

On the Problem of Iconographical Changes in Contemporary Netsuke

Tatiana Yahiro

The netsuke is a small pendant which is attached to the top of an *obi* in order to attach a *sagemono* or other portable things; such as a tobacco case or a medicine box. Netsuke came into fashion in the Edo period and became very popular, partially due to the fact that Japanese traditional clothes, such as the *kimono*, do not have pockets.

Despite the fact that there are many books and catalogues about contemporary netsuke, the problem of iconographical changes has not been researched deeply. Thus, in the first part of the research new trends appearing in the iconography of traditional subjects in contemporary netsuke will be studied; while the second part will be devoted to new themes and their interpretations.

Traditional Subjects in Contemporary Netsuke

Images of animals are very popular in both old and contemporary netsuke. Some of these subjects are connected to zodiac images, some with folk tales or legends. These contemporary netsuke keep their meaning without any changes. In the images *Ox* by Kangyoku, *Bull* by Shinryo, *Tiger* by Kangyoku, and *Tiger* by Unshu, the influence of the traditional style of depicting animals can be observed. Examining other animal subjects, we can find the same trend of repeating traditional forms, but carvers use very unusual materials to get more expressive. Kenji uses high quality amber to depict *Rabbit*. Carver David Kucer created *Mouse* from silver, making his work closer to jewelry. Gregg Stradiotto carved his *Grazing Horse* from walrus tusk.

Another popular theme in old and contemporary netsuke is images of religious figures; gods of luck, Buddhist personages, and we can find some new trends here. These are: portraying the individual features of characters as in netsuke *Fukurokuju* by Shoko, *Daruma* by Hosen, *Gama Sennin* by Tetsuro and others, and actively using colours as in netsuke *Fukurokoju* by Yoko, *Daikoku* by Asaoka, *Fukurokuju* by Komada Ryushi.

Depicting daily life is also a very popular theme in both traditional and contemporary netsuke. In scenes of daily life in contemporary netsuke, we cannot find precise iconographical copies of traditional ones, but the overall theme is the same as traditional netsuke. However, there are other new trends similar to the images of saints and gods – picturing the face of the person in detail like in netsuke *Man Tending Bonsai* by Shogetsu, *Sake Merchant* by Ichiro, *Learning Go* and *Warrior* by Koyu, and actively using colours like in the works *Man with Persimmons* by Hodo, *Portuguese Man* by Komada Ryushi and others.

Thus, in contemporary netsuke, the tendency to keep traditional iconography is still strong; *netsukeshi* depict traditional subjects and often repeat traditional netsuke forms. However, such trends as using rare and unsuitable materials for netsuke, actively applying colours, and creating very detailed carvings which express the individual features of the characters have appeared here. All these tendencies show that contemporary netsuke are made rather as pieces of art, than as functional things.

New Subjects in Contemporary Netsuke

In contemporary netsuke, numerous subjects portray various animals. These images are very unusual for netsuke of the Edo period, because many of these animals were unknown at that time. *Persian Cat* by Kenji, *Penguin Mother and Young* by Sawako,

Peacock by Gyokuzan, *Platypus* by Susan Wraigt, and *Dolphin* by Nick Lamb are carved very realistically. Another method of depicting animals is more humorous. Craftsmen create animals in a very realistic manner, but identify them with human behaviour; the monkey by Aya is listening to old music, the cat by Unshu is dreaming about her darling, the frog by Kiho is thinking about a puzzle.

Regarding images of gods in netsuke, only Buddhist or Taoist personages have been noted in traditional subjects, but, in contemporary netsuke, interesting images of the characters from European mythology and legends can be found. The most popular subjects came to netsuke from Greek mythology. For example, the images of *The Fall of Icarus* by Gregg Stradiotto, *Icarus Revival* and *Unrequited Love* by Kukan, *Serena* by Gregg Stradiotto, *Mermaid* by Sata Sumi. All these subjects are absolutely new for netsuke and made in the realistic style of Western sculpture.

In contemporary netsuke, a lot of subjects depicting various objects from daily life have appeared. Some of these netsuke depict traditional items like fish, for example, *Basket of Sweetfish* by Armin Müller and *Grilled Smelt* by Jin Kuwabara. *Hibachi-Mochi*, *Dumplings*, and *Pancakes* by Kiho Takagi, *Cut Piece: Apple* by Akira, *Watermelon* by Kinuyo are also made in a realistic manner and look like small copies of real things. Excepting food items, there are netsuke of Japanese objects, such as *Go Board* by Tomizo Saratani or *Tale of Genji Scroll* by Kodo, and Western objects, such as *Football* by Kinuyo, *Empty Cans* by Omu or *Charred Love Letters* by Shaw.

Thus, it can be noted that contemporary *netsukeshi* create absolutely new iconography, subjects and forms in netsuke by turning to the culture of other countries and using their imaginations. On the other hand, the strong influence of European sculpture can be found here, as well as the same tendencies as in netsuke of traditional subjects: very realistic imagery, active application of colors, and the use of rare materials.

The history of contemporary netsuke is short, only about fifty years. However, during this period, a lot of new, interesting netsuke have been created and many new subjects have appeared, and there are several reasons for these changes. The first is that, in the 1970s, netsuke went through revolutionary changes compelled by R. Kinsey. Another reason is that the art of netsuke got an influx of new ideas due to cross-cultural connections between Japan and other countries. One more reason is that, because of the Washington Convention of 1975 aiming to protect the decreasing number of elephants, ivory was prohibited for export and import. That was a stimulus for carvers to find and apply new materials, both natural and artificial, and use new methods of expression. And finally, the most important reason is that, with the appearance of European clothes, netsuke have lost their functional purpose. For all these reasons, the subjects and forms of contemporary netsuke have become more diverse and artistic, and netsuke created at the present time are recognized as contemporary art.