to convey. Later I wondered what the single character meant and why someone had chipped ivory from the gravestone. After fourteen years I have forgotten how much it cost, but I know that it may still conceal secrets for me to fathom.

Isabel Cunningham
Annapolis, Maryland

My heartiest congratulations for a superb publication! Being in the public affairs business, and having had a hand in many different types of publications, I know what is involved. My only suggestion is that the Journal concentrate on all levels of collecting, not just

top-of-the-line pieces that will always be beyond the monetary reach of so many NK members. Let's concentrate on collecting at the personal pleasure and hobbyist level as well as keeping tuned in to the latest developments in the art world.

Again, thanks for a beautiful magazine! Keep up the good work!

James R. Newton
Vienna, Virginia

Congratulations and compliments on the new format, contents and presentation.

My wife, Shirlee, and I have enjoyed reading each article with a great deal of interest, particularly Virginia Atchley's in-depth article. I sincerely hope future Study Journals will be as instructive and informative as this one.

Robert Guggenheim
Newport Beach, California

Membership Corner



Adele
Murphy

THE response to our membership drive continues to be extremely positive. Since the production of the new Study Journal, applications for membership have been pouring in and we expect to exceed our objectives by a wide margin.

The first meeting of the newly founded New York Study Group Chapter was held on March 27, 1982 and was a resounding success. The meeting was attended by such well-known personalities as Raymond Bushell and Neil

Davey. We can't help wonder what Chapter President Jerry Spiller will do for an encore.

The San Francisco Chapter will have had its founding meeting by the time you receive this issue. Chapter President is Maybelle "Betty" Doré capably assisted by Vice President Henry Toledano.

Reports on the activities of the Washington Study Group Chapter are really exciting. They have grown from "non-existence" to over 40 members in less than 6 months under the capable leadership of Chapter President James Rose. Jim Rose has asked us to publish the following invitation:

"On behalf of the membership of the Washington Chapter of Netsuke Kenkyukai, I would like to welcome all members who find themselves in our vicinity to join us at our meetings. I shall be glad to arrange any necessary lodgings, etc. We cordially invite nonmember experts and expert members and dealers to share their knowl-

edge with us by conducting informal workshops or seminars. For the remainder of 1982 our meeting will be held at 7:30 p.m. on the following Saturdays: July 17th, September 18th, and November 20th.

Currently, there are forty-one members in the Washington Chapter, and we continue to grow. Our enthusiasm is high and we were delighted with the first issue of the 'new Journal.'

James A. Rose, M.D.
President, Washington Chapter
Netsuke Kenkyukai
P.O. Box 34623
Bethesda, MD 20817"

Thank you so much for your kind words of encouragement and your terrific support. Please keep up the good work soliciting new members—our most important objective.

Adele Murphy
Adele Murphy
Membership Chairman

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.

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.

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MY motivation for writing this article is threefold. First, I have long been interested in early elephant ivory netsuke. By early, I mean the 17th and 18th C. pieces, with an approximate extension of 25 years into the 19th C. Unfortunately there is very little documentary evidence concerning the origin of the material and its subsequent use by ivory workers during the Tokugawa era (roughly 1600-1850). Partially because of this, a number of misconceptions have arisen and have been perpetuated both in Japan and the Western World. Proposing my own opinions of some of these matters is the second purpose of this paper. For example, the tall ivory figures are commonly designated as 18th C. in origin although they were almost certainly made over a two hundred year period (roughly 1650-1850). My final motivation is the hope that this paper may be a vehicle or stimulus for further study and understanding of the subject. I would like to think it possible to gather the clues and piece together a more complete picture of early ivory pieces in terms of a relative time scale, place of origin (regional) and method of use. With this in mind, and recognizing the probability of error, the author welcomes dissenting opinions, thoughts, or factual evidence dealing with any aspect of the subject.

To start with basics, elephant ivory is obtained from the tusks of

Early Elephant Ivory Netsuke

by Dr. Jay E. Hopkins

Asian or African elephants. Tusks are outgrowths arising above the mouth in both male and female elephants. They are phylogenetically related to teeth and are laminar in structure, tapering to an end point. All contain a hollow cavity (for nerve and nutritional purposes) in the proximal one third to one half of the tusk. Tusks vary in length from two to three feet for the smaller Asian variety and up to nine feet for the largest African variety. Fresh ivory varies in color from white to a creamy light yellow. The central core is stark white whereas outer layers tend to have more coloration. Moreover, with the passage of time, ivory takes on a pale yellow coloration. The outer layers color faster and more deeply than the central core and can reach a deep yellow to orange-brown tone. Elephant ivory may be recognized by finding patterns of cross-hatch lines (such as would be made by a series of intersecting circles) that are in the ivory on a cross cut portion; these lines are commonly seen at the ends of the subject.

Elephant ivory is not native to Japan. It is not certain when ivory first reached Japan or was used for netsuke. One reasonable theory is that the Hideyoshi invasions of 1592-98 were most successful in the booty brought back from China.¹ This could easily have included Chinese seals and toggles of ivory which were then converted to netsuke—the adapted netsuke. Fig. 1, a stylized *shishi*-like creature, could represent such a piece. The most common examples I have seen were of a *shishi* or variants on a base or stand. Occasionally there would be an additional human figure with the beast. They usually had a single hole drilled in the base.

Prior to this time (late 16th, early 17th C.) there are documented examples of the use of the netsuke. They are mentioned or shown in writings, scroll paintings, and screens.² These netsuke were primarily natural objects such as roots, gourds, or shells. By the 17th C. there are netsuke depicted that may have been ivory and which appear to be *manju* or ring in shape. Most *manju* netsuke now in existence date to the mid-19th C., but judging from early pictures, there were probably more primitive *manju* netsuke around long before that period. Fig. 2, a very highly worn example, depicting a wounded warrior holding the severed head of an adversary, may qualify. Fig. 3 is a variation of the ring netsuke but probably dates much later.



Fig. 1. Probable "adapted" netsuke. Ivory *shishi* on base.



Fig. 2. Early, worn *manju* depicting warrior holding severed head.



Fig. 3. Three rabbits. A variation of the ring netsuke.

Many sources state that ivory was not originally shipped to Japan in tusk form, but rather in pieces. Whether these pieces were cylindrical sections or small scraps is not known. The first whole tusks are said to have been brought to Japan early in the 17th C. (1632?) to the *Shogun Hidetada*.³

The next piece of information is an illustration from Jack Hillier's monograph, *Source Books for Japanese Craftsmen*.⁴ Fig. 4 is from a Japanese book of 1690 dealing with all facets of Japanese life at the time, *A Pictorial Encyclopedia of Mankind (Jinrim Kimmo Zui)*. It depicts an "ivory and horn worker" and some of his wares. Several observations are of importance. First, note that the craftsman is working with a whole tusk and cutting it into cylindrical sections. Secondly, note that there is a hand-turned lathe (necessary for making *manju* and *kagamibuta* pieces) in the background. Finally, in the foreground are pictured many of his wares including tops to small containers (for tea) combs, hair pins, plectra (the elongated hatchet-shaped pieces at the top), small pieces suitable for *ojime*, and discs with varying size holes that could be fashioned into *manju*, *kagamibuta*, or ring net-



Fig. 4. Early ivory (or "horn") worker from 1690 book. Note use of whole tusk, cylindrical sections, multiple various "wares" and lathe in background.



Fig. 5. Ivory Shinno (medicine man).

suke. There are also some rectangular blocks that could be the start of a *katabori*-style netsuke. There are also two bags which one could postulate contained the shavings used for medicinal or composition purposes. In the text of the book the products of this man are called *tsumosaiku* ("the wares made of horn") and netsuke and *ojime* are listed among those products. The points being suggested, at least at that time period, were that every last scrap of ivory was used, each for its own purpose, and the same artisan was responsible for combs, plectra, and netsuke. Moreover,

he utilized whole tusks by cutting them initially into cylindrical sections.

In referring to the adapted (early 17th C.?) netsuke, Meinertzhagen states that in the ensuing years Kyoto craftsmen copied and modified these Chinese-style carvings to supply an ever-increasing demand for netsuke.⁵ Probably a major reason was the rapidly increasing use of tobacco. Tobacco was introduced by the Portugese in 1542.⁶ Its use and propagation spread rapidly from Kyushu to Kyoto-Osaka, etc. It was outlawed in the early 1600's but probably was still used in defiance of the law. This law was then repealed in 1716, certainly creating an increased demand for netsuke. Early in the Edo period, according to the evidence, tobacco pouches were never worn by Samurai (they wore *inro*, etc.) but rather by artisans, merchants, and the like.

It is difficult to put together a precise chronological order for ivory netsuke because great overlap in the time periods existed. For example, *manju* were made over a three hundred year period. Perhaps the next type following the adapted, ring and *manju* pieces would be a group of figure netsuke usually carved in the seated position with or without a base. The *himotoshi* consisted either of a single hole drilled through the base or a channel passing obliquely through the piece with the larger hole at the bottom. Examples I have seen include *rakan*, *oni*, Shinno (the medicine man), *sennin*, Hotei, scholars, etc. Fig. 5, Shinno carved

1. Meinertzhagen, Frederick, *The Art of the Netsuke Carver*, Routledge & Kegan Paul London, 1956, p. 6, 28.

2. Bushell, Raymond, *The Netsuke Handbook of Ueda Reikichi*, Charles E. Tuttle, Tokyo, 1961, p. 60.

3. Meinertzhagen, *op cit*, p. 12.

4. Hillier, Jack, *Source Books for Japanese Craftsmen*, Han-Shan Tang Ltd., 1979, p. 11.

5. Meinertzhagen, *op cit*, p. 28.

6. Meinertzhagen, *op cit*, p. 27.



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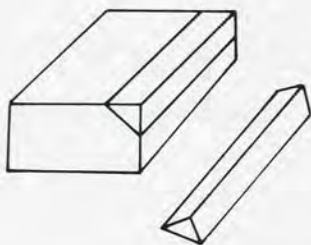


Fig. 6. If a rectangular block of ivory had the corner cut off to carve a statue, the resulting segment would look like this.

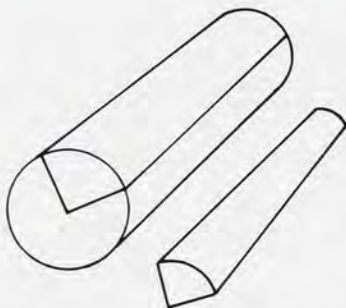


Fig. 7. If one started from a cylindrical section of tusk (see Fig. 4) and cut it pie-fashion into quarters the segment would look like this.

look at the pieces themselves, this color difference isn't merely on the surface, but is rather a layer. (see Fig. 13).

It seems much more likely that these triangular pieces result from direct sections of tusk. I found confirmation for this assumption in Meinertzhagen, who states that in the early period ivory sections of the tusk (cylindrical, see Fig. 4) were cut (pie fashion) into quarters or small sections. (Fig. 7).⁷

There's also some related discussion of this question in Raymond Bushell's translation of Reikichi's *Netsuke Handbook*, in which Reikichi refers several times in derogatory fashion to *sankaku* netsuke.⁸ He makes a number of points.

1. They are carved from scrap ivory.

2. They are made for "common people".

3. Fine artists such as *Kaigyokusai* and *Mitsuhiro* worked only in choice *tokata* or core ivory.

When I first read the foregoing, I realized why the Japanese dealers

without a base, is a representative example.

The next group to be considered are the triangular pieces. In Japan, these are called *sankaku* (three sided) and were not particularly highly regarded by the Japanese. These include the tall standing figures as well as small animals and other similar pieces.

A digression at this point. When I resided in Japan (1974-76) and was first being introduced to netsuke, I was most attracted to the early worn ivory pieces. As I continued seeing more and more pieces, this interest persisted, and dealers who had now become friends tried to advise me that these *sankaku* pieces were made for the "common people" and were not of top quality. They would then show me much later, intricate, detailed (my prejudice is showing through) ivory pieces—pieces I regarded then, and still regard, as over-fussy and described these as "top quality." I asked one man what he meant and he said that *sankaku* pieces were made from waste or scrap ivory. He told me that as ivory statues (*okimono*) were carved from rectangular blocks, these scraps resulted as corners were cut off. See Fig. 6. This didn't make much sense for a number of reasons. First, most *okimono* I saw were much later than the *sankaku* netsuke; most were carved during the

Meiji period. Secondly, the size of the *sankaku* netsuke made it quite unlikely that they could have come from scraps resulting from removing these corners. Finally, if one looked at the pieces themselves on end, one side of the "triangle" always had a convex surface—as would result from the outer surface of a tusk. Moreover, this surface is commonly darker in color. It is often said this color difference is a result of exposure: the piece rests on its back and this portion stays darker. This may well play a part, but the real difference is that the outer layer of the tusk takes on a different, darker coloration with age. Moreover, if you

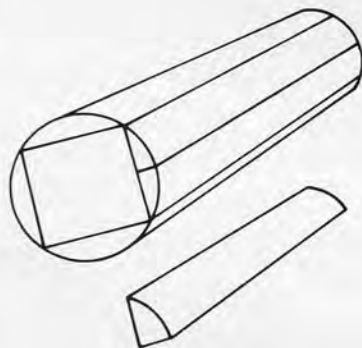


Fig. 8. If one took a cylindrical section of tusk but cut off the sides, leaving a tapered rectangular block and four sides and if each side piece were then cut in half, the segment could look like this.

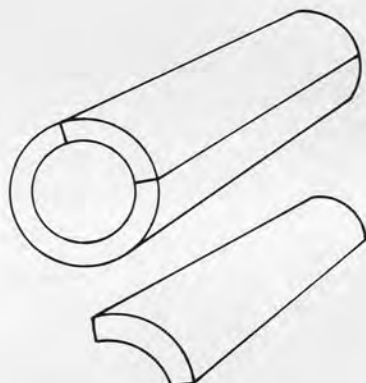


Fig. 9. If the cylindrical section came from the base of the tusk which is hollow, the section would look like this.

7. Meinertzhagen, *op cit*, p. 12.

8. Bushell, *op cit*, p. 75.

held these pieces in contempt, but also came to the conclusion (forgive the presumption please) that Reikichi was wrong, it seems to me, to compare qualitatively pieces and artists from widely different time periods and circumstances. *Kaigyokusai* and *Mitsuhiro* are indisputably superb artists, but they are highly patronized carvers of the mid-19th C. who headed their own schools. The early pieces are products of a time period where netsuke were probably a sideline of artisans creating numerous wares: for example, the ivory worker referred to previously with his combs, plectra, tops, and other similar products. Mask carvers created mask netsuke. Many wood pieces were the products of early Buddhist image carvers, or the work of artists primarily employed in other areas, e.g., *Shuzan*, a famous painter who carved and polychromed his netsuke as a sideline.

I was still bothered by the repeated mention of "scrap" ivory. Plectra were often mentioned in this connection. Fig. 10 shows a plectrum. It is described as an elongated (up to 9 inches) hatchet-shaped pick for the *samisen*, a string instrument introduced to Japan in the 1500's. If one were to take a cylindrical section of tusk and remove a tapered rectangular piece from the center (suitable for fashioning a plectrum) four outer sections would remain. If each of these sections were then cut in half it would produce two long, tapered triangular pieces with one short flat surface, one long flat surface, and a long convex surface. (Fig. 8) This happens to be a shape which corresponds very well to a majority of the *sankaku* pieces, particularly the tall figures.

In looking at the pieces themselves I believe there is evidence of use of all types of ivory sections.

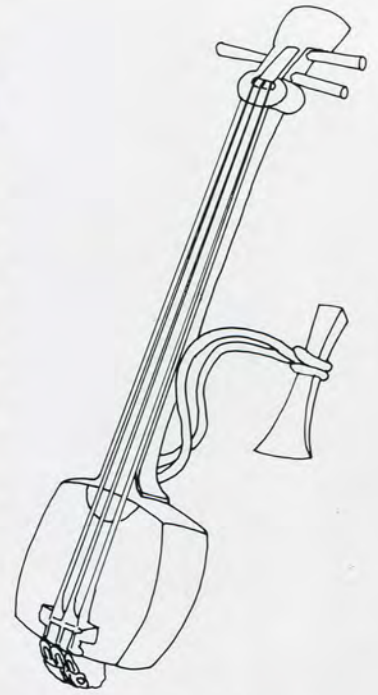


Fig. 10. *Samisen* and plectrum.



Fig. 11. Tall Chinese ivory carvings, of the Ming Period.



Fig. 12. Chinnan *Sennin*, Shoki and *oni* and AINU with *tengu* egg.

The best known *sankaku* pieces are the tall figures. The most common subjects are the various *sen-nin*, Shoki, Kwanyu, scholars, Dutchmen, etc. The pieces are usually large—up to four and five inches. The earliest pieces are more Chinese in character, often depicting subjects from Chinese mythology. Dress is commonly Chinese. Japanese literature repeatedly mentions that early Japanese culture and arts were strongly influenced by Chinese thoughts, ideals, and art tradition. Chinese were carving tall figures in the 16th C. and 17th C. (Fig. 11) Chinese artists of the period felt it presumptuous to

sign their work. Perhaps that and the fact that both owner and carver were local may help to explain why early netsuke are unsigned. Chinese artists felt it wrong to waste material. This may help explain why in the earliest pieces the original shape of the ivory is very apparent. Every scrap of ivory in a tusk appears to have been used. I believe that generally as time progressed from the 17th C. to the 19th C. this latter trait disappeared. Pieces were more deeply undercut and the original shape is less apparent. Of course, a lot of this depended on the skill of the artist.

Fig. 12 shows a Chinnan *sen-*

nin, Shoki and *oni*, and an AINU with a *tengu* egg. Fig. 13 shows the AINU in side view. The color differentiation and layering is present. Fig. 14 is a very early reclining Hotei that served a secondary function as a *fudekake* (brush rest). When these pieces are viewed on end they have a similar shape—long tapered triangular pieces with one long, one short, and one convex surface.

9. Barker and Smith, *Netsuke*, British Museum Publishers, London, 1976, p. 10, 177.

10. Meinertzhagen, *op cit*, p. 28.

11. Terry Wingrove, personal communication.

12. Meinertzhagen, *op cit*, p. 42.

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Fig. 13. Ainu side view.

Other subjects, carved from similar pieces of ivory, would include a standing horse, (Fig. 15) *kirin*, deer, tiger group or lying cow. There are also other standing figure netsuke of similar form only smaller.

Contemporary with the tall figures and cut from similar but smaller triangular pieces of ivory

are various animals. Fig. 16 shows a sleeping deer, a monkey and sake gourd, and a performing monkey and peach. The different views (Fig. 17) show the various triangular shapes and color lamination (darker color on the convex surface.)

Age cracks are the rule in these early pieces but rather than defacing a piece they can combine with some wear and varying shades of yellow-orange colorations (patina) to create a very pleasing effect. The Japanese combine these qualities with others under the term "*agi*"; those characteristics added to a piece by time, wear, and use by various owners. Unfortunately, these characteristics are most apparent only in a hand-held examination.

Fig. 18 depicts a high quality carving of a pair of rats. The piece, though unsigned, is attributed to *Okatori*. Though certainly far less apparent, when closely scrutinized from different angles, the same original triangular piece of ivory becomes apparent. The same holds true for most all early Kyoto lying and seated animals including those of top quality.

That leads to an interest consideration. Where were these early *sankaku* pieces made? Richard Barker and Lawrence Smith, in their book describing the British Museum Exhibition, state the tall figures were made in Osaka.⁹ The reasoning was that Osaka was the



Fig. 15. Standing horse.



primary port in the Edo period and certainly a likely spot for an exotic import such as ivory. Meinertzhagen feels they were carved in Kyoto.¹⁰ I would be inclined to go along with the latter. We know of signed tall figures such as *Yoshinaga's* Shoki and *oni*, *Masanao's* Dutchman and Mongolian archer. The *sankaku*

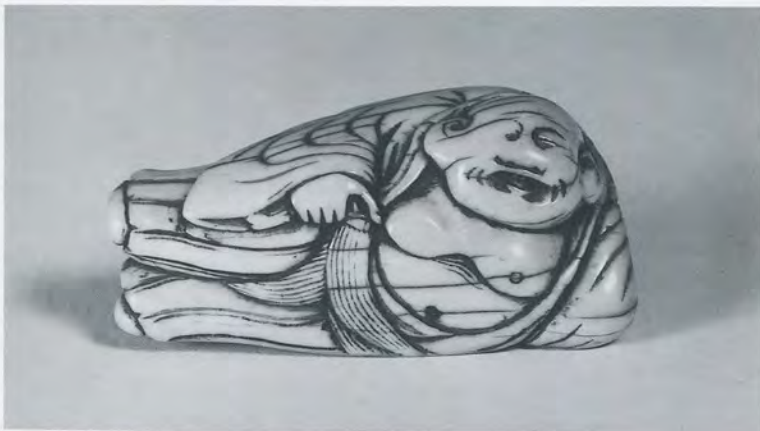
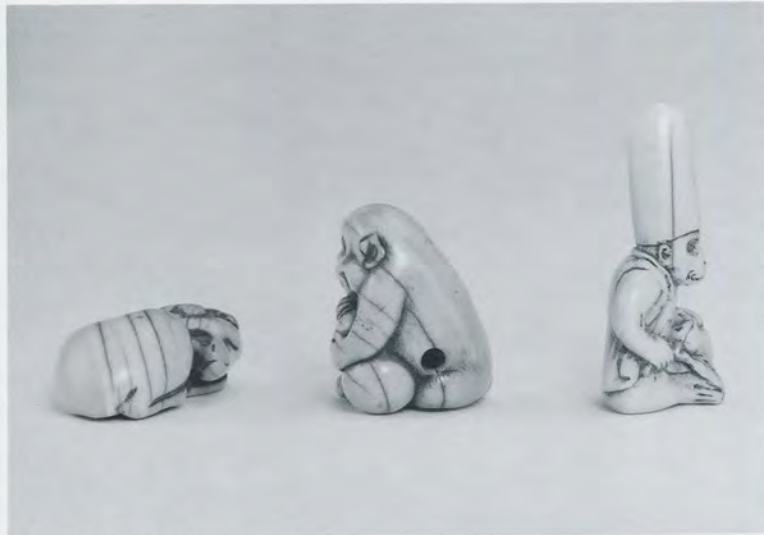
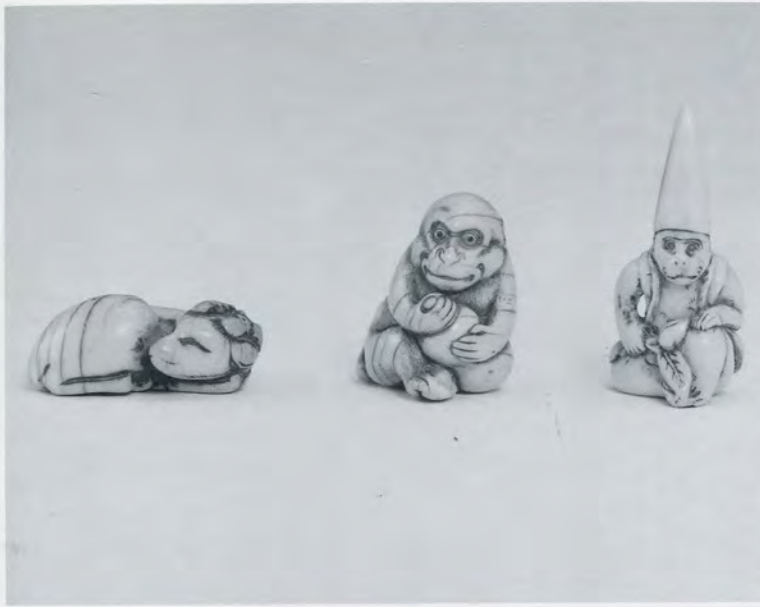


Fig. 14. Reclining Hotei-fudekake netsuke.





Figs. 16.-17. *Sankaku* animals.



Fig. 18. Pair of rats.

(Figs. 16-18) animals and other signed pieces would all suggest a Kyoto origin.

Subsequent information unearthed by Japanese researchers suggests that ivory was actually imported through the port of Sakai and then carried by boat or overland to Kyoto and possibly Osaka.¹¹ In the *Soken Kisbo*, besides the centers of Osaka, Kyoto, and Tokyo, only two other towns are listed as having more than one famous netsuke artist. These are Sakai (2) and Wakayama (5), the home of *Ogasawara Issai*—famous for “carving in ivory.” Both of these are small port towns on the same bay and relatively close to Kyoto and Osaka. As a matter of fact, the distinction between Kyoto and Osaka may not be important as they are reasonably close (30-40 miles). Perhaps it would be most reasonable to say the early ivory pieces originated from Kansai—the southern part of Honshu. One thing seems reasonably certain to me, they do not originate from Tokyo or the surrounding flatlands (Kanto plain). The signed Tokyo early style figures all seem to be in wood. Meinertzhagen states that *Chikuyosai Tomochika* (*Tomochika I*), who moved to Tokyo from Kyoto and worked from 1800-1830, introduced ivory to Tokyo.¹² By the mid-19th C. ivory began replacing wood as the

most common netsuke material except in provincial centers such as Nagoya-Ise, Hida, etc. If one looks at the huge number of highly detailed ivory figures and other pieces signed by known Tokyo artists, it becomes apparent they would date from the first quarter of the 19th C. or later. I'm certain more able and knowledgeable students will find exception or contradictions to the above, but it allows for interesting speculation and categorizing.

There is one more type of ivory piece to consider. I mentioned earlier that the first third or half of the tusk is hollow. As this hollow cavity tapers to an end at the mid-portion of the tusk, cross sections would provide rings or possibly even *manju* once the hole became small enough. If one cut the base of the tusk into sections, a flat piece with both a concave and convex surface would be the result. (Fig. 9) Indeed, there are pieces that demonstrate just that, such as the Chokaro *senmin* and sleeping priest (Figs. 19 and 20) and rabbit group (Fig. 3).

Mention is commonly made that early pieces tend to be larger in size than their later counterparts and this generally seems to be true. But there are some very small pieces that are quite early. Moreover, early illustrations that depict netsuke with *inro* usually

show small *manju*, ring or gourd netsuke. I believe the size of the piece was dictated more by the *sagemono* being used. Tobacco pouches or traveling cases certainly would require larger netsuke than the delicate *inro*. I would feel that further study of *sagemono*—those objects suspended by netsuke—would be very illuminating as to styles of netsuke.

To summarize, when looking at early ivory netsuke they must be considered in their own context. There are good pieces, bad pieces, and those in between. Some artists were more successful than others. Almost certainly early netsuke carving was a secondary or sideline profession—by artisans, not necessarily highly trained artists. Moreover, early pieces were utilitarian—made for use with the constrictions that this may imply in terms of size, shape, use of material, artistic restraint, etc. To compare a *Kaigyokusai* or *Mitsuhiro* piece, that may have been made for show for a wealthy patron, with an early utilitarian piece just isn't appropriate. Artistry is expected in the former; when it occurs in the latter, it is much more amazing. To say *sankaku* netsuke were made from scraps for the common people is to misunderstand the craft of the early ivory worker and the context in which he worked.



Fig. 19. Chokaro *senmin*.



Fig. 20. Sleeping priest.



KURSTIN/CHAPPELL

fine netsuke, inro, and lacquer ware



A fine and bold rendition of Kinko riding the carp.
Signed *Yoshitomo*, late 18th Century.

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Moreover, pieces that were recognized as some of the finest in existence are actually *sankaku* pieces including most of the early Kyoto masterpieces and "stunners" such as the tall *shishi* and cub shown as illustration 4 in *Real and Imaginary Beings*, Okada and Neill, from the Kurstin collection and Fig. 4, page 22, INCS Journal volume 8:1.

In conclusion I feel that early ivory netsuke were products of artisans from the Kyoto-Osaka area who were strongly influenced by the art objects, subjects and art tradition of China. Individual pieces varied in size and shape depending on the original section of ivory as well as use requirements (size of *sagemono*). The color variations found in early netsuke (darker coloration on the back of pieces) is partially a result of age and exposure, but more importantly is due to the fact the

outer layer of the tusk takes on a darker color with age than the inner core. Finally, as time passed into the 18th C. and the demand for netsuke increased, some of the craftsmen probably limited their work more and more to netsuke carving thus becoming the early *netsuke-shi*. This may have occurred in the generation of artists identified in the *Soken Kisbo* or more likely their immediate forerunners as the field was already well developed at the time of that writing in 1781.

As I mentioned in the beginning, these are only preliminary thoughts. Future study may further define, correct or categorize the subject. Moreover, I believe that further research could develop a more precise chronological order and possibly allow for identification and attribution (at least into schools) of some of the multitude of unsigned pieces.

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An erotic wood netsuke of Okame clinging to the elongated nose of a Tengu mask, the eyes of the mask inlaid with horn and ebony.

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MASANAO: Charming boxwood netsuke of a seated, smiling piebald puppy with inlaid ebony eyes. The *himotoshi* are formed by a natural opening between the legs. Signed Masanao (of Ise-Yamada); 19th Century.

The dog, man's friend and servant since time immemorial, is generally considered a good omen in Japanese legend. Faithful and loyal, he (and his likeness, such as in dog netsuke) were thought to ward off evil and to force creatures like the fox and badger, who have taken possession of the bodies of humans, to return to their natural shape. A dog talisman was also considered to be effective in ensuring easy and painless birth-giving, and is believed to be especially powerful in warding off evil during his Zodiac year, such as the present one: the year of the Dog, 4679, according to the Chinese calendar.

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Ivory Hawk
with Monkey.
Unsigned.
Early 19th C.
\$1,000.



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In Defense of Manju

by Raymond Bushell

This brief article was received in the form of a letter, addressed to several netsuke periodicals. Because of its value, and with Mr. Bushell's permission, we present it as a feature article. Editor.

I congratulate Bernard Hurtig for his initiative and enterprise in adding *Netsuke Trends Chronicle* to his list of publications. I applaud all published material for increasing the dissemination of the netsuke gospel, though as individual sermons the messages vary in quality and motivation. The tenor of the columns in the *Chronicle* is perhaps tendentious but in this letter I wish to consider only the aesthetics that would denigrate relief carving, as exemplified by the *manju*, as inferior.

All sculpture may be divided into carving-in-the-round and carving-in-relief. The Japanese would say *katabori* (figure carving) and *manju* (relief carving). Relief carving is subdivided into: *High Relief* which may be three quarters of carving-in-the-round or half-profile. Examples of high relief are found in the INCS Journal, Vol. 8, No. 3, page 45, Fig. 3A, and *Collectors' Netsuke* Fig. 241. While I have seen high relief in which the head and upper part of the body were actually carved-in-the-round—*à jour*, literally "letting in the light"—with only the lower part of the body attached to the ground, I have yet to see this extraordinary type of relief in a *manju*. *Low Relief* is relief that is moderately or slightly raised above the surface. Other forms of relief are *Etched Relief* in which the design is outlined or drawn on the ground; *Cameo Relief* in which the design is sharply raised with borders perpendicular to the surface (Neil Davey, *Netsuke*, Fig. 313); *Sunken Relief* or intaglio in which the design is hollowed out below the level of the surface; and *Inlaid* or *Mosaic Relief* in which

various or contrasting materials compose the design (*Netsuke Familiar and Unfamiliar*, Figs. 277, 281). Different types of relief carving may be combined in the one design. The essential characteristic, the *sine qua non*, of relief carving is the presence of a *background*.

Relief carving offers the *netsuke-shi* avenues for artistic treatments of his subjects that are impossible in carving-in-the-round. The *manju* immediately releases the carver from design restrictions that apply to *katabori* of compactness and roundness. He need no longer worry about fragility, about points, sharp edges and angles. He can represent Kaneko Kugutsune, the Strong Woman, stopping a runaway horse at the far end of its halter (*Collectors' Netsuke*, Fig. 241), a maid silhouetted behind a screen as she steals the guest's food, or a landscape or seascape with mountains, seas, temples, farms, boats and numerous figures (*Netsuke Familiar and Unfamiliar*, Fig. 275). Such designs are beyond the scope of practical carvings-in-the-round.

A minor advantage of the *manju* is that different designs may be carved on front and back. Even a sequence of events may be represented in a series of reserves (*Netsuke Familiar and Unfamiliar*, Fig. 290).

Painting is often maintained to be the highest form of art. While anything in life may be portrayed on a flat surface the representational problems confronting the painter are the most difficult of solution of any art form. Carving-in-relief is obviously closer to painting than is *katabori*; it is carving on a flat surface. But just

as the painter is able to represent perspective, depth and elevation, background and foreground, and even light and shade, so too can the *netsuke-shi* in the *manju*. These particular triumphs of artistry are simply not possible in *katabori*.

On simple merit it is difficult to imagine a representation in *katabori* that would improve upon the Soko Water Bug and Lotus, *Collectors' Netsuke*, Fig. 281, or on the *Kaigyokusai* Thunder Oni, *Collectors' Netsuke*, Fig. 152, or the *Moritoshi* Gentoku Escape, Neil Davey, *Netsuke* Fig. 414.

Some of the finest designs of Tokoku, Mitsuhiro, *Kaigyokusai*, *Kokusai* and *Rensai* are seen in their *manju*. It is true that 18th C. *manju* are rare—the *Okatomo manju*, INCS Journal Vol. 8, No. 3, is exceptional—but it was the 19th C. that witnessed the burst of individual craftsmen seeking self-expression in new materials, new forms and new types. They were the ones who gave us the *sashi*, the *ryusa* and the *manju*. We are indebted to them for the richness and variety they brought to the art of netsuke. It is well to remember that the identical craftsmanship and artistry the *netsuke-shi* instills in his *katabori* is no less present in his *manju*.

I am not at all certain that a comparison of *katabori* and *manju* is justified. They are different forms of sculpture, each with its own attractions and merits. That is all, and I have no quibble with those who prefer *katabori* exclusively. It is not necessary, however, to disparage the one in order to elevate the other. For myself, I like both. In fact I appreciate *all* categories of netsuke. My guiding principle in collecting is, and has always been, to search for fine quality regardless of category, material or signature.

Excellent defenses can also be made in support of ceramic netsuke, lacquer, metal, *kagamibuta*, *sashi*, masks and other disparaged or ignored categories. I hope their respective devotees will make themselves heard.



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THE netsuke world is in a turmoil. Collectors are worried and asking what has happened. What's gone wrong? Have we just witnessed the Rise and Fall of the Netsuke Empire? Will we ever be able to sell our pieces for what they cost? Forget making a profit! What went wrong?

Things really are not as bad as they seem. What actually has happened? Until the 1960s netsuke collecting was in the hands of a small group of serious collectors. Prices had not risen greatly over the previous fifty years, but why? There were easily enough netsuke to be had to keep all the collectors happy. There were no major netsuke dealers, few auctions and very little to be read on the subject. There was no hype. These collectors were not buying for investment. They didn't have their eye on the market—there wasn't any.

Collecting had always been in fashion among the rich and powerful from ancient times. The common people had neither the time nor the money. Not until the late 18th C. did the first auction houses as we know them emerge. In the 19th C. art dealers started businesses and with the Industrial Revolution a middle-class emerged that had the time and money to indulge in collecting. It was a refined world full of snobbery and elitism. It was probably done to show that you had money—not to make it.

The first great netsuke collectors were men of a different breed. They were truly fascinated with these miniature carvings. They had little information to study and so they had to learn by themselves. There was no prestige to be had by collecting netsuke and the rest of the world paid scant attention to them. These men were true collectors; they bought because they loved the art form and enjoyed collecting. We may assume that their commitment spanned many years of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries.

Collecting Can Be Fun...and Rewarding

by Richard R. Silverman



Stylized Dog

Ivory. Signed *Bishu*. Copied from a 300 year old Namban screen in Japan. Exhibited in Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1981. (See Cover)

During the first half of the 20th C. books were written and much more information was to be had. There were a few great auctions which gave back to the collectors many of the first generation collections, *i.e.* Trower, Behrens, Gilbertson, Reiss, Tomkinson and Gaskell. All these sales and those that followed until 1960 were characterized by multiple lots both plentiful and cheap.

And so the stage was set in the 1960s. By then there were three types of collectors: those who did it for pleasure, those who did it for investment and those who did it for both. The distinctions would become clearer in a few years. With the proliferation of books, exhibitions, auctions, netsuke dealers and hype the number of collectors grew tremendously and so did the demand. People with

vast sums of money came into the field and prices rose dramatically. Many of these new collectors were interested in the investment side and they were willing to pay great sums of money to buy the finest pieces. There is nothing wrong with this but when their interest waned they wanted to sell. There was much disillusionment in the 1970s with the netsuke scene—too much hype, wheeling and dealing, promotion, dirt and backbiting. A few people actually tried to control the market. It became big business with all the side-effects that accompany a partially controlled market.

But nothing calamitous happened until late 1981. The past few auctions in London, New York and Los Angeles have not measured up to expectations. Some of them were considered to have flopped badly and many collectors are worried, especially those who are in it more for investment than pleasure.

Did the market really fall with these auctions? No. Auctions are unpredictable by nature. They do not represent the entire market, just a small part of it. There are collectors who never buy at auction and those who buy at them only once a year. The vast majority do not buy at auctions because of the pressure of having to decide on the spur of the moment. Auctions provide a service for professional dealers and collectors. Most good auctions have fifty to one hundred buyers in attendance while many multiples of these numbers buy all year. Auctions cannot reflect the market as a whole since they only take place a few times a year and the contents are usually very mixed in quality. The market is to a great degree in the hands of private transactions between dealers and buyers. While few pieces were bid above \$10,000 this past Fall, a London dealer sold pieces for as high as \$80,000. Someone was buying.

“The nervousness now felt by collectors can be attributed to a number of investors who did not

generally mean to collect as a long term commitment. A long term commitment has proved to be a good investment which can outlast the present uncertainty due to the alternatives of high interest rates and the money market," said a prominent dealer to me in December 1981. He concluded, "Is it more relaxing to buy stocks and shares and see them drop deeply or is it more satisfying in the much more pleasurable world of art?"

I, for one, will opt for art! I have been a serious collector for almost twenty years. My criteria for buying is the pleasure I will derive from the piece. I truly do not care what others think. It is my money and my choice. I may listen to others' opinions in some cases but the decision is mine. I have done my homework and rely on my own judgment. I will not let others (collectors, dealers or auctioneers) influence my taste. I have been most fortunate to have lived in Japan for sixteen years and I have seen far more netsuke for sale there than is possible in any other place. My travels through Europe and America have added to the numbers. Through the kindness of museums and my fellow collectors I truly feel I have seen the vast majority of the world's better netsuke.

As I have stated many times greatness does not depend on a



Kappa and Horse
Ivory with inlaid tortoise shell eyes. Signed *Hideyuki* in inlaid gold tablet. *Hideyuki* is no longer under contract, but a free agent and no longer uses *Kosei*. A very unusual subject.

price tag or a signature. I will probably never own a superb signed Kyoto *Masanao*, *Tomotada* or *Okatomo* animal but there is so much more to collecting than these pieces. There are many truly fine animal netsuke that are not signed and have no provenance. The beauty and fun of collecting netsuke lie in the limitless subject matter, materials, shapes and sizes to be found. There is an entire world of art encapsulated in miniature form, and I will not limit myself to what a few dealers are telling me is the "right" type to buy, the piece that will surely be a great investment and will bring the greatest return on my

money. No one can or ever has been able to arbitrate what constitutes the ultimate in an art form. I will not collect only the old (old being synonymous with greater worth) for today's new will be tomorrow's old masterpieces. Oh, to have collected Van Gogh, Gauguin and Picasso when they were "upstarts"—what a joy to have bought the unknown before they became famous. I shall continue to collect the moderns, not because they will someday be considered great old masterpieces, but because they are masterpieces today. I cannot worry about how they will be ranked fifty years from now. And should they not succeed, what difference will it make to me? I got my money's worth in pleasure. But should they succeed then the pleasure will be redoubled knowing I helped to promote these fine modern artists.

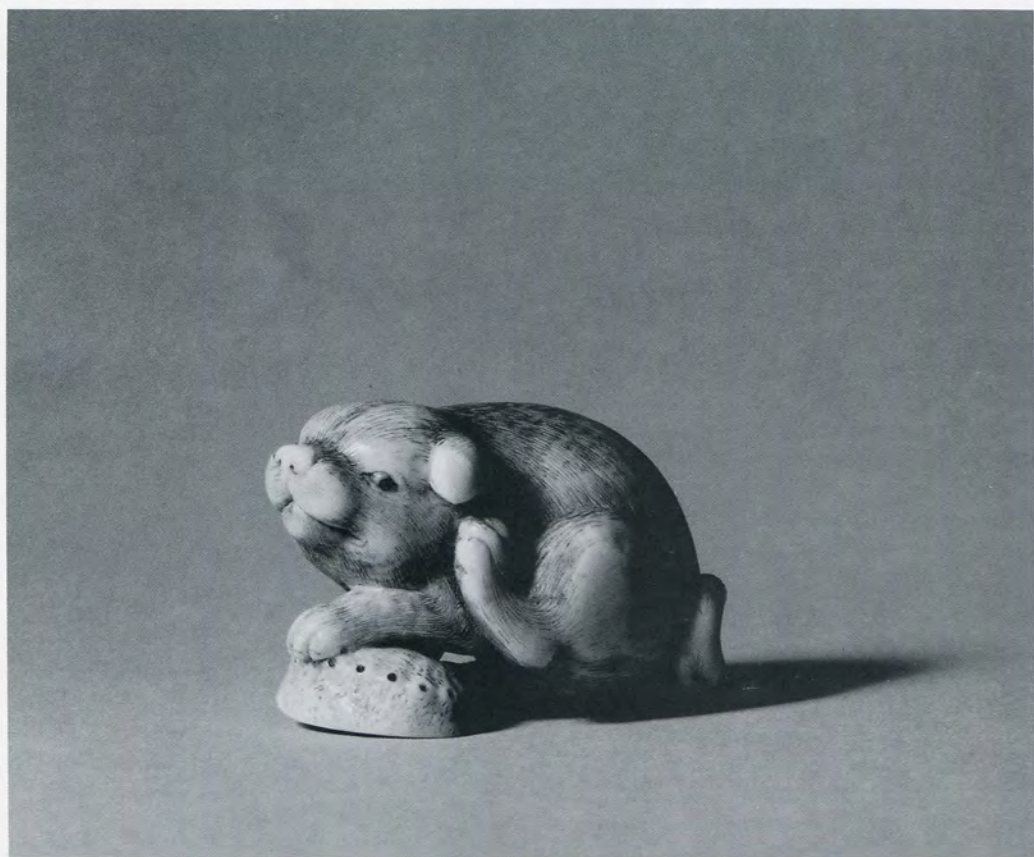
The cold hard fact of money will always enter the picture unless one is so wealthy that money is of no object. I do not fall into this class, so I have not paid and will not pay the large sums asked for certain pieces. This is all relative and each person will have a different idea as to what is cheap, expensive and prohibitive. I do not worry when a piece does not make its estimate of \$25,000 or \$50,000 in an auction or stays unsold in a sale. I do not spend this kind of money. There are tru-



Kirin-Baku
Ivory, Unsigned. Early 19th C. I have never seen an artist do a combination of these two mythological animals but here it is.



Sleeping Cat
Imari-Yaki. Very fine porcelain rendition of an unusual subject. Probably mid-19th C.



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Tiger and Dragon
Kagamibuta of gold, silver and mixed metals in an ivory bowl. Unsigned. Mid-19th C.



Immortal Maiden
Manju. Ivory with inlays – signed *Kikugawa* with *Tomoe* seal. Shown in a Netsuke Exhibition in Japan May-June 1981.



Demon Mask
Boxwood. Signed *Sansho* with *kakiban*.

ly too many fine pieces to be had for far less. The vast quantity of great netsuke can be had for \$10,000 or less, and in many cases much less. That a few pieces will always sell for much more is based on a small group of collectors who have the means and will to buy the ultimate which by its own definition is in a special price range.

No great museum has only Rembrandt, Reubens, Hals, de la Tour, Velasquez, El Greco and de Vinci. One need only look at the Behrens, Brockhaus and Hindson collections to see that their greatness comes from a wealth of different kinds of netsuke. Each has its great masterpieces but the fineness of each collection comes from the comprehensive collecting of animals, figures, *manju*, *kagamibuta*, masks, pottery, unique materials, sizes, shapes and forms which give a collection its richness.

There comes a time when I must weigh buying what is an expensive piece for my collection. Rarely have I paid over \$5,000 and the bulk of my pieces cost from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars. When faced with this dilemma all I ask myself is whether I can sell it for what I paid

should the need arise. If the answer is "yes" I will buy it. This is justification enough. There will always be a broader market for fine pieces that cost only a few thousand dollars, but when buying pieces for \$25,000 to \$125,000 you must face the fact that the market is very limited. The day may come when these figures are not considered exceedingly high, but for now they are.

Surely netsuke are underpriced when one compares them to the other fields of fine and decorative arts. What I consider to be absurd prices are continually paid for paintings, prints, porcelains, glassware, silver, clocks, watches, furniture, primitive art, objects of *vertu*, stamps and coins. In London on December 12, 1980, an ivory plaque from the 11th C. used as part of a bookcover sold for \$78,660. It was a mere 1-7/8" high and the quality of the carving left much to be desired. I would have rather had a superb netsuke, or two, or three. There is no accounting for taste or reasons in collecting and that is what makes it so enjoyable. The rewards are for you yourself. That others admire your collection and wish to own what you already have only makes it more rewarding. Had the

vast majority of collectors followed my collecting habits I would have never been able to form my collection. I can not be limited to schools, signatures and provenance. My only limitations are dictated by money, and within most collectors' a good collection can be formed.

Should the great masterpieces drop in value I might be able to buy some of them, but I am very happy with what I have. I can easily sell or trade most of my pieces should I so desire because they were bought at fair and reasonable prices and are within the means of most collectors. That my collections of masks, pottery, *manju*, *ryusa*, *kagamibuta* and unique subjects are not of interest to many collectors does not bother me. The vast majority of pieces in these categories sell for \$500 to \$1,500 each and the pleasure I derive from them is just as great as that from my more "conventional" pieces which everyone collects with prices rising accordingly.

At this juncture I will switch from the subjective "I" to the objective "you". It is very difficult to collect without knowing your subject. Books and articles abound which can be of great help. Unfortunately one must be discriminat-



Ashinaga-Tenaga By Akibide, a contemporary carver.

ing in what books to study as some are far better than others. Unless you are truly knowledgeable you will have to depend on dealers and the auction houses to help you form your collection. There are dealers who have the knowledge to be helpful but are their prices fair and reasonable or their netsuke overpriced? There are dealers with little knowledge and the same question as to pricing can be asked. There are also absolute frauds in the business whose pieces aren't worth mentioning. Obviously all dealers must make a profit. It is just a matter of what degree. The auction houses are also in business to make money and catalogue descriptions are made to sell pieces. Whenever possible you should personally view the netsuke before the sale or have a direct discussion with the auction house before placing a bid. Bidding at auctions can be very rewarding, but it can also be a waste of time and money. Many great pieces have been bought very cheaply in auctions. Just because a dealer is the underbidder does not mean that you have overpaid. He has to resell at a profit and you are buying it for far less than he would sell it for later.

There are many collectors who have great expertise and time permitting they can be very helpful with your questions. Most collectors are happy to show you their own pieces and this is an excellent way to learn.

Don't feel intimidated by dealers. It is your money and without you they are out of business. You expect a sales pitch when buying a used car; it is not necessary in the field of art. Buying art should be a pleasurable experience whether in a gallery or in an auction house. The pressure you might feel at your first auction will turn into an exciting race once you get the self-confidence to go it alone. There is pleasure to be derived from all aspects of collecting—from your initial contact with books and the art form itself, through the galleries, auction houses and private homes, to buying, selling or even swapping. It is a world of culture, refinement and tranquility.

And all this pleasure is doubled in the field of netsuke where you can feel, touch and even caress the works at hand. This distillation of most of the world's arts forms has truly been condensed into the perfect small gem which we so often mispronounce but so lovingly call "netsuke."

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"L'ao T'se Riding the
Unicorn," 19th century,
ivory with silver horn,
unsigned.



IN a recent letter from James Hume, President of Netsuke Kenkyukai, he stated that he had heard from a number of dealers and old-time collectors that "Interested prospective new collectors are frightened away by the hype and the publicity on high prices." He added, "It seems that newer collectors are not joining the ranks as rapidly as the older collectors are ceasing to continue active collecting."

Since James is a relatively fresh collector who has excellent taste in netsuke, I digested his remarks seriously. His letter provided the inspiration to compare yesterday's rumors with those of today. As you will see, there is very little that has changed. The complaints about rising prices, heard since the beginning of this Century, have been echoed throughout the years.

Yesterday

In the first chapter of Raymond Bushell's *Netsuke Familiar and Unfamiliar* the author points out that in 1894 Edward Gilbertson, a first-generation collector, wrote in his article "Japanese Netsukes" which appeared in the *Studio* (London), "Good specimens of the work of the eminent men of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are becoming more and more rare, and we have chiefly to rely on the dispersion of the older collections from time to time. They have consequently become much more costly, the higher class of wooden netsukes especially. The day has gone by when we saw them at Christie's strung together like onions, seven or eight in a lot, and sold for a third of the price we should now have to give for a single one." Bushell points out that "Mr. Gilbertson's collection was sold 23 years later in 1917. The highest price paid for one of his netsuke was 10½ British Pounds (\$50)."

In 1923 the Reverend L. B. Cholmondeley, chaplain to the British Embassy in Tokyo, wrote in his article "More Information About Japanese Netsuke" in the

Yesterday Versus Today

by Bernard Hurtig

Connoisseur (London), that in Japan netsuke "are becoming very scarce and absurd prices are often asked for them."

In 1951 the famous expert Mark Hindson discussed netsuke in his article "Netsuke Artists" in the *Antique Collector* (London). He advised discretion because prices were increasing. He referred to a crane group that had fetched \$8 in the Behrens sale in 1914 which "at a recent auction" fetched \$90.

In the early days it was fine to collect one of everything. The choice was bountiful and collectors were few. In the early part of this Century prices ranged from \$1.50 to \$15.00 per piece, thus investment never had to be considered.

The Seymour Trower Collection which was begun in 1876, consisted of 1,879 netsuke. When it was sold in 1913 the average price fetched was \$5.58. Only ten lots reached \$10 or more.

The Behrens Collection had 5,639 netsuke. They were sold in 1913 and 1914. The highest price paid was \$1,094 for the famed wrestling group illustrated in the *Behren's Collection*, Plate XXI, No. 465. But the average price paid per netsuke was only \$5.00.

Other large collections at the time were the Michael Tomkinson Collection which consisted of 1,609 netsuke, and the Colonel J. Belhouse Gaskell Collection of 1,164 netsuke. These collections were sold between 1918 and 1926. It is interesting to note that in those days more than one netsuke were offered in a sale lot. A man of modest means could afford to collect indiscriminately if he so chose—quality was not necessarily the criterion to a man who desired

to amass all the legends, all the animals, all the mythical creatures, and one of every type of model known.

As illustrated by the Behren's sale of over 5,000 netsuke, there was very little premium in those days for excellence. The average price fetched was \$5.00 and only 34 netsuke reached \$49.00 or over. Record prices for the Behren's sales were as follows:

Sessai wrestling group \$1,094.
Ryumin manju illustrating the 47 Ronin \$170. *Hidemasa* monkey on a pine tree \$151. Unsigned ivory rabbit \$141. Unsigned wood wrestler group \$117. Unsigned ivory model of Chokaro *Sennin* \$78. Unsigned foreigner \$63. *Kaigyokusai Masatsugu* "hollowed out" ivory ball of the animals of the zodiac \$58.

Not until 1960 did an important auction containing all individual lots occur. This was the Mark Fletcher Collection of 673 netsuke. This time the highest price paid was \$420, but 84 lots exceeded \$84. This sale marked the beginning of netsuke being recognized internationally as an art form.

After the Hindson sales, between 1967 and 1969, netsuke prices never looked back. The Hindson netsuke were sold in seven individual sales by Sotheby's in London. During the first sale the average price was \$260. By the end of the seventh session, the average price per netsuke had climbed to \$886. The highest price paid was for an ivory cat by *Kaigyokusai* which sold for \$6,720. At the conclusion of the sales many dealers and collectors prophesied that prices would soon decline and high prices were simply due to the fame of the Hindson name. They couldn't have been more wrong!

In 1972 an unknown collection sold in London and averaged \$1,038 per lot. Hindson's record price was equalled twice and broken four times. An *Itsumin* horse fetched \$7,680; a *Kaigyokusai* monkey \$9,120; a *Gyokusai*

severed head \$10,080, and a *Natsuo ojime* \$16,800.

After these two sales a famous Belgian collector was heard to say, "This is insanity and I shall not continue to collect." He is still exceedingly active today.

I can remember my own personal disaster of 1969 when I was a fairly new, gung-ho collector. Raymond Bushell advised me to "cool [my] collecting enthusiasm because prices [were] too high." Raymond's advice, although sincere, was disastrous for me. Naturally I heeded his advice, for who should know better than Raymond—a leading world authority, a man that was kind enough to show me many netsuke, and even let me purchase a few that I was totally enamored with. I wasted two precious years waiting for prices to decline. Instead they shot straight up.

The record price was again broken in October 1972 when a *Kaigyokusai* puppy group reached

\$17,280 and yet again in October 1973 when the famous *Okatomo* grazing horse fetched \$27,563. The *Kaigyokusai* puppies just mentioned were resold by a London dealer in 1976 for \$24,000 and resold once again in January 1981 for \$50,000. In June 1975 when a superb stag and young set a new record for a *Tomotada* netsuke at Sotheby's in New York of \$24,000, you could have heard a pin drop in the saleroom as two leading dealers competed for this marvelous piece. When the hammer fell at \$24,000 the observers seemed paralyzed. Again the agonized conversations of the collectors could be heard in the background. This was the end of collecting, they moaned, and they would have to withdraw and switch their collecting interests to another area. Only Dr. Joseph Kurstin stated at the end of the auction that the \$24,000 price might prove to be very cheap. However, at the very next New

York sale, most of the regular auction-goers, including those who had registered the loudest complaints, were back in attendance and participating in the contest of the day on one level or another.

Before concluding my review of yesterday's rumors, I would like to add a few words about auction attendances, numbers of collectors, and information available on netsuke.

Mr. J. van Daalen, Jr., in Volume 1 of *Andon*, the Bulletin of the Society for Japanese Arts and Crafts, The Hague, Holland, mentions how difficult it was to sell netsuke books in the early days. He states that the first World War came and interest went other ways. A small group of English collectors kept the fires burning. On the Continent even fewer remained. In 1935 when Frederick Meinertzhagen's book *Netsuke and Their Makers* was announced, it had to be shelved because the



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pre-publication offer did not draw sufficient response.

In a 1949 article "The T. S. Davy Collection of Netsuke," which appeared in the *Antique Collector*, the famous dealer-collector-expert W. W. Winkworth wrote that there were too few collectors to form a society or publish a journal, that the field remained static, that new collectors developed very slowly, that collecting was confined to a small circle and that private collections remained far too big.

I have been told by a well-known European collector that when he visited the early sales in the 1950s, the auction rooms attracted an average of between twelve to twenty people. Today a good sale may expect to draw a minimum of sixty in the audience.

Today

Conditions today are dramatically different and may be attributed to the following reasons:

1. Great premiums are paid for

excellence of sculpture, originality of design and rarity of subject matter.

2. An important signature added to a *major* work adds considerably to value. (Unfortunately, many collectors make the mistake of buying a minor work by a major artist, overlooking that a minor work by *anyone* always remains just a minor work).

3. Collectors are now more discriminating.

4. Fine quality netsuke are not frequently found.

5. New netsuke books are regularly being published.

6. The *INCS Journal* for the past nine years has provided a communication link between netsuke collectors throughout the entire world.

7. A great deal of information is now available about important artists.

8. Collectors now regularly meet at conventions and netsuke seminars in all parts of the world.

It has been said that too many collectors are chasing the same netsuke. This is true. It has to be true because there are less than 1,000 great netsuke in existence today. With some 3,000 active netsuke collectors this would provide one-third of a major netsuke for each collector. This is precisely why prices of exciting netsuke are escalating today and will continue to do so. But high prices do not constitute a problem in this area.

The problem exists where the average collector with average means must prospect. I have often heard it said "I don't care about investment, I collect only what I like." Admirable—provided the collector is knowledgeable and discerning, or is counseled by a dealer with good taste. Jacques Carre, a fine European collector, once made this statement to me "The least I can expect from a dealer is good taste, and very few of today's dealers have it."

A new collector with a good ap-



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preciation for fine quality told me recently that he felt he must keep netsuke collecting alive because "We need someone to buy our mistakes and discards." This is a poor and selfish reason to keep netsuke collecting alive. Encouraging new collectors to commit financial suicide is not unlike carrying a machine gun to a fox hunt. Buying indiscriminately today can be disastrous. There are thousands of mediocre netsuke worth very little on the market at ridiculously high prices. To the knowledgeable these netsuke are lacking in almost every area of merit, but they form the majority of the netsuke stock being carried in inventory by many of today's netsuke dealers. It is little wonder that these dealers complain that the number of collectors are shrinking. The number of collectors are not shrinking at all, but as their knowledge and awareness expands, they simply switch to the dealers who carry better quality

netsuke. Mediocre, common netsuke are over-priced and difficult to sell, but the few really great pieces will once again prove to be inexpensive in the not-too-distant future.

Thirty years ago W. W. Winkworth stated in the *Antique Collector* that "there is no reason why a rare netsuke, like a rare stamp, should not be worth several hundred pounds." Today his prophecy has partially come true. However, great netsuke still have a long way to go to match the prices of other miniature collectibles. For example, in the December, 1981 issue of the *INCS Journal* the following appeared:

"If You Think Netsuke Are Expensive . . .

"The Los Angeles Times recently reported that at an auction sale in March a Brasher doubloon coin was sold for \$625,000 during the fourth and final sale of the John Work Garrett rare coin collection that set five world records.

"In an earlier sale another Brasher gold doubloon sold for \$725,000, breaking two world records, for the most expensive coin sold and for the highest figure ever paid for any coin.

"A 1972 Birch cent sold for \$200,000 setting the world record for a copper coin and an 1806 silver dollar set a world record of \$400,000 for silver coins. A total of \$25.2 million was reportedly paid for the entire collection, another American record for any fine arts collection."

Remember that sooner or later most netsuke are resold for one reason or another. The reasons that collectors who originally had no intentions of ever selling but *do* sell are many and varied. The majority of netsuke in our inventory were obtained from collectors during the last two years for one of the following reasons:

1. Business reversals.
2. To help children or grandchildren purchase a home.



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3. Retirement and a need for cash due to inflation.

4. Death of a loved one.

Fortunately it was simple for these collectors to raise the funds they required and earn a substantial return on their original investment. Most of these collectors had held their netsuke for a reasonable length of time, from seven to ten years, and had purchased wisely with either good taste or good advice. These are the happy stories.

Now let us look at the opposite side of the coin. We are continuously being offered netsuke where the seller is attempting to dispose of his netsuke for one of the already mentioned reasons. But the netsuke were purchased indiscriminately. Now the collector is forced to sell one of his/her last assets. It is heartbreaking to have to tell them that although their "treasures" have brought them great personal satisfaction, they have very little commercial value. For those who had been collecting

for a long time their investment was probably minimal. But imagine making the same mistake at today's prices! This could mean someone's future financial disaster.

This point was well illustrated in London in October, 1981 when a large portion of the netsuke offered for sale at Christie's were unsaleable at the requested reserve prices and were bought in. The few very fine pieces included in the sale sold well, but the majority, all genuine netsuke, belonged in the "rather dull" category.

Since I often use the terminology "dull" I would like to be more specific. Dull netsuke surface with famous artists' signatures as well as lesser respected craftsmen. Major artists often turn out minor pieces, but there are numerous reasons for this.

1. Poor compensation.

2. The product may be the result of early or late work in the artist's career.

3. Influence by a client on subject matter which the artist did not excel in.

4. The idea of a design simply did not work out well.

5. A design too often repeated and the artist became bored.

In summary, dull netsuke usually fall into one or more categories: repetitious; poorly crafted; lacking crisp carving; inferior staining or polishing; or stiff and lacking movement. Any combination of these points makes a netsuke lack charm and proves it to be sculpturally inadequate.

In contrast to the poor sale results at the Christie's auction mentioned above, the fine dealer Eskenazi in London, during the same week in October, held an exhibition and offered a number of outstanding netsuke. Many were immediately sold at good prices, such as a pair of tigers and cubs, one signed *Tomotada*, the other *Okatomo*, which sold for \$130,000 for the pair.

What's happened to the Netsuke?



Only the very best has happened! We have decided to accord our Netsuke and Inro a befitting setting in a spacious gallery overlooking Hyde Park. The comfort and style will be complemented by the panoramic views of London from the 19th floor. Luxury and privacy are our aim. Visit us, by arrangement, as from June 21st.

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Is there any solution to the problem of ever escalating prices? Is a collector with a modest pocketbook barred from the netsuke collecting world forever? Not at all. There are dozens of areas of collecting where good netsuke can still be purchased in the \$3,500 to \$5,000 area. These netsuke are artistically pleasing and have merit. They will certainly appreciate monetarily over the years. Collectors will have to restrain themselves from buying something they are only mildly interested in and save their money for that one piece they absolutely *must* have. As Raymond Bushell states in *Netsuke Familiar and Unfamiliar*, "Probably the purest of collectors nurtures the hope that his acquisition will appreciate in value, if not for profit, then for vanity."

If you will consider the word "appreciation" in a different light, then no matter what your collecting motives might be, you should collect for appreciation.

1. Will you appreciate your netsuke after you have viewed other fine collections?

2. Will knowledgeable collectors appreciate your netsuke and will you be invited to show your treasures at important exhibitions?

3. Will your netsuke appreciate in monetary value?

Armed with this knowledge you can continue collecting in a wiser manner. Let the top dealers know about your desires and budgets and don't be bashful. You will be surprised how many items of merit will come your way. Remember that big reputations are always earned. Find out the important dealers and challenge them.

The collector who comes to me and says, "Mr. Hurtig, I have very little knowledge and a modest budget. Will you help me form a collection?" is in an enviable position. This collector has put us on our honor and we go out of our way, not only to help them, but

when we stumble onto something of merit at a reasonable price, pass the good buys along. The cynics are left to make their own decisions—right or wrong. Those who don't ask for advice don't receive it.

Today there are a great many new collectors being introduced to netsuke. In the month of November our Gallery at the Kahala Hilton Hotel started four new collectors within a one-week period. Our audio visual room which features movies on netsuke is exceedingly beneficial in introducing the curious to the world of netsuke. These new collectors are not aware of past prices and only have knowledge about current conditions. There are many new collectors buying their very first netsuke today—good and bad; many more than there were ten or even five years ago. Our netsuke department continues to grow in all areas. Today, not only does the *INCS Journal* exist for collectors,

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Wooden snail on a piece of bamboo with translucent horn antennae. Signed with kakihan (*Kamman*). 19th Century. Length 6 cm.

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but a number of newsletters and study journals, such as this one, keep collectors informed. Movies are made and sold on the subject and study courses on individual artists now exist. No fewer than twelve books and museum exhibition catalogues have been published during the last eight years and all have sold well.

Another major reason for the increase in knowledge about netsuke is that the world has become very small, due to the efficiency of communications and jet travel. There are very few unknown major collectors or netsuke in the world today. We now have fairly accurate documentation and knowledge of the netsuke that exist in both museums and private collections. However, one thing has not changed. We are still forced to rely on the same sources of fifty and seventy-five years ago for our netsuke supply, due to the recycling of collections for various reasons already discussed. There are no increased sources for antique netsuke, only an ever-increasing number of knowledgeable collectors. The majority of howls of protest today come from "the collector that knows the price of everything and the value of nothing." (Raymond Bushell, *Netsuke Familiar and Unfamiliar*).

Where will netsuke for the future collectors and dealers come from? The answer is not so simple. In days gone by when netsuke were inexpensive and limited connoisseurship was available, they would come from culls, because collectors' tastes change. The removal of duplications, inferiors and questionable authenticity by the advanced collector in order to raise the standards of their collections were and still are a prime source. Today, however, only occasionally are these culled netsuke desirable and the prices asked for them far too high. The cost of mediocrity is expensive and a mediocre netsuke always remains

mediocre. Few netsuke today can be purchased cheaply enough to compensate for purchasing something you settle for rather than something you love and should have. Only the collectors of yesterday could afford this type of indiscriminate buying. But also please bear in mind that an endless source of money does not ensure one of a superb collection unless the collection is formed with accompanying good taste and knowledge. Pity the next generation of dealers as well as collectors! In today's small world the recycling of netsuke collections disperses them to South America, Asia, America and Europe. Through necessity new and future collections will be modest in size. The cost of chasing these netsuke in order to bring them to the market will become enormous. Only a few months ago I spent one week in Europe prospecting for netsuke. I returned to Hawaii with only two. Fortunately one was very good, but the cost of obtaining the netsuke was enormous. A merchant must charge in direct proportion to what he must pay.

When the *Okatomo* horse, referred to in the "Yesterday" portion of this article, was sold in 1978 for \$75,000 many collectors were upset. Disgruntled collectors again began to threaten they would pull out of collecting. When the famous steed was offered on the market two years later, along with a companion at a price of \$250,000 a roar was heard throughout the collecting world! Many collectors were betting that they wouldn't sell. However, not only did they sell, but they were competed for by several collectors seeking the right to own the world's most famous pair of netsuke. But there was nothing to roar about. This sale did not affect the average collector. Most of the complaining was motivated by sheer envy. These collectors weren't in the competition for the *Okatomo* horse when it sold in

1973 for \$27,563, let alone at the current price. There are netsuke with good value available at prices most collectors are able to afford. But these collectors will have to broaden their knowledge and their contacts. Future collections will be smaller, more wisely and carefully chosen, and in the end, far more gratifying.

Recently I was told by a famous expert visiting Hawaii that everything I said had a great deal of influence on what people are collecting. "Quite the contrary," I advised him "the collectors have played a great role in influencing me, as to what I carry in my inventory." I believe, as do many collectors, that there are many interesting areas other than *katabori* netsuke (netsuke in the round). Eighteen months ago I carefully purchased unusual, interesting netsuke that could be sold in a price range between \$150 and \$1,000. We developed special trays to contain them and advised collectors that the netsuke housed in these trays were within a price range. Such items as *kagamibuta*, masks, *ryusa*, compasses, guns, metal and porcelain netsuke and other unusual examples of very nice quality comprised this group. These pieces were offered to numerous collectors and the end result has been that 90% of this merchandise remains unsold eighteen months later. In spite of having tried to convince collectors that these were within areas of merit in which they could collect at reasonable prices, they showed very little interest. We were unable to influence the market—the market influences us.

While we are on this subject of influence, let us clear up the matter of who sets the prices of netsuke today. It is certainly *not* the dealer. He sells in direct proportion to what he has to pay. The same collectors who are complaining about high prices when purchasing are the ones who are extracting heavily when they are

selling to the dealers. And every collector who has been collecting for a while sells occasionally.

In Japan today, dealers who twenty years ago were renowned for their huge selections of Imari porcelain, which used to be literally stacked to the ceiling, are today featuring skimpy, sad selections of blue and white transfer Imari. As a comparison to netsuke, is this what the future

holds? Will future generations of dealers resort to selling copies of netsuke, while the great masterpieces we know of today remain the legends of tomorrow?

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Journals of the International Netsuke Collectors Society.

CONVENTION CALENDAR

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Westbury Hotel, New York City.

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Details to be furnished in future issues of the Study Journal.

IN 1932, during the height of the American Depression, a teenage bride and her husband moved from Colorado to southern California to begin their married life. The young couple loved California on sight, found a small home, and settled down. The beautiful, willowy bride with the flawless complexion was Ann Meselson. It was not long before Ann had a host of new friends, undoubtedly drawn by her naturally cheerful disposition and genuine delight in others.

The 1930s were also a time when newly married girls devoted themselves to the care of husband and home and rarely became involved in anything else. Ann's life took a different turn and led to a wholly new creative adventure. She found the wonderful world of art; a world of excitement felt within and radiating out to new intellectual horizons. She responded to the artistic stimuli of artistic forms, and her enthusiasm led to those individuals who reacted on a similar emotional level. This lovely young girl could not have had the vaguest idea, in 1932, that she would discover the miniature sculpture of Japan, known as netsuke, fall in love with this art form, and one day become a prime influence on friends and acquaintances, motivating them to become collectors. Nor could she have had any clairvoyant perception that several of these same individuals would go on to create some of America's finest collections. Of course, this was not to be for many years. In fact, Ann had never heard the word netsuke at that time.

This story really begins when Ann decided to join an art class shortly after settling in California. Part of the course involved working in clay and she found that she enjoyed designing and shaping this material. She still remembers her achievements from that course, a small frame decorated with tiny plum blossoms and a humidor which she lacquered black with a bridge design. The

Portrait of a Collector

Ann Meselson

By Joy Epstein



frame and humidor joined a growing collection of inexpensive but beautiful objects; minerals, shells, small porcelain cups and saucers, little pitchers. Says Ann of those times, "We lived in a small home and we just didn't have room for large things!" The rationale may be accurate, but Ann admits that she was always drawn to miniatures. She grew to appreciate their expression in the Oriental arts as exemplified in Bonsai plants, snuff bottles, netsuke, *inro*, and *ojime*.

It wasn't until the 1950s that Ann was ready to begin collecting in earnest. She had met most of the art dealers in her area and formed close friendships with three of them. The one that probably had the greatest influence was Lilla S. Perry, author of *Chinese Snuff Bottles: The Adventures and Studies of a Collector* (1980), and a respected dealer in Oriental art. Ann says of Lilla Perry, "I adored her." Mrs. Perry's philosophy of encouragement and enlightenment of young persons to educate themselves in order to appreciate art was passed on to Ann, who in turn channeled and directed her efforts into the

fields of netsuke, *inro*, and *ojime*. The Meselson home was to become an informal meeting place for those who wanted to "talk art". This well known open house policy led to a surprise telephone call from Lilla Perry. She wanted to introduce Ann to a famous expert and author (primarily in the field of netsuke) who was visiting in her home. She had told him that Ann had been collecting for only a few years but he expressed a desire to see her collection. The call resulted in an immediate invitation to the author. He arrived shortly carrying a paper bag containing a few of his netsuke. It was not long before Ann's pieces, as well as those of her guest, were displayed on the dining room table. By the time the evening was over, they had agreed to swap three pieces! One of the pieces Ann received in the trade is today pictured in Miriam Kinsey's scholarly book, *Contemporary Netsuke* (plate 116, p. 126), entitled "Man Trying to Fly", by *Masatoshi*. The friendship with the author continues to this day and the Meselsons always see him when they are within the same geographic area.

Ann's netsuke collection started in earnest in 1958. The Meselsons had met a businessman in Pasadena who sold many things including, "now and then," a few netsuke. Ann had seen a small netsuke collection that was for sale and had fallen in love with one piece, a delicate camellia blossom on a twig with two buds. It was the work of the artist *Kaigyokusai*. Since she couldn't afford to purchase the collection, she approached the businessman and persuaded him that this collection was exactly right for his shop. She would lead him to the collection if he would in turn sell her the camellia blossom. He agreed and Ann became the possessor of what she feels was her first "fine" netsuke.

If you were to ask Ann what was the most exciting experience she has had in her years of collecting,

she will immediately relate the modern version of finding a "treasure chest." It is every collector's dream to come across a "find," and it happens maybe once in a lifetime if you are lucky. It did happen to Ann in the late 1960s. She had been hearing of a collection owned by an elderly gentleman living in a small seaport town in southern California. Since it was quite a distance from the Meselson home, and Ann did not drive, she had not been able to view the collection. Over a period of two years she had made several telephone calls to the owner trying to ascertain if it was possible to purchase a few of his netsuke. The answer was always an emphatic "No!" The collection had to be bought in its entirety. The price quoted was out of the question for Ann, and time was going by. Her main worry was that rumors kept reaching her that the owner was ill. Finally, in June of 1970, she called her close friend, Virginia Atchley, and Virginia agreed to drive Ann down to see the collection. Possibly they could purchase it together. They could hardly contain their excitement when at long last they saw the netsuke displayed in a beautiful cabinet. The owner was indeed elderly and ill, but he would not yield an inch on the price or consider splitting the group. Ann and Virginia left, downhearted, but determined not to let this wonderful collection get away. They finally came up with the solution—a third partner! Virginia drove Ann to the nearest telephone and a call went out to Ann's brother. He was persuaded to come down the next morning and join the ladies for a viewing. He arrived and agreed it was a wonderful collection. And so, a partnership of three happy netsuke lovers was formed and a fine collection purchased. They were able to divide the netsuke through alternating selections, and these netsuke in turn joined three emerging fine collections. Is it still possible for one to have this kind of "dream come true" in the

1980s? Yes. Netsuke have a way of surfacing from the most improbable areas. It is one of the most fascinating aspects of collecting and a constant source of fascination. But, says Ann, when the opportunity comes be sure you have a couple of terrific friends or relatives or both!

Most collectors eventually develop a preference for certain subjects and artists. For Ann those favorite subjects were always "birds, bugs, dragonflies, bees, and especially butterflies." Her collection includes many fine examples with these designs. What is her favorite netsuke? A dragonfly by *Mitsubiro*. While Ann places *Mitsubiro*, along with *Tokoku* and *Kaigyokusai*, among her favorite artists, she feels that one of the fundamentals for collecting is "not to buy by artist or signature—trust your own eye."

This story of Ann Meselson would not be complete without mentioning her influence on *ojime* collecting. She was one of the earliest collectors of this category in the United States. It was over twenty years ago that she found sixteen *ojime* in a small

shop in Beverly Hills. The store's owner had received them as a gift from some Japanese friends, but not finding them interesting had put them in a case in his shop. There they sat for five years, without a single inquiry, until Ann spotted them. They were so beautiful that Ann decided then and there to really get going on *ojime* collecting. Her delight with *ojime* resulted in awakening the interests of other persons to this field. Again, as with netsuke, these friends went on to seek and build exciting *ojime* collections.

Ann says of herself, "I feel I was born under a lucky star." Her lucky star has led her to close friendships, and her quiet influences will be reflected in the netsuke and *ojime* fields for years to come. She has been instrumental in encouraging the beginning collector and a true friend in sharing with all ages her intelligence, enthusiasm, and even her netsuke. Who is not convinced when she looks you in the eye, smiles that truly beautiful smile, and pronounces, "Netsuke are the most interesting, magnificent sculpture the world knows!"

Q & A FORUM

THE Q & A Forum is intended to be a regular feature of your Journal, wherein readers 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.

This issue has neither Questions nor Answers for the simple reason that we have received virtually no response. The Q & A Forum—and indeed the destiny of the entire Study Journal—is in the hands of our readers. *Please contribute.*



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A s h k e n a z i e & C o .



Ivory recumbent deer and young.
Signed: *Tomotada*, Kyoto School, 18th Century.
*Provenance: Anne Hull Grundy Collection.
Height: 3.5 centimetres.



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