

HINA MATSURI

by Diane Durston

The Day of the Serpent, *Jyomi no Gyoji*, a ritual observance that originated in China—it is from this ancient ceremonial day, the third day of the third month of the year, that *Hina Matsuri* evolved over a period of a thousand years.

It was one of five special days of the year called *sekku* whose original meaning was food and drink for the gods. On these days at the beginning of each season people invited the spirits of their ancestors to feast with them. Offerings of food and sake were laid out in the *tokonoma*, each family hoping to prevent the illness and misfortune that often accompanied the change of seasons in this island country.

The dolls that have become associated with Hina Matsuri are descendants of paper figures attached to sticks that were rubbed over the body and then thrown into the nearest stream in a kind of purification ceremony. These figures called *hitogata* (人形), literally “human form”, were thought of as surrogate figures that drew illness and evil away from the people they represented. Throwing the polluted *hitogata* into water purified the human spirit and hopefully secured more months of good health. This custom, practiced on March 3rd, the First Day of the Snake, was imported from China in the seventh century.

The same Chinese characters used in the word *hitogata* can also be read *ningyo*, which translates as “doll” in modern Japanese. This translation is misleading, however, in the case of *hina ningyo* because these dolls are descended from ceremonial paper figures and protective images that were placed with offerings in the *tokonoma* on the 3rd of March. Perhaps because of this religious festival’s association with dolls, it evolved into a day of celebration for little girls.

In the Western mind, a doll is a toy to be held and played with by small children. Japanese tradition also has many dolls of this kind. But *hina ningyo* represent something more intangible. Not to be held or played with, they sit silently on their shelves during Hina Matsuri, a lesson for Japanese girls in gentility, dignity and respect ... at least that was the original idea. Today, the long ceremonial history of these dolls has been all but forgotten by most people. With the high prices placed on beautifully handmade *hina ningyo*, they have become more symbols of status than images of a spiritual past.

Historical Background

In the *Genji Monogatari*, written by Murasaki Shikibu about 900 years ago, there is mention of “*bina asobi*”. In the descriptions of this activity, the children of noblemen “played house” with small figures and furnishings. This first literary mention of “*hina*” is said to have meant tiny or miniature and it is presumed that the present day spelling of “*hina*” was derived from this word. “*Asobi*” is also translated today as “play”, but some scholars say that it may have originally referred to something closer to “pray”.

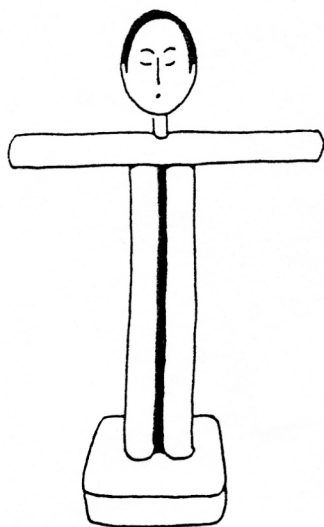
There are other records of figures called “*amagatsu*” that were made of bamboo sticks and covered with silk. They were placed next to the heads of newborn babies of the nobility to protect them from illness and evil. The counterpart of “*amagatsu*” among common people was called “*hōko*”. These were stuffed cloth dolls that were used in exactly the same way. Historians believe that the two figures came to be placed together with offerings for the gods in the *tokonoma*, making them the first pair of “*hina*”.

From paper figures and protective images, the “*hina*” evolved during the Muromachi Era (1392-1530) into a pair of seated figures, male and female, much too carefully made to be thrown into streams. There are no “*hina*” dolls left in existence from this period and the “*hina*” that bear the name “*muromachi-bina*” are actually dolls made in a much later period after the manner of this era.

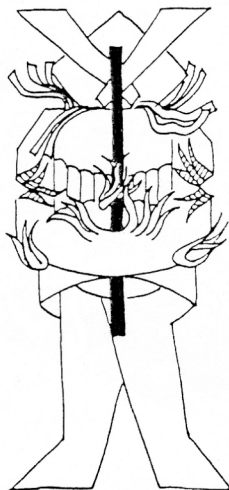
It was not until the Edo Era (1603-1867) that the making of “*hina*” reached the highest level of development. In the Genroku Period, around the end of the 17th century dozens of different kinds of “*hina*” were being made. This period was the height of extravagance for nearly all of the traditional crafts of Japan and “*hina*” came to be clothed in silk brocade, specially woven in miniature to fit their royal costumes. The dolls at this time had heads made of a mixture of woodshavings and glue which were then coated with *gofun*, a kind of seashell paste. The tiny eyes were finally made of glass and inserted in place. Some of them have microscopic teeth and tongues inside their delicate mouths. The hair is silk thread attached by hand. The facial features are sometimes delicately painted on and the costumes range from accurate replicas of court fashion of a particular era to whatever the individual dollmaker felt appropriate (or could imagine, having never seen a “real nobleman”).

In 1721, the Tokugawa Shogunate brought in austerity reforms which included a ruling to limit the size of “*hina*”, as some of them were made no less than 3 feet high. It was during this period that the merchant class had risen to a position of great wealth and power and it was their ardent desire to rival the upper classes in extravagance and grandeur. In the city of Edo, the displays of “*hina*” spread over seven-tiered shelves that sometimes took over an entire room. The displaying of “*hina*” on March 3rd was officially recognized by the government and became known as “*Hina Matsuri*”, the Doll Festival.

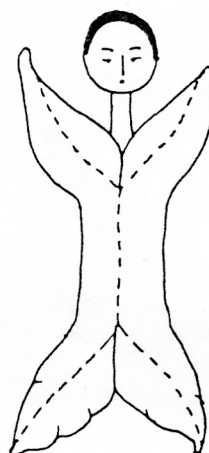
The customs of Kyoto dictate a simpler manner of displaying “*hina*”. Only five-tiered shelves, or “*hinadan*” were used and sometimes a miniature wooden palace was constructed to house a comparatively small number of dolls and accessories. One of the most interesting details of the “*hina*” display is the “*dogu*”, or furnishings and utensils that accompany the dolls. These pieces were added to the original display of dolls a little at a time until they finally came to include a royal oxcart and palanquin, a set of *tansu* or trunks, mirrored dressers, wardrobes, and tea ceremony utensils, all made of wood and carefully lacquered. The most elaborate sets also included kimono,



Amagatsu



Hitogata



Hōko

futon, and eve tiny hair ornaments. As the "Genji" legend was enjoying a revival during the Edo Era, the displaying of "hina" came to resemble a much later generation's romantic dream of the glamour and finery of three days of Genji, the Japanese "Camelot".

The Meiji Restoration, however, brought a much more staid approach to life in general and the government issued very serious treatises on the importance of "Hina Matsuri" as a means of educating children. The keen interest is 'proper' education in those days stressed the virtues of loyalty, gentility, and restraint as necessary qualities for maintaining a stable society. As March 3rd had become a day especially for little girls (May 5th being reserved for boys) Hina Matsuri was held up as a model of happy family life and the virtues of womanhood were lauded. The ideal wife and mother was quiet, gentle, demure and restrained and the beautiful hina dolls were there to remind her. Not to be demeaned, the celebration of festivals like these acted as the fabric of Japanese society. Anyone from a culture devoid of this kind of family festival must realize the unifying nature of seasonal family gatherings. "Hina Matsuri" was just that. For a period of about a week and a half in March, the dolls go on display and little girls gather to admire each others dolls and rink *amazke* and eat sweet cakes together. Family members join in the celebration and Spring is welcomed in by all.

It was not until the Pre-War days in Japan that the dolls came to explicitly represent the Emperor and Empress themselves. During the long history of "hina", the dolls had always been thought of as noble and courtly, but the Pre-War government was determined to use them as a means of inspiring patriotism and today most people think of the "hina" pair as synonymous with the Emperor and Empress.

Today's festival has lost much of its meaning as handmade things are given the price tags of works of art (which in fact they may be). Hina Matsuri is still observed throughout Japan by rich and poor, city dwellers and farmers alike, whether the dolls are made of paper or clothed in silk. But it seems that they have become more of a status symbol in industrialized Japan. With a meaning obscured by a thousand year history, they come to represent the degree of wealth a family possesses.

Although many of the dolls today are still made by hand, they are assembled by retailers from parts that are made separately with an overall sameness as the result. These days, it is not unusual to find dolls made of plastic as the handmade ones have become exorbitantly expensive.

Perhaps not everyone has forgotten the spirit of "Hina Matsuri" though, as a trip to Hokyo-ji Temple will demonstrate. There is still a custom in Kyoto of taking tattered

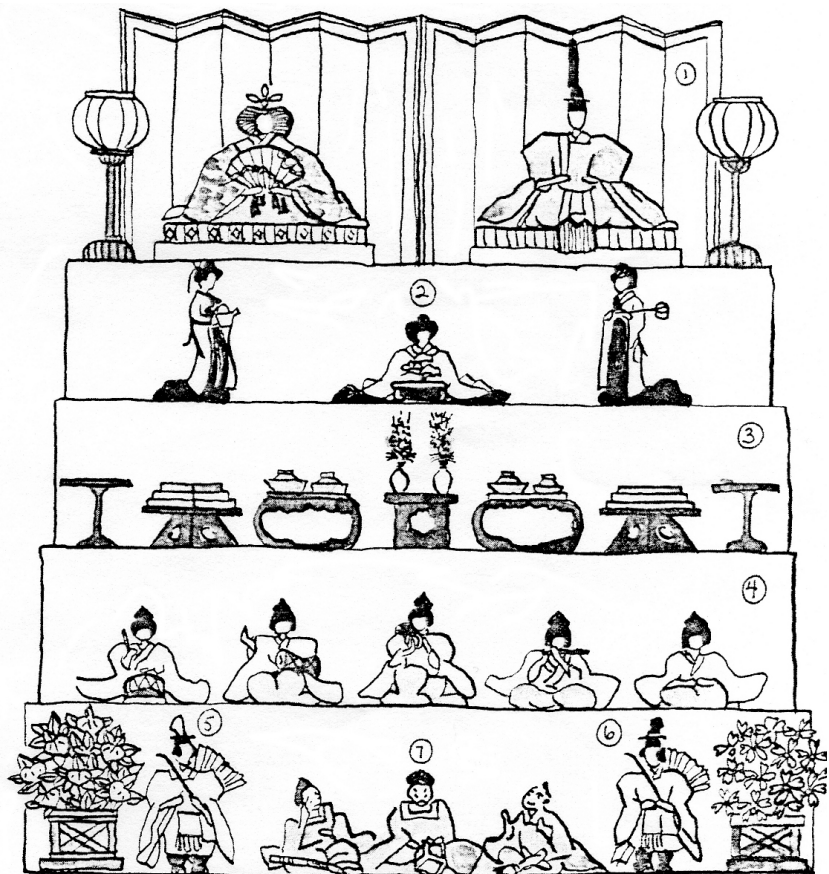
old "hina" dolls to this temple to be burned in a special ceremony to release the spirits trapped with the "human form" (人形). This temple is called the Doll Temple and during the month of March it is open to the public. There you can see the collection of dolls that belongs to the nunnery there. In ancient times, Imperial princesses sent to enter convent brought their dolls with them. One of these dolls is said to walk through the temple corridors at night, protecting it from damage by fire. As the mother of one of my friends told me, "When people get too old to

live any longer, they die. Dolls should be allowed 'to die', too." That there is still a feeling of the spiritual nature of dolls in Japan is a sign that the cultural heritage of this country has not yet been forgotten.

Note: There are two excellent exhibitions of "hina" dolls shown each year at the National Museum in Kyoto and at the City Library, north of the Botanical Gardens. Both shows are open during the month of March and contain fine examples of dolls from the Edo Era.

HINA KAZARI

The display of *hina* seen in modern shop windows throughout Japan at this time of year more or less follows the formal arrangement that was established two hundred years ago in the Edo Period. It consists of fifteen dolls with their furnishings and accessories. A folding screen is placed behind the two main figures on the top shelf of a five or seven-tiered *hinadan*. A pair of lanterns is placed on either side. A peach tree and an orange tree stand on the fifth self. The furnishings are placed on as many lower shelves as space (and finances) allow. The display is set out about ten days before the 3rd of March and remains up for a few days after. The order of display is sometimes changed subject to personal taste and regional customs.



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| 1. Dairisama | a nobleman and his lady in formal court attire |
| 2. Sannin Kanjo | three maid servants |
| 3. Chodo | lacquered offering trays and symbols of the Imperial Court |
| 4. Gonin Bayashi | five court musicians |
| 5. Udaijin | left court minister |
| 6. Sadaijin | right court minister |
| 7. Sicho | three foot servants |
| Dogu (not pictured) | the furnishings of court life: carriages, palanquin, chests, tea ceremony utensils, futon, mirrors, kimono, hair ornaments, etc. |