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CHRONOLOGIES

Periods in Japanese history
Kofun  around 3rd century - 593
Asuka  593-710
Nara  710-794
Heian  794-1185
Kamakura  1185-1338
Momoyama  1336-1573
Azuchi  1573-1603
Edo  1603-1868
Early Edo  1603-1716
Mid Edo  1716-1801
Late Edo  1801-1868
Meiji  1868-1912
9  

Nature  
Agombokuta  
Chipoku  
Lacquer  
Early 18th century  
4.2 x 4.2 x 3.0 cm

11  

Kochi  
Itakata  
Shiro  
Nishikogiku  
Dark wood  
19th century  
4.7 x 4.7 cm
Holding a netsuke is, in some ways, like holding a miniature world in the palm of your hands. Among the many subjects of netsuke carvings are scenes and items from daily life, at the time the piece was made. Some of the customs shown here have faded out of practice, while others are still familiar today.

With careful observation and a little study, netsuke will draw you into the world of the Edo period. Some netsuke doubled as charms, carried for luck or health, like a rabbit’s foot in the waist. Others were disguised with hidden meanings, now lost to time, that were important to the artist or the owner. Look closely, and perhaps you will be the first person to discover a netsuke-shi’s hidden riddle or clever trick.

Hey, That’s Mine!

A fisherman is trying desperately to retrieve the end of a piece of cloth that is caught tightly in a clam’s shell. What’s the big deal? The truth is, that clam is giving him a wedgie.

The cloth is the loose end of the man’s fundoshi, a loincloth that is comparable to today’s underwear. There was a wide variation in fundoshi styles, but the most common type was a strip of cloth about 180 centimeters long. One half of the cloth, about 90 centimeters, would be sliced, splitting it into two narrower strips. These could be tied around the waist, and the remaining fabric would be pulled from back to front between the legs, looping over the tied ends at the front. But how did a fisherman get his underwear stuck in a clam in the first place?

The difference between fundoshi and today’s underwear is that in the Edo period, men could freely walk about and work wearing only fundoshi, a sight captured in many ukiyo-e prints. For convenience and other reasons, even when wearing kimono, they often tied up their hems and left their legs and fundoshi bottoms exposed. This was perfectly normal and accepted. Nowadays, this freedom can still be experienced in some local festivals, where men participate in fundoshi.

So this poor fisherman was going about his everyday business, only to stumble into this absurd situation. Will he ever get his fundoshi off? Or will his suffering continue?
Men'uchi-ki—The Mask Carver

One of the greatest individual mask carvers in Japanese history was Shakutsuru, who was active in the late 13th century. He was from Obo City in the Sichuan clan region, which is now part of Fukuoka prefecture. His professional name was Higatai, much later, specifically after the late Muromachi period, some famous mask-carving families were established. Among them was the Dene clan. The founder of the Deim clan was Zekan Yushimizu. He was active from the 16th century through the early Edo period. Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the warlord who unified most of Japan in the late 16th century, awarded him the title of Tanka Ichikawa (the Divinest in the World), and so began his family’s illustrious tradition of carving masks.

Sarumawashi—The Monkey Trainer

Sarumawashi were a kind of street performer who would tame wild monkeys and train them to do tricks. The practice has a long history in Japan, and references to sarumawashi can be found in ancient texts such as the Azuma Kagami, an official historical record of the Kamakura period.

The sarumawashi tradition emerged from the association between monkeys and horses in Japan. Monkeys were considered the guardians or protectors of horses, and sarumawashi would visit stables to perform as part of New Year celebrations. Over time they gained popularity as street performers throughout the year. By the Edo period, there was an organized association of monkey trainers practicing their art all over Japan for delighted audiences.
Zato – The Blind Musician

Zato were blind musicians who looked like monks with their shaved heads and robes. They were the lowest-ranking members of the Yodolz guild for blowing players (Japanese lute performers) that was established during the Muromachi period. The higher ranks were known as kengyos, bento, and koto. During the Edo period, zato offered acupuncture and massage services in addition to their musical performances.

Fukusuke – The Good Luck Doll

Fukusuke, a doll, is regarded as a good omen which brings prosperity, success in business, good luck, longevity, and fortune. Fukusuke first appeared in the mid-Edo period, and is usually rendered as a kneeling man with a huge head and a toponot. Although there are several potential real-life origins of the doll, every theory centers around a man of short stature who was blessed with good fortune and success in business. Fukusuke made his international debut on the jacket cover of the “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” album from the Beatles.
A Statement in Red

The inro design features seven rats leaving Daikoku and his sack. Daikoku is one of the Seven Lucky Gods in Japan. His basic style is to hold a huge sack over his left shoulder and a lucky mallet in his right hand while standing on a rice bale. Rats are believed to be messengers of Daikoku.

The netsuke is a long twisted guard, and the ojime is a simple bead. Every piece is done in a bright, vivid red, sure to draw attention.

Maternal Love

The theme of this set may be motherly love. The netsuke design shows a mother tigress affectionately watching over her cub, and the inro's design comes from a Chinese folk tale:

Whenever a tigress gave birth to triplets, one cub was always actually a leopard that would try to kill and eat its siblings. The tigress could never leave the two other cubs alone with the third. A tigress in this situation once had to cross a river, but could only carry one cub across at a time. To avoid ever leaving the leopard alone with another cub, she crossed the river seven times, swapping cubs from shore to shore.
Rats!

On this inro, two fat rats stand out against a brilliant gold background. The ivory netsuke also shows a rat clambered on top of a winnowing basket and some straw hats. This set may have belonged to someone born in the Year of the Rat, or it may have been commissioned for someone to wear during that year of the Zodiac cycle.

**Understated Elegance**

The overall design of this set is simple, deceptively so. Where the fig.12 ensemble draws the eye with its bright color, this one is a rich, deep black all over with sparkling gold accents. Zeshin, the master craftsman, created the inro, using his skill in lacquer to make it look like a partially used ink cake.

Please refer to page 19 to learn more about Zeshin.
Exquisite Craftsmanship of the Edo Period

What do you think this iron and malleable netsuke have in common? What key element connects the two?

The answer is a katana sword. The designs of both the iron and the netsuke are derived from a katana and its parts. As only samurai were permitted to wear katana in the Edo period, this iron ensemble may have belonged to someone in that class. Another hypothesis is that they were intended as export products for Westerners who showed great interest in katana and their accessories.

Katana remain popular worldwide today, appearing in Hollywood films such as Kill Bill and The Bodyguard. The focus usually lies on the sharpness and quality of the blade, but a Japanese sword also incorporates a number of small but important decorative parts. Those tiny parts, made by renowned craftsmen, are valued as fine art objects. When the country was unified in the early 17th century, the need for katana as weapons was drastically reduced. Their decorative qualities began to take center stage, evolving over time with increasingly intricate and meticulous designs. Contemporary artisans compiled catalogues of the best work, which other artists used to recreate them in their own drawings, paintings, and carvings.

This inro was made by Zeshin, a prolific master craftsman in the 19th century. His design depicts the work of famous artisans from the 17th and 18th centuries, including a tsuka hand guard made by the legendary Nara Yasuchika, a kozuka blade hilts made by the famous metalworker Yosio Sonin, and a matched fuchigashira (a decorative ring that fits snugly on the hand guard and a pomell for the end of the hilts, put together) from Nara Toshime, a master of sword decoration. This unsigned netsuke also uses a matched fuchigashira for its inspiration, Zeshin and the anonymous netsuke carver reached across the ages to collaborate with the masters who came before them, not only preserving the designs but also illustrating the enduring place which katana, their makers, and their masters held in Edo culture.