

# Rabbits in Art by Bob Whitman

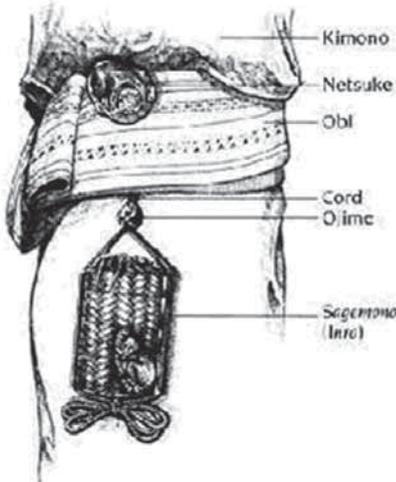
KEEPING RABBITS in any large quantity these days can at the very least be quite expensive what with the rising cost of feed and the other necessities involved for proper rabbit husbandry. So what if I told you that 200 rabbits can be easily housed in an area just about the size of one of your normal size breeding hutches. There's no need to invest in an automatic watering system, just some shelving, and better yet, there is no need to have to write that cheque for a tonne of feed. That's correct, 200 rabbits, one hutch and no feeding.

Impossible you say! Not really when you take up the hobby that I like to call . . . . . "The Art of Collecting"

*This particular collection started while researching "Rabbits in Art" about nine months ago when I discovered these amazing little treasures each individually carved by master Asian carvers. I could immediately see why these finely detailed pieces are prized for their style and patina. Little wonder that in many places, they could be interpreted as manna, or that a particular energy that a piece acquires brought out its life. The variety and variability is reason enough for their collectable appeal. I should know, because within six months my collection of rabbits grew to over two hundred uniquely different pieces, so detailed, so amazing that they have become an addiction. Now let me introduce you to a once practical item that became an art form.*



## The Netsuke



The word netsuke literally means "root for fastening" (pronounced ne tsuke, net-ski or net-skeh). Netsukes are toggles once worn by Japanese of the upper and middle classes. These "roots for fastening" developed from a practical object to a coveted collector's item over a 300 year period.

The origin of the netsuke is of a rather practical nature. The Japanese kimono which had no pockets, was tied together with a sash or belt, called obi. Women would tuck small personal items into their sleeves, while the men would suspend their tobacco pouches, pipes, purses or writing implements on a silk cord. So everything that you would carry in a pocket was put into a pouch or a box and attached to the sash with strings. The netsuke had two openings, usually on the bottom or side for the string to pass, and acted as a toggle to prevent the sagemono (everything hanging from the sash) from slipping down from the obi. The channel or hole carved into the netsuke for the passage of the cord is called the himotoshi. If a netsuke has a natural opening for the cord to pass, one would speak of a natural himotoshi. Far beyond their practical use, they were considered as a status symbol by their owners.

Soon the little netsuke developed from a simple practical object to an impressive piece of art of the highest standard. Netsuke were in use from at least the early 17th century to the second half of the 19th century. With the Meiji period of restoration, the Japanese people adopted Western type clothing, which made the netsuke disappear as an item for daily use by Japanese women and men.

Netsukes can be categorized into five distinctly different types and all are typically two inches in size.

- katabori – the normal compact and most common form of netsuke, these are figural and are of people or animals.
- sashi - a long and thin netsuke as in a spoon.
- kagamibuta - means "mirror lid" a netsuke in the form of a

- bowl with a lid (usually metal) on top and a carved bowl.
- manju - a round and flat netsuke that resembles a bun, it is named after the bean paste dish.
- Ryusa - is hollow inside and the design on either side is carved through to the centre.

All three items (obi, sagemono and netsuke) were beautifully decorated with carvings, lacquer work and inlays of precious metals, ivory, coral and other rare or expensive materials.

Netsuke were often carved into different designs, and were shaped as everything from animals to humans to abstract patterns. Because of their individuality and uniqueness, netsuke quickly became highly collectable and their design became a coveted art form, especially so in their own country.

Netsuke were also a sign of social status, as the craftsmanship and the quality of materials used varied between individual pieces. The wealthy tended to own only the better quality netsuke.

Netsuke can be made from a large variety of materials, the most popular being ivory. However, it is not uncommon to find netsuke made from wood, animal tusks, antlers, amber, jade, pottery, bamboo and more.

Common netsuke subjects included the animal characters taken from the Asian zodiac as well as mythological figures, heroes and scenes from everyday life, but netsuke subject matter was hardly limited to these and they could take the form of anything the artist could possibly imagine, such as with the mask netsuke which are fashioned after the masks in the Noh and Kyogen style plays that were popular in Japan at that time. I've found that most netsukes are signed by the artist, however that doesn't actually make them any more valuable than some of the unsigned pieces. Some are signed with an inlay button of ivory that I find to be highly sought after.

**Since the Rabbit is one of the Zodiac animals symbols for the Chinese Lunar Calendar in the following years of 1927, 1939, 1951, 1963, 1975, 1987, 1999, 2011, the carving of rabbit netsukes became very popular and are a wonderful item for rabbit collectors.**



Netsuke rabbit, late 18th century early 19th century, by Toyomasa.

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## Ojime Beads & The Inro

Beads have forever been a part of human history, covering virtually every culture throughout our world. Although most beads are used to embellish and adorn, they also served a number of other functions, which covers political events, social circumstances, religious beliefs, symbolism of curative powers, and have even been used as currency.

Beads are also made in a huge variety of colours and designs, and can be made from all types of materials to include wood, metal, glass and ivory.

Many of the ojime beads made from ivory were first carved in the Heibe province. However, during the late -1980s, ivory was banned at which time ojime beads were made from boxwood.

These beads are not carved by just anyone, but actual master carvers who consider this a very valuable art form. Many master carvers can create up to five to ten designs and while some will vary in colour, the density and fine grain are what makes them unique.

For a single ojime bead to be crafted by a skilled master carver, approximately four to six hours is required. Once the carving is complete, the beads are then signed by the artist, hand polished, and waxed to bring out their shine.

Ojime beads first originated in Japan. The beads are meant to work with the netsuke so the Japanese people could hang items on a sash from their kimono. Although these small beads are beautiful and intricately made, they had a very distinct purpose for every day life. Because of the amazing carving of the ojime beads, they soon became somewhat of a fashion statement.

Now keep in mind that during the 17th Century in Japan, pockets were not a part of clothing design. Over time, the tobacco pouch was created along with a writing set, to keep things together and organized the Inro was created. The Inro for example was a box with anywhere from two to seven layers were carved. The layers interlocked and stacked together which were used to store small objects. To keep the Inro together, cords made of silk were braided and then run through the box vertically.

As a way of maintaining the integrity of the braid, ojime beads were used. Then to close off the end of the cord, a small toggle called the netsuke was placed. With this design, the Inro could dangle from the kimono out of the way yet still within close reach.

Soon the beautifully designed ojime bead became a piece of art expressed by the artist. With so many different designs, the Japanese individual could choose the style, colour and design that best matched his or her personal preference. For instance, some of the designs included whales, dogs, monkeys, snakes, crabs, tigers, dogs, dragons, mice, bats, roosters, owls, and yes rabbits, along with many other fanciful themes.

# Rabbits in Art

by Heather Heron

IN SOUTH AFRICA I am a breeder, exhibitor and All Breeds judge. This hobby began in 1967 when I was given a Chinchilla Giganta as a pet. They're still my favourite breed, followed by the Belgian Hare and the Beige, Wheaten and Lynx group of Rare Varieties.

My home is filled with original rabbit artworks and pictures, crockery and figurines. Whilst I appreciate good artworks, it is the memories of people and places I associate with them that are important.



Rat netsuke

While you can still find authentic ojime beads, today many reproductions are also available, which are quite charming and typically carved from boxwood found in China, but following the old traditions of the Japanese.

The design of the ojime bead consists of a hole drilled from the top all the way down through the bottom. Additionally, depending on the design of the bead, there may also be some holes running lengthwise. The original and reproduced ojime beads are indeed amazing, refined pieces of art that are actually very sophisticated and they are but one inch tall. Indeed tiny works of art.

Today netsukes are typically carved from the Boxwood bush (native to China). These are the most common, followed by Ironwood (Sonoran Desert), Ivory Palm Nut or Tagua Nut (South America) and Mammoth Ivory (Russia).

Elephant ivory is no longer used due to the international ban placed on it in the late -1980s. Bone, Hippo Ivory, amber and jade can still be found, but rather uncommon.

You may find netsukes made from resin, but in my opinion these are not true netsukes as they are made in a mould and not carved.

Netsukes, Ojime beads and Inros start at a few pounds and then the sky is the limit in pricing. Mammoth and Hippo Ivory as you can expect are the most expensive pieces for one's collection.

While you may find a few of these carvings in Asian gift shops or estate sales, most have to be imported from Japan and China. These intricate little rabbits are well worth searching out for any of you that collect rabbit memorabilia. And remember, you don't have to feed them!



*Front row:* African crafted wire and bead hare. It is rare to find African hare carvings and ornaments as in their culture, Kalulu the hare, is seen as a villain, by reason of his intelligence. Grey rabbit bought in Luss after visiting Meg Brown [author of *Rabbit Lopaedia* and former BRC President – Editor] in Cardross. Delft rabbit from Holland. Russian hand-painted rabbit. The beautiful facial detail is similar to the work seen in their dolls. Enamelled lead rabbit from Russia. Hollahaza rabbits from Hungary – very unusual detail to their eyes. Pewter hare from Holland.

*Left group:* Sylvac green bunny – family heirloom. Two Dutch rabbits from John Beswick Countryside Collection. Deborah Edlmann Teviotdale rabbit in flower, Scotland. Regency Arts rabbit found in Todmorden, bronze hare.

*Centre:* Eric Heon clay hare found in Hebden Bridge. Perhaps a distant relative of mine?! Royal Doulton rabbit and hare.

*Back:* Aynsley rabbit. Regency Arts British Wildlife Collection rabbit. Grey rabbit made from Mt St Helens volcanic dust from the 1980 eruption.

Impasto Acrylic painting by John Wilkinson. The rabbit is based on a piece done by Charles Collins



in the 1880's. John painted it for me after my English and Scottish holiday in 2002. It is filled with special memories for me and has pride of place in our lounge.

English Lops, pewter tray, Arthur Court, 1994



Beige doe sketched in oil pastels by Sandra Keet at the 2004 Royal Show in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. I think she has captured the subtle colour very well.



This Bellini Pirolyte porcelain casserole rabbit and Sherratt & Simpson guinea pig are among the 239 ornaments in my collection

