

KINSEY

LIVING MASTERS OF NETSUKE



LIVING MASTERS OF
NETSUKE



LIVING MASTERS OF NETSUKE

By
MIRIAM KINSEY

Foreword by
EDWIN O. REISCHAUER



KODANSHA INTERNATIONAL LTD.
Tokyo, New York, San Francisco

Distributed in the United States by Kodansha International/USA Ltd., through Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, New York 10022

Published by Kodansha International Ltd., 12-21 Otowa 2 chome, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 112 and Kodansha International/USA Ltd., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, New York 10022 and the Hearst Building, 5 Third Street, Suite 430, San Francisco, California 94103.

Copyright in Japan 1983 by Kodansha International Ltd.
All rights reserved.

Photographs Copyright in Japan by Dana Levy
All rights reserved

Printed in Japan
First edition 1984

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Kinsey, Miriam.
Living masters of netsuke.

Bibliography: p.
Includes index.

1. Netsuke carvers—Interviews. 2. Netsukes—History—20th century. 3. Netsukes—Collectors and collecting. I. Title.
NK6050.K57 1984 738'.68'0922 [B] 84-47685
ISBN 0-87011-679-7 (U.S.) ISBN4-7700-1179-2 (in Japan)

Designed by DANA LEVY, Perpetua Press

Composition: CONTINENTAL TYPOGRAPHICS, Chatsworth, California
Printing: TOPPAN PRINTING CO., Tokyo, Japan
The typeface used is Electra

CONTENTS

FOREWORD	9
INTRODUCTION	11
CARVERS	15
Kangyoku	17
Bishu	31
Hideyuki	39
Ryushi	47
Akihide	59
Senpo	65
COLOR PLATES	73
Meigyokusai	99
Meikei	113
Masatoshi	123
Kodo	135
Michael Birch	151
Michael Webb	161
COLOR PLATES	169
NETSUKE MASTERS OF TOMORROW	193
Four Tokyo Carvers	194
Keiun	195
David Abel	196
David Blissett	196
Alex Ignatius	196
Mark Severin	197
COLOR PLATES	201
APPENDIX	209
Development of an Idea	209
The Fascination of Netsuke Collecting	211
Copies	215
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	217
GLOSSARY	221
BIBLIOGRAPHY	227
INDEX	229





*To my husband, Bob,
and to all the talented artists
who are keeping alive
the art of netsuke carving.*

FOREWORD

THE WINDOWS OF ONE CULTURE ON ANOTHER OFTEN ARE AT FIRST very narrow. Throughout history civilizations have collided with one another, usually with fear, distrust, and repugnance, rather than with admiration and appreciation. In the disdainful encounter of the West with Japan in the nineteenth century, few Japanese things won the admiration of Occidentals. One that did, however, was the popular woodblock art known as *ukiyo-e*. Another smaller thing was the beautifully carved and brilliantly imaginative toggles, called netsuke, used to fasten tobacco pouches and the like to the sashes around men's kimonos. The netsuke art had reached its height in the early nineteenth century, only to be all but killed by the substitution of Western dress, with its pockets in place of the sash and its ancillary netsuke.

Only the enthusiasm of Western collectors has accounted for the precarious survival of the art of netsuke carving. A few years ago, Miriam Kinsey in her beautifully illustrated and meticulously scholarly account of modern netsuke making, *Contemporary Netsuke*, gave us a marvelous record of the revival of the art. In this new volume, she is carrying the story further by focusing particularly on the lives and work of a few of the finest living artists in this field.

Netsuke offer a good example of some of the outstanding aspects of Japanese culture. One is the extremely broad aesthetic appeal so much of it has come to have. It was largely Westerners who in the late nineteenth century revived

Japanese interest in netsuke as well as in many larger and more important aspects of Japanese art. Netsuke also illustrate the meticulous skill of Japanese craftsmen and artists. It is curious that it never occurred to Westerners of the time that such skilled craftsmen, when joined with Western industrial technology, might equal or outdo their mentors. A third point is the lively continuance of old arts in Japan despite innumerable vicissitudes and long after they have passed the heyday of their use. One thinks of the *Gigaku* court music and dance, which flourished in the eighth and ninth centuries but is still performed today, the *tanka* style of poetry of the same period that millions practice today, and the fifteenth-century *Noh* drama, which still has its many devotees. Netsuke in a sense fall into this category. The need for toggles disappeared a century ago, but the art persists and has taken on a new life. I can think of none of the traditional Japanese art forms which is not more alive and vigorous today than it was in my youth more than fifty years ago. This is a token of the richness and diversity of Japanese culture—perhaps the richest in the world today. Mrs. Kinsey's books beautifully illustrate and record one small angle of this great cultural wealth.



EDWIN O. REISCHAUER

INTRODUCTION

REMARKABLY BEAUTIFUL NETSUKE ARE BEING CREATED TODAY BY A comparatively small group of artists—carvers of talent and skill. My husband and I have been privileged to know these carvers over a period of ten or twelve years, and with some of them we have developed a close friendship. We have watched the younger artists mature in techniques and grow in creativity. We have seen them venture into new areas of design, encouraged and challenged by the appreciation of Western collectors and by the higher prices attainable for original, high quality work. We have seen some of them develop and improve to a point where indisputably they can take their proud place among the finest netsuke carvers of all time.

My approach in this book is, thus, that of a netsuke collector whose interest during the past decade has focused on the work of promising living artists. My husband and I always have been as interested in the person who produces a beautiful work of art as in the work itself. The two, of course, are inseparable. As a friend of these artists, I have tried to share with you something of the personalities of twelve of these carvers—how they think, how they work, how they live—as well as the netsuke that they are making.

Knowing the artists adds a fascinating dimension to netsuke collecting. Unfortunately few collectors can get to Japan and establish such contacts. Largely through the carvers' own words, which (with the exception of those of Michael

Birch and Michael Webb) have had to go through the translation barrier, and the eloquent language of their work as seen through the camera, I hope to convey to the readers of this book some of the warmth and artistic integrity, the dedication and genius of this remarkable group of artists. It has not always been easy to bring to the surface the personal thoughts of these men because in Japan one does not generally ask questions; it seems to violate the curtain drawn around inner feelings. (It should be noted that neither the relative position nor the length of the profiles represents an evaluation of the comparative merit of the carvers' work.)

Full appreciation of their work requires understanding of the world in which they live and the traditions of their culture. Their enthusiasm and creativeness reflect their exterior life and are blended with inherited talents, traditional training, and acquired refinements.

These carvers either endured and survived World War II or were "war babies." They live in an age vastly different from those years which marked the historic development, ascendancy, and decline of netsuke carving. They are not only perpetuators of this carving, they are the vanguard of its renaissance.

This renaissance embodies both the resurgence of the netsuke art form with its traditional techniques and spiritual energy, and an inner quality of twentieth-century freedom. Many of the innovative designs of living carvers reflect the influence of "new" Japan, with its changes in life style and economics, and the current aesthetic tastes of netsuke collectors throughout the world.

During this age of science and highly mechanized industry Japan has absorbed the industrial cultures of the West and in many fields has taken leadership. The tempo is fast, the cost and the standard of living are high.

Many basic changes in the netsuke world itself also are having an impact on netsuke artists. With the evolution of the netsuke from a functional and status-symbol object to a highly prized art object, the continuity and spontaneous creativity of the work of talented carvers become increasingly important.

Feeding the growth of netsuke collecting are excellent books on various phases of netsuke carving and acquisition, exhibitions throughout the world, quarterly netsuke magazines, and catalogs from frequent international netsuke auctions. In addition, there are periodic conventions, seminars, collectors' organizations (both formal and informal), and a notable increase in knowledgeable and enthusiastic netsuke dealers worldwide.

Broadening the horizon of the carver in his constant study and research are carvers' associations where the exchange of ideas and techniques is in sharp contrast to the traditional secrecy of the old carvers. He can visit museum exhibits, he can enroll in art classes at various schools and colleges, and he can make contact with collectors whose fine antique netsuke are available for study.

The incredible escalation in price of both contemporary and antique netsuke emphasizes the investment facet of the current netsuke story. Translated into higher income for the living artists, it is the practical phase of the netsuke picture which in today's inflated economy enables the carvers to spend time and thought on developing new ideas and to break out of the inertia and sterility of making countless repetitions of a single design.

Thus, the Japanese netsuke artist today is sharing to a greater extent in the fruits of his talent, he is receiving recognition in his own lifetime, he is meeting many people who are buying and enjoying his work, and inevitably he is being influenced by their appreciation or criticism. He realizes there is an expanding market for top-quality contemporary netsuke at high prices but he will learn that

this market is totally dependent upon the creation of high-grade original work and that he therefore must exercise quantity control or his quality will suffer.

For his part, the collector must realize that there is a variation in quality of the work of even the best carvers and that, as in all forms of art, a netsuke that in basic design has been repeated many times is worth less than a netsuke that is one-of-a-kind or one of only three or four. In short, the collector must consider quality versus quantity and not make selections by artist name alone. He must realize that the greatest artists cannot create masterpieces every time they take tools in hand; and, conversely, that good artists who have not yet reached the top occasionally produce masterpieces. The discriminating collector looks for these sleepers, which sometimes find a place among his favorite netsuke.

Currently, a major change is evolving in the material used by many of the top carvers—a change from ivory to wood. With the exception of Shinzan Masanao, who died in 1982, very few wood netsuke were made by carvers during the 1950's and 1960's. In the 1970's this trend began to change, and today some of the finest pieces are being produced in wood. This is largely because of the worldwide Endangered Species laws and the restrictions of the United States Department of the Interior on the importation and sale of ivory by dealers in the United States. Artistically, this is not a serious problem because the majority of the top-rank living netsuke carvers have shown they can make the transition from ivory to wood with skill and ingenuity.

Fashions and tastes in the art world change, but great art has a way of surfacing and surviving. Ultimately, the continuity and flourishing of an art form depends upon the artists. Watching the old art of netsuke carving come alive with beauty, vigor, and originality in the closing decades of the twentieth century is an exciting experience. I firmly believe that the current momentum in collecting both antique and contemporary netsuke by an increasingly large number of knowledgeable buyers will continue for a long time to come.





立志齋
寬王