

LOST PAGES IN JAPAN'S ART HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

The present state of research in Japanese arts is characterized not only by a considerable number of retrospective narratives and conceptual works, but also by the prevalence of die-hard stereotypes. Most general works on Japan's art history tend to elaborate on time-proven cultural phenomena commanding a warranted interest in the West. A researcher into materials new to the academic discourse is then faced with such challenges as scarcity of accessible factual information, non-unified terminology and unagreed appreciation criteria. Among the cultural phenomena neglected by the mainstream narratives of art history seems to be okimono, Japanese miniature plastic arts for decorating the interior.

Keywords: okimono, Japanese miniature sculpture, carved ivory

INTRODUCTION

The art of *okimono* is the least studied form of Japanese arts. Undefined till present is its status in the accepted genre-and-form classification of arts. Some critics even go further to deny it the right to be called art. The Western collectors and art dealers, however, recognize the *okimono* as a miniature plastic art object carved in ivory or wood, or metal-cast. The Japanese language provides a wider definition of the word. It defines "*okimono*" as "something freestanding", the term embracing all things standing, that is, placed on the shelf for decoration, including art objects, dolls, souvenirs, and craftworks.

The absence of fundamental research in *okimono* can partly be explained through the scarcity of high-quality items in most museum collections. A mass interest in *netsuke* in the West as well as numerous fakes capitalizing on the fashion resulted in a perception of *okimono* as a second-rate art. Not surprisingly, most reference sources describe the *okimono* simply as items for decorating the interior, the difference from *netsuke* consisting in the absence of *himotoshi*, a special hole for a string. Regrettably neglected fact thereby is that it was the *okimono* carvers who were entrusted to present Japan at World Trade Fairs.

An in-depth study into *okimono* is somewhat hampered by the diversity of materials in use. Other factors accounting for difficulties in comprehensive research in the subject seem to be as follows: back in Japan *okimono* was mostly regarded as a luxury item and, therefore, meant predominantly for export. Of the remaining items, a lot were lost in the Great Kantō earthquake and air-raids during WWII. In Europe and the USA the valuable items were mostly purchased by private collectors thus vanishing from the public eye.

Pioneered by Barry Davies (1996), the earliest studies into the art of *okimono* seem to date back to the late XX – early XXI cc, coming out in the form of an auction catalogue¹, featuring a brief article on the history of *okimono* and a description of the 34 articles which later comprised the core of the renowned Otto and Ruth Schneidmann collection.

Other catalogues, which appeared a decade later, were compiled by Achim Hartmann² and Laura Bordignon³. Given the limitations pertaining to the genre of the catalogue, the publications provided brief information of the *Meiji* period, specifics of the art form and a detailed commentary of the plots behind the subject matter. The Laura Bordignon's catalogue owes much of its appeal to the listings of the Japanese artists as well as samples and interpretations of their impresses provided with the English translation.

The same time period also witnessed the first publications pertinent to the art of *okimono* in Japan. Worth mentioning in this respect is first of all *Yasutami Fukui's* article⁴, offering systemized information on the known ivory carvers. Note-worthily, the author refers to a number of little-known collections introducing carvers previously obscure in Japan.

A special tribute ought to be paid to Mr. *Murata Masayuki*, director of *Kiyomizu Sannenzaka Museum*, for his relentless effort in organizing subject exhibitions and making valuable contributions to the research in question. Mr. *Murata Masayuki's* life-long activity as a collector is aimed at returning to Japan the *Meiji* period art objects, most of which happened to be found in overseas collections. The museum collection features works of such hallmark carvers as *Takamura Kōun* and *Ishikawa Komei*. An indisputable authority, *Murata Masayuki* is also the author of numerous review articles and exhibition catalogues in various *okimono* techniques in materials, i.e. wood, ivory and metal⁵.

The mentioned publications testify for the growing interest in the art of *okimono* both in Japan and beyond, necessitating further research into the history of this art form, its characteristic features, artistic significance and its place in the history of Japanese arts. Understandably, all these issues cannot be addressed exhaustingly in one article, which, therefore, is a brief outline of the most significant aspects of the present-day *okimono* studies.

The research base of this work will be limited to the catalogues of the World Fairs and auctions, as well as exhibits at Japanese, European and American private and museum *okimono* collections.

Historically, the *okimono* as a miniature plastic art ascends to the tradition of decorating *butsudans*, i.e. home altars, with figurines of deities, saints, and hermits, with the earliest known

¹ Davies, Barry. *Okimono: Japanese Decorative Sculptures of the Meiji Period*. London, 1996.

² Okimono. Masterpieces of Japanese decorative sculpture during the Meiji period / Text by Achim Hartmann. Katowice, 2005.

³ Bordignon, Laura. *The Golden Age of Japanese Okimono*. The Dr. A. M. Kanter Collection. Woodbridge: Antique Collectors' Club, 2010.

⁴ 福井泰民 「明治の牙彫置物盛衰史」 『日本象牙美術』 東京 一九九六年 二一〇–二一七頁。

Yasutami Fukui. The history of prosperity and decline okimono of ivory in the Meiji // History of Japanese ivory carving. Gebory-okimono and Shibayama of Meiji Period. Tokyo, 1996. p. 210 – 217).

⁵ For example: Murata Masayuki. *Exquisitely Crafted Ivory and Wood Carving of Meiji Period*. Kiyomizu Sannenzaka Museum. 2003.

pieces dating back to the XVII c. One of *Suzuki Harunobu's* (1724-1770) prints features a ceramic shop with 'okimono objects' on offer. As can be seen, those were mass-produced miniature figurines well beyond the pale of art.

The *Meiji* Restoration gave *okimono* a new lease of life. The Japanese exhibitions at the World Fairs stirred a steady interest in Japanese crafts in the West. The need to present *okimono*s to advantage in the European-type interior prompted their larger dimensions, up to 25-50 cm. The Europeans grew fond of Japanese figurines, which satisfied their interest in an exotic Japan and comported with the Western tradition of decorating houses with objects of miniature plastic arts.

The *Meiji* Reforms provided for the disbandment of the four divisions of society, whereby samurais were disallowed to bear arms and a European dress code was introduced. With the *Meiji* Restoration, in 1868, the new government adopted a strong anti-Buddhist stance, bringing *Shinto* to ascendancy throughout the country, which left an army of highly-qualified carvers and metalworkers unemployed and seeking jobs as souvenir manufacturers for the West-oriented market. Noteworthy, the *Emperor Meiji* personally attended to the matters pertaining Japan's participation in the World Fairs, preoccupied not only with the image of the country in the West but preservation of traditional crafts as well⁶.

The opening of Japan ushered in an era of an in-depth study of European art heritage in the country, allowing for the sculptors to travel and study abroad, visit world-famous museums and contemporary art exhibitions. Meanwhile, a pivotal position in fashioning Japanese carvings for the European market was taken by the so-called 'Tokyo school', an umbrella term now widely accepted in specialist literature.

As an ivory-carving world centre, Japan owes much of its fame to such names as *Asahi Gyokuzan* (1843-1923), *Ishikawa Komei* (1852-1913), and *Takamura Koun* (1852-1934). It was they who became founding fathers of the Tokyo Fine Arts School (now the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music), established in 1888 (1887). Apart from it, *Ishikawa Komei* headed the Emperor's Ivory Carving Board. The very fact that the 1900 Paris World Fair, which the contemporaries sometimes called 'a parade of civilizations' and for which Japan made a special point of preparing, featured six works of *Ishikawa Komei* speaks volumes. Needless to say, only the best of the best carvers were entrusted with the honour of presenting Japan at events like this⁷. Many of his contemporary carvers admitted to being largely influenced by his work. In 1917 *Asakura Fumyo* (1883-1964) created a bronze bust, now on display in the Museum of Tokyo Academy of Arts and Music, to commemorate the outstanding sculptor.

Takamura Kōun, who is justly viewed as one of the founding fathers of Japanese modern sculpture, worked mostly in wood, a material traditional with Japanese carvers. *Takamura Tōun's* apprentice (or should one way 'disciple'), *Takamura Kōun*, himself an accomplished master in monumental Buddhist sculpture, went on to succeed in different genres, from miniature *okimono*s to large-scale monuments, his most acclaimed work being the bronze statue of *Saigō*

⁶国 雄行 「博覧会の時代：明治政府の政策」 2005年、岩田書院、東京 (Kuni Takeyuki. *The era of the exhibition: The Politics of the Meiji patronage of the exhibition*. Tokyo, 2005)

⁷ 「帝室技芸員と一九〇〇年パリ万国博覧会」 『三の丸尚蔵館展覧会図録』 四七号 東京 二〇〇八年 九九頁。(Imperial palace artists and Paris International Exhibition 1900. Tokyo, 2008)

Takamori. Researchers point out that it was *Takamura Kōun* whose creative work ‘bridged the gap between old carving traditions and modern sculpture’⁸.

Another celebrated carver of the time was *Shimamura Shunmei (1854-1896)*, a master of temple sculpture, who also carved in ivory for sale in Europe. Most of his works now decorate European collections, whereas in Japan his name hardly crops up in relation to *okimono*.

This period is marked with virtuoso carving without either polishing or tinning. The ivory figurines of the period are all notable for their pristine whiteness. Unfortunately, only a few of them survived in the original state. The Japanese artists themselves relate only legends of what is called the ‘white age’. A typical example is *Asahi Gyokuzan’s A Heian Noblewoman*⁹. A general impression of the imagery of the multilayer raiment is maintained through the multilayer carving style.

A representative sample of the ‘white age’ can be found in the Oleksandr Feldman collection. The statuette, *A Flower Monger*, by *Ishikawa Komei (il.1)*, is notable for its subtle modeling and masterful chiseling. Combining a traditional Japanese plot with a verisimilitude of characterization and detail, *Ishikawa Komei* seems to have laid the foundation for Japanese Realism.

A profound study in nature, coupled with an exacting reproduction of visual imagery, echoed the core of the *Meiji* Reforms aimed at restructuring the Japanese society after the European muster. After centuries of time-honoured traditional symbolism in painting, *Takahashi Yuichi’s Salmon* strikes with its manifested naturalism. A synchronic parallel to this quest in sculpture was *Kano Tessai’s (1845-1925) Dried Salmon*.

Illustrative of this period are works of *Morino Korin (?-?)*, allegedly one of the most gifted apprentices of *Ishikawa Komei*, a participant to the 1900 Paris World Fair¹⁰. Whereas his *Hérons*, with all the convincing force of the ‘plastic solution’, still bear a touch of ‘salon art’, his *Hen* is unequivocally realistic, suggesting preliminary draft sketches. The artist masterfully conveys a ‘nascent’ movement. *Morino Korin* is mostly known as an unrivalled animalist, his ivory group, *A Stag and a Hawk*, being of particular interest as a logical continuation of the subject prompted by the *sensei* and commissioned by the Empress (now on display in Ukraine).

As Japanese plastic arts made inroads into the Western market, so the demand in its turn began to shape trends in their development. Wealthy Europeans who were used to having the interior decorated with marble sculpture, came to value the patina of time, the yellowish-golden smooth texture of the material. ‘White’ *okimono*s with their unfinished surfaces did not easily lend themselves to long-term preservation while retaining original looks, which caused a new generation of carvers to improvise their own techniques of finish. This brought to life a new kind of *okimono* noted for their golden hue, tinted with organic dyes, furbished and polished with grafting wax. Any touch of the object then would only enhance the patina effect.

⁸ Murata Masayuki. A Wood-carving Master: Takamura Koun - Kiyomizu San'nenzaka Museum Collection // DARUMA - JAPANESE ART & ANTIQUES MAGAZINE ISSUE 68. 2010/11/11. Pp.12- 33

⁹ 『日本象牙美術』 東京 一九九六年 二一〇—二一七頁。History of Japanese ivory carving. Gebory-okimono and Shibayama of Meiji Period. Tokyo, 1996. P. 84-85.

¹⁰ Exposition Universelle Internationale de 1900 : catalogue special officiel du Japon. Paris, 1900.

Evaluating the *Meiji* period in the history of *okimono* one cannot help but note its landmark significance, for, on the one hand, it ‘summed up’ predecessor traditions and urged for radically new artistic challenges, on the other hand. A pattern work of the period is *Udagawa Kazuo’s Mother Breastfeeding her Baby (il.2)*. Incidentally, in Ukraine this work has acquired a ‘second name’ of the “Japanese Madonna”. Indeed, *Udagawa Kazuo’s* interpretation of a peasant woman of the *Meiji* period is reminiscent of European-style Madonna imagery, in particular Leonardo da Vinci’s *Madonna of Benois*. Alongside with other attention-worthy aspects, the sculpture seems to reflect Japan’s aspirations to enter the ‘club’ of the mighty powers of the world. The sculptor replicated his work in ivory¹¹, wood¹², and bronze¹³. The bronze variation was exhibited in Louisiana in 1904 and at the 1910 Japanese-British Exhibition. The latter circumstance is indicative of the esteem paid to the given work by the Japanese curators of the London exhibition. Importantly, the exhibition was held pending the prolongation of the military alliance between the two countries and by means of the exhibition the Japanese government meant to substantiate Japan’s claim to a status of a country with a time-honoured history and culture¹⁴. Not surprisingly, by its scale and quality of the items exhibited the London exhibition superseded even the 1900 Paris World Fair.

New to Japan was also a nude female model. Japanese art never cultivated appreciation of the naked female body (the genre of *shunga* was far from demanding in depicting a human body). Traditional Japanese raiment provided a perfect guise for the body, yet ‘deprived’ it of any individual features. The mastery in depicting a naked body, which, in the then Europe, was part and parcel of classical artistic education, took centuries to be honed. Japanese artists proved to be capable students in that they achieved the required mastery within one generation.

Apart from the traditional motifs borrowed from the netsuke and other visual arts, the corpus of subject matter with the *okimono* carvers of that time acquired a new dimension. While Japan itself was living through the crucial period of rapid modernization, its appeal to the West still lay in times past. Against the background of the disappearing past, the photographers would hectically try to capture the sights of rural Japan; the *okimono* masters undauntedly followed suit, depicting genre scenes from fishermen’s and peasants’ everyday life. Especially popular became an “old men and the children” motif. Apart from an overall sentimentality, these scenes have other common threads. The unflinching features of old men in question then included fatigued shoulders as if encumbered by the burden of the years past, sinewy, physical labour hands, kind eyes, and ‘toothless’ smiles, whereas the kids were always presented as frolicking around, plump, round faced and carefree.

As was mentioned earlier, the mass closure of Japan’s Buddhist temples left most Buddhist carvers unemployed and seeking commission elsewhere, which resulted in their joining the ranks of *okimono* sculptors. Naturally, what they introduced in the art was their usual subject matter

¹¹ Рибалко, С.Б. *Зі Сходу на Захід: японська мініатюрна пластика з колекції О.Фельдмана*. Харків, Фоліо, 2009. С. (Rybalko, S. *From East to West: Japanese miniature sculpture from O. Feldman’s Collection*. Kharkiv, Folio, 2009. P.28)

¹² 『日本象牙美術』 東京 一九九六年 二一〇—二一七頁。 *History of Japanese ivory carving. Gebory-okimono and Shibayama of Meiji Period*. Tokyo, 1996. P. 105

¹³ Earle J. *Splendors of Imperial Japan: Arts of the Meiji Period from the Khalili Collection*. London, 2002. P.376

¹⁴ Mutsu, H., *British Press and the Japan-British Exhibition of 1910*. Routledge, 2001.

and carving techniques, adding the characters of the Buddhist pantheon, i.e. Buddha, Bodhisattva, or the hermits to the subject matter repertoire of the *okimono*.

Another renowned carver of that time was *Asahi Meido* (1843-1923) also known as *Asahi Akira*, a member of the Tokyo *Chokokai* (The Tokyo Carvers' Association) between *Meiji* 37-43 (1904-1910). He was successful in both Japanese Realism (il.3) and Buddhist plastic arts, his works displayed at World Industrial Fairs – the achievement the more significant as only a few carvers, namely, the winners of the all-Japan industrial exhibitions, were honoured to present Japan internationally at events like these. It was these artists with their international acclaim who secured the thriving of Japanese plastic arts in the *Meiji* period.

Gaining momentum as much as Japanese Realism was also 'Japanese Orientalism'. By "Orientalism" we usually understand the imagery of an Eastern culture as perceived by Europeans. However, in the case of the cultural heritage of the *Meiji* period we observe an intended *orientalization* of the cultural product. A vivid example of this was the 'output' of the *Miyao*, a company, founded by *Miyao Eisuke*, and specializing on the objects to decorate the 'European-style' interior. It was not uncommon for the company's carvers to sacrifice historic verisimilitude to emphatic decorative effects. Note-worthily, the company, which owned luxury shops in Tokyo and Yokohama, was preoccupied with the quality of their goods and commissioned only top professionals.

Illustrious in the spirit of the convergence of art and utility goods design are such works as a table-stand, *Tenaga-Ashinaga*, *A Demon Serving a Charcoal Tray*, *a Woman with a Baby* candleholder (il.4), etc. all noted for their plasticity, rich decorative effects and functionality. Unfortunately, we shall never come to know the names of the masters behind them as the company only used their own trademark, *Miyao*, for marking their products. Nor is there any company's documentation left, the only established fact being the dates of its heyday, 1880-1890s. No less interesting is the fact that, whereas the *Miyao* tended to flood the European market with items made of bronze or porcelain, at the Second National Industrial Exhibition held in Tokyo in 1881 it presented solely wooden carvings.

It should not come as a surprise, though, that alongside with the true artists, who served purely artistic missions, there existed a cohort of craftsmen busy with fashioning off-the-mill, fast-to-make figurines for undiscerning tourists and private collections. These works, produced by the thousands in Tokyo's numerous workshops, featuring elephants, the Seven Lucky Gods, samurais in full war array and oriental beauties clad in festive kimonos, were never intended for art exhibitions and laid no claim to fame as objects of *haute arte*. The popularity of the given plots can also be accounted for by the recommended listings issued by the *Meiji* government for the artists. According to Victor Harris, the intention of the authors was to single out the motifs and subject matter characteristic of Japan's culture, on the one hand, and easy to understand for foreign viewers on the other¹⁵.

Mr. *Komada Ryushi* (born 1934), a third-generation Japanese carver, related the 'how they run' story of such workshops to the author of these lines. The management of such a workshop was normally organized as follows: a souvenir shop, which served as a sort of transmission mechanism between the producer and the final consumer in the West and worked in partnership

¹⁵ Harris V. Japanese imperial craftsmen. *Meiji art from the Khalili collection*. London, 1994.

with the deacon, would place orders with his workshop. Having been commissioned, the deacon would select a sketch for the prospective *okimono* from his own collection or, in his turn, commission a black-and-white artist to produce a new one. Junior carvers or apprentices would perform a rough treatment of the ivory following the sketch, leaving the masterstrokes for the senior carvers.

In the late *Taisho* and early *Shōwa* periods the number of carvers began to dwindle. Among the acclaimed pre-World War II masters one should mention *Morita Sōko* (1879-1943) and *Ando Ryokuzan* (1885-1955), also known under the name of *Manzo*. The former achieved fame for his virtuoso carving techniques both in *okimono* and *netsuke*, and, according to the Japan Netsuke Society's poll, was recognized the nest carver of all times¹⁶. The latter was universally acclaimed as an unparalleled master of carving fruit, vegetables, and 'gifts of the Ocean'. His meticulous shaping and texture may well compete with those in the Dutch still life in the XVII century. However, as life's little ironies had it, the chief merit in preserving the century-old traditions of carving should be indebted to nobody else but the anonymous souvenir manufacturers. And it was nobody else but them who, in response to the revived interest of the Europeans in *netsuke*, gave a new lease of life to the old genre.

In the post-war time, ivory miniatures on various themes from Japanese history and ethnography regained their popularity, not in the least due to a keen interest with Americans, who would buy them in bulk. Mass demand and quick work, however, infallibly led to an inferior quality. An economic boom towards the end of the *Showa* period (1926-1989) provided for a large-scale import of ivory, making *okimono* as much in demand with European collectors as in its heyday, and reviving an interest in it with the Japanese themselves.

The 1989 worldwide ivory trade ban put the very existence of *okimono* art in peril, causing carvers to address other available materials, such as mammoth bone, amber or bronze. However, as a Japanese saying goes, creativity borders on ingenuity, so what makes a piece of ivory valuable is not the ivory but the power of art behind it.

In conclusion it ought to be emphasized that the *okimono* is an inalienable constituent of the history of the Japanese culture, which should be considered in the broader context of Japan's plastic arts alongside with monumental religious sculpture, salon sculpture, and *netsuke* art. It was the *okimono* which became a testing ground for new creative artistic devices. The *okimono* mostly mirrored the complexity of the Meiji period with its quest for preserving national carving traditions, the nascent realism, sentimentalism, orientalism, all coupled with the rapid modernization and search for national identity. At the same time, the *okimono* can be viewed as the bridge between the East and the West, traditions and novelty.

This survey would be incomplete without mentioning the *okimono* collections in Ukraine. A few fine samples are on display at the Museum of Western and Oriental Arts in Odessa, the Lviv Art Gallery, the Bohdan and Varvara Khanenko Museum of Arts in Kyiv, and Kharkiv's Museum of Fine Arts. Yet, the most representative *okimono* collection in Ukraine belongs to Oleksandr Feldman, a well-known art-lover and patron of arts. The collection numbers about 400 *okimono* exhibits¹⁷. These include works from the 'white period', those of the Tokyo school, and purely

¹⁶ Watanabe Masanori. *What is a netsuke?* In BS *Netsuke. Condensed Culture of Edo*. Tokyo, 2005. P.19.

¹⁷ Улыбка богов: японская миниатюрная пластика = A Smile of Gods: Japanese Miniature Plastic Arts: [фотоальбом]. Харьков: Фолио, 2006 ([photos]. Kharkiv: Folio, 2006).

decorative pieces. The collection features works of such renowned carvers as *Ishikawa Komei*, *Udagawa Kazuo*, *Morino Korin*, and *Ando Ryokuzan*. The metal casting is presented by the names of *Seunsa* (?-?)*i*, *Masatsune Kimura* (1827-1890), *Takagawa Moritsugu* (?-?) and the *Miyao* collectible items. An important feature of this collection is its openness to all appreciators of and researchers in Japanese arts.

This collection has been exhibited at the largest museums of the country, including Kyiv, Lviv, and Kharkiv. A significant step in the academic research of the collection became the monograph *Japanese Miniature Sculpture from the Oleksandr Feldman Collection*.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

№682_05 1.jpg II.1. Ishikawa Komei. *A Flower Monger*. Ivory. Ca 1900



Source: The Feldman Collection, Kharkov.

(№463K_01.jpg) II.2. Udagawa Kazuo. *Mother Breastfeeding her Baby*. Ivory. 1900-1910



Source: The Feldman Collection, Kharkov.

Ivory_1_1.jpeg. Il. 3. Asahi Meido. Girl with flowers. Ivory. Ca 1900



Source: The Feldman Collection, Kharkov.

№670_01.jpg. Il.4. Miyao Company. *Woman with a Baby*. Candleholder. Bronze. 1890



Source: The Feldman Collection, Kharkov.