

THE DOLLS OF JAPAN

Shapes of Prayer, Embodiments of Love.



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In all parts of the world, dolls have since ancient times been created for many different purposes — as the embodiment of spirits to be worshipped, as objects endowed with magical powers, as playthings in human form, or simply for the purpose of display and appreciation. However, there can surely be no single country that has a greater variety of dolls than Japan, which has cherished its unique doll-making traditions right up to the present day.

The history of dolls is very long, with the oldest known doll in the world dating back nearly twenty four thousand years. The origin of Japanese dolls is also extremely old, beginning in the Jomon period about 3,000 years BC. However, it is only since the Edo period that dolls have come to take on a wide variety of forms and purposes, and many different types have been produced.

Of the various festivals held at the change of the seasons to ward off misfortune, the *Joshi no Sekku* on the third of March and the *Tango no Sekku* on the fifth of May became increasingly popular during the Edo period, a time of stability free of political struggles which saw the growth in influence of the common people. Under these circumstances dolls came to be used much more for display and visual enjoyment than for mystical purposes. This brought about an improvement in the materials and techniques used, and local dolls, each unique to its own locality, began to appear throughout the country, thereby establishing the foundation of the rich and varied doll culture of the present day.

Japanese dolls are made from wood, paper, cloth or clay, and a wealth of techniques are employed to create a quiet beauty of expression and a rich display of color. Because they exhibit a high level of artistic workmanship, dolls are no longer confined to being the simple playthings of children, but have attained the status of a formative art, constituting a separate genre within the field of handicrafts.

Gosho Ningyo, or Imperial Palace dolls, which depict the sweet features of little children, are made by coating a wooden base with layer upon layer of

oyster shell powder which is then polished to bring out a luster before the eyebrows, eyes and mouth are finally painted on. Kimekomi dolls are carved from wood and then are "dressed" by having fabric glued directly onto the surface of the wood, the edges neatly pressed into carved grooves. Costume dolls, as the name suggests, is a generic term for dolls dressed in tailored costumes of dyed or woven fabric and intended for display. These dolls show the greatest range of different designs. They are usually made in separate stages, a doll craftsman first making the head, a costume specialist then dressing the doll in kimono while yet another person makes the arms and legs before the doll is finally put together. Most clay dolls are molded out of fired clay and then colored with distemper paints or oyster shell powder, but there are broad variations in different parts of the country, each region retaining its own distinctive simple taste in its use of color. Kokeshi dolls, a product of Japan's turnery arts, are made of carved and painted wood. They have a relatively short history and originated in the later part of the Edo period and are a handicraft traditional to the Tohoku region. Their characteristic feature is that they are made with heads and bodies, but no arms or legs are visible.

From serving as the embodiment of spirits to be worshipped, or as the companions of our childhood, or as a comfort to our souls — or perhaps a combination of the three — the dolls of Japan have reached magnificent levels of development. This exhibition is an introduction to the present day artistic world of dolls, with their unsurpassed tradition and deep involvement in the modern life of Japanese people. The dolls are grouped according to particular events in the Japanese calendar, their method of manufacture, their design and regional characteristics. We hope that you will be touched by the way these dolls embody the rich yet gentle spirit of our ancestors, and would be most happy if this exhibition brings about greater understanding and appreciation of the dolls of Japan.