

## NETSUKE

By HANNA WOIDT

*The author of "Chinese Handicrafts" (a book reviewed in our issue of October 1944) has been collecting "netsukes" and information about them over a number of years. In the following article she traces the brief appearance of the "netsuke" on the Eastern stage of miniature art. The illustrations show specimens in the author's collection.*

THE Chinese as well as many other Eastern people, particularly the wealthier classes among them, of whom no manual labor or any strenuous walking was required, wore long, loose, flowing garments held by a girdle or, in the case of women, by embroidered or jeweled sashes. The style of these garments was much admired by the couriers who traveled back and forth between the courts of Yamato and Cathay. Eventually this style of clothing was adopted by the Japanese, and they made the buttonless, interfolding, wide-sleeved garment their national costume, known to us by the name of kimono. The sash which secures the kimono, the obi, is the house in which the *netsuke* resides. With the disappearance of the kimono the little *netsuke* will also quietly take its leave of the stage where for two or three hundred years it has played so charming and pleasing a part. In the preface to the *Meibutsu Rokuchō*, *netsukes* are mentioned in 1714, and the term *kensui* is used. *Kensui* means "hanging position" and is usually applied in connection with gymnastic exercises.

The *netsuke* is a large button of great variety of shape, or a counterweight which keeps from slipping whatever may hang on the other end of the cord strung through its two holes (one smaller, one larger in the older species, to let the knot slip in easily and conceal it). These two holes are frequently reinforced by a rim of horn or bone or ivory.

During the Tensho period (1573-1592), the carrying of medicine cases was very much in vogue in Japan. These medicine cases, or *inro*, were copied from the little boxes worn by smart Chinese at that time to hold their seal and the red paste to seal with. I think one may safely assume that the fashion of making and wearing *netsukes* originated in Japan at this time.

Since it was not everybody who wore medicine cases—hypochondria having at all times been reserved for the idle—other things were supported by *netsukes*: a bunch of keys, a purse, or a snuffbox. But most responsible for the huge demand for *netsukes* was the introduction of tobacco, when the carrying of pipes and pouches became the great fashion. From the middle of the eighteenth century till the end of it, the practice of smoking pipes was very

common, and it was during this time that *netsukes* enjoyed the height of their popularity. Everybody seems to have worn them and, for that matter, many people seem to have tried their hand at making them, mostly just for the fun of it and without great skill. The equivalent of our butcher, baker, and candlestickmaker, the artisan who made lacquerware, the carver of wooden images for temples and homes, the potter who was responsible for the refined and sophisticated vessels used in the tea ceremony: in short, all those who produced things for daily use in the Japanese home, made a *netsuke* now and then, either to give away or to wear. I can well imagine how, after the day's work was done, the artisan sat outside his house among his family and neighbors, carving away at a small piece of wood while the sun set and supper was cooking.

Wood was the most common material of which *netsukes* were made. But what variety of wood: boxwood, persimmon wood, mulberry tree and tea shrub, bamboo and camphor wood, and even wood of the beloved cherry tree! These *netsukes* were stained, colored, or polished, or dyed with the juice of walnuts or, sometimes, lacquered in various shades. The most beautiful finish, however, was acquired by the *netsuke* simply by being worn and touched through the years and in every kind of weather.

The usually flattened part of the *netsuke* which was worn against the body (and consequently held the two holes)—a good example is the chestnut illustrated—in time became as smooth as silk and, in the case of ivory, took on the beautiful color of old sherry. Ivory is one of the materials the more experienced carver of *netsukes* loved to employ. The Japanese have a string instrument, the samisen, the strings of which are struck by a plectrum, a finely shaped wedge made of ivory. While carving this wedge from the tusk, triangular pieces are chiseled away on both sides, and this "waste" ivory accounts for the many triangular-shaped *netsukes* one finds, such as the grazing horse.

The tea ceremony has had a fertilizing influence on many trades and crafts, and so we find *netsukes* made of clay, partly glazed, and porcelain, also covered with colored glazes. These latter were evidently formed in molds

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CENTURY



Two No actors, one with a mask of a young woman, the other with that of an old man



Old man (warokami), stroking his beard, which has broken off



This little mouse has rolled itself up into a ball



An old man, his teacup beside him, fans his kettle while waiting for it to boil



Triangular grazing horse, cut from a "waste" piece of ivory

Fancy  
Buttons



Eggplant carved from the wood of a tea shrub



*Nara ninajo*, the famous dolls made in Nara, executed in "one-chisel carving" and brightly painted



Underside of chestnut (ivory), showing large and small hole for the cord and carver's signature



The frog of Osaka, carrying on his back a gourd full of sake



Kappa-san (boxwood), his foot caught in a caltm

because, although naturally they are frail, one sometimes finds two which, apart from the damage they have suffered, are exactly alike. The porcelain *netsukes* are, of course, very much coveted by the collector, as their fragile substance has increased their rarity.

If an attempt at classification is to be made, I would perhaps try thus:

1. Round buttons, with or without metal plaques.
2. The animals of the zodiac.
3. Fabulous or legendary animals.
4. Gods, saints, and mysterious beings.
5. "People who are doing something."
6. Fruit and vegetables.

The twelve animals of the zodiac were probably believed to have some influence on the good fortune of the bearer and therefore occur in great variety of execution and design, workmanship, and material. The fabulous animals, such as Kappa and the good- or bad-tempered badgers, rabbits, and birdlike creatures which populate the air, all have one or more stories, usually with a sly twist which shows up the cunning cleverness by which one animal swindles another or which accentuate human weaknesses and faults in a humorous way. The gods and saints are, of course, endowed with supernatural powers and so have more the duty of a protector and promotor of good health or riches.

The "people who are doing something" are naturally by far the most numerous, and the activity they are depicted in is often connected with happenings in some place, town, temple, bridge, or wood, very similar to the souvenir carvings and articles we find in celebrated places in the West. The fruit and vegetables would, one should think, appeal to peasants; while the "people who do things" and the masks, dancers, street vendors, nightwatchmen, and pilgrims seem to have been reserved for the city dweller who was within reach of the storyteller, the burlesque shows of the temple fairs, and the beautifully cultivated stages of No and Kabuki.

Often a special technique of carving, chiseling, or coloring indicates the place the *netsuke* comes from and even the artisan who made it, because in the course of time there appeared professional *netsuke* carvers who signed their names to their work and even to the little wooden boxes the *netsukes* were sold in. To find a *netsuke* carved by a famous artist complete with its box is a rare and expensive occasion for the collector, just as he happens only now and then to find two *netsukes* in two different places made by the same man. The famous little *Nara ningyo*, the dolls made in Nara, delight our eye by their simple and rustic execution and their mellowed colors. They belong to a group of carving which the Japanese call *itto-bori*, "one-chisel-carving," and which is also to be found in the neighborhood of Tokyo at the temple fair of Sasano.

The Japanese adore their heroes; they love their little creatures of folklore, as we do our Red Riding Hoods, Snow Whites, and big bad wolves. The stories of these countless dreaded or beloved figures circulate forever through the mouth of the storyteller in the people. Marvelous deeds are done over and over again, gaining in glamour and fascination all the time. It would be a bold undertaking to press all those lovely tales and stories into a small space. Among the stories attached to the *netsukes* shown in our illustrations, I will only tell you two.

Kappa-san, the little imp, half tortoise, half toad, is full of mischief and therefore disliked by the denizens of the rivers he inhabits. Our illustration shows him with one foot caught by a clam, and he looks none too happy about it. In his head, Kappa carries the elixir of life in a little dent, which makes him invincible and immortal. He is blamed for luring children into the water, where they drown. One day, a courageous father of a little boy went to challenge Kappa-san to a duel of swords. But how can a duel be fought in Japan without politely bowing to the opponent before the fight? Kappa-san bowed low to the angry father, and the elixir of life flowed onto the meadow. So he was easily conquered and had to promise solemnly never to harm children again.

Another story runs like this: one fine spring day a frog who lived in Kyoto decided to travel to Osaka and see the town. He equipped himself with a gourd full of sake and climbed the mountain called Tennosan. At the summit he met another frog who desired to see Kyoto and whose home was Osaka. They greeted each other and talked about their plans. They had both come halfway, and both cities could be seen from the top of the mountain. So they stretched their legs, stood on tiptoe, and looked about them. The Kyoto frog said: "Really, looking at the famous sights of Osaka one hears so much about, to me they don't seem very different from Kyoto. I shall not trouble to go any further, I'll go back home."

The Osaka frog, smiling maliciously, said: "Well, I have heard a great deal of talk about Kyoto and it being the most beautiful place in Japan; but it is just Osaka all over again. We really might just as well go home."

You see, frogs have their eyes on the top of their heads, and the better to see they had stood on their hind legs, both believing they were looking at the place they wanted to go to. In reality, each was looking at his native place.

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Since there are a fair number of *netsuke* collectors all over the world and particularly in Japan, it is to be hoped that the most precious specimens will be preserved and eventually reproduced for more people to become acquainted with these small objects of perfect workmanship.