WHEN I FINISHED my medical training I owed the US Air Force two years and we had the good fortune to be sent to Japan, where we were stationed outside Tokyo. It was a magical two years. I was there with my family and we were all introduced to the Japanese aesthetic which clearly hit a responsive cord. It was just one visual delight after another from Japanese gardens to Ikebana, bonsai, woven baskets, etc. The list goes on and on. We still continue to marvel at the extraordinary ability of the Japanese to create wonderful handcrafted material, particularly in miniature. The real revelation occurred with netsuke, when I was introduced to the irresistible miniature sculptures. The fact that these were utilitarian and actually made for use first enhanced the attraction. Then as I worked my way along the learning curve, the studying about and collecting of netsuke became a lifetime passion. This collecting and study have introduced us to many fascinating and wonderful people as well as sending us on many extraordinary adventures. We have always considered ourselves to be extremely fortunate to have been introduced to this wonderful art form.

Both of us enjoy all forms of netsuke and our collection reflects that as we have pieces from the 17th to the late 19th century. We are also enamored with all materials as each have their distinct charm but, right from the beginning, I seemed to have gravitated to the early pieces. There was a distinct sensitivity in the way that the artist used the materials and it was a marvel to learn that most pieces of material were considered scrap pieces. All netsuke artists, but particularly the early artists, had a reverence for the material and treated it as such. I was enthralled with the rich colours, patination and delightful tactile qualities of the early pieces. What they may have lacked in highly detailed finesse, to me, they more than made up with the power, originality, twisted ferocity and extraordinary movement that the artists were able to extract from often times very limiting materials. We both have also had an affinity for stag horn. We have always appreciated the rich organic colours and patination of this material. This was only enhanced as we have learned that the materials are not only difficult to carve (very dense) but extremely limiting in its terms of construct. Despite that, the successful artists were able to create extraordinary masterpieces that actually seemed to take advantage of the various flaws and limitations of the material. To us that is just pure genius. Our tastes have not always been mainstream but they seem to suit us well. I have always admired the early figures and mythical animals in all materials, whereas my wife immediately gravitated to the extraordinary output of the Asakusa School.

Some collectors are bothered by wear, age cracks and any damage. I think that is a reasonable concern especially with 19th century pieces, particularly second quarter and later, as many pieces were repetitive and usage was lessened. But if you were to apply the same demands to the early pieces you would be extremely restricted and perhaps vulnerable to acquiring later copies of early pieces. In contrast, I find wear, age cracks and other signs of age an enhancement that adds the wonderful colours and rich surface qualities that are a confirmation of use and appreciation. I firmly embrace the Japanese concept of “aji” as espoused by Mr Raymond Bushell and others—that is the contribution of time and usage to a piece. To me that contribution adds a richness to the piece that may be somewhat lacking in the later extremely fine but perhaps somewhat sterile creations. I can easily live with some damage if the piece has great quality and originality.

Another aspect of netsuke that seems very important to some collectors is signatures. Again, I think that may be very important when dealing with 19th century work but is far less so with early pieces, many of which were made before signatures came into vogue. Moreover, many of the early pieces were made for local consumption where signatures would be superfluous or, if made for aristocracy, presumptuous. To me the overriding factor is the quality of the work. If a piece has great merit and originality, and a signature that corresponds with that masters work, then it is a definite enhancement.

Whatever the disease that creates a “collector” is, I seemed to have had it for a very long time beginning with old guns at age four. Since that time, with my wife Beverley at my side, we have enjoyed collecting furniture, accessories, Kentucky rifles, and powder horns among others. Perhaps it was natural that we would appreciate the rich qualities of old surfaces.

Our netsuke journey continues. I would estimate that I have handled between 20,000 and 40,000 pieces and probably viewed in pictures a like number. Despite that, I continuously encounter brand new subjects or a new twist on an old subject, and continue to marvel at the exquisite creativity of these artists.

Many qualities of netsuke enrich the enjoyment as noted with the richness of the material and the compact and tactile quality of pieces. Yet another element that has been a great source of enjoyment is humour. The netsuke artists were very much inclined in that direction as nothing was off limits or sacred. They could be irreverent about all subjects. They particularly feasted on human foibles and loved to depict an event just as it was unfolding. They could depict somebody just about to step on a banana peel and your imagination fills in the rest of the story. You could well imagine that the artists themselves had great fun as they were creating, and the owners and wearers likewise shared in that enjoyment. We consider ourselves extremely fortunate that we continue this tradition. A final source of great pleasure has been the sharing of our pieces with others as we continue to learn and deepen our appreciation. Hopefully this article by the esteemed expert Ms Yukari Yoshida can contribute to that tradition.
AN ECLECTIC NETSUKE COLLECTION

YUKARI YOSHIDA

Photographs by Andrew Wilds

Introduction

IT CAN BE SAID that netsuke are both jewellery as well as a form of decorative art. Such a statement is appropriate because the creation and wearing of netsuke involved not only the satisfaction of the owners but also the appreciation by people who came into contact with the owners. On official occasions, netsuke indicated the owner's authority and loyalty, while on private occasions they indicated the owner's high cultural level and sense of humour.

When a netsuke was affixed at the waist of the owner's worn outfit, it fascinated people around him even more than the owner himself, and on the occasion of a lovers' secret meeting, the netsuke was a part of the decoration of the room together with the owner's outfit put away in the room. You can actually find such facts in various diaries, poems, novels and woodblock prints created in the 18th and 19th centuries.

When presented with this opportunity to write an introductory article indicating the proper way to appreciate netsuke, both for readers who have not yet experienced the pleasure of netsuke and for those who have already opened the door to that world, it came to my mind to focus on a wonderful collection built over many years. I asked for the cooperation of some dear friends and prominent netsuke collectors, Mr and Mrs Jay Hopkins who reside in the US. Dr Hopkins is the former Chairman of the International Netsuke Society. It was very fortunate that they graciously accepted my request. I would like to take this opportunity to express my deepest appreciation to them. Moreover, on the occasion of publication of this special issue of Arts of Asia featuring Japanese arts, one of the projects commemorating the magazine's 40th anniversary, Mrs Tuyet Nguyet, the founder of this magazine, and Mr Robin Markbreiter, her son, at our meeting in London, offered me the opportunity to write on a chosen subject and kindly accepted my proposal. I would like to express my deepest gratitude for such kindness to Mrs Tuyet Nguyet and Mr Robin Markbreiter. I sincerely look forward to the continuing success of Arts of Asia magazine, with this most recent special Japanese number.

Origin of Netsuke as Fashion Items

In the Edo period in Japan, men belonging to the upper class wore a formal garment called a hakama, which can best be described as a type of wide trousers. After wrapping the belt of the hakama around the waist, as a finishing fashion element, they put on beautiful decorative items consisting of netsuke, ojime and sagemono which were integrated together by a braided cord. In those times, such style of fashion was quite common; and these decorative items were indispensable for men of the upper class when they appeared at official ceremonies, and also when they went out for hunting and other private matters. In connection therewith, they tried to obtain more beautiful and stylish pieces than those worn by the others around them.

It is assumed that people first used netsuke as fashion items in the 16th century, when matchlock guns and tobacco were introduced to Japan. People carried with them small pouches, called doran, containing hand tools for matchlock guns, as well as small tobacco pouches and containers, called tonkotsu, containing shredded tobacco, and they ordered netsuke which would match these items. Netsuke were also chosen to match intro, which are elaborate and decorative pill cases consisting of separate compartments, which people carried hanging from their waists.

On some folding screens created at the end of the 16th century, you can see paintings of a dancer wearing a simple doughnut-shaped netsuke as well as sagemono hanging from his waist. Ryuho Nonoguchi, who died in September 1669 at the age of seventy-five, was a well-known painter, doll maker and also haiku poet, and in addition it is described in certain historical documents that he also was engaged in carving of netsuke. This indicates that, in the 17th century, orders for the creation of netsuke were placed even with prominent artists. Interestingly, this also supports the conclusion that the number of orders for excellent netsuke were actually increasing in the middle of the 17th century, when Kanae culture (early Edo period) was at the height of its prosperity.

Features of the Jay Hopkins Collection

The netsuke collection owned by Dr Hopkins, which I am pleased to have the opportunity to introduce to readers, contains a number that presumably date from the early Edo period. Since only a few from such period still exist, the collection is extremely valuable and significant for his-
1 Hermit with gourd and Shishi. Ivory, horn eye pupils. 13 cm. Early 18th century. Note the elaborate and layered clothing.


3 Raiden (the ruler of thunder) holding umbrella and geta (wooden sandals). Boxwood. 9 cm. Unsigned, attributed to Minko. Mid-18th century.

4 Powerful seated Oni on base. Ivory. 5.2 cm. 17th century.

5 Ashinaga (Long Legs) and Tenaga (Long Arms). Boxwood. 11.7 cm. Unsigned, attributed to Shugetsu I. Mid-18th century.

6 Ashinaga (Long Legs) and Tenaga (Long Arms). Ivory, horn eye pupil inlays. 12 cm. Late 17th–early 18th century.
7 Ryujin figure holding tide-controlling tama. Boxwood. 12 cm. Early 18th century

8 Crouching Ronin lying in ambush. Boxwood, inlaid eyes. 4.8 cm. Signed Minko. Mid-18th century

9 Kneeling Kiyohime holding her hair. Wood. 5 cm. Unsigned, attributed to Tametaka. 18th century

10 Chinese figure holding branch with flowers and hat on cord. Ivory, horn eye inlays. 11 cm. Early 18th century

11 Dutchman holding hat. Boxwood, horn inlays. 11.7 cm. Early to mid-18th century

12 Tall foreigner with wine goblet. Ivory, horn inlay. 15 cm. Early 18th century

13 Mongolian archer. Ivory, horn eye pupils. 9.5 cm. Mid-18th century. This was our first netsuke purchased in Hirosaki in 1975
torical and study reasons. The collection contains a substantial number of high-quality netsuke depicting foreigners, whom only a few Japanese people had the chance to meet when Japan was a country closed to foreigners. There are also a number of outstanding netsuke-style carvings of legendary characters such as sages. Behrens and other great western netsuke collectors in early times preferred to add human-figure netsuke to their collections. Such tendency decreased the chances of finding high-quality human-figure netsuke in the market or, even if found, were at increased prices; consequently, excellent human-figure netsuke rarely became available to collectors. Despite such difficulties, Dr Hopkins has focused on human-figure netsuke over many years, the early Edo school netsuke in the collection being particularly significant (see the cover of this magazine).

Another unique group of netsuke contained in the collection is those made of stag antler. The time periods of these range from the early netsuke period to the late 19th century. Building such a high-quality collection of stag antler netsuke from such a broad time period is a great achievement which other historical collectors have been unable to accomplish.

In addition to these two primary netsuke groups, also included in the collection is a prominent range of animal netsuke figures, both real and legendary, from the early and middle periods. Moreover, the sense of beauty of Mrs Beverly Hopkins, who is highly cultured and fond of witty stag antler netsuke of the Asakusa School from the 19th century, has been a crucial element in the building of this extensive collection.

So far, only the core or the main body part of the collection has been described. Many other types are important, including the humorous groups and highly elaborate works. Demonstrated in the collection are the robust technical skills and realistic depictions of the carving, as well as the insights of the netsuke carvers. Displayed are all of the intricate and complex charms of netsuke in an extremely careful and thorough manner.

Method of Building the Collection

It is possible to collect netsuke based on many criteria, including material, design, time period and artist. Though focusing on any one category from the beginning can still be significant, it may lead to losing the essential pleasure of enjoying a wide variety of elements.

Some of the unique types of netsuke in Dr Hopkins' collection have, in a sense, been formed as the result of chance. I believe that he had a substantial budget; however, what most contributed to the formation of this powerful collection was essentially the many netsuke of various styles with which he felt a special connection. In order to express this idea, Dr Hopkins calls this article: An Eclectic Netsuke Collection.

When collectors see netsuke which are special to them, they often instinctively feel these are meant to join their collections. This type of collector does not necessarily intend to acquire specific categories, but rather tends to follow his or her subconscious instinct. This is the typical behaviour of authentic netsuke collectors. Only their subconscious knows how and in which direction their collections will develop. One of the most unique and exciting aspects of collecting is that you never know which netsuke will happen to appear in front of you. As a result, collections develop much more dramatically than owners can predict.

Mystery of Netsuke Carvers

One of these charms is the fact that the carver who created a certain type of netsuke would likely be unknown if his signature was not inscribed on such a netsuke.

The late Raymond Bushell, who built a great netsuke collection in Japan in the 20th century, once told me that his rough estimate of the number of unsigned netsuke was half of the entire number ever created. I thought at the time that roughly 50% was a reasonable estimate, however, based on my subsequent research, I have reached the conclusion that unsigned netsuke probably account for roughly 65% of the entire number ever created.

The reason for the existence of so many unsigned netsuke made in the 17th to 18th centuries in Japan is that artists seldom signed their names or kept records for their work of furnishings and accessories ordered by people of the upper class, because the social status of artists was much lower than that of their patrons (an exception to this lack of signatures by artists existed in the case of Japanese swords). This is completely opposite to the custom of modern Japanese artists, who sign only works they are more than satisfied with, and do not sign those works which do not satisfy them in this way. I would like to emphasise the difference between these customs of different times to avoid misunderstanding there is any implied meaning for netsuke being unsigned.

Collectors who put priority on the study of carvers and their signatures may not welcome this fact, though most outstanding examples (particularly those from the early periods intended for use by upper class people), including many which are considered masterpieces, were not signed by the carvers.

Excellent independent and documented information exists about netsuke and netsuke carvers, however the study of matching netsuke with their carvers is actually difficult. Nonetheless, such aura of mystery, or the fact that the carvers of many netsuke are unknown, may be one of the reasons for people’s continuous and passionate interest in the art. The study of the carvers is still ongoing, and it has unlimited potential for development. The Jay Hopkins Collection, which contains a number of unsigned masterpieces, is thus extremely valuable for the study of netsuke from early periods.

Distinctive Netsuke Characters

Figural netsuke crafted in Japan can compare well with similar sculptures from other countries created during the 17th to 19th centuries. Not only functioning as portraits, they emphasise legendary and godlike figures through the imagination of the sculptors, a unique reflection of inner soul beauty. The pictures described below are only a small part of the collection from Dr Hopkins which he has chosen especially to introduce figural netsuke.

Seen on the cover (top row, second from right), carrying a Shishi (lion) on both shoulders, this hermit clearly shows joyful expression on his certainly foreign looking oval face
14 Powerful seated wolf. Horn pupils, fruitwood. 5.5 cm. Wonderful, muscular anatomy. Late 18th century

15 Large and powerful reclining tiger. Ivory. 5.5 cm. 17th century. Very Chinese in feel

16 Reclining deer. Ivory, horn eye pupils. 4.8 cm. Signed Okatomo. 18th century

17 Stylised standing fox. Ivory. 9.5 cm. Mid-18th century

18 Shishi with feet on elaborate ball. Ivory. 6 cm. 17th century

19 Shishi with rear feet on egg, baby hatching. Stag horn, horn eye pupils. 7.7 cm. Mid-18th century

20 Flying dragon fish. Boxwood. 8.5 cm. This piece is hollowed. Mid-18th century

21 Upright Kirin. Cypress with pigments. 9 cm. Attributed to Yoshimura Shuzan. Mid-18th century

22 Howling Hakutaku on thick base. Ivory. 7.5 cm. Mid-18th century

23 Seated Suisei with carapace. Stag horn, horn eye pupils. 5.4 cm. 18th century
24 Curled flying dragon fish. Ivory. 4.5 cm. Early 18th century

25 Ring netsuke in form of three elephants. Ivory. 5 cm. 17th century

26 Rabbit dancing across the waves. Stag horn, horn eye pupils. 4 cm. Attributed to Rensai. 19th century

27 Standing curled Baku. Ivory, horn pupils. Unsigned, attributed to Gechu. 5 cm. Early to mid-18th century

28 Seated tiger scratching chin. Ivory with horn pupils. 3.2 x 3.8 cm. Unsigned, attributed to Tomotada. Mid-18th century

29 Humorous depiction of Dutchman holding puppy that has just had an accident. Boxwood, silver buttons, horn pupils. Signed Jobun. 9.3 cm. Late 18th–early 19th century

30 Humorous representation of Jurojin as temple servant. Ivory. 10 cm. Late 17th century

31 Hyotoku mask. Ivory. 4.7 cm. 18th century

32 Standing hear no, see no, speak no evil monkeys (sambiki saru). Ivory. 7 cm. 17th century

33 Octopus as one-man band. Ivory, horn pupils. 4.5 cm. 19th century. A family favourite

34 Priest sleeping on mokogyo. Stag horn. 4 cm. Signed Masayuki. 19th century
With flawless arrangement, a gourd at his waist, his expression and the Shishi on his shoulders are two different elements represented together as a whole, silence and action. The interpretation of the back and sides of the figure is another highlight to show rhythmic and dynamic deformation on the movement of beard, hair, Shishi’s long tail and robe.

It is quite common to find the hermit figures depicted in netsuke of the early years due to the influence from Tao beliefs spread from China in the 17th to 18th centuries. In addition to the well-known legendary eight figures of hermits from ancient China, there are unique designed hermits who must have been crafted by some sculptors based on their imagination. Some such wonderful creations have been included in Dr Hopkins’ collection.

A detailed design of only 12 cm in size, this figure shows a really amazing shape (2). Ikakku Sennin (the hermit with one horn), according to Chinese legend, was born from the antler of a hind. He was known for his punishment of Ryuo the dragon king (the ruler of rain). One day, Ikakku Sennin slipped on a rainy mountain. He blamed Ryuo for this accident and locked him in a cave. After this punishment, people were so devastated by severe drought that finally the king sent a woman called Sendanyo (one of the most beautiful women at that time) with five hundred other mistresses to persuade Ikakku Sennin. As a result, Ryuo was released and brought back the rain for the people. Numerous characters appearing in netsuke figures relate to water. Thunder (Raiden), rain and water were often chosen.

Vibrant carving and tender colouring seen here indicated this figure to be most likely the work of Minko, a master from the 18th century (3). The humanised appearance of Raiden (the ruler of thunder) carrying umbrella and wooden sandals evokes certain humour to the viewers. Humorous art figures demonstrate social and cultural maturity. The materials for this figure are both wood and ivory, and its distinguished colouring style by Minko is extremely popularity.

The Oni (4) is considered to have been made before the 18th century, the era of Minko described above. The design of this character, sitting on his bottom with one knee up on the flat ground, has appeared from early years. Due to its age, it shows wonderful colour and patina.

Two great early examples from this collection, the collaboration between a long-armed man (Tenaga) and a long-legged man (Ashinaga) catching fish (5, 6), are among the most popular themes among netsuke of sculptors and owners. Made of boxwood (5) with some features which are considered enough proof to be the work of Shugetsu, it shows the exquisite balance of two faces carved side by side on rare wood.

The comparison between numerous netsuke figures eventually brings our attention to their elegant curves. Unlike an artificial technique called magaki mainly used for furniture, steaming woods over boiled water to be bent, netsuke curves feature natural characteristics of materials: wood, ivory and stag antler. The elegance of netsuke curves can be translated as nature’s own beauty, and Ryujin (7) is the great example of the knowledge acquired by netsuke sculptors about their materials.

Romin figures (8) represent popular Kabuki actors from the 17th to 18th century. During those centuries, Kabuki actors appearing on stage inspired people to adopt their characters into sculptures and fashion, a rare phenomenon that hardly ever occurred in other countries. A beautiful girl transforming herself into a demon (Dojoji) caused by her lost love to a handsome priest is a famous tale in Japan (9). For performing that character on stage, the actor usually holds the tail of his hair to indicate strong longing for her lost love.

A necessary subject when it comes to the portrait techniques of netsuke is the portrait of foreigners. It is not surprising that the Japanese at that time held strong interest in foreigners, since the Japanese government enforced national isolation from the 17th to early 19th century, which limited foreigners entering the country. Among Dr Hopkins’ collection, these portraits of foreigners occupy a major position.

The portrait of a Chinese man carrying flowers on his shoulders and holding a hat was carved in ivory with a luxurious robe and shoes (10). Two big bunches of flowers imply a sage in China, and a wide brimmed hat has been commonly used among netsuke portraits of Central Asians. Flowers and hat point to a rare work of humour and parody. (11) looks like a Dutchman taking a bow with a hat in his hand. Carved in boxwood, the sophisticated design of curly hair and inlaid buttons are evident.

The tall foreigner holding a wine goblet (12) is a rare netsuke example and hard to find. The subject matter is uncertain—a drunken Javanese manservant has been suggested. What it does show is the Japanese fascination with exotic foreign subjects. Note the European-style boots. The Mongolian archer (13) is thought to be the work of a sculptor from Kyoto, possibly the master Masanao. It is rather common to see Mongolian archers among netsuke portraits of foreigners. This work must be quite old, and its masterful carving is just exquisite.

Animal and Imaginary Beings in Netsuke

The four seasons in Japan each have a distinctive charm, and this environment functions as the prominent repository for wild animals and general interest in the arts and literature. Moreover, the usage of the zodiac signs, a traditional belief or custom among all Asian countries using twelve different animals to define almanac and time, strongly influenced netsuke artists to carve various animals. Netsuke are such a great source to study the admiration in the Edo period of people toward nature. Demonstrated are how the artists captured this through their carvings both of animals and imaginary beings. The works described below are wonderful examples of the imagination of netsuke artists to show Japan’s magnificent natural environment.

(14) is a rare wooden figure from early days because Japanese wolves have become extinct. Such wolf and wild dog figures in netsuke are now considered a primary resource for the biological research on Japanese extinct species. The wolf is wonderfully carved showing a muscular anatomy.

Tiger, the zodiac symbol of the first general of Edo period, Ieyasu Tokugawa, was a popular theme among artists including the Kano group—the sect of prominent painters that influenced many netsuke artists carving tigers. The figure introduced here (15) is especially old—it
would go back to at least the 17th century. Enhancing the style and the scale from Chinese jade, it succeeds in bringing the feeling of chinoiserie to us. Netsuke from early days are hardly ever found, so the existence of such a netsuke figure is invaluable.

Adding delicacy to the powerful and stable form of jade, the ivory reclining deer (16) shows how netsuke sculptors used their skill to enhance distinctive gracefulness. The colouring technique of speckles on its back is another great example of Japanese delicacy. This figure (17) captures the moment a fox attacked other animals. A wonderful design using sophisticated carving techniques, such examples became very popular throughout the 18th century.

Shishi (18), the most popular mythological animal in netsuke, is used to display supremacy and the meaning of amulets. The carving on the figure here is very attractive with its size, lively deformation and effective shade. The voluminous balance of the lion’s tail surely leaves a great impact on its viewers.

There are a very small number of lion figures available of this size made of stag antlers (19). It is a pleasure to see the quality of netsuke of this size with such exquisite carving technique. Since stag antlers were not as stable as ivory, there are not many stag antlers’ netsuke in existence. The technique called “open work tail” emphasises the voluminous lion’s tail and the speckles scattered evenly on its surface demonstrate a delicate line carving skill.

The boxwood flying dragon fish with shrimp tail (20), mid-18th century, is a very unique showcase among mythological animals in netsuke. Kirin (21) are treated as one of the most pleasurable themes among mythological animals. Though the humanised Kirin figure as shown here has been seen quite often in imported stationary from China, it is rarely found in netsuke. Due to the colouring on its back, the sculptor presumably was a Buddhist devotee.

Though sharing a lot of similarities with the Kirin, this howling Hakutaku displays its own special iconography of sharp fangs (22). Two string holes called himotoshi going through its mouth to body and reaching the bottom suggested that the primary purpose of its usage was a seal, which was modified later to be used as a netsuke. The seated Suisei (23) carved from stag antler is a rare 18th century example showing a mythological animal with a carapace on its back.

Netsuke Materials and Techniques

One definite reason why netsuke should not be considered just a form of small scale sculptures is the usage of precious materials, diversity and beauty within. There are infinite choices of materials from nature such as various woods, bamboos, citrus fruits, plum seeds, and resins including lacquer and amber. Materials selected from animals are ivory, whale teeth, stag antlers, wild boar’s tusks, shells and corals. Other common materials are minerals and glass. These materials have been sourced from not only the entire country but also from overseas. It took a long time for netsuke artists to prepare these materials for carving. After multiple processes of softening and polishing with tender love, these materials were finally ready to be carved. Artists were assigned material of which they have specific knowledge so that they knew how to deal with the material they held. With their masterful techniques, the charm of the netsuke was brought out to the world. Unfortunately, many of these professional and masterful techniques have been lost in modern society. From this collection, the most important materials and techniques are introduced below.

Compact and Restricted Design

Another strong reason why netsuke should not be considered just a form of small scale sculptures is “the compact and restricted design of infinity within”. The main reason why a block of natural material was chosen for carving a netsuke figure was to reinforce its stability as accessories. As a result, this qualification caused an interesting effect to create “the beauty of compact shape in a limited space”. As mentioned above, each material exists in various forms, and there are still many characteristic differences among the same material that infinite diversity in netsuke exist. The outstanding beauty designed in such small sculptures demonstrated netsuke’s major attraction. Netsuke are designed not to be edgy or fragile while wearing them on the surface of any garments, and the care behind the creation of netsuke for its users adds great value to the beauty of compact shape (24–28).

Humour in Netsuke

Observing humour in netsuke, after all the descriptions above about the charm of netsuke, is an additional important enjoyment for those who would like to explore more into the world of this unusual art form.

Mainly to be used with inro, netsuke played an important role for samurai soldiers who were at the top of the social hierarchy. Inro were developed as a pill box, but since they were designed with each family crest on the front, they came to inform the class of the wearer in public. Since netsuke was always worn with inro, it became also a necessary tool for life in the Edo period. Throughout the years, netsuke began to have another function in the smoking world. Smoking, a private joy, contributed heavily to increasing popularity of netsuke that smokers carried attached to their tobacco pouches. As a result, netsuke artists produced some of the most unexpected creations, and their humour widely attracted netsuke lovers even from overseas. Netsuke is a unique art form which is not found in other countries. They contain two opposite elements: often humorous high-quality art, while functioning as accessories for daily use (29–40).

Conclusion

Netsuke are small objects which are often described as miniatures. Even large types of netsuke are not much more than ten centimetres. Despite the size, however, they have the power to make a substantial impact on people.

National museums around the world, including major ones such as the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, the Los Ange-
les County Museum of Art, and also small and medium-sized museums, have permanent exhibitions of excellent netsuke donated by charitable collectors. Those exhibitions are gaining popularity with visitors. In Asian countries other than Japan, netsuke have appeared in a special exhibition at the National Palace Museum in Taiwan. Moreover, with respect to private museums featuring Asian arts in such European countries as France, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Italy and Hungary, almost all have permanent exhibitions of netsuke to emphasise their high status as a museum.

In Japan, the home country, the collecting of netsuke ironically first became active only in the early part of the 20th century, when collecting and trading by foreigners inspired Japanese people to pay more attention to these small objects. Such a tendency is still ongoing today. In this age of information, the rise of collectors from young generations are remarkable particularly in Japan and Eastern Europe, and the overall number of netsuke lovers are steadily increasing in spite of the worldwide economic recession of recent years. One of the reasons for such an increase of collectors involves the size of these art objects: due to their compactness, attachment to netsuke tends to develop quickly, and also they are easy to carry and do not require a large amount of storage space. In addition to such practical reasons, their great marketability should be mentioned as well: netsuke are traded both in Western countries and in Japan, and this global marketability gives a sense of security to the owners of these art objects. In fact, the netsuke market consists of Europe, US and Asia including Japan, and thus, their status as reliable global art objects has been established.

In this article, I introduced some top-quality netsuke contained in the Jay Hopkins Collection in order to demonstrate the reasons why netsuke keep fascinating people with keen aesthetic feeling, and keep stimulating their curiosity. I predict that netsuke will gain even more popularity in the future, and I intend to devote my life to serving people who love netsuke, these small giants with mysterious charms.