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NETSUKE
KENKYUKAI

Study Journal

Volume 4, Number 4, 1984



An *ama* (fishergirl) wringing out her silk skirt after a dive.

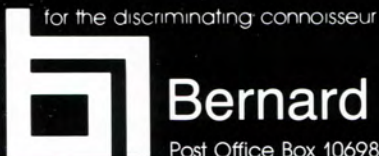
Ivory, signed *Yasuaki*, 19th C. H. 2½".

This netsuke was previously catalogued as a woman dyeing silk. Several months ago we viewed an original Hokusai print displayed in the Miyako Hotel in Kyoto, Japan.

Illustrated in the print were several *ama* on a shell-scattered beach. One of the *ama* shown, identical to the netsuke illustrated here, was unmistakably *Yasuaki*'s inspiration for this netsuke.



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Cover photo: Michael B. Glass. Objects courtesy of Richard Silverman. (See "A Tale of Two Netsuke" page 6). Two sterling silver spoons with 18th C. ivory netsuke.

NETSUKE KENKYUKAI

Study Journal

Volume 4, Number 4 Winter 1984

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FROM YOUR EDITOR



Virginia G. Atchley

It is a constant source of amazement to me that new materials about netsuke and *sagemono* continue to surface — out of the blue, so to speak. Indeed “out of the kitchen” comes this issue’s feature story of two handsome silver serving spoons with netsuke handles. We choose to hope, even expect, that serendipity, with an occasional assist from our readers, will raise its lovely head in similar fashion many times in the future.

As luck, and a bit of planning, would have it, this issue has a strong emphasis on contemporary netsuke: a review by Neil Davey of Miriam Kinsey’s brand-new book, *Living Masters of Netsuke*; an article by the contemporary American carver, Whittaker Freegard; and a detailed account by Mrs. Kinsey of contemporary women carvers.

Ojime, those “little beads” long cherished by a small handful of connoisseurs, are now sought with what may best be described as avidity by growing numbers of collectors. Very little has been printed about *ojime* to date, however, and we are therefore much pleased that Frederick Chavez (“The Beadologist”) agreed to prepare for us the article herein.

The caring collector will find much to savor in Michael Birch’s penetrating analysis of Paul Moss’ London workshop on “Intelligent Netsuke” which was a thoughtful and incisive consideration of some of the subtle values of netsuke and of art in general. Read without haste and with reflection, this is material of intrinsic value.

What with the recent London convention and the current Honolulu gathering, Norman Sandfield’s resume of the prolific netsuke convention calendar of the past ten years is timely. For fun, use his checklist to see how many times “you were there.”

To all these contributors, warmest thanks. It has been my genuine pleasure to work with you.

Virginia G. Atchley

PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE



James Hume

If you read my message in the Fall issue you were expecting inside color in this issue, which didn’t materialize. Unfortunately we did not have sufficient color advertising support to make it happen. Michael B. Glass & Associates, our publisher, plans to acquire a color separation machine. We think it will be possible to produce color separations at a lower cost and consequently attract more color advertisers, resulting in color in each issue. We will keep you informed of our progress.

Producing a newsletter is one of our objectives for 1985. I am looking for an editor for this project. If you are interested please let me know.

For those of you who want a bargain, we have a limited quantity of Study Journal Binders which are “Seconds” meaning they have a small blemish which is hardly noticeable. They are available for only \$11.00.

We were absolutely swamped with orders for Miriam Kinsey’s book. The publisher, Kodansha, informs us that the books are arriving early December and will be shipped immediately to Kenkyukai members.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of you for your support during this past year and we look forward to serving you during 1985.

Best Wishes for a good New Year,

James Hume

IN MEMORIUM

With deep sadness we report the sudden passing on November 27, 1984, of Margaret Birch, wife of the carver Michael Birch and affectionately known as Maggie to her many friends. Our heartfelt sympathy to Michael.



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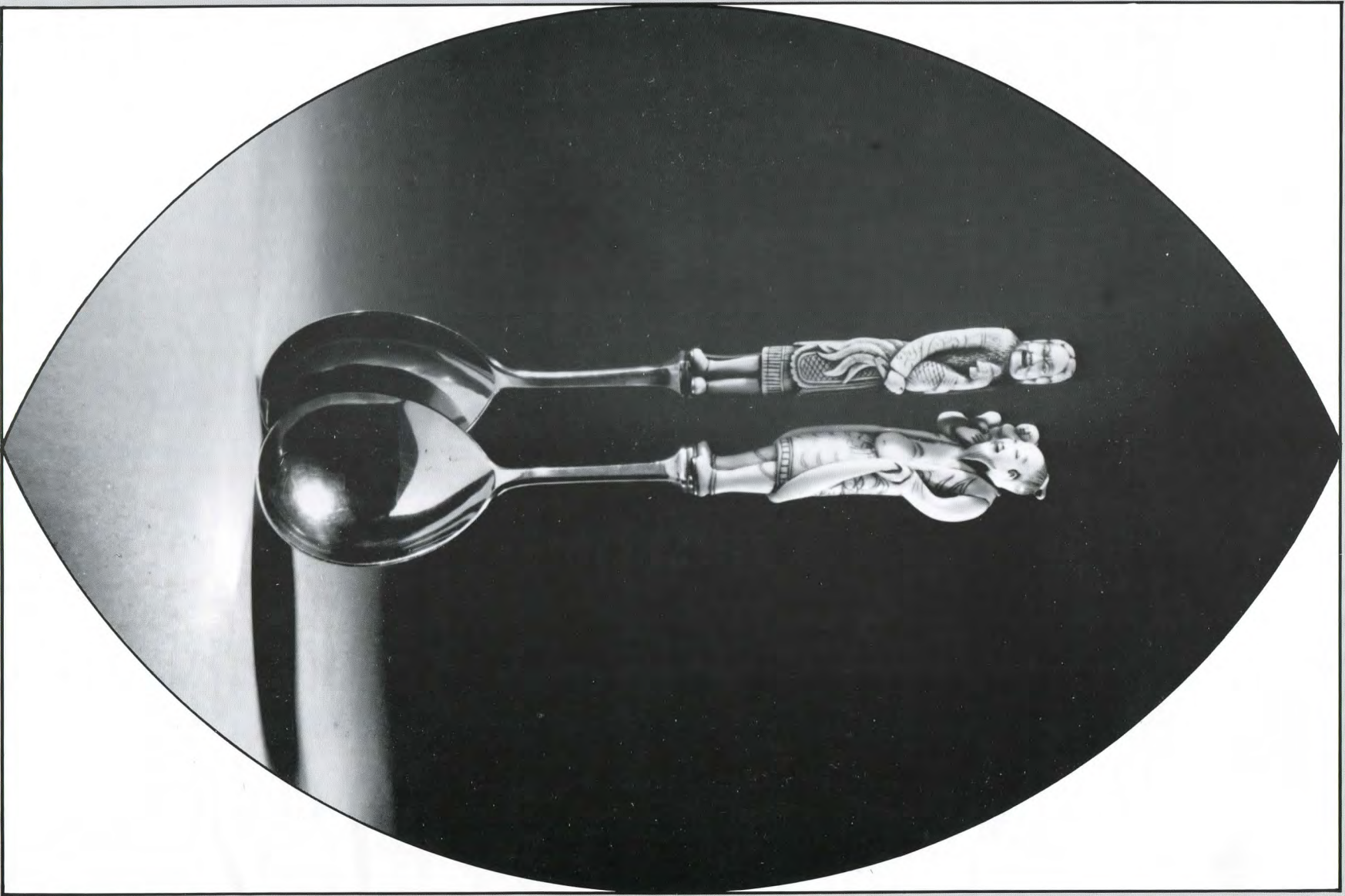
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A Tale of Two Netsuke

by Richard Silverman



Netsuke came into being with the sole utilitarian purpose of use as a counterweight for hanging pouches and cases. Over the next few hundred years they evolved into magnificent miniature sculptures, but their main purpose remained the same...until 1897-1898!

It was during these two historic years that someone had a brilliant thought: netsuke can have another purpose and it will not interfere with the visual and tactile joy that one derives from holding or just looking at them. And so these two silver serving spoons were made with ivory netsuke handles. Both netsuke are from the 18th C. and are well carved. The Chinese gentleman holding a child on his shoulder is 4" tall; the Dutchman holding a long-tailed rooster in his arms is 4½" tall. Each man is standing on a silver base that is incorporated into the spoon's silver handle. The backs of the handles ride 2" up the backs of the netsuke and are secured by screws in such a way that they do not detract from the beauty of the netsuke themselves.*

Shortly after the Olympics in Los Angeles I was invited to a friend's apartment in my building for a Sunday brunch. And there I saw these serving spoons sitting in the salad bowl. I stayed quiet until it was my turn to take some salad. I did have some doubt as to their being "real" netsuke, but as soon as I picked them up all doubt faded. When I told my hostess what they really were she seemed quite surprised. Her mother had given the spoons to her over forty years ago in London. She knew nothing more about them, I am sorry to say...except that when I remarked about the beautiful condition

and patina of the ivory, she was quick to reply that she had always taken very good care of them: "I just put them in the dishwasher with everything else." And they are also kept in a drawer with other serving pieces with no special care.

It has been said that God looks after all babies and children. Might I add that He surely has shown special affection for these two unique netsuke. They must have received tender loving care from their first few generations of owners, but I think Divine intervention has played a big part during the past forty years.

I believe there may be more to this story, but I cannot finish it without help. Can someone out there trace the English hallmarks back to the silversmith who made the spoons for these two netsuke? Might the netsuke have come from one of the first-generation English collections? The English keep meticulous records, and maybe one of you can locate some pertinent documents. Please write me any information available so that I may complete "A Tale of Two Netsuke." Richard R. Silverman, 838 N. Doheny Drive #1102, Los Angeles, CA 90069, (213) 273-3838. ■

*Authentication for the dating of the spoons comes in a letter to me from the Schragger Galleries, as follows:

"Your silver is Victorian, made in London, 1897-1898, in the XXII cycle of marks. The reason it does not have the Queen's Head for the fifth mark is that the sovereign's head was discontinued as a mark on May 1, 1890.

"The maker's mark "TS, WS, HM" is unregistered as they stopped registering makers circa 1850. Makers' marks were registered prior to that date.

"This reference is from *English Goldsmiths and Their Marks*, by Sir Charles James Jackson FSA."



A fine russet iron somen, signed Myochin Ki Munekata,
17th century.

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Toshusai Sharaku: hosaban; portrait of the actor Sawamuro Sojuro III in the role of Otomo no Kuronushi. signed Sharaku ga and published by Tsutaya Jusaburo—fine impression and color, trimmed to the right but otherwise very good condition.
Provenance: Henry Vever



A fine and exceptionally large Kyoto School netsuke carved as Shoki and an oni, 18th century, 4½ inches high.
Provenance: F. Meinertzhagen Collection and recorded with a colored drawing in his card index.
J.A. Fairley Collection
M.T. Hindson Collection, illustrated in Davey, *Netsuke* (London 1974), no. 1027, p. 337.



An important shakudo nanako tsuba, signed Omori Teruhide and dated Meiwa 7 (1770).



CHRISTIE'S
NEW YORK

Japanese Ojime

An Historical Perspective

by Frederick Chavez



Fig. 1. Three *ojime*; all signed with a *kakihan*. a. Snake in foliage. Silver. b. Four seasons foliage. Silver. c. Basket of fruit. Gold.

In feudal Japan, in the year 1600, two great leagues of *daimyos* (the landed barons), clashed forces at Sekigahara, and the warrior-statesman, *Tokugawa Ieyasu*, was victorious. (This dramatic conflict was the subject of *Akiro Kurosawa's* masterful epic film, "Kagamusha.") *Tokugawa* established a military government at Edo, a shogunate that dominated Japanese politics and art for more than two and a half centuries.

Beginning in 1609 and culminating in 1682-1683, a number of sumptuary laws were effected whereby the Japanese were forbidden the use of Western dress and accessories. Western jewelry, tobacco, and smoking implements were proscribed. Not surprisingly, the injunction against smoking proved difficult and finally impossible to enforce but the ban on rings, bracelets, and earrings prevailed.

The political isolation and the forbidding of Western accessories worked in favor of the individualistic evolution of Japanese artistic expression

since the Japanese artists and artisans were virtually forced to restrict themselves to indigenous motifs and forms.

Metalworkers provided decoration or "sword furniture" for an artistic display of martial manners and of sophisticated taste. The *tsuba*, or sword-guard, became the foremost exponent of technical virtuosity in metalworking during the Edo period. Eventually, these metalworkers produced *ojime* of various combinations of metals, objects which rivaled the *tsuba* in quality of design, wondrously fine detail, and varied subject matter.

Japanese legislators frequently combined artisans and merchants into a single urban class referred to as *chonin*. The 17th C. witnessed great economic prosperity, and the *chonin* class, elevated economically, often achieved a higher position in society than was envisioned by the legislators.

These prosperous merchants, eager to express their secular spirit and to display their newly



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Fig. 2. *Karako* holding a treasure sack. Gold.

Fig. 3. *Oni*. Copper.

A figure in the round rather than the more usual carving in low relief, is comparatively rare.

Fig. 4. *Lion Dancer*. Gold. Signed *Shomin Koku*. Repousee in heavy sheet. Chased and stamped.

Fig. 5. Multi-metal *shojo* in a sake pot. Signed with a seal.



Fig. 5

acquired wealth, escaped to the pleasure quarters of the major cities. The theaters, restaurants, public baths, and *geisha* houses became showplaces where those with any pretensions to wealth or position delighted in displaying their fine garments and, of course, the *inro* and its appurtenances, the *netsuke* and the *ojime*.

The *inro*, whose origins reach back to the 16th C., is a container, frequently made up of two or more ingeniously nested boxes, used to store and carry medicine. The *inro* was a brilliant solution to the problem of the pocketless kimono, and was worn, suspended on a double cord, at the right rear hip, anchored to the sash (*obi*) by means of the *netsuke*.

The *netsuke* (a toggle or counterweight) was attached to the *inro* with a silk cord. Between the *netsuke* and *inro*, as a cinch for the cord, was a sliding bead called an *ojime* (pronounced "o-jee-meh"-with no major stress on any syllable). At first quite simple in design, *ojime* became more and more ornate in the 18th and especially in the 19th C. It was then that affluent Japanese commissioned artisans who worked full time making *inro*, *netsuke*

and *ojime*. After 1868, with the coming of the *Meiji* emperor, these splendid objects continued to be made for export to the newly-found European and American markets.

The size of the average *ojime* is approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ " in height and $\frac{1}{2}$ " in diameter. Ideally, the *inro*, *netsuke*, and *ojime* should form a perfectly integrated ensemble, composed of the finest materials and executed with painstaking craftsmanship. Although it is now not at all unusual to find an exquisite *inro* attached to an indifferent or even inferior *netsuke* and *ojime*, it is probably true that at the height of fashionable use, the entire ensemble was made up of three miniature works of art.

Plain *ojime* (those with no carved or worked design) are of varying shapes, often spherical or ovate. *Ojime* differ from ordinary, purely decorative beads in that they fulfill a function beyond the aesthetic. Their function is a dynamic one, that of securing the cord immediately above the *inro*. The *ojime* must lend itself to the smooth passage of the cord. There are, of course, exceptions to every rule: many tobacco pouches have metal chain "cords" and either a stationary or movable

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Of the many Tsu school carvers who signed their name Minko, the two most famous and perhaps earliest were Tanaka Minko and Juntoku Minko. Juntoku Minko's style was the more rough-hewn and powerful: Tanaka's work was chubby, in pale wood. Juntoku Minko is known for such combination of materials as this in his inlaid *tonkotsu*.

Mid 18th C.

Ex: HG & MA Beasley Collections

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Illustrated: *Contrasting Styles* 1974 or 78



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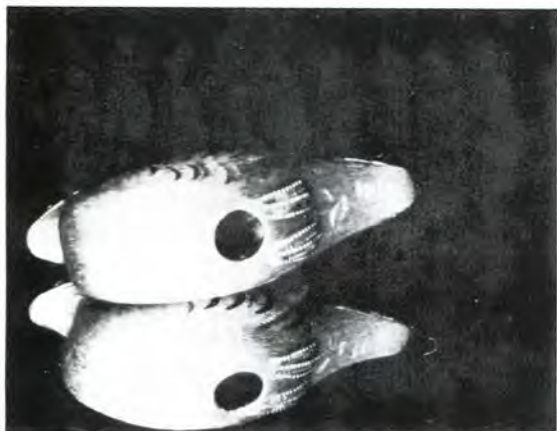


Fig. 6. Mandarin duck. Gold. Repousee and chased. Topknot and wings are fabricated. Inlaid eyes. Bottom view (left). Side view (right).



ojime whose use is purely decorative.

All *ojime* have one feature in common: the *himotoshi* (an aperture or shaft) through which the silken cord passes. When sleeved, the frame at each end of the aperture often has a smooth lip to help prevent the cord from becoming abraded. This lining may be made of metal, sometimes of ivory, or other material. The finest spherical ivory *ojime*, carved in relief, usually have a gold-lined *himotoshi*. Many natural materials were usually not lined, but great care was exercised to make certain the *himotoshi* was smooth and entirely functional.

Some of the first *ojime* used in the 16th and 17th C. were colored hardstones (jade, crystal, agate, coral, soapstone), most of them from China. Additionally, simple uncarved coral and assorted Chinese beads are often adapted by today's *inro* collector.

During the 18th C., when artisans turned their attention to the carving of netsuke and *ojime*, ivory and wood (boxwood, cypress, ebony, cherry)

became common materials (Okada, 1980, p.20). The fine-grained nature of elephant ivory makes it particularly workable in the artisan's hand and provides the base for some of the most intricate relief carving.

In addition to elephant ivory and wood, fine *ojime* exist in glass, seeds, stag antler, bone, fossil or mammoth ivory, and varieties of marine ivory or dentine: whale, hippopotamus, walrus, and, although rare, narwhal.

A treatise by the novelist *Saikaku*, published in 1682, describes the attire of a gentleman: "...an *inro*...hung by a small carved netsuke of sandalwood with a pouch of colored leather, and two carnelian beads (*ojime*)." A "Guide to Present-Day Fashion," published in Edo in 1773, states that the "highest style" includes the use of an *inro* as part of the well-dressed man's ensemble (Pekarik 1980, p. 44). In a treatise published in 1778, the author (*Ise Teiji*) states that "Nowadays *inro* are worn not so much because of their use as because they are pleasing and rather extravagant toys" (Hutt, 1982,



Fig. 7a. & b. These have similar illegible worn signatures. The *sennin* may have had its signature placed as an afterthought. a. Flowering plum blossoms. Ivory. b. *Sennin* with a *shishi*.



Sennin with a *shishi*.

p.22). A certain *Lord Matsuura*, writing before the year 1818, describes his "reputation for eccentricity for wearing *inro*, and sometimes *kinchaku* [money bags] and *doran* [pouches]" (Pekarik, 1980, p.124).

During the 18th C. metal artisans responsible for the intricate work on swords and fittings, sometimes made fittings for smoking paraphernalia and miniature sculpture (*netsuke* and *ojime*). The metal used was usually repousse or cast and chased and then hand corrected. It was sometimes patinated to various colors with experimental chemical treatments. According to the *Soken Kisho*, published in 1781, the metal artisan, *Hirata*, had made

shippo (enamel cloisonne) *ojime* by that date. Also by 1781 the artists *Soyo* and *Somin* had made *ojime* from gold, silver, and alloys of copper and gold (*shakudo*) or alloys of silver and copper (*shibuichi*). Metal *ojime* also incorporate copper whose applications in the decorative arts are more numerous in Japan than in any other country (Hickman, 1977, p.104). By the late 18th C. the use of gold, which was expensive and hard to get, was limited for the most part to the sword and its decorations and to the fittings of the pipe and tobacco pouch, *netsuke*, and *ojime* (Hickman, 1977, p.76).



Fig. 8. Fish and waves. *Takabori* with *shakudo* and *shibuichi takazogan*. Signed *Nagakazu*. 19th C.



Fig. 9. Stylized floral. Cloisonne.



Fig. 10. Mandarin ducks. *Shibayama* inlays. Signed *Ichinobu*.



Fig. 11. Duck and young. *Shibayama*-type inlays. Signed *Masamitsu*.



Fig. 12. a. Simulated coral; marbled waxy lacquer on wood.
b. Lacquered wood.



Fig. 13. *Shibayama*-style floral.

There are many approaches to making a collection of *ojime*. One collector might consider the variety of materials from which they were made. Another might prefer a collection built on subject matter. *Ojime* may be collected for their beauty and romance alone without regard for material or subject matter. A worthy beginning for collecting would be to seek out appropriate *ojime* to enhance an already existing collection of *inro* and *netsuke*.

The collectors, so far, are the custodians of these miniature sculptures; they are the seekers and preservers of a part of the cultural and art history of Japan. Public collections are few: presently the British Museum has the only large collection of *ojime* on permanent display, and the Newark Museum has the largest number of fine ones.

Something about the creation of *ojime* may be inferred from the written material about *inro* and *netsuke*, as well as about swords and sword furniture in the case of metal *ojime*. But written documentation about *ojime* themselves is scant; indeed such history is virtually nonexistent. It is to be hoped that this gap will soon be filled with accurate, scholarly, and well-illustrated publications. ■

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Book Review of
Living Masters of Netsuke

Reviewed by Neil Davey
Written by Miriam Kinsey, published by Kodansha International Limited, 1984.

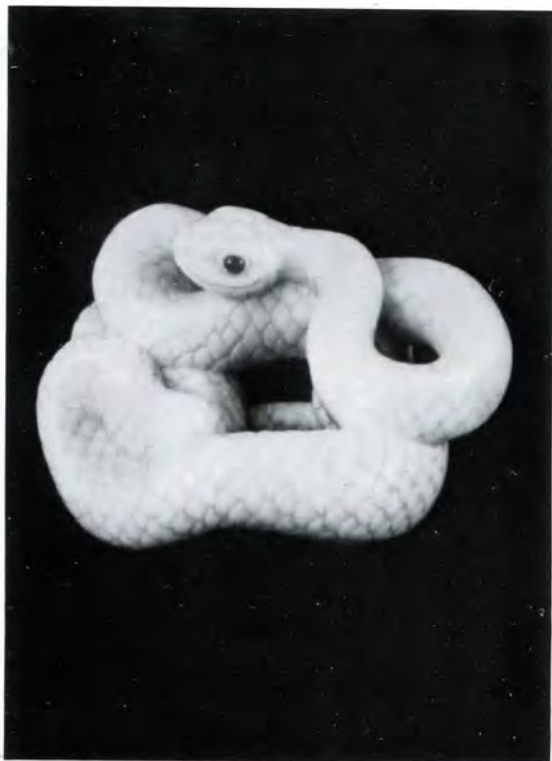


Fig. 1. Sacred Temple Snake. Ivory. *Kangyoku*.



Fig. 2. Mother Swan and Two Cygnets. Ivory. *Bishu*.

It was with a considerable amount of pleasure and a few misgivings that I accepted the invitation from Virginia Atchley to review Miriam Kinsey's new book, *Living Masters of Netsuke*. My doubts were based on the fact that modern netsuke, even now, have not found complete favour with all collectors, particularly in Europe, and that the whole matter is still subject to some controversy.

I, in company with many other interested parties, was brought up to believe that netsuke were utilitarian objects, the Japanese pocketless dress having

a strong bearing on their existence, and that when Western dress was introduced to Japan at the end of the last century, any netsuke-style carving produced from then on should be termed an *okimono*.

However, doubts that surrounded contemporary netsuke and their makers, accompanied by such questions as "Are they true netsuke in the accepted sense?" or "Should they be termed *okimono* in netsuke form?" have largely abated in recent times, due to a large extent to the fine work done by a



Fig. 3. Cicada on *Biwa* (Semimaru). Ivory. Senpo.

few people, including Miriam Kinsey and her husband Bob. It has been recognised by knowledgeable collectors and dealers that a number of the modern carvers are not, as was thought, "fly-by-night" artisans, but serious artists in the media of painting and sculpture who have, for various reasons, accepted the netsuke as their chosen vehicle. These artists and their work are finely documented in an original manner in this book.

So much has been written on the subject of netsuke over the last few years that it becomes increasingly difficult to find a new approach. In this aspect, Miriam Kinsey has a distinct advantage over other writers in that she is dealing with artists who are still alive and working, and the information about them and their work is readily at hand. However, having the information is one thing, while imparting it to others in a succinct, easily understandable form is another. Here, Mrs. Kinsey has been highly successful. Her warmth and her appreciation of the artists and their netsuke are readily discernible throughout the pages of this well-written book. She has been wise to concentrate on just a few artists, each one chosen with care from the many *netsukeshi* still active. While each aficionado of the subject will have his or her favourite style, all of us must accept that the artists selected have a plethora of talent and, in the



Fig. 4. Breeze. Ivory. Ryushi.



Fig. 5. Bishamon & Oni. Wood. Akihide.

majority of cases, much originality of style. It would also appear that the artists have been chosen, apart from their obvious talent, for their different approach to the art of netsuke carving.

Miriam Kinsey and her husband have travelled widely, particularly to Japan, where they have met and befriended the modern netsuke makers, in some cases becoming their patrons and in others merely showing an appreciation of their work which is apparent in these pages. One can readily perceive the *rapport* which they have with the artists and



Fig. 7. Two Carps. Ivory. Shingetsu.



Fig. 6. Genji Scroll. Ivory. Kodo.

their families, having stayed with them, in their homes, gleaning the type of background information lacking in other books. While it could be said that Mrs. Kinsey dwells a little too much, perhaps, on the private lives of the artists, her anecdotal approach serves to provide us, the readers, with a fuller understanding of the thinking that lies behind the work produced.

This aspect of the book is the one which sets it apart from most others on the subject: Mrs. Kinsey uses the artists' own words to explain their philosophy and techniques and the reasoning behind each carving.



Fig. 8. Dancer. Ivory. Mitsuyuki.



Fig. 9. Daruma. Wood. Hideyuki.



Fig. 10. Sennin with Snake. Wood. Masatoshi.



Fig. 11. A Kirin Wedding. Wood. Meikei.



Fig. 12. Two Foxes. Ivory. Sumi.

Raymond Bushell, in his book *The Art of Netsuke Carving*, based on the work of Masatoshi, began this trend which has been adroitly adapted by Mrs. Kinsey, through transcribed conversations with many of the artists, she asking pertinent questions and the carvers giving honest, and, to us, useful answers. Thus we learn that Kangyoku fervently wishes.... to create netsuke that will bring peace of mind to the person who appreciates them; that Hideyuki wishes.... to take the initiative in an effort to rediscover lost techniques as an heir to the traditional art of netsuke carving; that Kodo is outspoken about copies... I am unhappy about collectors who entice a carver to produce imitations. I grieve for the practice of copying and encouraging others to copy, for it is the evil force that has retarded the development of netsuke art....and much as I like the ancient netsuke, I can not imitate. I must follow my own spirit in my own way. And perhaps, at least to me, the most cogent remarks pertaining to the subject come from Michael Birch when he says, *At the very*

moment that a human being takes a piece of material and alters its form in however small a degree, the act of human intervention has turned it into a work of art. I like to think of the first man who picked up a piece of tree root to use as a toggle. As he put his knife to it, pierced it to take a cord and altered its shape, he transformed it into a simple work of art. The Japanese adopted and developed the netsuke into a coherent, sophisticated and recognisable art form.

These and other personal comments are interspersed with interesting details about the lives of the artists as well as highly informative explanations of their carving techniques.

The work represented in this book includes a wide variety of styles. These range from the free and vigorous style of Kangyoku and Bishu (Figs. 1 and 2) to the delicate, naturalistic netsuke of Senpo (Fig. 3) and include the sensuous studies of young girls by Ryushi (Fig. 4), the finely carved and inlaid work of Akihide (Fig. 5), and the superbly lacquered netsuke of Kodo (Fig. 6). Other artists given worthy



Fig. 13. A. Southern Sea Lion. Wood. B. Penguin and Chick. Wood. Michael Webb.

mention and well illustrated include *Shingetsu* (Fig. 7), *Mitsuyuki* (Fig. 8), *Hideyuki* (Fig. 9), *Masatoshi* (Fig. 10), *Meikei* (Fig. 11) and *Sumi* (Fig. 12).

For the first time in any book on netsuke, detailed biographies of Occidental carvers, with examples of their work, are shown, thus illustrating how international barriers are being beaten down in this as in most other art forms. The work of these Western carvers is well depicted by the highly naturalistic studies of animals by Michael Webb (Fig. 13) and the sophisticated, formalised work of Michael Birch. They and all the other carvers represented show artistry and originality that set them apart from each other but, more importantly, place them on a level equal to that of the finest of the traditional Japanese carvers.

If I can find a fault with the book, however minor, I would question Mrs. Kinsey's chapter heading, "Netsuke Artists of Tomorrow." Several of the artists listed under this title are talented people who have not yet sought to market their works, choosing rather to share them with friends and families. However, in all other respects, they are carvers of today rather than tomorrow, having been designing and making netsuke for a considerable period of time.

On the technical side, one can find no fault. Assuming that the finished volume matches up to the page proof I was kindly sent to read, the quality of the paper, printing and, above all, the photographic evidence of the work portrayed are all of an excellent standard. The illustrations are mostly (quite rightly in my view) of natural size, and the actual size of the netsuke is recorded in other cases. The order of the book has been set for ease of reference, with a clear Table of Contents and a comprehensive Index.

With those of us who are newly "converted" to contemporary netsuke as an art form, the book will find much favour. For those yet to appreciate these "new fellahs," the book will go a long way to reassure them that carving netsuke is not necessarily an art of past times. It is much in evidence today and appears to show no signs of abating in the foreseeable future.



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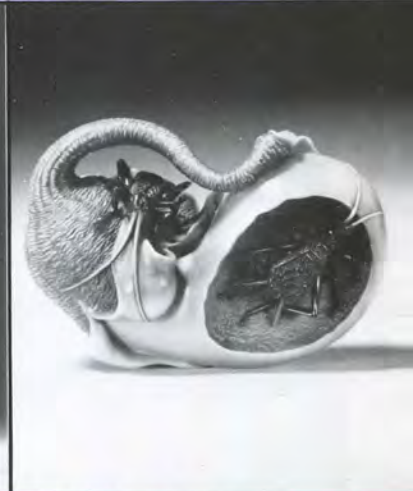
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Michael Spindel(center) with *Hideyuki* (left) and *Ikku* (right)



Ama and octopus. *Hideyuki*.



Gourd with insects. *Ikku*.



Bishu and Michael Spindel



The chase. *Bishu*.

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Mermaid in ivory. Sumi.



Michael Spindel (center) with Ikumi (left) and Sumi (right).



Nue (Mythological beast). Kangyoku Rishshisai.



Kangyoku and Michael Spindel.

Aug. 1st

Dear Kay and Michael
 How are you and your family?
 Thank you very much for your mail
 I received it 10th at 28th June.
 I reviewed it 1st July.
 I'm very happy to find the pictures
 (Nue and Nue) in the magazines.
 I'll carve another 'Nue' my best.
 I understand how to write your
 addressing.
 Thanks.
 Now I have two dictionary.
 It's difficult to write a letter
 in English than netsuke carving.
 My nose pecked is soaked
 with sweat.
 It's exceptionally hot this summer.
 Yours Sincerely
 Kangyoku



Kangyoku at work in his studio.

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Contemporary Women Netsuke Carvers

by Miriam Kinsey



Bishu giving his wife, Ikumi, instructions in netsuke carving.

Until the late 20th C. only one woman achieved recognition for a high degree of excellence in the world of netsuke carving. She was *Bunshojo*, the daughter of *Tomiharu*, the originator and founder of the Iwami school. The Iwami carvers lived in an isolated province facing the Japan Sea and because of their segregation from the centers of netsuke carving activity in Kyoto, Osaka, and Tokyo developed distinctive characteristics in their work. They are particularly known for their use of wild boar tusks instead of ivory, and their work was usually signed with long inscriptions etched in miniscule characters. They were also known for their use of the *ukibori* or raised technique, (originated by *Tametaka*) on their boxwood and black persimmon pieces. *Bunshojo* was a skilled *ukibori* artist and was one of the best carvers of the Iwami group.

Since her death in 1838, the question has often arisen, "Will there ever be another woman carver such as *Bunshojo*?" For nearly one hundred and fifty years, there has been no known woman carver of noteworthy talent and skill. Today, however, four Japanese women carvers are attracting attention and gaining recognition in the netsuke world: *Ikumi*, *Sumi*, *Masami*, and *Atsumi*.

Because the classic apprenticeship system no longer exists between netsuke master and pupil, *Bishu*, one of today's top netsuke carvers, recognized the need of making some basic instruction available to aspiring *netsuke-shi*. Several years ago, he moved to a larger home so that he could provide live-in accommodations for a limited number of pupils. Two of his star students are *Ikumi*, his wife, and her friend, *Sumi*. *Bishu* also occasionally gives instruction for short periods to Western carvers. Unlike the apprentices of earlier days, his pupils work independently and develop their own designs. They use their own *go* (art name) and market their netsuke as soon as their work merits consideration by collectors.

Ikuko (*Ikumi*) met *Bishu* when they were both attending Taiheiyō Arts Academy in the mid-1960's. In the five years following their marriage, two baby girls and a boy were born. *Ikuko*'s interest in art in general, and in her husband's netsuke carving in particular, inevitably resulted in her being *Bishu*'s first pupil. In spite of running a large and busy household with three active children, and sometimes live-in pupils, *Ikuko* works at her carving from 9:30 to 5:30 almost every day.

Her art signature *Ikumi* is taken from the first



Mermaid. Ivory. Ikumi.



Mermaid. Ivory. Ikumi.



Two Puppies. Ivory. Ikumi.



Rabbit. Ivory. Ikumi.

part of her given name and from the *mi* in *Mishu*, *Bishu's hiragana* signature. She has talent and originality and is especially skilled in polishing ivory. She has created a number of whimsical mermaid netsuke but her chief design interest is in small animals such as cats, squirrels, and rabbits. Her animal netsuke are quite different from *Bishu's* animals although her work shows his influence in a subtle way. While *Bishu* and *Ryushi* are her favorite contemporary carvers, and *Kaigyokusai* her favorite among the early carvers, she wants to carve freely from designs which are completely her own. She thinks women can show a delicacy and softness in their work which often is absent in the work of male artists.

Like many netsuke carvers, *Ikumi* has an interest in oil painting. Unlike most, however, she has no one in her ancestry or her family with carving talent except, of course, her husband *Bishu*. She produces two or three saleable netsuke a month, and a number are included in important collections. At forty, she is a successful netsuke artist as well as a good wife, mother, and homemaker. She has long years ahead to continue and develop her carving career when her children have married and gone to homes and lives of their own. In the Netsuke Hall of Fame, *Ikumi* and *Bishu Saito* will be known as the first husband-and-wife team of netsuke artists.

Sumiko Sata became interested in carving while attending Taiheiyō Fine Arts Academy. Later, through her friendship with *Ikumi* she started taking instruction from *Bishu*. She carves with the *go* of *Sumi* and, like *Ikumi*, produces two or three netsuke a month, a number of which are favorites of well-known collectors.

Sumi, besides caring for her husband *Kozo* and son *Sho*, finds time to spend four or five hours a day on netsuke carving. Unlike *Ikumi*, who sits on the floor in traditional Japanese fashion while carving, *Sumi* sits on a chair. Figures and animals are the inspiration for most of her netsuke designs, and she strives to express her inner feelings in her



Two Rabbits. Ivory. Ikumi.

work. She thinks netsuke carving is a most suitable profession for a woman, saying, "I think miniature carvings which can be held in the palm of the hand show warmth and roundness like a female."

Sumi greatly admires the very early carver *Shuzan* and, understandably, her favorite contemporary carver is *Bishu*. Her own designs, like her teacher's, are imaginative and original and have feeling and delicacy. She hopes that her work will be appraised not as the work of a female carver, but on its own merit and on an equal basis



Two Foxes. Ivory. Sumi.

her aptitude, he began to teach her the basics of netsuke carving and conferred on her the *go*, *Masami*.

Today, at forty-seven, *Masami* spends six to seven hours a day, five or six days a week, carving netsuke. The *Masanao* influence is very evident in her work. She carves in wood (boxwood, or *tsuge* as the

Japanese call it, for which the Ise Peninsula where she lives is famous) and her favorite designs are animals. Many collectors have pieces of hers in their collections, perhaps not always realizing that



Cat with bell. Ivory. Sumi.



Kappa. Ivory. Sumi.

with that of male carvers.

Shinzan Masanao, a fourth-generation *Masanao* carver and one of the few early 20th C. carvers to work with wood, had four daughters but no sons to carry on the *Masanao* tradition. His oldest daughter, *Miyo Sakai*, wanted to learn to carve but her family thought netsuke carving was not a profession for women. Finally, when her son and daughter were in their teens, she decided to learn to carve in spite of family opposition. When *Shinzan* saw both her determination and

the engaging little rat or other animal was carved by a woman.

Masami's favorite antique carver is *Masakatsu*, the son of *Suzuki Masanao* and the teacher of *Masakiyo*, her grandfather. Rather curiously, her favorite contemporary carver is *Ryushi* whose netsuke are far removed in feeling from the *Masanao* work.

She has little time now for embroidering which is her chief hobby. Today, she is consumed with the desire to be known as a very good carver, not just a woman carver, and



Kappa. Ivory. Sumi.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4a

Fig. 1. *Yume* (dream). Ivory with turtle-shell inlaid eyes. Lady daydreaming. She would like to be as beautiful as *Benten*, Goddess of Beauty, shown in clouds over her head. *Takako Atsumi*.

Fig. 2. *Obake* (ghost) reading scroll. Ivory and turtle-shell inlaid eyes and scroll. He has eight heads and one leg. Each head has one eye (red, green, brown, black and yellow). *Takako Atsumi*.

Fig. 3. *Issun Bashi Kappa* (as Tom Thumb). Ivory and turtle shell. Kappa sleeping in wooden *miso* soup cup on the river carrying his sword (a needle) and lunch wrapped in a *furoshiki*. He is on his way to rescue the princess from the *oni*. *Takako Atsumi*.

Fig. 4a. b. *Kappa Lovers*. Ivory and turtle shell. Ebony *ojime*. *Takako Atsumi*.



Fig. 4b

to carry on the *Masanao* tradition in the netsuke world. *Masami* feels it is possible for women to produce netsuke comparable to those of men carvers but she says it is more difficult for women because they do not have a man's strength in their hands and they are responsible for running a household which takes time and attention from their carving hours.

Like *Ikumi*, *Sumi*, and *Masami*, *Takako Atsumi* was born in Japan, in a small town in Shizuoka prefecture. Beyond this point, there is little similarity in background, motivation, and training. *Takako* graduated from high school in Mikkabi, the small town in central Japan where she was born. When she was eighteen, she moved to Tokyo to enroll at Jissen Women's University and from this school received a B.A. in English and Home Economics.

Always in the back of her mind was her childhood dream of traveling in Africa, probably, she says, because of her love of animals and her fascination with Tarzan movies. This dream developed into a

study of African art, especially rough and unsophisticated ivory carvings, and she took a trip to Zaire where she stayed for three months. While there, she bought a pair of ivory tusks, and a piece of elephant skin which she made into a purse and wallets. The tusks remained a nagging challenge, and three years later she returned to Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda for nearly two months. Her interest in ivory carving increased and when she sought a place in Africa where she could study ivory carving, she received the answer, "Japan is the best place for that." So she returned to Japan where she met *Yasafusa*, a fine living netsuke carver, who in turn introduced her to Mr. and Mrs. David Abel during their travels in Japan. Shortly thereafter, she went to America to live with them in Miami and began to study ivory carving under David, who is one of the best netsuke carvers in the West. Before meeting *Yasafusa*, *Takako* was unfamiliar with netsuke and did not realize it was possible to carve such intricate pieces from ivory.

She has proved to be an apt pupil and has put aside her talent and interest in other art forms – such as prints, leather carving, illustrations, and ceramics – for netsuke and *ojime* carving. Her netsuke are mostly in ivory, occasionally amber, and are original designs, usually inspired by mythical animals or Japanese legends. Her favorite netsuke carver is *Ryushi* and her dream is to carve beautiful women as skillfully as he does. She hopes that eventually she will develop a recognizable style.

In *Takako Atsumi*, we have an accomplished and talented young woman netsuke carver, born in Japan, living in the United States, who has

learned her carving skills from an American. She is very imaginative and her versions of legendary tales and figures are amusing and fresh. She is a skilled carver, and the finish and polish on her ivory pieces are exceptional.

Netsuke carving traditionally has been the province of Japanese men. Today, there are a number of non-Japanese men who are achieving recognition for the carving of excellent netsuke and, as noted above, there are at least four Japanese women who are contributing quality pieces to the current netsuke market. In Sue Wraight, we find a young English woman who has turned from jewelry making



Kitsune (fox-lady) looking for a man she can cheat. She tries to cover her tail with her cloak. Ivory. *Takako Atsumi*. Photo by Ed Ikuta.



Little boy with origami hat running and playing soldier. Ivory. *Takako Atsumi*. Photo by Ed Ikuta.



Coiled rat. Wood. *Masami*.



Tiger. Wood. *Masami*.

Octopus holding fish. Wood (holly), with inlaid ebony and amber eyes. Sue Wraight.



Hatching snake. Wood (holly). By Susan Wraight. Photo :Courtesy of *Fine Woodworking* magazine.





Susan Wraight at work. Photo: Courtesy of *Fine Woodworking* magazine.

to netsuke carving. I have not met her nor have I seen any of her netsuke but she deserves mention among today's women netsuke carvers.

During her second year at the Royal College of Art in London, it occurred to her to combine jewelry techniques and wood. Her decision to change from metal to wood was made easier by her growing disenchantment with the limitations of jewelry. She searched the museums and galleries of London for background material to help her find an art form which lent itself to her particular creative talent and skills. Among other

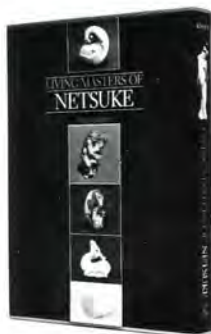
sculptural forms, she discovered netsuke. She found their intimate scale and meticulous detailing appealing. In short, they combined all the elements she wanted to use, especially the narrative element and the wit with which it is translated into three dimensions, and she decided to experiment with a hybrid of jewelry making and wood carving.

The subjects of Sue Wraight's netsuke are animals and insects indigenous to her part of the world, like "Wasp on a Blackberry" (ebony and boxwood), "Hatching Snake" (holly), a crayfish, and "Mountain Hares" (holly). Her legendary subjects also are English rather than Japanese, like "The Walrus and the Carpenter," which was inspired by Lewis Carroll's poem in *Through the Looking Glass*. Like the Japanese functional netsuke, however, her pieces are highly tactile, even though not designed to be worn. She is particularly happy when her clients carry her netsuke in their pockets like worry beads.

In the closing decades of the 20th C., we find more and more women moving into areas considered for centuries the domain of men. Even in an esoteric corner of the art world like netsuke carving, the women mentioned above are today gaining recognition and success where, with the exception of *Bunshojo*, only men had been the known practitioners. ■

LIVING MASTERS OF NETSUKE

BY Miriam Kinsey



A colorful look at twelve modern practitioners of netsuke art with valuable advice for collectors. Forward by Edwin O. Reischauer
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Miriam D. Kinsey has collected netsuke for thirty years. She is well known to many leading carvers, whose homes and workshops she visits on frequent trips to Japan.

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Carving Contemporary Netsuke and Other Miniatures

by Whittaker Freegard



Fig. 1. Seaman's chest and whaler's pipe set. Bone and horn recorder (pitched in f) in ebony case; ivory *ojime*; ebony and ivory netsuke of monkey chained to seaman's chest with tiny horn whistle inside.



Whittaker Freegard at work.

Whittaker Freegard has been a full-time artisan for more than fifteen years. At first he made musical instruments, including hardwood flutes and recorders (some of his own design) and original design string instruments with expanded scales. For the last five or six years he has concentrated on work in a miniature scale. His miniatures are designed and carved within the Japanese *sagemono* tradition and include a case attached with a cord and *ojime* to a suitably designed netsuke. The netsuke usually have a whistle incorporated into their design. Recently he has been carving these functional miniatures and netsuke out of gemstone. He is also working on a series of gemstone *ojime*.

All craftsmen/artists or artisans (which is the term I prefer to use) have their own story of what led them to their present life style or livelihood. Some have simply followed their family tradition; others have sort of fallen into the artisan life; and still others have broken with family ties to satisfy a driving desire to create something or manifest an auditory or visual image.

Among those who have felt the tugging of creative urge, a large variety of early influences and triggering experiences have nudged them toward the artisan life. One of the triggering experiences during my youth occurred on a beautiful summer day in the Missouri Ozarks, when several friends and I had

the privilege and joy of helping my aunt unpack over a dozen large shipping crates that she had sent from Japan. These crates were stuffed with three years' accumulation of gifts and souvenirs gathered while she was a Fulbright scholar/teacher in Tokyo. I vividly remember carefully unwrapping each object, and being deeply impressed with the obvious patience, skill, and impeccable attention to detail lavished on the finer pieces.

This first exposure to the arts of Japan established a standard of excellence that over the years has been refined by repeated and more selective exposure to the Oriental art traditions. These traditions, with their emphasis on years of training and painstaking work, form a solid background, but, in today's market, they provide an economically difficult model for the struggling and emerging artisan to strive toward. Few if any serious artisans expect their livelihood to provide them with quick or easy money. In fact, unless one is stepping into an established business, the desire to be an artisan insures one of little and uncertain pay for many years. Fortunately, the desire to create is stronger than the desire to accumulate.

For the Western carver of miniature art, the path to collector acceptance is overgrown with



Fig. 2. Komuso and miniature shakuhachi set. African blackwood shakuhachi in redwood root case; porcelain ojime; whistle netsuke of monk with ivory basket, and four fingerholes.

entrenched imagery and cultural prejudice from both the East and the West. Western art critics have traditionally held the view that sculpture must be monumental in order to be important, or even classed as art. Collectors of small carvings often feel that only the Oriental artisan can rightfully work in the miniature scale, with the exception of jewelry or wearable art.

Throughout history the artisan has always reacted to and adapted much of the artistic influence from other cultures (except during periods of nationalistic isolation), often before such influences have general acceptance within the supporting community. Today, through mass communication, the artisan has the entire world with all of its different cultures from which to find inspiration and influence. From an historical perspective, the carver of miniature art can draw upon the traditions of netsuke and *okimono* carving from the East, and Eskimo, whaling, and prisoner-of-war art from the West. These traditions have been very important to me as I developed and refined my feeling for miniature art.

Contemporary considerations that influence many of my carvings are my concern for and celebration of the many endangered animals that may soon disappear forever from our world, and a similar appreciation and concern for the survival of ethnic music and instruments, particularly those in the flute family. My interest in ethnic cultures has inspired me to develop a series of miniature yet authentically designed, tuned, and playable historic and ethnic flutes. The size and pitch of these miniature instruments put them in a class with whistles (which I also study and collect), although their tonal range will often encompass a chromatic scale of two octaves.

The ideas for the subject matter and design of my carvings come from a varied field of inspiration, and they are usually of a visual nature. Once the seed of an image has taken root in my mind, it

slowly grows and becomes clearer and more complete. To continue the plant metaphor, I feed and water the developing image according to its needs. I do this by research of my subject, by spending hours and days, sometimes weeks and months, with books and photographs and paintings, with any other information that pertains to the over-all carving as the concept and total image develop to completeness. When I am concerned with matters of realism and detail, books are my main source, and as a consequence, my personal library has grown past the point where it is easy to box up and move. Even with the continuing expansion of my own book collection, I depend upon the local public library. There are times when I have found it necessary to make a page of sketches or even clay models before a particular aspect of the design is clear to me. Usually, I work from nothing more than a mental image of the design I want, sometimes keeping the image loose in some areas to allow for flexibility as the carving progresses. This allows me to be surprised.

At this point, I want to discuss a few tool and technical considerations. A controversy has been brewing for some years over the acceptability and proper place for the use of power tools in creating miniature sculpture. The traditionalists argue for the authenticity of the hand-controlled cut; the proponents of power tools point out the efficiency and lower labor costs of using modern machinery. The argument usually boils down to a question of speed versus control. My own opinion is that it is possible to have both; it is simply a question of when to concentrate on one over the other. There's an old carpenter's phrase that applies here: "the right tool for the right job." The fact to keep in mind here is that the act of carving both monumental and miniature sculpture is a process of refining detail. This is accomplished by first cutting away large chunks of material in order to block out the design. In ivory carving, this is done with a saw, and although a certain amount of

control is necessary to ensure leaving enough material from which to carve the design, this step can easily be done with a power band saw in a fraction of the time required to make these same cuts by hand with a hack saw.

There aren't too many howls of protest at this early stage, but the next carving step starts heating up controversy. This step is known as "roughing out" the design. The term is quite literal, for both the design and the carving process at this point are handled in a rough, *i.e.* unfinished, style. Remember that this is only the second step in refining detail. There is still a lot of material to take away in developing the design. The traditional ivory carvers used a wide variety of coarse and medium files to remove this material. The modern ivory carver is much more likely to use a flexible shaft power tool. This tool holds a wide variety of round cutting burrs, and acts as a rotary file that quickly cuts away the unwanted material. The howls of protest are coming in loud and clear now. In my opinion, the flex shaft tools are merely extensions of the hand like any other tool, and it is the practice and skill of the hand holding that tool that determine the results. The tools might cut, but they do not carve.

After the design has been fully roughed out to the desired size, and the proportions seem correct, the general subject, unless abstract, should be easily recognized. It is usually at this stage before final carving of detail that I concern myself with the whistle aspect of the netsuke. On the wood carving of a whistle netsuke, I will often split the unfinished carving down the middle in order to hollow out the whistle cavity and cut out the windway passage. Then, using hidden bamboo pegs set in around the perimeter of the whistle cavity (taking into account the design configuration so that I don't carve down into a peg), I rejoin the two halves. When working with ivory, this procedure cannot be used because any such split or cut down the middle of the carving would be too hard to conceal, so I usually work out some way of drilling into the carving and hollowing out the whistle cavity with round burrs held in a flex shaft. Because each carving is unique it requires its own particular approach and solution to incorporating the whistle into the design. One of the main considerations is the placement of the windway passage and window ramp.

The proportions and angles must be correct for the whistle tone to respond correctly. In the design and cutting away of the whistle ramp and window, and design of the air passage and plug, these whistles function like tiny mouthpieces. In working with this miniature scale on both the tiny flutes and netsuke, big tonal changes are produced by very little changes in the proportions and angles, so I have to work slowly and guard against cutting too much. The tuning process in particular is care-

fully done, starting slightly flat in pitch and slowly enlarging or scraping the needed areas to raise the pitch to the desired level. I am finally satisfied when the whistle responds easily in tune, with sufficient dynamic change.

The next step is the completion of detail refinement on the carving. For me, this stage is by far the longest and most tedious. It is the most painstaking, the fussiest, most intense, and also the most enjoyable part of carving. For me to get ultimate refinement and crispness of detail, all of this final carving has to be done by hand with several favorite knives and a selection of reground dental tools. Much of this work consists of removing previous tool marks, and making carefully controlled cuts. To accomplish this on a miniature scale requires tool cutting edges to be long, thin and/or narrow, and perfectly sharp. I check for sharpness by inspecting the cutting edges under a light. If there is absolutely no reflection along the edge, then the knife is sharp. One of my favorite knives is a bench knife with medium length (1") blade that gently slopes down to the point. I have squared the top of the blade, particularly on the slope down to the point, and have honed this into a very effective scraper for smoothing and removing the tool marks from tight corners and otherwise inaccessible spots.

When all of the design details are carved and refined to my satisfaction, I turn my attention to any considered embellishments including inlays such as eyes or fingerhole bushings. With most of the fun work behind me, I steel myself for the tedium of finishing the carving. This final stage involves removing all tool marks and preparing the carving surface for any treatment, *i.e.* any simulation of natural textures such as animal fur, or hair, or wood graining, or incised garment



Fig. 3. Scarab seal blank netsuke, carved from optical quartz.

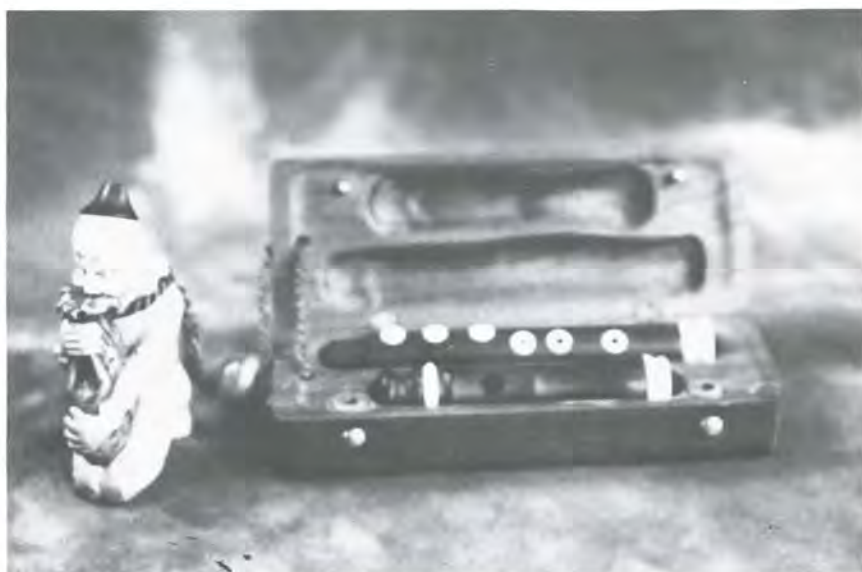


Fig. 4. Clown and miniature flute set. Rosewood and ivory flute (pitched in d) in a walnut case; malachite *ojime*; boxwood and ivory clown whistle netsuke with one fingerhole.

designs. These surface treatments are the last cuts to be made before any staining or coloring, and must be done on a polished surface so that there are no marks or abrasions done over them. Before these final treatments, the surface is prepared by scraping to remove the tool marks, sanding through all the grits to remove the previous sanding marks (I finish this step with worn 600 grit), and finally by polishing out any sanding marks. If one is not very patient and thorough during this step, it is easy to think one has finished, only to see under close inspection that there are still scratches that require going through the whole process in that area again. That can be very frustrating. I learned early, however, that although finishing doesn't pay, it sells. What I mean by this is that without a satisfactory finish, a carving will never sell.

This brings up the completion of the creative cycle, which means finding a satisfied recipient of the artistic effort. If all artisans were independently well off, I feel sure most of them would gladly give their work to the right person. Many of them still do even though they can't afford to. The truth is that the great majority of creative artisans that I know are far from well off (though they might live with a great deal of style and some ease), often being paid for equal amount of time with less money than a beginning laborer. If there is any bitterness in that statement it is only because I have seen too much brilliant creative promise wither and not reach its fullness from lack of support.

The contemporary ivory and miniature carvers (and there are more of us than most collectors realize), who are actively working, can either trade their work or sell it. In either case, they must establish some sort of value for their work. This can be agonizing and sometimes humbling. Often the artisan establishes an hourly rate, but this is

normally only for measurable shop time. And since there is usually no comparable industry job or established pay scale for comparison he is faced with the task of choosing a compromise, between what his time is worth and what he can reasonably expect to sell it for in the marketplace. Right off, the ivory carver knows he will be selling to a small, very selective, and scattered clientele. He can either represent himself or get an agent to do it for him, and somewhere along the line decide whether or not to wholesale his work. To reach the attention



Fig. 5. Whistle netsuke of lemur in tree. Ivory with inlaid eyes.



Fig. 6. Whistle netsuke of shaman/wolfman. Ivory with a horn face inlaid with ivory teeth and glowing eyes.

of the customer, the work must be attractively exhibited, and for ivory and miniature work of high value this means exhibiting at finer galleries or at specialized shows and conventions where potential customers are gathered for mutual interest.

Fortunately, many collectors realize that through their support of working carvers they are helping to keep alive the art that they love. What collectors are also beginning to realize is that there



Fig. 7. Three miniature flute *sagemono* sets.

is a small but healthy core of ivory and miniature carvers working here in the United States who do excellent work. Of the work I have seen, it appears to me as if an over-all style is emerging, bursting with fresh concepts and original subject matter enlivened with a good sense of humor. It is a style that reflects our history; it is a blending of cultures and eras. With encouragement and support, this totally American style of carving will blossom into an internationally recognized and artistically important expression of our regard for the past while pointing toward the future. ■

The Oriental Corner



Ivory netsuke of a wolf and monkey signed *Sei cho* (student carved). Kyoto Late 18th Century.

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The London International Netsuke Convention 1984 (October 21-27)

by Virginia Atchley

The fourth London netsuke convention seemed to this participant to be a particularly notable and pleasant gathering, centered in the conveniently located Park Lane Hotel on Piccadilly, with its many comfortable and spacious meeting rooms, its big ballroom, and its central Palm Court for easy socializing, relaxing, and sharing afternoon tea. The convention drew many collectors from the Continent, most of whom rarely venture farther west than London for such gatherings.

Workshops and lectures are the backbone of any netsuke convention, and London provided an excellent assortment of both, as evidenced by the following listings which may be of interest to those of you who were not present. Our Journal cannot, of course, report on all of these, but we are pleased to offer Michael Birch's thoughtful critique of Paul Moss' workshop on "Intelligent Netsuke" (page 40).



Lectures:

- The Role of Contemporary Netsuke Carvers—Michael H. Birch
- The Tea Ceremony—Michael A. Birch
- The Meinertzhagen Card Index—George Lazarnick
- Export Lacquer in the Victoria & Albert Collections—Joe Earle
- Inro, the Finest Miniature Lacquer Art—Virginia Atchley
- Japan's Gift to the World—Richard Silverman
- Tiger, Tiger—Edward A. Wrangham

Workshops:

- The Kyoto Artist - Luigi Bandini
- In Praise of and in Defense of *Manju*—M.J. Barnett
- Symbolism in Netsuke and Related Arts—Sharon Chappell
- Related Artifacts by *Netsukeshi*—Barry Davies
- Netsuke from the Collection of Raymond Bushell—Nelly Davies
- Mimasaka Katsuyama, a Small Town of the Edo Period—Michael Dean

Nagoya and Gifu Schools—Alain Ducros
 Metalwork Artists in Netsuke—Trudel Klefisch
 Contemporary Geniuses, *Kodo Okuda* and
 Michael Birch—Sharen Chappell
 The Brockhaus Collection—Herlint Meyer-
 Lindenberg
 Intelligent Netsuke—Paul Moss
 An Analysis of Regional Characteristics in
 Netsuke Art—James Rose
Kiseruzutsu—Jens Rasmussen
 The Influence of Japanese Art in Art
 Nouveau—Jerome Spiller
 The Earliest American Collections of Japanese
 Art—Denis Szesler
 The Evergreen House Collection of Netsuke
 and *Inro*—Susan Tripp
Ojime—Sachi Wagner
 Early French Collectors and Their Taste—
 Gabor Wilhelm

A few highlights from the London Convention:

1. George Lazarnick, during his lecture on the Meinertzhagen Card Index, shared the good news that publication of the Card Index is now assured by the generous offer of Dr. Alan R. Liss to be responsible for both publication and distribution.
2. There were four auctions in two evenings, at Sotheby's and Christie's, with enough netsuke and *inro* to satisfy every taste and purse. This, in

addition to many and good offerings by several dealers.

3. A special loan exhibition of 100 Raymond Bushell netsuke was on display at Christie's. (These 100 netsuke, plus 50 more, are currently on exhibit at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art until June 1985. The next issue of the Journal will feature a detailed report on this exhibit.)

4. Two special features of the convention were (a) a movie demonstration of "The Lacquer Art of Tomizo Saratani," recorded and presented by Galerie Zacke of Vienna, and (b) "The Magnificent Seven" Panel Discussion wherein seven collectors showed slides of their favorite seven netsuke and tried to explain "why."

5. The wind-up of the convention was a 1920's Gala Dinner and Ball, featuring the Salisbury Stompers band, where more than 160 participants stomped and cavorted with abandon over the big dance floor. Several of the ladies wore smashing 1920 gowns and headdresses as they whirled about with their straw-boated, striped-blazered partners or with Al Capone look-alikes sporting felt fedoras pulled low, dark glasses, wide-lapeled jackets, and big cigars. Charlie Chaplin (*aka* Luigi Bandini) didn't miss a dance, and handsome Bill Tilley, with full band support, gave a lusty, heartfelt rendition of "Goodby, Tootsie, Goodby." ■



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Ivory netsuke of two wrestlers.
 Unsigned. Attributed to "Masakazu".
 Early 19th C.

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

Were You There?

by
Norman L. Sandfield

Since 1974 which was the beginning of it all, conventionally speaking, there have been nineteen major netsuke conventions held in ten different cities around the world. The attendance record is probably held by Bernard Hurtig and Sharen Chappell, who have attended eighteen. Helen Hurtig and Betty Killam have been to seventeen; I have attended sixteen; and Irene Crispo and Marilyn Miller, fourteen.

How many have you attended? A check list is given below. If you haven't been to many, or any, now is a good time to move. At the rate of three conventions every two years, there are plenty to choose from. Remember: conventions are great and irreplaceable learning experiences and can be as addictive as netsuke themselves.

The 19 Netsuke Conventions

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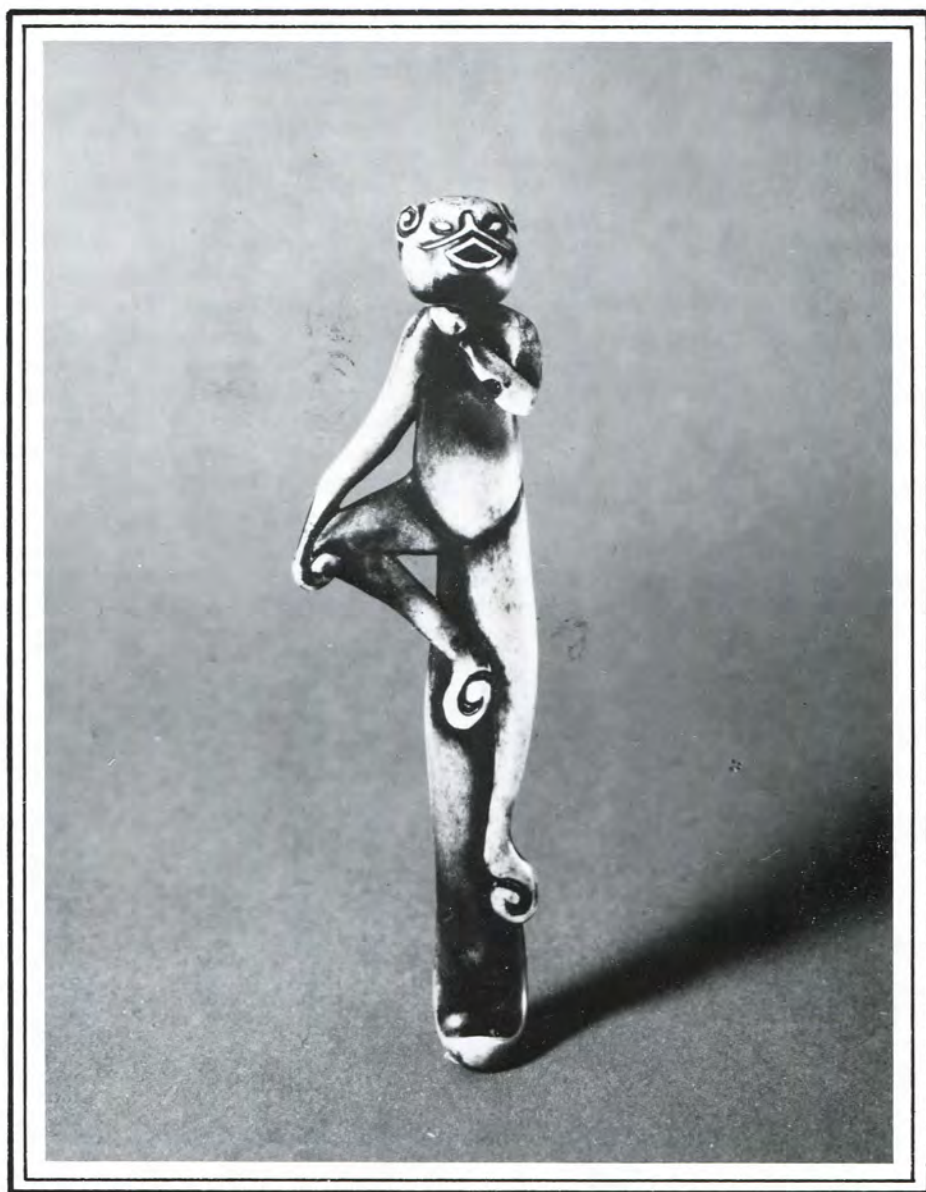
1. June 7-9, 1974	TK	Newport Beach, CA
2. Jan. 18-25, 1975	INCS	Honolulu, HI
3. May 24-26, 1975	NK	Kansas City, MO
4. Oct. 1-4, 1975	NS	Cape Cod, MA
5. June 18-25, 1976	LNC	London, England
6. Jan. 20-26, 1977	INCS #2	Honolulu, HI
7. Oct. 5-9, 1977	NK #2	Kansas City, MO
8. June 23-30, 1978	LNC	London, England
9. Jan. 14-21, 1979	INCS #3	Honolulu, HI
10. Sept. 12-16, 1979	NK #3	Minneapolis, MN
11. May 24-30, 1980	LNC #3	London, England
12. Jan. 6-13, 1981	INCS #4	Honolulu, HI
13. Aug. 19-23, 1981	NK #4	Los Angeles, CA
14. Sept. 29-Oct. 3, 1982	KK	Cologne, Germany
15. Oct. 3-9, 1982	NDA	New York, NY
16. Jan. 22-29, 1983	INCS #5	Honolulu, HI
17. Sept. 19-23, 1983	NK #5	Washington, D.C.
18. Oct. 21-27, 1984	LNC #4	London, England
19. Jan. 26-Feb. 2, 1985	INCS #6	Honolulu, HI

INCS...International Netsuke Collectors Society
KK...Kunsthandel Klefisch
LINC...London Netsuke Dealers
NDA...Netsuke Dealers Association
NK...Netsuke Kenkyukai
NS...Netsuke Seminar (Killam)
TK...Token Kai

Intelligent Netsuke

Paul Moss Workshop
Report from London Netsuke Convention 1984

by Michael Birch



When Virginia Atchley asked me to write a report on one of the workshops to be held during the 1984 London Netsuke Convention little did I know that I was to select the presenter with the most elusive thesis and that I would also be prevented by *force majeure* from actually attending

Paul Moss' workshop, entitled "Intelligent Netsuke." Never mind. Assisted by Paul's xeroxed preamble to his workshop, together with his article in the October 1984 *Orientalism* magazine (which he says was "edited out of recognition, and fails as a satisfactory outline") I shall persevere, because

Paul examines some most interesting aspects in the nature of certain types of netsuke.

In his *Orientalisms* article Paul chooses the work of three netsuke carvers, *Sessai*, *Masanao* of Kyoto, and *Kokusai*, to illustrate a few points about netsuke which he considers "special" or "intelligent." He describes several of their carvings while pointing out a number of special features about their work as well as the unusual talents of the artists concerned. I found Paul's comments erudite and well observed; and, to be fair, clearly something must have been dropped off the dish because I somehow failed to capture the full flavour of the essence of his argument about the fine netsuke he described compared with any equally fine netsuke I had seen in the past—with the exception of *Kokusai's* work, in which, as Paul states, "we have, perhaps, the most extreme example of the necessity to look for subtle and hidden meanings because *Kokusai* would consciously play games with the wearer or viewer of a netsuke." Paul explains, for example, how "*Kokusai* very often concealed his single-character seal signature in the formalized designs he created." (Fig. 1)

I then turned to Paul's brief statement of purpose for his workshop and now quote it in full:

WORKSHOP: INTELLIGENT NETSUKE

I want us to examine and enjoy one major aspect of what is "special" about netsuke; the use of particularly clever or intelligent means by the carver to express something extra within his concept of the carving. We can distinguish this concern from direct symbolism or legendary significance, although it may relate to those levels of meaning; the often oblique references require to be sympathetically sought out in order to be appreciated.

At a stage further removed from literal representation of the subject matter than any question of purely stylistic treatment, the inclusion of subtler elements need not represent mere gimmickry. Often these "intelligent" references reveal to us the essence of the carver's concerns, the personality of the artist.

Only a small proportion of netsuke fall into this "intelligent" category, so I am obliged to focus once more on some of the individual carvers mentioned in my "Eccentrics in Netsuke." These thoughts grow out of that survey of their work, although the conclusions and points to be made are not the same. I had intended that an article for *Orientalisms* magazine should provide a preliminary explanation of this theme, illustrating old and new favourites by three diverse *netsuke-*

shi, *Masanao*, *Kokusai*, and *Sessai*, and that I should then be ready to expand on that in the workshop, primarily through the work of other artists. Unfortunately the article was edited out of recognition, and fails as a satisfactory outline.

I do feel that groundwork observations are better laid out logically in print, even in this brief resume, than stumbled through verbally in the course of the workshop. I hope to treat briefly several related issues within the workshop: what is special about netsuke, about old netsuke rather than contemporary, and the nature of objects in relation to us. Underlying this approach, though, is a concept which I would like to consider before any discussion. It is this:

What is Quality? I don't mean only in terms of netsuke or art-aesthetics is an entirely separate discipline—and I certainly don't refer to finesse of carving; those who judge netsuke by mere technique miss 90% of the point. Quality of thought and action is impossible to define, yet we all recognise the degrees of its presence or absence. For the Greeks, as for the Chinese and Japanese, the concept of quality was identical with that of virtue. In the English language, too, the words "Good" and "God" have the same root. The extension of this notion of Quality to our apprehension of a netsuke is in the intent which lies behind its making. Sincerity and originality are the same faculty, and power of expression in carving cannot be realized without them. Quality is a term which can be translated a number of ways; perhaps Soul is another good word. It is a concept outside our analysis of the properties of an object, informing our pre-intellectual cognition of it, and, to the extent that our view of what constitutes Quality is different for each of us, shaped by our own individual experience.

Quality in philosophical terms has an important function for us in defining the great Aristotelian /Platonic split; that is, classic/romantic, technological /humanistic, substance/ style, square/hip, matter/ mind. Quality is a property distinct from our intellectual and artificial (but automatic) analysis and categorisation into these cubbyholes. It is a fault line of illogic running through any deed or object which splits it unerringly into these two definitions. Quality comes into being at the interface, the meeting point of these two constituents—of object and subject, of substance and style, of theory and practice. Consequently it is of paramount importance in our understanding of works of art. It represents their moment of creation. Art is,

of course, overwhelmingly romantic in its nature (as opposed to classic and scientific); but everything contains the seeds of its opposite, and within any art form there are aspects (schools, styles, carvers) more classic than romantic, more individualistic than hieratic.

I would like to discuss certain properties of netsuke within the context of the above "definitions." Please consider your thoughts and feelings as to what comprises quality or specialness in netsuke.

It becomes fairly clear that what Paul means by "intelligent" netsuke are those which have an additional special or oblique quality, not always easily detected, and which call for a higher degree of intelligence or subtlety from the carver in expressing "something extra within his concept of the carving." This is an area of exploration with which I am in sympathy since it can only lead to a better general understanding and appreciation of netsuke. Indeed, I myself have made several discoveries of that nature which made me marvel at the subtle ingenuity of the carvers. In one case, a landscape carved by *Kaigyokusai* within a hinged ivory bamboo shoot depicted *Jo* and *Uba* sweeping leaves against a background of pine trees. Lit from the front it was simply another example of the consummate craftsmanship we expect from the master, but by chance one night I held the piece so that it was lit only from the back. The whole scene suddenly came to life: the pine trees were drawn into a deep perspective, casting their shadows over the figures now silhouetted in the foreground enveloped in the glowing sombre colour of an autumn sunset. It was quite breathtaking, and there has never been any doubt in my mind that this was precisely what the crafty old master intended. (There are other examples, but I shall save them for another occasion.)

What Paul has in mind, I believe, is not only that "intelligent" carvings have some special extra esoteric element introduced by the carver but also that this is *unlocked* by an act of detection and participation by the viewer. Thus the bond which any work of art melds between the maker and the observer (or user) is further reinforced by mutual delight through invention and subsequent discovery.

In putting forward his selection of metaphysical premises and philosophical definitions as a base for discussion, Paul is perhaps on less sure ground. In his question regarding Quality he states, *inter alia*, that "those who judge netsuke by mere technique miss 90% of the point." This is rather like saying that it is *thought* that counts, not *mere words*. But since one cannot achieve anything but the most basic responses to the world around him without a complex language structure, it follows

that technique is a measure of the fluency with which an artist expresses himself. By "technique" I am of course not referring only to mechanical skill. I am dwelling on this point because, while an attitude towards art evolved in the West during the 20th C. into a powerfully lingering avant-garde movement which still regards skill in execution in art as decadent, irrelevant, or, at best, the province of artisans, and that the artist's inner impressions, however inadequately expressed, are what *really* matters, I do not believe that I am being reactionary when I say that it is in their essential nature that netsuke have to be crafted with the greatest possible human skill and observation and that this is the very criterion by which they can most effectively be judged and enjoyed. It is, incidentally, that precise discipline which drew me into carving netsuke rather than any other form of sculpture.

When Paul says that "art is, of course, overwhelmingly romantic in nature (as opposed to classic and scientific)..." is he reflecting the deeply entrenched Western notion of art and its 17th C. origins: the notion of fine art as opposed to crafts, the idea that art contains a spiritual element independent of objective experience, the belief that art transcends the natural world by rising above mundane functional purpose?

In any event, this would not be in concert with the Japanese concept that art and craft are indivisible and that both are synonymous with living. It is important for us to rely on this concept if we are to understand the fundamental basis on which we can form valid opinions about netsuke—in fact, about everything made by human beings.

Paul states that "the field of Japanese netsuke has not been accorded much respect or research by academics." Well, there has of course been a great deal of research and writing by netsuke aficionados: the earlier European netsuke historians; Raymond Bushell's unique books and articles which have long delighted and enlightened collectors; Helen and Bernard Hurtig's *I.N.C.S. Journal*, and, latterly, the *Kenkyukai Study Journal*, with many remarkably penetrating contributions by collectors; Miriam Kinsey's dedicated books on contemporary carvers; and many others. But, yes, the field has been overlooked by art historians and academics in the area of general research, analysis, and criticism in art; and with his well-informed and fresh approach, matched to his spirited enthusiasm, Paul Moss is taking the right steps toward encouraging a more widespread recognition of netsuke as an art form worthy of comparison with any other—and an art form which, you will not be surprised to hear me say, is still very much alive. ■

Kurstin / Chappell

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Taken from a Chinese painting of monkeys reaching for the moon.
Sumi-e togadashi on silver ground. Signed: Yoyusai, late 18th C.

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Two case lacquer inro richly decorated with a samurai seated and addressing a young boy. Signed in raised gold lacquer: Jitokusai Gyokuzan, with red kakihan and also in lightly scratched characters: Toshiyuki, with inlaid seal: Bairyu.
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