

# Netsuke: The Collection of a Lifetime.

by Ed Martel

“By looking at *netsuke* closely,” explains Professor Bruno Werdelmann, a collector of South East Asian art and in particular *netsuke*, “one can discover Japanese culture with all its customs, legends and fairy tales, almost a microcosm of Asia.”

*Netsuke* (pronounced ‘net-skeh’) began life in Japan most likely during the sixteenth century, and developed over the centuries to become what is now one of the most popular and diverse East Asian collectables the world has seen. The subject matter varies greatly, from intricate carvings of children at play, to phallic symbols, to simple beads. *Netsuke* are most commonly made from intricately carved wood or ivory, although early examples were sometimes small squashes, roots or coral.

The *netsuke* formed an important part of the



A) 19th C, 10cm x 5.5cm. Kagamibuta netsuke, cornelian ojime. B) 19th C, 8.8cm x 8.3cm. Well-pulley netsuke. (The Werdelmann Collection).

popular Japanese male dress until the Meiji period (1867-1912) when the *kimono* and *kosode* became less commonly worn in favour of western style clothing. The *kimono* having no pockets, the Japanese instead used a series of small medicine boxes (*inro*), money (*kinchaku*) or tobacco (*tabako-ire*) pouches, pipes and writing implements, collectively known as *sagemono*. The *sagemono* were threaded onto a cord (*himo*) and fastened or loosened with a bead (*ojime*). The *himo* was then suspended from the waist sash (*obi*), and kept in place by the *netsuke*, which itself roughly translates as ‘wood fastening’.

The *netsuke* is thought to originate from workmen who, wanting to find a way to have their tools to hand, would tie the tool to a root and secure it in place under the *obi*. The popularity of the *netsuke* in Japan began to take off considerably from the eighteenth century, mainly as tobacco smoking became an accepted custom. Around this period, it was a common ritual to begin a business meeting with a smoke, and one’s *netsuke* was a form of status symbol: the more intricate and sought after the design, the more valuable the piece, and therefore the more powerful its owner.

In 1781, Inaba Tsūryū published the *Soken Kisho*. This eight volume work contained details of some fifty three *netsukeshi*, or *netsuke* carvers, and is reported to be the first written record of *netsuke*. Less than one hundred years later, as Japan began to open to the

west, Japanese art was exhibited for the first time at world fairs in Paris in 1867 and then Vienna in 1873, sparking avid western interest in everything Japanese. The small size and vast array of *netsuke* made them ideal items for the collector, and at a time when *netsuke* were used less and less, it provided an opportunity for the *netsukeshi* to remain in business. Famous *netsukeshi* include Masanao of Kyoto, famous for his *fukura suzume* (good-luck sparrows) and Ono Ryomin of Tokyo. Amongst the many categories *netsuke* designs fall into are figures from Chinese history, flora and fauna, Japanese mythology, (*noh*) masks and people, occupations and activities.

Even today, *netsuke* are still made for the collecting market. The range of *netsuke* on the page opposite, all of which were taken from our Price Guide databases and sold at auction in the last few years, demonstrates the diverse styles of the carvings as well as the vast differences in terms of price. Those dating from the early to mid nineteenth century and before are rarer and therefore tend to fetch prices much higher than those made any later: difficult to define because of the rare occurrence of signatures or stamps on *netsuke*. Furthermore, more intricate carvings usually command higher prices than plain or simple *netsuke*; those having moving parts fetching higher prices still.



The World of Netsuke, by Patrizia Jirka-Schmitz

One of the world’s most outstanding *netsuke* collections is the Werdelmann Collection at the museum kunst palast Düsseldorf with almost 1100 objects, the result of thirty five years of collecting and thus a unique survey of this Japanese art from the seventeenth to the twentieth century.

Each object is reproduced in brilliant colour photographs and described according to the most recent scholarly research. An extensive list of signatures and carvers with commentary rounds off the publication.

(352 pages, 683 illustrations in colour with 1070 objects, 407 illustrations of inscriptions and marks).

## Further information.

[www.japancollection.com/pages/netsuke/netsuke.htm](http://www.japancollection.com/pages/netsuke/netsuke.htm)

*old and new netsuke for sale.*

[www.worldcollectorsnet.com/netsuke](http://www.worldcollectorsnet.com/netsuke)  
*information on netsuke and details of netsuke collectors.*

[www.netsuke.org](http://www.netsuke.org)  
*information on netsuke and links.*

[www.tsu-ho.com](http://www.tsu-ho.com)  
*many good quality pictures of netsuke for sale.*

[www.antiques-info.co.uk](http://www.antiques-info.co.uk)  
*free to subscribers to Antiques Info, our databases hold thousands of pictures, prices and descriptions of Japanese items sold at UK auctions recent years.*

## Glossary

*Netsuke* - an often intricately carved toggle which stops the *himo* from slipping through the *obi*. *Ne* - wood, *tsuke* - fastening.

*Kimono* - traditional Japanese clothing.

*Kosode* - traditional Japanese clothing, similar in design to a long shirt.

*Obi* - a sash, usually wide, worn around the *kimono*, from which the *sagemono* hang.

*Sagemono* - collective term for the objects hanging from the *obi*.

*Ojime* - a sliding bead strung on to the sash between the *netsuke* and *sagemono*, tightens or loosens, to open or close the *sagemono*.

*Netsukeshi* - carvers of *Netsuke*.

*Katabori* - a form of *netsuke*, carved to represent figures.

*Sashi* - a long, narrow *netsuke*.

*kinchaku* - money pouch worn on the *himo*.

*himo* - the cord, often of silk, which hangs from the *netsuke* and holds the *ojime*, *sagemono* and *inro*.

*tabako-ire* - tobacco pouch worn on the *himo*.  
*inro* - a small medicine box or case.

*kagamibuta* - a type of *netsuke* with a mirror fitted into a bowl shape.



**1**  
Late 19thC carved ivory netsuke, in the form of a seated man with a lantern, floral engraving to back, two character mark, 1.25in high. Another of a seated rotund man with a young boy, floral engraved back, 1in high. Two others. Diamond Mills & Co, Felixstowe. Dec 04. £90.



**2**  
Group of seven signed Japanese coloured ivory netsuke, all representing different pursuits, 2in. Gorrings, Lewes. Dec 03. £95.



**3**  
Japanese ivory netsuke, carved as a monkey with hatching eagle egg, 1.75in. Gorrings, Lewes. Sep 04. £95.



**4**  
Three ivory netsuke, Meiji, seated shishi, 1.25in, fisherman with pipe, 1.5in (rod missing) and seated lady, 1.25in. Gorrings, Lewes. Mar 03. £100.



**5**  
Ivory netsuke of a hare and leveret, carved in a crouching position, signed, 1.75in. Gorrings, Lewes. Jun 03. £100.



**6**  
Japanese ivory clam netsuke, and four others. Gorrings, Lewes. Jan 05. £100.



**7**  
Amber netsuke carved as a cat, 1.5in. Gorrings, Lewes. Feb 01. £110.



**8**  
Early 20th century Japanese ivory netsuke carved as a noh mask, 2in. Gorrings, East Sussex. Mar 02. £110.



**9**  
Group of ivory netsuke, Meiji and Taisho, ivory Fukurokuju, 2.75in, elephant, 1in and man with barrel, 2.75in. Wood netsuke of seated man, 1.5in and an ivory study of maternal monkey group, 1.5in. Gorrings, Lewes. Mar 03. £140.



**10**  
Japanese ivory netsuke of a seated couple, 1.5in, a pair of ivory figures of hotei, 1in and another of figures with an ox, 2in. Gorrings, East Sussex. Mar 02. £160.



**11**  
A Japanese ivory netsuke carved with a Buddha and two small figures 1.5in. Gorrings, Lewes. Jun 03. £170.



**12**  
Ivory netsuke, Meiji, two playful boys, one seated upon the other's back, signed, 1.75in. Gorrings, Lewes. Mar 03. £180.



**13**  
Japanese ivory netsuke carved as a rat on a skull, 1.5in. Gorrings, Lewes. Jun 03. £180.



**14**  
Ivory netsuke, Meiji, father and son at play, father wearing engraved kimono, signed, 1.25in. Gorrings, Lewes. Mar 03. £200.



**15**  
An ivory netsuke, Meiji, three mythological characters and shishi, signed, 2ins. Gorrings, Lewes. Mar 03. £240.



**16**  
Two Japanese hardwood netsuke, carved as a rat and two gourds. Gorrings, Lewes. Jul 04. £260.



**17**  
Japanese carved ivory netsuke of a dragon faced warrior holding sword, standing on a dome, with a snake coiled round. The base with two character mark. 4.5cm high. Rosebery's, London. Sep 04. £280.



**18**  
Ivory netsuke, Meiji, artisan grinder; his kimono with engraved detail, signed 1in. Gorrings, Lewes. Mar 03. £300.



**19**  
19th Century carved wood netsuke of a recumbent cow, 6cm. Sworders, Stansted Mountfitchet. Nov 04. £400.



**20**  
Ivory netsuke, Meiji, two rats on an engraved fan, signed, (one eye missing) 2in long. Gorrings, Lewes. Mar 03. £750.



**21**  
Wood netsuke of two toads, Yamada School, 19thC, signed Masakatsu, signature to base, 5cm. Henry Adams, Chichester. Sep 02. £950.



**22**  
Japanese ivory netsuke, 18th Century, of a figure of a Dutchman standing with a curly wig under his tasselled, wide brimmed hat, dressed in a long coat and breeches, holding a cockerel with both hands, signed on the back leg, 7.5cm. Sworders, Stansted Mountfitchet. Feb 05. £1,050.



**23**  
Masanao, late 18thC ivory netsuke carved as a boar reclining on a bed of leaves coiling around the larger of the himotoshi, signed on red coral tablet, 5.5cm wide. Cheffins, Cambridge. Apr 04. £1,300.



**24**  
Toyomasa, mid 19th Century, a fine and rare Tamba School wood netsuke of sea life, including a carp and crayfish, the details boldly carved and with a good polish, 5.5cm signed Toyomasa carved oval. Sworders, Stansted Mountfitchet. Nov 04. £1,500.



**25**  
19thC Japanese ivory netsuke carved as Kinko reading as he rides a giant carp through the waves, 5.5cm. Cheffins, Cambridge. Apr 04. £1,700.