



REPORT ON KÔBE DOLLS IN THE JAPANESE COLLECTION OF THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM

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Introduction

The Japanese Collection of the Náprstek Museum is famous for its vast and excellent sets of woodblock prints, lacquerware, porcelain, swords and sword fittings but it also includes toys, and notably, dolls. More than two hundred various types of dolls were exhibited in Prague during 2005 (April 14th–Sept. 28th 2005) and in Ostrava (Nov. 29th, 2005–Feb. 28th, 2006). The doll collection includes also several groups of very special dolls, one of them being dolls from Kôbe.

History

After the opening of Japan and after an increase in commercial trading in Japan during the middle of the 19th century, a great variety of products was made in order to be exported abroad or to be sold as souvenirs in Japan to foreigners. Apart from great quantities of porcelaine and lacquerware that were exported abroad, there were also smaller souvenirs such as photographs or Kôbe dolls. The latter were produced mainly between the years 1870 and 1920, and almost all of them were approximately of similar dimensions and were made of different kinds of wood (boxwood, magnolia, persimon), with bone or ivory inlays, and wire. They can be characterized as mechanical toys consisting of a torso with a black face situated on top of a small box which hides a simple mechanism. The dolls hands, eyes, or other parts can be moved by using a lever that is situated on one side of the box. Beside *Kôbe ningyô*, they are also called *obake ningyô* (ghost dolls) or *maboroshi ningyô* (illusionary dolls).

There are several different theories about the origin of Kôbe dolls: 1) Mr. Nakamura, a doll craftsman on Awaji Island, made the first Kôbe doll after being inspired by black seamen who had come to Kôbe in the Meiji period, and had made a strong impression on him. 2) Commodore Perry had entertained his Japanese guests with black minstrel shows in 1845 and the shows were so impressive that dolls were produced commemorating them. 3) Black seamen made such an impression not only on doll makers, but also on common

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Japanese people, that dolls were created in their image. 4) The black dolls were produced as souvenirs for seamen who liked to buy them. When making them, the craftsmen combined black and may have also used white for the eyes. The combination of Negro figures portraying activities typical of Japanese culture such as playing a biwa, eating a watermelon, beating a drum, etc. was fascinating. That is one of the reasons why the dolls are so peculiar and interesting even now.

These mechanical trick dolls were particular to the port of Kōbe and were exported from Japan. Because of this, not many of them can be found in Japan, the largest collection is apparently preserved in the Japan Toy Museum in the Kanzaki district, in the prefecture of Hyōgo.

Producers

It was not common for Japanese artisans to sign their own products but the names of the main producers of Kōbe dolls are known. Nagato no Haru (early Meiji - 1940?) who signed his dolls as Kōbe Nagata mura ganso obake Noguchi Hyakkidō can be listed as the first one. He also stamped his products. Later on Dezaki Fusamatsu (1883 - 1967) followed the Noguchi style and became an artisan who continued in this tradition. He used black colour for the boxes and he liked using snake motifs. He passed his knowledge to Oda Tashirō (1883-1950), his brother in law, who made Kōbe dolls famous. His dolls achieved a higher level of craftsmanship and attracted attention, namely of foreigners. The dolls were too expensive to be bought by the Japanese themselves. The last famous maker who should be mentioned is Kazuoka Masaatsu (1928-1989) of Kakogawa city, who prolonged the tradition of producing these dolls almost to the present day.

Dolls in the Museum's Japanese Collection

Altogether, the collection contains eight dolls, six of them being from Joe Hloucha's collection, which were part of Hloucha's donation in 1955. Unfortunately, Joe Hloucha did not mention in his diaries chronicling both of his journeys to Japan in 1906 and 1926 when and where he had bought many of the artifacts that he brought back to Prague. One of the two other dolls can be classified as one of the oldest acquisitions in the museum and also the oldest of all eight of the dolls. It was donated by Ms. A. Urbánková in 1906. The last of the eight dolls was incorporated into the Japanese collection after 1945 and originally belonged to Bernhardt Brandt. It is certain that three of the dolls from Hloucha's collection (Inv.Nos. 34 693, 34 694, 34 696) were produced by the same maker, even though they are not signed. Their boxes are almost identical, the front and also left and right sides of the boxes partially decorated with checkered ornamentation. On the other hand the oldest item (Inv.No. 375) and two other dolls from Hloucha's collection (Inv.Nos. 34 697 and 34 695) were most probably also produced by the same maker, judging from the fact that the boxes are riveted with bone rivets in precisely the same way. The box of one of these two dolls (Inv. No. 34 695) is evidently made the same way as the dolls signed by Noguchi. It is a only a small clue, nevertheless one may suppose these three items were either produced in the Noguchi workshop or that Noguchi's work was precisely imitated in some other workshop.

Even if we do not know the exact maker and exactly when the dolls in the Náprstek collection were bought in Japan, they represent quite an interesting part of the doll collection.

Description of individual items

Photo No. 1. Inv.No. 375

A black man sitting at a table. The man appears to cut and eat a cucumber if one moves the lever on the right side of the box. The mechanism inside of the box is made of wood and ivory and a part of the left hand is missing. 80 x 60 mm, height 110 mm. End of the 19th century. The museum acquired the doll in 1906. It was donated by Ms. A.Urbánková.

Photo No. 2. Inv.No. 29 253

A black man sitting in a three-wheeler; if one rolls the wheels, the man moves his neck upwards. It may be a variation of the well known Japanese ghost, *rokurokubi*. His tongue is sticking out of his mouth and his right eye protrudes, though neither is moveable. Originally, the figure's hand were connected to the wheel mechanism and were likely moveable, but the connection is now broken and the hands do not move. The man has a mokugyo gong on his lap. There are several kinds of wood, bone, including a wood carving on the back side of the chair, which resembles a peach. Length 170 mm, height 110 mm. End of the 19th century. Originally a part of Dr. Bernhardt Brandt's collection.

Photo No. 3. Inv.No. 34 693

A man sitting at a table and eating a red fish. A red tongue showing from the man's mouth is probably missing. Both the hands and the fish's right eye move when the lever is moved. The mechanism is housed in a box made of colored wood with checkered ornamentation on the front and partly on the sides of the box, with bone detail. 65 x 75 mm, height 110 mm. End of the 19th century or the beginning of the 20th century. From the Joe Hloucha collection.

Photo No. 4. Inv.No. 34 694

A woman sitting at a table and playing a biwa with musical notation on the table in front of her. Moving a knob causes the woman's hand, which is holding a plectrum, and her head to move, making her appear to play her biwa. The mechanism is housed in a box made of colored wood with checkered ornamentation on the front and partly on the sides of the box, with bone detail. 65 x 75 mm, height 115 mm. End of the 19th or beginning of the 20th century.

Photo No. 5. Inv.No. 34 695

A darkly colored man eating a melon and opening his mouth. The box is made of light colored wood, slightly ornamented by waves and bubbles, 65 x 80 mm, height 110 mm, end of the 19th century. From the Joe Hloucha collection. Well preserved, not damaged, probably a product of Noguchi Hyakki-dō or of some craftsman imitating his work, though it is not signed.

Photo No. 6. Inv.No. 34 696

A monkey is eating a peach with a worm in it. Both the monkey's hands, head and the worm are movable. The mechanism is housed in a box made of colored wood with checkered ornamentation on the front and partly on the sides, with bone detail. 60 x 75 mm, height 105mm. End of the 19th or beginning of the 20th century. From the Joe Hloucha collection. Well preserved, not damaged.

Photo No. 7. Inv.No. 34 697

A man eating rice dumplings. The mouth can be opened or closed using a lever. The doll as well as the box are made of light brown wood. 70 x 80 mm, height 105 mm. End of 19th or beginning of the 20th century. From the Joe Hloucha collection. Partly damaged, one hand is missing. Unsigned, probably made by Noguchi or one of his imitators.

Photo No. 8. Inv.No. 34 930

Torso of a man with a grinning black face and a large top hat hiding dice, made of wood, bone and a sort of ceramic material. One die is probably missing, they are only four. The inside of the hat is stained red. Diameter 65 mm, height 138 mm. Beginning of the 20th century. From the Joe Hloucha collection. One die as well as a pouch made of bone and a protruding tongue are missing. Probably a product of Oda Tashirō - the same image is mentioned in Oda Tashirō's collecting orders from souvenir shops.

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Photo No. 1. Inv.No. 375



Photo No. 2. Inv.No. 29 253



Photo No. 3. Inv.No. 34 693



Photo No. 4. Inv.No. 34 694



Photo No. 5. Inv.No. 34 695



Photo No. 6. Inv.No. 34 696



Photo No. 7. Inv.No. 34 697



Photo No. 8. Inv.No. 34 930