

NETSUKE

- miniature art work in wood -

My six weeks long journey through Australia is almost completely dedicated to forests, trees and timber, besides the various family visits. It concerns extensive forest areas, impressive coloured majestic trees, splendid wooden art work, 'craft villages', mangroves, botanic gardens, timber mills, etc., etc. A further special programme component is the meeting in Melbourne with Susan Wraight. She is a 'netsuke' artist, who practices the art of a very fine and exact wood carving. Her impressive wooden art work finds its way over the whole world to fanatical collectors. The prices range from US\$5,000 to US\$ 10,000, which immediately gives an impression of the value of and the appreciation for her work.



Susan Wraight

In the world there exist only about fifty Netsuke artists. Most of them are Japanese men. Astonishingly, Susan is one of the best. Since 'netsuke' (pronounced 'netskay') is almost unknown in the western part of the world it seems interesting to present some background of these splendid and fine wooden art works, that usually measure not larger than 2 to 2,5 inches. The enclosed pictures give a good impression of the art work. Netsuke are the traditional hand work of carving miniatures. This art originates in Japan. Several types of material used vary from ivory, stone, bones, shells, coral to wood. Netsuke are therefore little, a few inch-large sculptures, which are generally figurative and highly detailed. The special wood carvings depict animals, characters, mythical creatures or almost everything that has to do with daily life.

In Japan netsuke reached its peak during the Edo period of 1615-1868, actually the period that art really flourished. It came into existence because the traditional Japanese dress, the kimono, didn't contain pockets. A woman could put small objects in her sleeves and the samurai (the Japanese warriors) could hang small items from their weapons, but all in all this was not ideal. So they began to suspend everyday objects from the sash (obi) with a silk cord. The netsuke was a little carving that was positioned at the top of the sash to stop the whole thing from falling to the ground, it acted as a fastener. However, with the arrival of the Western dress (with pockets) replaced the Japanese dress. Also, the need for the netsuke disappeared and this art form became a pure collector's item.

Susan got interested in netsuke about 20 years ago at the time she studied in London to become a jeweller. One day she got a project task for which her teacher advised her to gain inspiration in a museum. Just at that time the museum presented a Japanese exhibition, where Susan discovered 'netsuke'. She admired how each carving had its own history, that they were intimate and engaging. The art work made an enormous impression on her. They were small, one could take them along easily, moreover they had no functional restrictions like jewels and were entirely three-dimensional sculptures. Then, Susan was not aware that collectors of netsuke existed. She decided to carve one for fun and then turn back to the jewellery work. But that idea turned out differently and now she works full time on netsuke, making between 12-15 per year. Depending on the amount of detail it takes her about three weeks to complete one. She spends a lot of time researching before she starts carving. She sniffs through books and photographs, examines wild creatures, she keeps pets, she disturbs zoo guards and studies even dead animals for close-up details, which implies that she keeps snakes in jars and dead animals in the fridge. Most of Susan's carvings are related to animals as displayed by the pictures.

At first Susan makes a model in plasticine, that serves as a pattern, before she starts carving the wood version. She prefers to use wood that is hard, dense and tight grained like European boxwood and holly, preferably slow grown. These woods hold the small details at best. But she has always returned to boxwood as the material that is the most satisfying to use. In addition to boxwood she uses African blackwood, ebony, pink ivorywood, holly, snakewood and various Australian desert woods. The woods she is using, that are not boxwood, are chosen for their colour or figure. E.g. the beautiful pattern on Snakewood reminds her of the glaze you find on some ceramic vessels. For inlaying eyes she uses amber, boar's teeth, hippo teeth, buffalo horn, mother of pearl, gold, silver, stag antler, enamel, shells

NETSUKE

of various kinds or the Tagua nut. About thirty different tools are used for carving. These vary from an electric bandsaw to smaller tools when carving becomes more intricate. Some tools originate in Japan but Susan prefers her jewellery tools. Most of her work goes to America and the second largest market is Japan. About 10% of her work goes to Europe and the smallest market is Australia. As with many artists it is often difficult to part from her work. The pictures are the courtesy of Susan Wraight.

Fig. 1 and 2 'Octopus in pot'. Using Snakewood would imply that fine detail would obscure the beautiful grain, so it was chosen to put all the detail on the inside of the carving. At first glance you may not know what the carving depicts, but when the Boxwood coils at the top of the pot are pulled upwards, the Octopus reluctantly slides out of his hiding place! *Pot: Snakewood. Octopus: European Boxwood. Eyes of inlaid mother-of-pearl. Barnacles: stag antler.*



Fig. 1. Impression of the netsuke size



Fig. 2. Octopus sliding out of the pot

Fig. 3 'Hare and tortoise'. *European Boxwood. Eyes of inlaid buffalo horn.*



Fig. 3. Hare and tortoise

Fig. 4 'Hatching Gecko' Holly. *Eyes of amber inlaid over gold leaf.*



Fig. 4. Hatching Gecko

NETSUKE

Fig. 5 'Appetite'. It shows a collection of ingredients sitting in a bowl - waiting for the chef to make a delicious meal.

Bowl: Snakewood and European Boxwood. Food: European Boxwood. Inlays of buffalo horn, and amber over gold leaf.



Fig. 5. 'Appetite'

Fig. 6 'Possum's Nest' is one of Susan's favourites, showing an Australian Possum curled up in its nest of gum leaves. *European Boxwood. Eyes of inlaid buffalo horn.*



Fig. 6. 'Possum's nest'

Fig. 7 'The Competitors' shows an Echidna, who is exploring an old rotten log in the hunt for some ants for his lunch. When the piece is turned around, you can see a Gecko, who is most upset at the sight of the hungry Echidna! *European Boxwood. Eyes of Echidna are inlaid buffalo horn. Eyes of Gecko are amber inlaid over gold leaf.*



Fig. 7. 'The competitors'

Fig. 8 'The Burglar' was designed after American friends told in tones of disgust that the Raccoon was a thief that robbed the garbage bins at night and sneaked in to the house through the cat flap to steal their pet's dinner! The carving looks like an innocent Raccoon sitting on a rock. Innocent until you turn it round and see that the familiar markings on the Raccoon's face are a burglar's mask tied into place, and he is sitting on a bulging sack of swag. *European Boxwood (stained, with some parts bleached). Eyes of inlaid buffalo horn.*



Fig. 8. 'The burgler'

NETSUKE

Fig. 9 'The Happy Angler' This piece was inspired by the stories that fishermen tell of the huge fish that got away, so one could wonder what would happen if the fisherman actually managed to catch that elusive fish. *European Boxwood. Inlays of buffalo horn, and amber over gold leaf.*

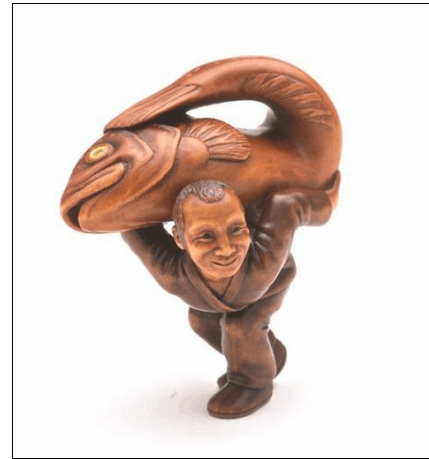


Fig. 9. 'The happy angler'

Fig. 10 'Hunting Gecko'. *The nut is made from Ebony, and the Gecko is Boxwood. The beetle and the eyes are amber lined with gold leaf.*



Fig. 10. 'Hunting gecko'

Fig. 11 'Found' shows an otter that has gone in search of its missing cub, to find that, exhausted by play, it has curled up inside a hollow log and gone to sleep. *European Boxwood. Eyes of inlaid buffalo horn.*



Fig. 11. 'Found'

Fig. 12 'Lotus dreaming'. A study of two of the creatures that live in Kakadu Park in northern Australia. The Lily trotter bird is anxious because the Turtle has strayed too close to its nest. *European Boxwood, African Blackwood. Inlays of buffalo horn, and amber over red lacquer.*



Fig. 12. 'Lotus dreaming'

NETSUKE

Fig. 13 The 'Aesop's fable' of The Monkey and the Dolphin shows the moment when the Dolphin has seen through the lies of the Monkey he was rescuing, and is diving downwards to abandon him to his fate. *European Boxwood. Eyes of inlaid buffalo horn.*



Fig. 13. 'Aesop's fable'

Fig. 14 'Paper Palace'. The Queen Wasp builds the Palace that will house her entire colony within its fragile walls. *European boxwood, stained.*



Fig. 14. 'Paper Palace'

Fig. 15 'Nautilus' A study of this beautiful and ancient creature as it bobs in the ocean current. Examination of nautilus fossils reveals the decreasing number of days in the month as the moon moves away from the Earth which makes the relationship between this small creature in the sea and the Moon fascinating. *European Boxwood.*



Fig. 15. 'Nautilus'

Tjerk Miedema
Kleve, november 2008