

Small, Smaller, Perfect

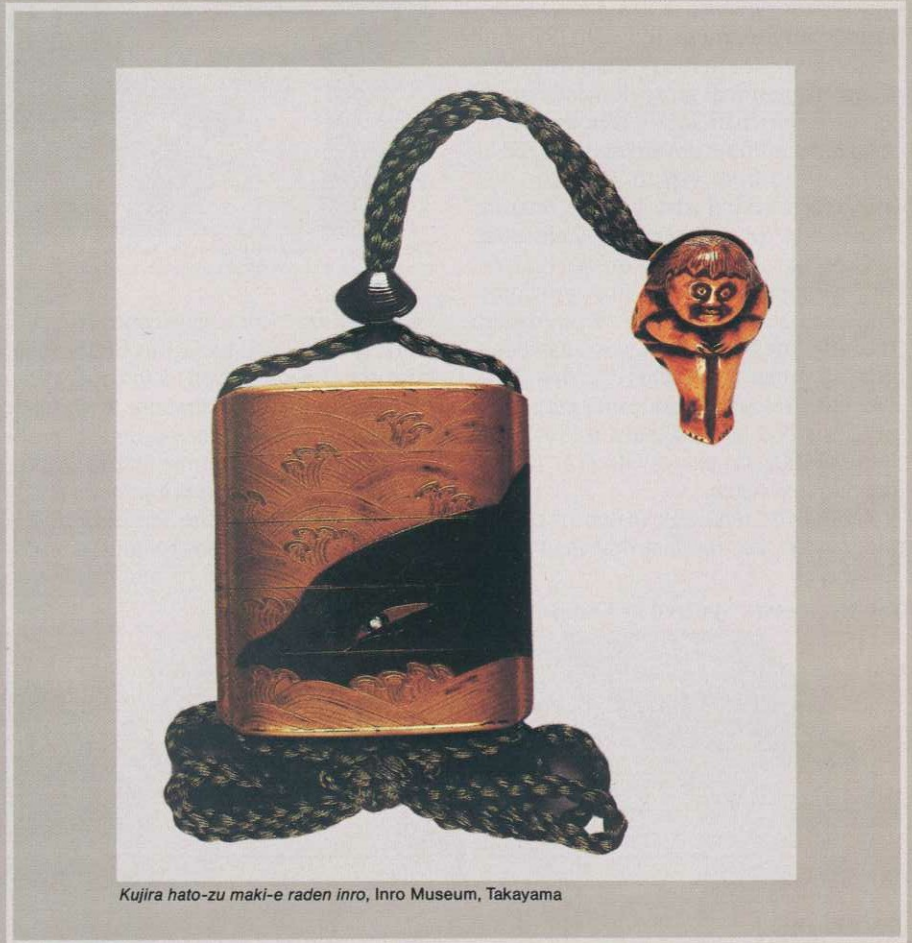
By Nobuo Tsuji

Westerners today probably know more about *inro* and *netsuke* than do the Japanese people to whose culture these exquisite works of art belong. *Inro* and *netsuke* were born in the Edo period (1603–1868), when it was common for kimono-clad men to attach their purses, tobacco pouches and the like to their *obi*.

Inro were miniature medicine boxes, usually flat receptacles about six to seven centimeters long divided into three to five compartments for different kinds of medicines. These compartments could be opened by sliding a fastener (called an *ojime*) holding together the two strings coming out from the *inro* lid. *Inro* and other such accessories were attached by a string passed under the *obi* and secured by a toggle called a *netsuke*. These *netsuke* are especially popular outside of Japan, some pieces selling at auctions for hundreds of thousands of dollars. There are also more authoritative writings on *netsuke* and *inro* in the West than there are in Japan.

At some point in the 18th century, in the latter half of the Edo period, *inro* and *netsuke* lost their functional purposes and assumed purely decorative roles. It is around this time that we begin to see the finest craftsmanship being applied. *Inro* were made of ceramics, metals, ivory or other materials, and most were lacquered with *maki-e* (literally “sprinkled picture”) decorative technique, which made them finely executed miniatures of Japanese and Chinese artistic traditions. Because there was so little variation in shape and size, *inro* functioned best as tiny canvases.

Netsuke, on the other hand, though even smaller—only around four to five centimeters high—could assume any form and proved an ideal medium for the minutest kind of sculpture. Popular subjects included ancient Chinese and Japanese folklore and Buddhism, animals, insects, plants, skulls, common objects of



Kujira hatu-zu maki-e raden inro, Inro Museum, Takayama

daily use and various fashionable themes. *Netsuke* were carved out of ivory, antler, animal bone, boxwood, bamboo, clay, quartz, agate and even glass. They were often humorous: a man struggling to escape from a clam that has clamped onto his loincloth; a yawning figure; a silly monkey. The *netsuke* craftsmen could transform ivory into a slimy slug or the delicate transparency of a cicada's wing, or could carve a scene of *go* players within a fruit pit.

In the Meiji-period (1868–1912) rush to absorb just about everything Western, the Japanese disdained *netsuke* as a

symbol of their own “backward” culture. Western visitors to Japan, however, were fascinated by the tiny works of art, and large numbers were taken out of the country. As a result there are few good pieces left in Japan today, and even fewer exhibited in Japanese museums.

Happily, not everyone has been so careless. Reiko Yanagi has been collecting *inro* and their *netsuke* for more than 30 years and has recently opened a museum in Takayama, Gifu Prefecture, to exhibit her collection. Two pieces from the new Inro Museum in the former castle town are shown here.



Zoge-ji bijin hatsuyume-zu maki-e raden inro, Inro Museum, Takayama

One is of a lacquer *inro* depicting a whale curved around the box. The *netsuke* is a child, straw hat on its back and eyes opened wide in wonder at the sight of the monster in the sea. The string fastener is shaped like a shell.

The other is an ivory *inro* showing a dozing woman leaning on a low table. The picture is decorated using *maki-e* and *raden* mother-of-pearl inlay. Butterflies in *maki-e* adorn the round *netsuke* and the string fastener. The parts together represent a popular tale of a famous Chinese Taoist sage. The sage dreamed that he was a butterfly flitting among the flow-

ers for 100 years. When he woke, he wasn't sure if he had dreamed of being the butterfly or whether he himself was part of the butterfly's dream. The back of this *inro* is decorated with Mt. Fuji, a hawk and several eggplants, thus reinforcing the dream image, since the Edo-period townspeople believed it was an auspicious sign to have one of this odd assortment appear in one's first dream of the New Year.

In his 1982 best-seller, *Smaller is Better*, the Korean author O-Young Lee claims that the Japanese people have always loved the miniature, tirelessly working to

shrink just about anything and everything. This propensity, he says, is one of the reasons for Japan's success in electronics. Lee makes no mention of *netsuke* or *inro* in his book, but he certainly could have, for they provide valuable substantiation for his thesis. ■

Nobuo Tsuji is a professor of art history at the University of Tokyo. He specializes in Japanese art history.