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Art in the Garden



From Damsels to Demons: The Hidden Art of Netsuke Carving



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Photography by Jonathan Ley



From Damsels to Demons: The Hidden Art of Netsuke Carving

The exquisite miniature carvings known as *netsuke* (pronounced nets-keh) were originally used as toggles to secure tobacco pouches, small medicine boxes (*inro*), and other containers to the sash of a gentleman's kimono—a garment that had no pockets in which to carry the things of everyday life. At the height of their popularity in the Edo period (1615-1868), what began as a simple functional solution to this problem had become elaborate but discreet signifiers of wealth among the merchants. As the lowest in the Tokugawa Shogunate's strict social system, the merchants were prohibited from overt displays of their rising prosperity. Half hidden beneath the outer cloak of the townsman's garments, netsuke were the essence of *iki*—the understated chic of the fashionable man about town in Old Japan.

Carved with consummate artistry by master craftsmen in wood, horn, bone, ivory, and other materials, netsuke were made in a wide variety of imaginative shapes that have much to tell us about the customs and folklore of traditional Japan. Netsuke carvers enjoyed great freedom



in depicting whatever their imagination allowed—everything from fierce demons to beautiful damsels, from acrobatic street performers to trained monkeys, and from zodiac animals to mythological beasts. These carvings served as personal talismans, humorous mascots, and treasured portable works of art.

This exhibition celebrates the Marian Plumb Miller Collection of more than 100 netsuke, which was generously presented in 1998 to the Portland Japanese Garden in memory of Marian's aunt, Mrs. Inez Plumb Kinney. Highlighted by the photography of Jonathan Ley, the exhibition explores some of the legends and characters depicted in these intricate carvings.

In addition to traditional netsuke from the Miller Collection, the exhibition features the work of two contemporary netsuke artists, British-born sculptor Nick Lamb and American sculptor Janel Jacobson, whose work introduces new directions inspired by this traditional Japanese art form.

