

MICHAEL BIRCH-
A WESTERN MASTER OF AN EASTERN ART

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Degree in Craft Design

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NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

**MICHAEL BIRCH -
A WESTERN MASTER OF AN EASTERN ART.**

A Thesis submitted to the faculty of History of Art and Design and
Complimentary Studies and in candidacy for the Degree.

Faculty of Craft.
Department of Glass.

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Fig. 1 - Inro, *Ojime and Netsuke Set*,
Armin Muller, Inro in the form of three tiered medicine case, porcelain, 1900's.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	4.
List of Illustrations	5.
Introduction	7.
 Chapter 1: The Origins and Rise of Netsuke	 8.
 Chapter 2: Michael Birch - A Living National Treasure.	 20.
 Chapter 3: Two Conceptual Nations and a Universal Concept.	 30.
 Conclusion.	 38.
 Endnotes.	 41.
 Bibliography.	 43.
 Transcript of interview with Michael Birch.	 i.

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I would like especially to thank my thesis tutor, Dr. Nicola Gordon-Bowe, for her patient and invaluable guidance.

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1950

1951

1952

1953

1954

1955

1956

1957

1958

1959

1960

1961

1962

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Armin Muller, *Inro, Ojime and Netsuke set*, the inro in the form of a three-tiered porcelain medicine case, Twentieth century.
2. Masanao, *Dutchman and Hare*, ivory, 9.2cm high, signed 'Masanao', c. mid-1700's.
3. Shuzan, *Tsuru Sennin* (crane sennin - A sennin is a fairy. In Japan, the crane is symbolic of peace and longevity. The crane sennin is recognisable because he carries the leg bone of a crane with him as a staff), painted cypress, 8.9 cm high, c. late 1700's.
4. Shuzan, *Kirin*, (The kirin is a mythical beast of Chinese origin. It is a good omen and is represented both in animal and humanoid forms. As an animal it has two horns, the body of a deer and skin of fire.) painted cypress, 8.1 cm high, c. late 1700's.
5. Nagamachi Shuzan, *Kirin*, painted cypress, 7.6 cm high, signed 'Shuzan', c. late 1700's.
6. Tomotada, *Tiger and Cub*, ivory, 3.5 cm high, c. mid-1700's.
7. Shigemasa, *Snail on a Well Bucket*, wood, 4.1 cm high, c. early 1800's.
8. Shigemasa, *Frog on a Broken Well Cover*, wood, 4.5 cm long, c. early 1800's.
9. Mitsuhiro, *Roof Tile*, ivory, 4.3 cm wide, c. mid-1800's.
10. Mitsuhiro, *Teabowl and Whisk*, lacquered wood, 3.8 cm diameter, c. mid-1800's.
11. Mitsuhiro, *Teakettle*, ebony, 2.9 cm high, c. mid-1800's.
12. Mitsuhiro, *Duck*, ivory, 2.9 cm high, c. mid-1800's.
13. Bunshojo, (Iwami School), *Spider on Folded Taro Leaf*, boar tusk, 8.9 cm long, c. early 1800's.
14. Gansui, (Iwami School), *Rat Group*, boar tusk, 11.1 cm long, 1830.
15. Birch, *Seed Pod*, ivory (billiard ball), 1976.
16. Birch, *Grazing Horse*, narwhal ivory, 7 cm high., 1976.
17. Birch, *Lewd Nude*, buffalo horn, 6.3 cm high, 1979.
18. Birch, *Torso*, cow elephant ivory, 1978.
19. Birch, *Bean Pod*, ebony and ivory, 1977.
20. Birch, *Bean Pod*, narwhal tusk, 1975.
21. Birch, *Dosojin*, ivory and rhinoceros horn, 1977.

22. Birch, *Dosojin*, ivory and blue horn.
23. Birch, *Fukurokuju*, ivory.
24. Birch, *Double Mobius Fukurokuju*, ivory.
25. Birch, *Cowrie Shell*, mammoth ivory.

26. Birch, *Ashinaga and Tenaga*, rhinoceros horn.
27. Gessei, *Ashinaga and Tenaga*, wood, 8.6 cm high, pre-1800's.
28. Birch, *Mobius Daruma*, ivory.
29. Bishu, *Alighting Swan*, ivory, 1971.
30. Bishu, *Rabbit*, ivory, 1973.
31. Kodo, *Sea Poem*, ivory, 1971.
32. Kodo, *Three Hozuki*, Japanese lantern studies, ivory, 1979.

The illustrations in this thesis are taken from a number of sources:

Fig. 1 - Robert Kinsey, Ojime Magical Jewels of Japan (1991).

Figs. 2-14, & 26 - Raymond Bushell, Collectors' Netsuke (1977).

Figs. 15, 22 & 27, - Eskenazi, Michael Birch - Netsuke and Sculpture (1976).

Figs. 16-19, 21 & 29-32 - Miriam Kinsey, Living Masters of Netsuke (1984).

Figs. 23-25 & 28 - Kindly donated by Michael Birch.

INTRODUCTION

One afternoon, in the early Summer of 1995, I went into the library and began to pick up books at random and thumb through them. This relaxing pastime paid off, for it was then that I discovered Robert Kinsey's book Ojime - Magical Jewels of Japan (1991). I was fascinated not so much by the *ojime* but by the *netsuke* in this book. Soon I had rooted out other books on this subject and my interest grew until eventually I decided that this would be a subject worth exploring through my thesis. It should be understood that for many years now I have been intrigued by Japanese culture, past and present. Netsuke seemed a viable channel to explore cultural differences between the art of the East and the West. Through bibliographies I discovered that netsuke are still carved today. Miriam Kinsey has written a book entitled Living Masters of Netsuke (1984). This book was not available in Ireland so I acquired it for a short time through a British library loan. I fell instantly in love with the work of today's netsuke carvers, especially that of Michael Birch. In the writing of this thesis, I intend to briefly examine the traditions of netsuke carving formed over the past three and a half centuries. I will then explore the breathtaking work of Michael Birch and the context in which he has successfully breached two far distant cultures by addressing some fundamental differences between the East and the West.

The first part of the paper discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It is essential for the business to have a clear and concise record of all income and expenses. This will allow the business to track its financial performance over time and identify areas for improvement. The second part of the paper discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all assets and liabilities. This will allow the business to track its net worth over time and identify areas for improvement. The third part of the paper discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all taxes paid. This will allow the business to track its tax liability over time and identify areas for improvement. The fourth part of the paper discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all debts owed. This will allow the business to track its debt liability over time and identify areas for improvement. The fifth part of the paper discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all equity owned. This will allow the business to track its equity over time and identify areas for improvement. The sixth part of the paper discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all contracts entered into. This will allow the business to track its contractual obligations over time and identify areas for improvement. The seventh part of the paper discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all legal proceedings. This will allow the business to track its legal history over time and identify areas for improvement. The eighth part of the paper discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all correspondence. This will allow the business to track its communication over time and identify areas for improvement. The ninth part of the paper discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all other documents. This will allow the business to track its document history over time and identify areas for improvement. The tenth part of the paper discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all other information. This will allow the business to track its information history over time and identify areas for improvement.

CHAPTER 1:

The Origins and Rise of Netsuke.

There was a time when it was the custom in most Asian and European countries for their national traditional costumes to be in a dress style. Just as the Italians had their toga, the Japanese had their kimono. These clothes had no pockets. Therefore if a man wished to carry his belongings with him, he would have to carry it 'off his person'. On mainland Asia, people carried small personal belongings by tying them to a belt with some cord. This was bettered by the concept of anchoring one's belongings using a stone or root that would not slip through the belt. When the Japanese unsuccessfully invaded China and Korea during the 15th century, they brought back with them a trove of cultural loot, among which were some primitive root and pebble toggles, soon to become known to the Japanese as *netsuke*. As Michael Birch has noted¹ - the Japanese are not inventors by nature, but they are excellent improvers. Almost everything that comes out of Japan is an improved version of ideas from other cultures, mostly China. E.A Wrangham wrote in the catalogue of Michael Birch's first solo exhibition, "It is the nature of the Japanese to take an idea and develop it to the ultimate".² Netsuke are no exception. Soon netsuke progressed from being found objects to being small carvings. They sometimes doubled in function as a firefly cage (portable torch), whistle, compass, abacus or even a sundial³. It is important to remember that netsuke are not only toggles but a means of self-expression.

First I must introduce the netsuke themselves. They form part of a threesome when used in their functional sense. The *inro* is a small compartmented container serving as a tobacco pouch, a medicine bag or a box for carrying any small personal items. It has

layered compartments which are threaded together by cords. These cords meet at the top. There they pass through a decorative bead called the *ojime*. The *ojime* acts as a means of keeping the inro shut, but at the same time allowing it to be easily opened. The cords then continue up under the wide *obi* (kimono belt), and are attached finally to the *netsuke* which stops them slipping back under the *obi* (see fig.1). Often the three elements are seen to be matching although it is unusual that such sets were the work of only one carver.

Netsuke were primarily functional items. Therefore, no matter how embellished their designs were to become, certain ground rules had to be adhered to. These insured the usability of a piece and acted as a gauge against which to check potential practical quality. They have little to do with the fineness of a finished piece as that is the responsibility of the carver alone. Netsuke have to be appropriately sized. If they are too small they would slip under the *obi*, too large and they would be a nuisance to the wearer. They must also be compact in shape and smooth in finish so as not to snag the silk of the kimono. There should be no thin extremities that would be in danger of breaking off with everyday wear. *Himotoshi* (holes through which the cords are attached) should be included, whether they are carved or incorporated naturally into the design. Above all, the netsuke should be satisfying to feel when held in the hand, for this will determine the true charm of a carving to its owner. The best of old netsuke are heavily patinated with time and fondling, a test of how they have been appreciated through use.

There were reasons for the rise in popularity of netsuke in Japan. From 1639

to 1858, Japan was a closed country. This is to say that, during this time the country was



Fig. 2 - Dutchman and Hare,
Masanao, ivory, 9.2 cm high, c. mid-1700's.

held under the government policy of *Sakoku* (national seclusion)⁴. *Sakoku* was implemented as a means of protecting Japan from an influx of foreign religions such as Christianity. Foreigners were not allowed into Japan. The exception to this was in the cases of some Dutch and Portuguese merchants who were permitted limited access to a small island in Nagasaki bay called Deshima. Imports and exports were very restricted. The Japanese were not permitted to leave their own country. It is interesting to note that in Japan at the time, Dutchmen were considered the lowest form of social humanity, being portrayed as almost sub-human⁵. They were often depicted as comical and stupid through netsuke carvings (see fig. 2). Marginally higher on the ladder of acceptability were all merchants, sellers and money-men. These would have the corresponding level of respect from Japanese people as we had (and probably still have) for tax collectors. Dealings in money seem to have been looked upon as socially corruptive. This is also why many netsuke carvers traditionally have not signed their work, or sign using a *go* - a carving name similar to a pen-name. By making and selling netsuke, a *netsuke-shi*⁶ became a merchant. During the period when Japan was a closed country it was forbidden for anyone other than the Samurai to carry swords or show any display of jeweled wealth⁷. The netsuke were subtle enough and small enough to be an acceptably discreet measure of social status and taste. There was also the consideration that they were a functional item. Every man and most women possessed at least one netsuke. Even in their plainest form they were a necessary addition to one's attire. Therefore, there was a constant demand for these tiny carvings. Together with this demand and the increasing elaboration and refinement of netsuke, a traditional national artform evolved.

In keeping with other traditional crafts of Japan, netsuke carving was taught through the master-apprentice system. This system operated primarily within the family, passing through the generations from father to son. Often a master would teach his nephew but it was rare for the family trade to be taught to an outsider or non-relative. It was also highly uncommon for carving to be taught to women. Netsuke carving was a male dominated craft, except in the isolated Iwami province (mentioned later) where there are pieces signed by women. A young boy would learn to carve masks at the age of fourteen and gradually progress through different forms, gaining skill on the way. As a means of acquiring skill, he would have to copy work by previous masters until he gradually improved in technique. The Irish weaver, Alice Roden⁸ observed a Japanese girl learning to weave in Ireland and was astounded by what she saw: "She had an absence of self - no

own immediate desire for expression”⁹. That would come later but, for then, the girl’s only desire was to learn. This selflessness comes from a respect for the work of others. Roden witnessed this absolute concentration first-hand when she went to Japan to learn their weaving techniques. She recounted¹⁰ that they went to school at nine in the morning and knelt at their looms for anything up to twelve hours a day with only a short dinner break. The room was the only one in the building that was not heated, so the students worked in the biting cold of Winter. This was a deliberate measure to help the students focus on the task in hand and not settle into a comfortable daydream. The level of concentration in the room throughout the length of the day was something that Roden had never before experienced. It had a profound impact on her. She told this story¹¹ several years after her ten week trip to Japan, still captivated by the power of this desire to learn traditional techniques. Respect for tradition must have been very strong for this system to have evolved and survived. Compare this to the learning of art in the West today. A certain emphasis is placed on skills and techniques, but there is a much greater requirement for pure self-expression in whatever form that might take.

“I am happiest with the thought that netsuke as an art form is not earth-bound. It is sculpture in suspension”.¹² This is one of the most endearing qualities of netsuke - the fact that it is miniature sculpture in the round. Attention must be paid to every detail, down to the soles of the shoes or the underside of an animal’s paw. In order to understand and appreciate the sense of wonder that first attracted Birch to carving netsuke, I feel that it is necessary to explore some of the works and techniques of preceding masters. I have chosen to briefly discuss the work of four of my favourite non-contemporary carvers in order to illustrate different qualities and skills within their carvings.¹³ My choice for most of these carvers is based on how the artists’ styles and forms appeal to me personally. Others I have chosen for their cleverness in approaching techniques. Although the skills of these carvers are exceptional, there were hundreds of *netsuke-shi*, many of whose works are every bit as exciting and perfect as the netsuke of the few artists I have chosen. These four are Yoshimura Shuzan, Tomotada, Shigemasa and Mitsuhiro.

The first part of the paper discusses the importance of the study of the history of the United States. It is argued that a knowledge of the past is essential for a full understanding of the present. The author then goes on to discuss the various factors that have shaped the development of the United States, including the role of the government, the influence of the economy, and the impact of the culture. The paper concludes by suggesting that a study of the history of the United States is not only a valuable academic exercise, but also a necessary one for anyone who wishes to understand the world in which we live.

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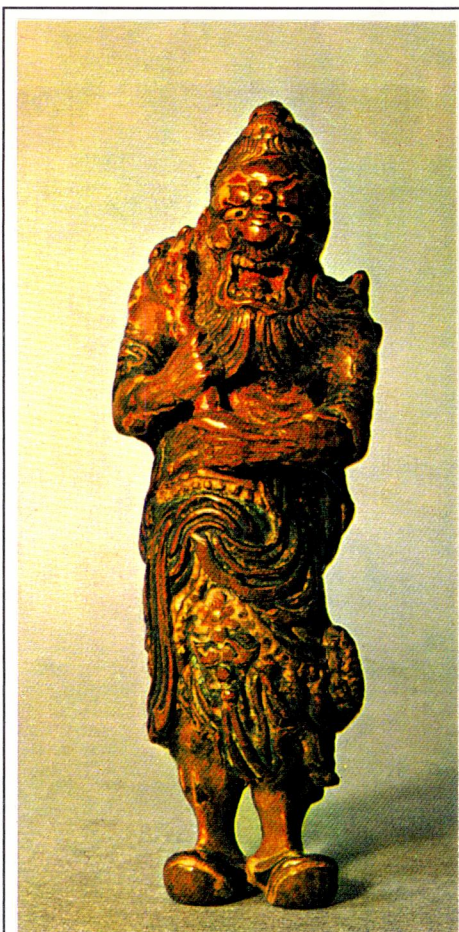


Fig. 3 - *Tsuru Sennin*,
Shuzan, painted cypress, 8.9 cm high,
c. late 1700's.

Shuzan was an eighteenth century carver (he died in 1776). His work is widely copied, therefore making it difficult to authenticate. For this reason, he is avoided by many collectors who want to know for sure that they have acquired a genuine Yoshimura Shuzan carving. This is an ill-founded doubt for all but a few of his carvings, since the greatest fact one can acknowledge about Shuzan's work is that it is actually identifiable through quality, facial expression, movement and finish. He never signed his work, preferring to remain anonymous rather than adopt a *go*.¹⁴ To say that after two hundred years a carver's unsigned work can still be identified, among a plethora of other carvers, is something to be admired and envied. Shuzan preferred working with human forms and demons rather than animals. Many of his pieces are of standing figures that resemble dolls in posture. His work is full of expression (fig 3) and

movement (fig 4). This was a deciding factor as to whether a carver's work was of superior quality or not. If a piece, no matter how simple or detailed it is, does not move, then it is a lifeless study. Bushell notes in his book entitled Collectors' Netsuke (1977), that collectors often decide whether or not a piece is an original by this quality¹⁵, as was the case in the identification of the Kirin¹⁶ in figure 5. The form is far too stiff to be of the hand of Yoshimura Shuzan. Coupled with the fact that it is signed 'Shuzan', collectors have attributed it to Nagamachi Shuzan, a greatly inferior carver to Yoshimura. Shuzan is not a carver of stoical subjects or dead-pan faces. He has a more gutsy, hands-on approach. His demons are meant to terrify. There is life in his netsuke. Another notable quality of this carver's work is the finish. The pieces are carved in *hinoki*¹⁷ which is a soft wood that wears badly with time. Shuzan overcame this drawback by coating the wooden carvings with a home-made primer before applying his own unique paints. These paints are extremely hard combined with the primer. They don't chip, crack, dry-out, blister or fall off. They protect the *hinoki* underneath,

preserving the original forms. However, the paints fade with time, dulling pieces that were mainly of primary colours to an autumnal mix. Shuzan's carvings are all over two-hundred years old. Time and use has given them the warm inner glow of patination as opposed to a brash exterior polish.



Fig. 4 - *Kirin*, Yoshimura Shuzan, painted cypress, 8.1 cm high, c. late 1700's.



Fig.5 - *Kirin*, Nagamachi Shuzan, painted cypress, 7.6 cm high, c. late 1700's.

Whilst Shuzan's subject matter adhered closely to the glories of Japanese myths and legends, his contemporary, Tomotada, took quite a different route with his work. Tomotada was a native of Kyoto and preferred to work with animals. He is most famous for carving cattle but, unfortunately, in this respect he has outdone himself. It has become common place to find his name on the majority of oxen netsuke¹⁸. He was so good at carving cattle that almost every bovine netsuke bears his signature. Forgeries of this side of his work are rife. Even in his own lifetime, he was blatantly copied. Such was his good reputation that his work was well known and liked from Kyoto to Tokyo. This is quite remarkable considering the limited movement between provinces at the time. To discover what is so special about Tomotada, we must turn to the carvings themselves. Although Tomotada is long dead and accounts of him are sparsely forthcoming, I feel that quite a lot can be ascertained through the work itself. Figure 6 is an illustration of his *Tiger and Cub* netsuke. It is a representation of tenderness and protective affection. In *Tiger and Cub* the mother stands over her infant, resting her paws lightly on the

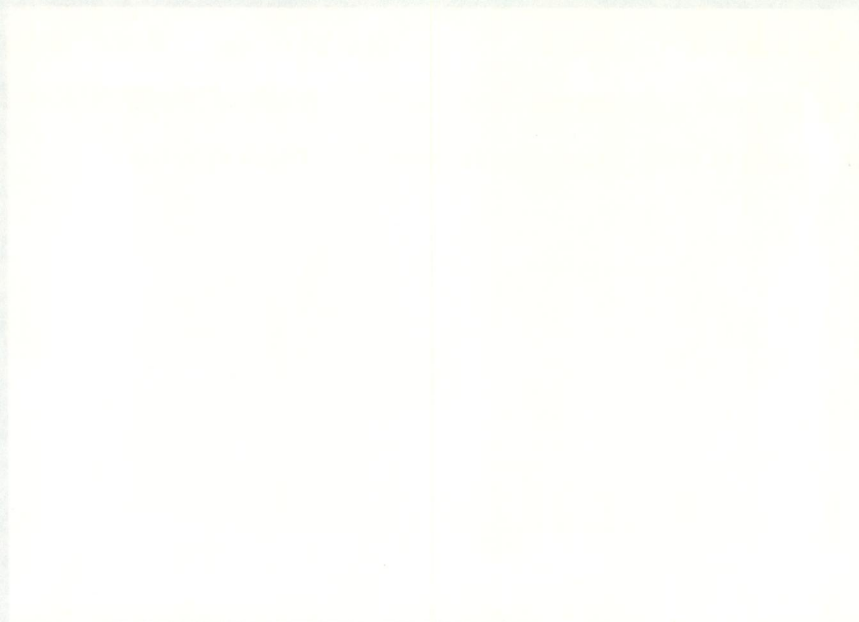


Fig. 6 - *Tiger and Cub*,
Tomotada, ivory, 3.5 cm high, c. mid-1700's.

young animal's back. The position is akin to one of guarding a personal possession by holding it close to yourself. In her eyes, there is a hint of worry for her young. Her furrowed

brow and cocked ear are signs of her alertness. She is ready to ward off any danger to her as yet defenceless cub. This carving is typical of Tomotada's ability to handle expression. It is for this reason that he is probably the best netsuke carver of animal subjects ever. It is also true to say of Tomotada that he pays attention to all aspects of the carving. Netsuke are sculpture in the round. When they are worn, the base is as important as every other detail. Therefore, the underside of a Tomotada carving will prove to be every bit as anatomically correct as the upper section. Everything is included, from the genitals to the pads of the paws - he leaves nothing out.

The third carver I wish to mention is Shigemasa. He produced work for the first thirty years of the nineteenth century. The reason I'm including this netsuke-shi is because of his simplistic approach. Shigemasa carved snails, frogs and shells. He chose animals with no obvious emotions, and of which most people have little understanding. Perhaps he carved them for their seemingly easy-going natures. Shigemasa always set his subjects in their own rustic surroundings¹⁹, usually on a discarded manmade farm object like a broken bucket or well cover. He allowed for the setting to be less than perfect, as if in respect for the Buddhist philosophy of imperfections and purity of the spirit. He often depicted wood as if it were rotten or in poor repair. For instance, figure 8 illustrates a *Frog on a broken well cover*. Possibly the most endearing quality of the artist's work is his ability to mimic textures through the use of stains. In *Snail on a Well Bucket* (fig 7),



he has succeeded in making the shell of the snail appear hard, shiny and brittle, while its flesh seems soft. The wood of the bucket is an entirely different texture again. Yet all of these elements were carved from the same piece of wood. Shigemasa was a genius at using stains in order to emphasize these differences in texture.



Fig. 7 - *Snail on a Well Bucket*, Shigemasa, wood, 4.1 cm high, c. early 1800's.



Fig. 8 - *Frog on a Broken Well Cover*, Shigemasa, wood, 4.5 cm long, c. early 1800's.

Mitsuhiro lived from 1810 to 1875. While Shigemasa excelled at staining his wooden carvings to simulate substances, Mitsuhiro played a game of complete transformation. He was gifted in his ability to take a material and make it appear as if it was produced in another material. *Roof Tile* (fig 9) looks like brick or ceramic although it is actually made in ivory. *Tea Bowl and Whisk* (fig 10) seems to be ceramic and ivory, but in reality they are lacquered wood. The same can be said for *Teakettle* (fig 11), which looks like

blackened iron, but is ebony. Like Shigemasa, Mitsuhiro adored the banal. Through his work he brought dignity to many objects usually taken for granted. He was a clever man at disguising materials while still allowing his work to remain simple.



Fig. 9 - Roof Tile,
Mitsuhiro, ivory, 4.3 cm wide, c. mid-1800's.

His style is so distinctive

that, like Schuzan, he is easily recognized by that alone. Therefore, I cannot pass this carver without showing one netsuke in the more minimalistic style for which he is most famous. Figure 12 is of a *Duck*. It is sparsely dressed in details, but it is by far the most graceful representation of this bird I have yet seen.

I have mentioned that carving skills tended to be passed from father to son. As a result of this, it often happened that styles and subject matter were 'inherited'. During the period when Japan was under *Sakoku*, each region was ruled by a feudal lord called the *Daimyo*. Movement between regions was very restricted so individual areas tended to develop their own styles and carving identities. This is especially true in the case of the Iwami School - a school of the isolated province on the South-West coast of Honshu. Here the carvers used materials locally found which were often rare in carvings from the rest of Japan. These were mainly boar tusk, black permisson, buffalo horn, *umoregi* (a partially fossilized wood that resembles ebony but has no grain) and *umimatsu* (a form of coral that ranges in colour from jet black to brownish-yellow). Their sole influence was of nature and, unlike most netsuke which are compact and round, the carvings of the Iwami school are stylistically long (fig.s 13 & 14). They kept close to the shape of the material and tended to carve their subjects as if they were crawling or sitting on the original form. In doing so, they represented nature without changing the meaning of the materials, but the most fascinating point about the Iwami school is their method of signing their work. The Iwami way of inscribing their *chomei*²⁰ is awe-inspiring. They signed in *kanji*



Fig. 10 - *Teabowl and Whisk*,
Mitsuhiro, lacquered wood, 3,8 cm diameter, c. mid-1800's.



Fig. 11 - *Teakettle*,
Mitsuhiro,ebony, 2.9 cm high, c. mid-1800's.



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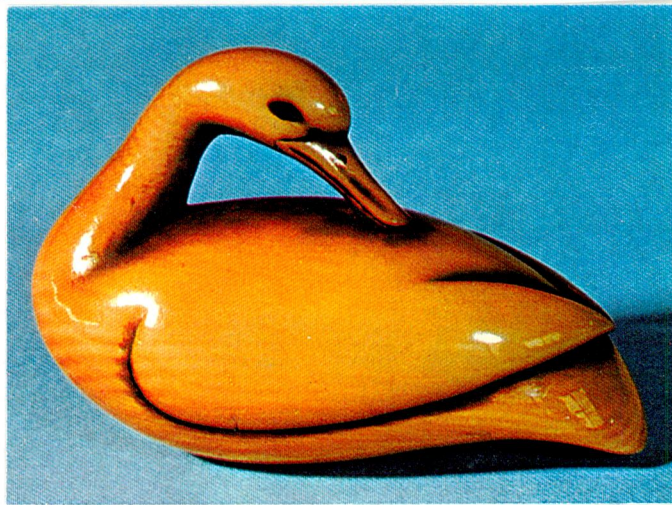


Fig. 12 - *Duck*,
Mitsuhiro, ivory, 2.9 cm high, c. mid-1800's.

(Chinese characters)²¹ using raised *kebori* (lines barely the thickness of a hair). The total size of a *chomei* is minute, a large one rarely exceeding one centimeter in length. So the level of detail their inscriptions require can be imagined. How did they do it? In trying to discover their technique, experts considered the options. They could have carved away the area around the characters, leaving them raised, or they could have used a stamp to emboss the wood. The former solution was possible to achieve by a supreme master, but it would have taken up to three weeks just to sign a piece. The latter was not feasible as



Fig. 13 - *Spider on a Folded Taro Leaf*,
Bunshojo (Iwami School), boar tusk, 8.9 cm long, c. early 1800's.

Fig. 14 - *Rat Group*,
Gansui, (Iwami School), boar tusk, 11.1 cm long, 1830.





Figure 12-10: A large rectangular area that has been completely redacted, appearing as a solid white block.

Chinese character '2' (number two) and '3' (number three) are placed within the thickness of a hair. The total size of a hair is approximately 1 inch, and the distance between the two characters is approximately 1 inch. The level of detail that this image conveys is not as high as the original. However, the image is still a good representation of the original. The image is a good example of how a low-resolution image can be used to represent a high-resolution image. The image is a good example of how a low-resolution image can be used to represent a high-resolution image. The image is a good example of how a low-resolution image can be used to represent a high-resolution image.



Figure 12-11: A large rectangular area that has been completely redacted, appearing as a solid white block.



Figure 12-12: A large rectangular area that has been completely redacted, appearing as a solid white block.

the *chomei* were not always on a flat surface. The Iwami carvers achieved this complex, raised *chomei* by using a metal instrument with a tiny rounded point. They depressed the wood by squeezing down with the rounded point to sink the characters. The surrounding wood was then planed down to level the surface. Finally, the piece was immersed in water and the contracted wood swelled to form raised characters²². Bushell quoted an unnamed source as having said "There is a right way to do things, a wrong way and a Japanese way",²³ perhaps referring to the Iwami carvers!

Chapter 2

Michael Birch - A Living National Treasure

Michael Birch began what was to become a life of achievements in Egypt in 1926. He was to spend the first twenty years of his life in Africa before moving to England. From a very early age, Birch displayed a penchant for small objects. When his father gave him a present of three netsuke for his ninth birthday, it was the seed for a dream that would carry him successfully through to the present day and beyond. Birch decided at the age of nine that he would be a netsuke carver. Time passed and he continued his interest in small artifacts of other cultures and ages - Pre-Columbian, Byzantine, Etruscan and Mongolian. In 1946 he moved to England. Not being able to afford college fees, he acquired tuition by associating with sculpture tutors at the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts in London. Among these was Henry Moore who once remarked to Birch that "In order for a piece of sculpture to be important it has to be large"¹. Birch disagreed and to his credit he has proved himself correct. During his early twenties Birch carved out of billiard balls, which were a cheap raw material. At the time, he was influenced by organic forms such as seeds, shells and insects. However, at the age of twenty-two he married and profits from carving proved insufficient to support a family. Birch spent the next twenty years of his life building up a business. He began by making spectacle frames by hand but soon expanded to electronics and related products, showing his underlying interest in formulae and structures. In 1970, with a thriving business and two thousand employees, Birch decided the time had come to return to his true vocation. He sold the

business to a merchant bank and set about acquiring a wide range of traditional antique netsuke. Some of them were good and he kept these for his collection. Others were broken. Birch used the restoration of these netsuke as a tool for gaining necessary carving skills. By examining the pieces he had obtained, he was able to expand his techniques and refine his judgment of quality. However, the market for netsuke in the early 1970's was small and, in the case of contemporary carvers, it was even smaller. At the time there were less than fifty carvers in Japan making a living out of netsuke alone. In the West there was only one carver - Birch. Collectors were interested in the work of carvers from before the twentieth century. There seemed to be the opinion that due to the political and social changes in Japan during the latter half of the nineteenth century, leading to the fall of netsuke, only carvings that pre-dated the modernization of Japan were of any real value. Not only did contemporary carvers have to build their clientele of buyers almost from scratch, but they also had to work against the resistance of ignorance. For this reason, Birch had to do a lot of work in the form of attending netsuke conventions and giving lectures in order to attract buyers. In 1976 Birch held his first (and to date, only) solo exhibition in the Eskenazi gallery in London. By this time he had become an accepted and respected *netsuke-shi*, having achieved worldwide acclaim among collectors for his astonishing work. Today, practically every collection of any importance possesses one or more of Birch's carvings. The Japanese themselves respect his work and skills so much that they have declared him a Living National Treasure.

Birch uses Japanese legends only as a starting point, and even now considers them to be 'a readily accessible compendium on international subject matter'. Why then did he choose to carve netsuke, as opposed to small objects from another culture? Why did he choose to carve in the traditional style of any culture in a time of great stylistic diversity in European sculpture? The answers to these questions are really quite simple but important. Netsuke provided Birch with **rules**. These physical restrictions were outlined in chapter one. He has given a metaphor² that provides a clear understanding of his requirement for rules: chess cannot be played without a chess-board. The rules are discarded when the structure within which they apply has been removed. All fun is drained from the game when one no longer has a chance to implement clever tactics or discover new moves. Tennis is another example of this. It can be played without a court but has none of the zest of achievement that comes from adding a few painted lines and

subsequently a sense of relevance. The tendency in fine art of this century has been to move towards an increasingly looser acceptance of what 'art' encompasses. While this is perfectly legitimate³ in its own right, it has led to negligence in the areas of quality and skill in favour of diversity through medium. Unlike small objects from other cultures, netsuke were functional and therefore had to be governed by rules if they were to survive. Birch suggests that if you have boundaries, then you can push and expand them whilst still remaining within them. Without these boundaries there can be no excitement. Instead of working against him, they have acted in his favour. He seems to have found plenty of scope in which to create entirely original pieces.

Besides working within the restrictions of netsuke, there is a further necessity for rules. One cannot be a good netsuke carver without a great degree of technical skill. In order to learn his skills, Birch studied the work of a wide cross section of carvers under magnification. Through repairing and scrutinizing the work of other carvers, he has harvested much knowledge. This he has applied to his own work and eventually, after many mistakes and errors, has developed a technique and style to suit himself. I will discuss this in more detail later in this chapter.

Although Birch uses Japanese myths and legends as a starting point to his work, when it comes to determining the feeling of the piece through shape, contours and design, he abandons the story and draws on a subliminal pool of inspiration and influences gathered since childhood. I have mentioned that Birch is influenced by small objects from many

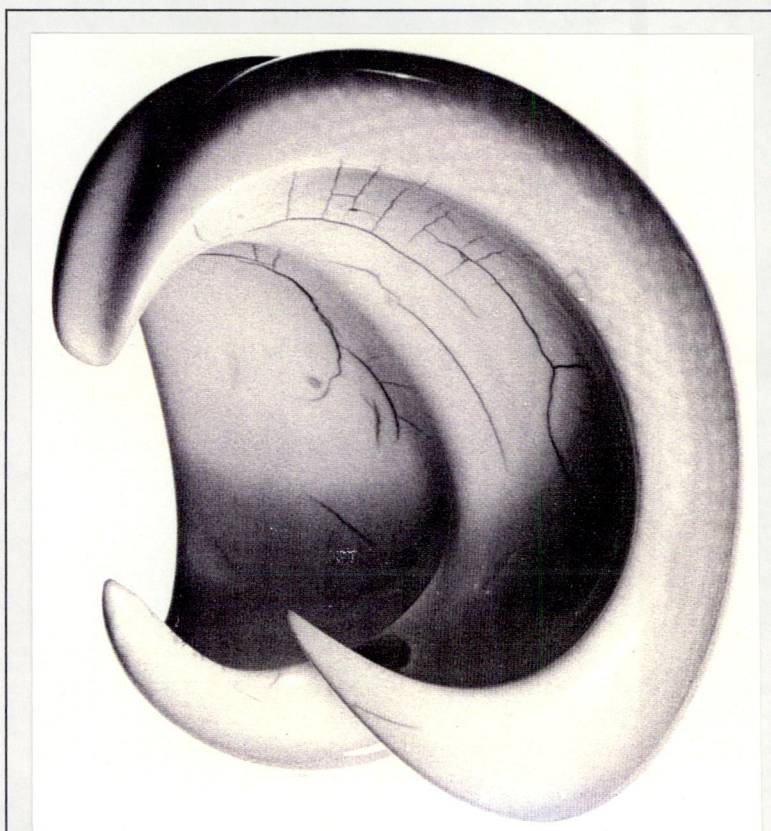


Fig. 15 - *Seed Pod*,
Michael Birch, ivory (billiard ball), 1976.

cultures, not necessarily because they are for any particular function, but that they are small. It is of no importance if they are carved, as he expresses interest in all miniature works whether they are “carved, formed, shaped or cast in metal”. This lifelong interest is one ingredient of Birch’s blend of influences. However, a more direct authority in the ruling of his work has been his love of the forms and structures of nature. For Birch, the analysis of natural forms is an exciting adventure in which there are always new discoveries. He is intrigued by “the growth pattern of antlers, the formula for the shape of the egg, the shapes of sea shells, the shape of the head of the femur, ball and socket joints, fishbones, flowers, leaves”⁴ and anything that has a form due to its growth. These forms have “their own dynamics and inner strength”. They have definite structures, unlike, for example, pebbles softened by erosion, which he finds weak uninspiring forms. Birch’s fascination with natural structures was evident in his earliest work dating back to his first carving, in 1947 (fig 15). This *Seed pod*, carved from a billiard ball, has a distinct resemblance in visual feeling to a ball and socket joint.

Michael Birch has a particularly enchanting way of conveying his subjects using both representational and abstract means. His subjects vary from gods to legends to animals to stylized female forms, but no-one can argue that time after time he produces work of enviable elegance. He balances efficiency of form, attention to detail and the use of appropriate materials with ease and success. Luigi Bandini wrote in the preface to the catalogue of Birch’s Eskenazi Gallery exhibition: “*Shibui* is the notion of an artist’s ability to convey, by the most perceptive and elegant economy of means, the essence of what he wishes to depict”⁵, a blessing that Birch in no way lacks. Close inspection of his work reveals his rich and varied choice of materials, meticulous sense of detail and smooth soft polish that makes one want to reach out and indulge in its tactile quality. A good netsuke feels well in the hand. If it is smoothly formed, it acts like a worry stone to the wearer who invariably cannot resist holding the carving throughout the day. The best antique netsuke are well patinated from decades of fondling. However, the most important characteristic of Birch’s netsuke is that they have, in his own words, a “heartbeat”⁶ of their own.



Fig. 16 - *Grazing Horse*,
Michael Birch, narwhal ivory, 7 cm high, 1976.

When I look at Birch's carvings I am struck by several prominent details. First there is his efficient use of line. Almost all of his work is alive with the use of crisp, simple lines, creating elegance and movement. Movement remains one of the most important features in ascertaining the quality of a piece. It is as relevant for Birch today as it was for Schuzan two hundred years ago. Birch puts his intuitive fluidity to great use in everything he carves. Almost every netsuke he has produced sings with this quality, but perhaps his *Grazing Horse* (fig 16) sums it up best. *Grazing Horse* is an example of the artist's ability to express the grace and elegance of the horse, without referring to any specific details of its anatomy. We see the suggestion of slender hind legs and a strong arched back leading into the neck which twists down to the soft form of

his head and lower jaw. In one arc, Birch depicts the whole animal and more. Not only are we convinced the carving is of a horse, but we also know the animal is in the act of grazing. In this piece, he has carved the ivory into a smooth, uninterrupted curl, reminiscent of a single brush stroke. He tends to treat the female torso in a similarly minimalistic style to that of the *Grazing Horse*. *Lewd Nude* (fig 17), a miniature version

of a three foot sculpture by Birch⁷, is carved from buffalo horn and polished smooth and shiny. The piece stretches from the woman's crotch up to just above her breasts. He has emphasized her hips, and then, sweeping the torso upwards in a sensually tapering curve, he brings the form to a close with a suggestion of breasts. *Torso* (fig 18) is treated in much the same way, but lacks the dynamism of *Lewd Nude*. Here, the artist has 'boxed' the female torso into a rectangular form with breasts at the top and a star of three nicks at the base, symbolic of pubic hair.

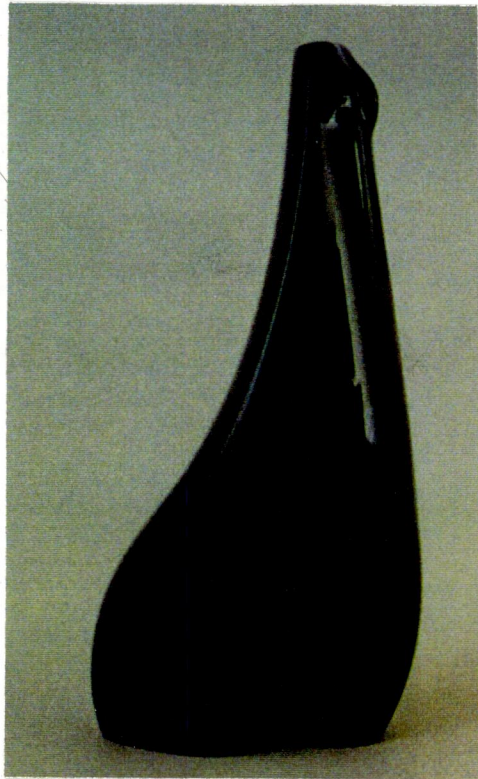


Fig. 17 - *Lewd Nude*,
Michael Birch, buffalo horn, 6.3 cm high, 1979.

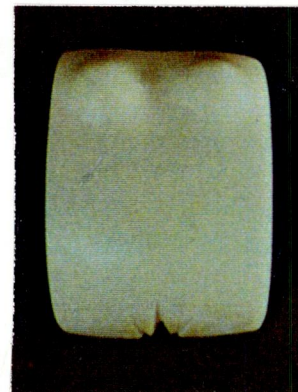


Fig. 18 - *Torso*,
Michael Birch, cow elephant ivory, 1978.

Another way in which Birch uses line is by playing dark materials against light materials, as evident in *Bean Pod* (fig 19). Birch uses a wide variety of materials in his carvings, allowing himself the freedom to choose from a multitude of possible colours, textures and finishes. Among these are **antlers** (elk, Chinese swamp deer, English fallow deer, roe buck, molakai stag (Hawaii) and red deer), **horns** (deer, greater kudu, African buffalo and rhinoceros), **tusks** (mammoth, elephant and narwhal), **teeth** (whale, shark, hog, boar and hippopotamus), **wood** (boxwood, holly, cedar, rosewood and ebony) and other materials such as *umimatsu* (a form of coral also used by the Iwami carvers), *umoregi* (a partially fossilized wood resembling ebony), tree fungus, abalone, tortoise shell, gold, silver, mother-of-pearl, lacquer, coral, hornbill, precious and semi-precious stones⁸. In his *Bean Pod*, he has used ivory and ebony in such a way that they seem to be sweeping

into each other. This piece also bears a subtle likeness to the curves of the female form. It has been implied⁹ that the “curve of the stem suggests the provocative tilt of the female

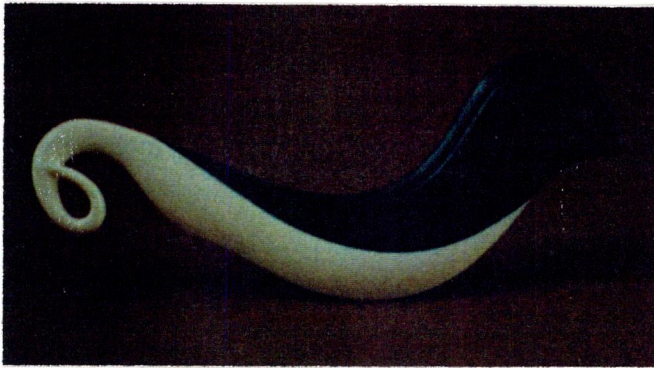


Fig. 19 - *Bean Pod*,
Michael Birch, ebony and ivory, 1977.

Fig. 20 - *Bean Pod*,
Michael Birch, narwhal tusk, 1975.



Fig. 21 - *Dosojin*,
Michael Birch, ivory and rhinoceros horn, 1977.

neck”. In Japan, the curve of the back of the neck is considered the most visually erotic

and cross-section thickness, also bears a significant relationship to the nature of the faulting. It is postulated that the nature of the strain suggests the presence or absence of the fault.



Fig. 1. Schematic diagram of a fault system showing the relationship between the fault zone and the fault plane.

The fault zone is defined as the area of the fault system in which the faulting is most intense. It is the area of the fault system in which the faulting is most intense.



Fig. 2. Schematic diagram of a fault system showing the relationship between the fault zone and the fault plane.

part of a woman's body. Contrary to the West's approach to posture which emphasises the frontal sweep of the collar bone, the Japanese tend more towards a demur unpresumptuous dipping of the head (without slouching), that brings attention to the top of the spine. The kimono is designed to accentuate this very feature. It is often referred to in Japanese woodcuts and prints. However, I see the upper curve of ebony as simulating the small of the back sloping downwards to the buttocks, although this beautiful and simple form is open to interpretation. It cannot be denied that this piece has grace, movement and drama, each created through form, line and colour, which brings me to another of Birch's *Bean Pod* netsuke carvings. Figure 20 shows a long straight piece made in ivory¹⁰. This works especially well, as the artist has synchronized the subtle undulations of the pod with the grain of the ivory, making the subject and material fit snugly together.

Dosojin is a Japanese folk god of fecundity. When Birch visited Japan, he took a liking to these 'gods' of the phallus and decided to design some himself¹¹. As roadside sculptures, representations of *Dosojin* come in many forms, all of them phallic, many of them fun. It is with a sense of fun that Birch has approached his subject, but he has managed to arrive at very satisfying and strangely settling forms. Figure 21 shows his

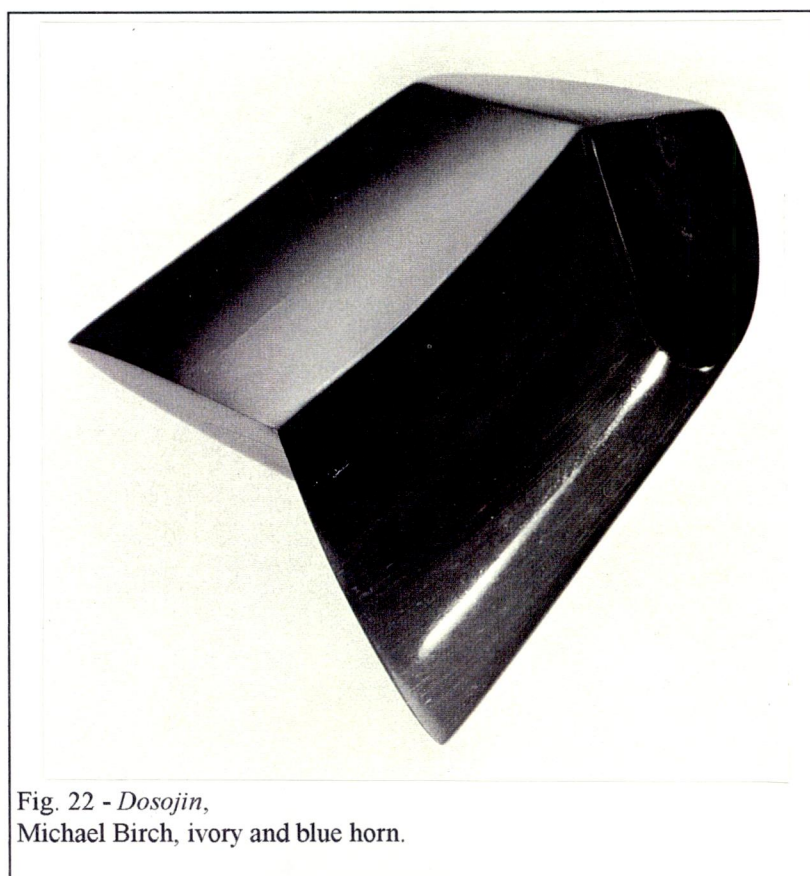


Fig. 22 - *Dosojin*,
Michael Birch, ivory and blue horn.

love of structures, although this form is also open to interpretation. At first glance I thought it resembled a bird's skull and played on the image of wings. Birch has cradled the phallus, carved from rhinoceros horn, against the creamy ivory structure of the female pelvis. He plays black on white for dramatic emphasis. This piece could be interpreted as phallic, or simply appreciated for its sensual element. It could also be read as a racial comment or as an expression of Yin/Yang unity. He has treated the *Dosojin* carving in figure 22 in a much simpler way. As well as being the god of fertility, *Dosojin* is also the god of sexual equality. Here he has taken ivory and bluehorn, joining them together so perfectly that they have become one. Perhaps in spirit, they are one.

While discussing his work on display at the National College of Art and Design, in December 1995, Birch took pains to explain to me the mobius and the significance of the concepts that arise from it. The fact that the mobius is a never-ending plane intrigues Birch. He has arrived at some very interesting interpretations of this fact which I will discuss in context in chapter 3. One of the pieces shown in NCAD was *Fukurokuju* - one



Fig. 23 - *Fukurokuju*, Michael Birch, ivory.

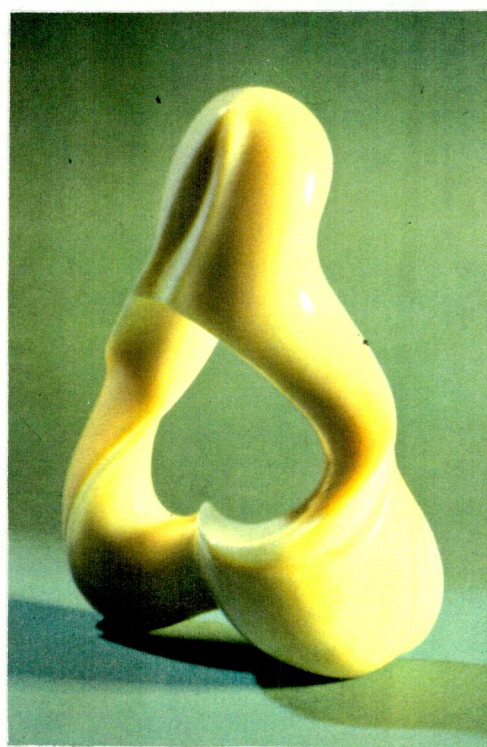


Fig. 24 - *Double Mobius Fukurokuju*, Michael Birch, ivory.

of the Seven Happy Gods in Japanese folklore (fig 23). *Fukurokuju* is a god of wisdom. It is for this reason that he is depicted with an elongated cranium, in which he stores his

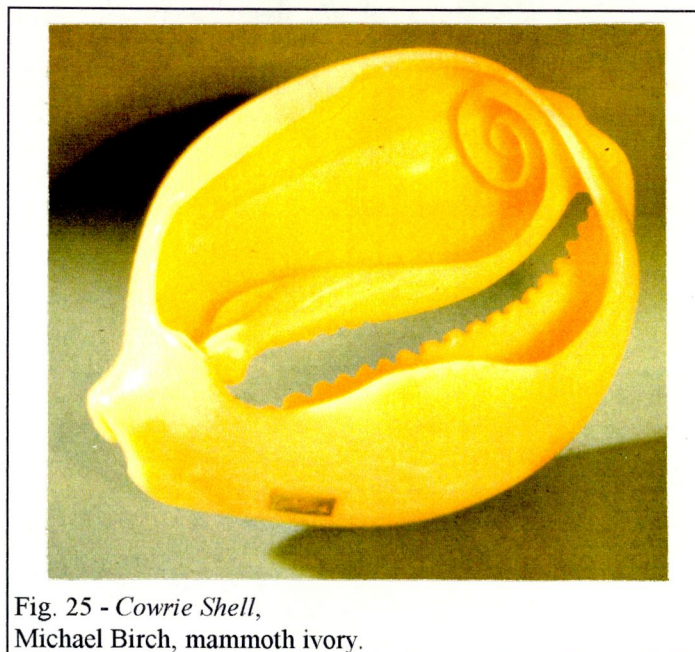


Fig. 25 - Cowrie Shell,
Michael Birch, mammoth ivory.

excessive knowledge. Beside this netsuke, there was a carving of a *double mobius* (fig. 24). The two carvings are of the same subject, but one is an abstract representation of the other. Birch took the fold of Fukurokuju's hood in the first carving and designed a double mobius interpretation of the subject. In an interview, Birch expressed an interest in forms and structures found in nature. However, I would argue that he has a penchant for all formulae and things that follow plans or patterns, due to the fact that the mobius is a man-made concept which does not naturally occur.

Yet, as with the excitement of working within rules, Birch likes to reproduce rules within his own collection. Examples of these are all the naturally found forms mentioned earlier, such as eggs, shells, bones and flowers, coupled with unnatural forms such as the mobius. Perhaps I can illustrate this application of rules within rules by explaining his reasons for carving his *Cowrie shell* (fig 25). Birch carved this shell out of mammoth tusk. Yet, at an initial glance, it is for all the world a simple shell, battered by erosion and washed up on the shore. It is no different from any other shell on the beach; no different, that is, until you look closer and notice the grain of ivory and the absent shimmer of mother-of-pearl. This is not a shell. It is a very realistic copy of a shell that addresses the subtleties of difference between nature and mans' creations. "There is something very dramatic about an object that is so realistic that it can fool the eye."¹² Driven by this, Birch takes the rules governing nature and, working within the rules of carving, produces pieces that adhere strongly to a dynamic elegance, characteristic of all his work.

CHAPTER 3

Two Conceptual Nations and a Universal Concept.

While Japan was a closed country, it was almost entirely self-sufficient and allowed very little import-export trade. This isolation meant that Japan developed its own very strong cultural traditions, but as a nation it was internationally blind. By 1868, when Japan finally agreed to trade with other countries and lift its *Sakoku* policy, it had become a nation of much cultural difference from the rest of the world. One might argue that every culture is unique, even within the boundaries of Europe alone, but it must be remembered that European countries have interacted and learned from each other. For almost two hundred and thirty years, Japan had only itself as an influence. Most countries have religion as their main initiative for laws. Governments and monarchies alike have tended towards ruling on religious beliefs. It is true to say that in Europe, most wars were fought for 'God or Glory', for religion or for land, and Royal marriages have been based on little more. So it was in Japan. The primary reason for imposing *Sakoku* in the first place was to stop Japan becoming corrupted by Christianity. It worked. Japan is dominated by Shintoism and Buddhism. Many Japanese follow both. The practices of Shintoism and Buddhism have instilled in the Japanese people a unique way of thinking, which, rather than their way of life, has created fundamental differences between Japan and the West. From his experiences of the Japanese, Birch has noted that, using syllogistic logic, they often come to strange conclusions which seem quite contradictory to Western minds. The mental leaps they make would be impossible had they not developed a conceptual approach to life. An example of such thought, through the use of

CHAPTER 1

THE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA were founded in 1776, and have since that time been a leading power in the world. The country has a rich and varied history, and its people have made many contributions to the world's progress.

The first settlers of the United States were the Pilgrims, who came to the New World in 1620. They were followed by other groups of settlers, including the Puritans, the Quakers, and the Cavaliers. The country grew rapidly, and by the late 18th century, it was a major power in the world.

The American Revolution was fought between 1775 and 1783, and resulted in the United States becoming an independent nation. The country's first president, George Washington, led the nation through its early years, and his leadership was instrumental in the country's development.

The 19th century was a time of great change for the United States. The country expanded its territory, and its economy grew rapidly. The Civil War was fought between 1861 and 1865, and resulted in the abolition of slavery. The country's population grew rapidly, and its influence in the world increased.

The 20th century has been a time of great progress for the United States. The country has made many contributions to the world's progress, including the development of the atomic bomb, the space program, and the civil rights movement. The United States remains a leading power in the world, and its people continue to make many contributions to the world's progress.

a syllogism, would be as follows: "A cat is an animal, a cow is an animal, therefore a cow is a cat"¹. Obviously this makes no sense to us, but nothing is ever black and white, especially in a nation of contradictions such as Japan. A practical example of this rationale in action would be the manner in which the Japanese accepted Birch as a *netsuke-shi*: netsuke are Japanese, Birch is a netsuke carver, therefore Birch is Japanese². The Japanese carvers had encountered Birch and his work through conventions and were duly impressed. In the glossary of Miriam Kinsey's book Living Masters of Netsuke (1984), a Living National Treasure is said to be an "artist or craftsman so designated and honoured by the Japanese government in its unique system of fostering traditional arts and crafts"³. Following its general disuse through lack of function - as the Japanese took to wearing Western suits instead of kimonos - the role of netsuke became ominous. They are strangely unmentioned in government issued books promoting the traditional crafts of Japan, yet, the appointment of Birch as a Living National Treasure is evidence that they are still recognised by the government. Every year since 1955, Japan appoints a handful of people to become Living National Treasures⁴. These titles are bestowed upon selected craftsmen of distinction in areas of Japanese traditional practices that are either dying out or have an important cultural or historical significance⁵. Birch has excelled in a Japanese craft now largely unrecognised in its own country.

I feel there are two reasons why the Japanese government honoured him with this title and responsibility. First, he is undeniably fresh and unique in his approach and his skills are unquestionable. Secondly, the market for netsuke now lies outside Japan. It therefore makes sense that Birch, who took the initiative to be the first Western carver of netsuke, should be integrally involved in the future of this craft. The Japanese have adopted him as one of their own, not only because he is a master of one of their traditional artforms and has subsequently become an element of Japanese tradition itself, but also because, to a certain extent, he holds the delicate future of netsuke carving in his hands. In a time of obvious struggle between the old and the new in Japan, it is fitting that a non-Japanese keeps its heritage safe, alive and contemporary, without destroying the essence of its traditionalism. A similar situation occurred in the modernisation of Ireland. During the Sixties, Irish heritage was decidedly unpopular here. The Americans largely held our torch for us. It is only in the last ten years that Irish people have begun to show interest in their own heritage, and rekindle it through language, music, dancing literature and art. However, an American is not necessarily accepted as Irish just because he can play Irish

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music brilliantly, even though he could well be a descendant of Irish emigrants from past times. A different thing has occurred in Japan. By virtue of the fact that Birch is a master of a traditional Japanese craft, and is a Japanese Living National Treasure, one could decree, using a syllogism, that he is actually Japanese.

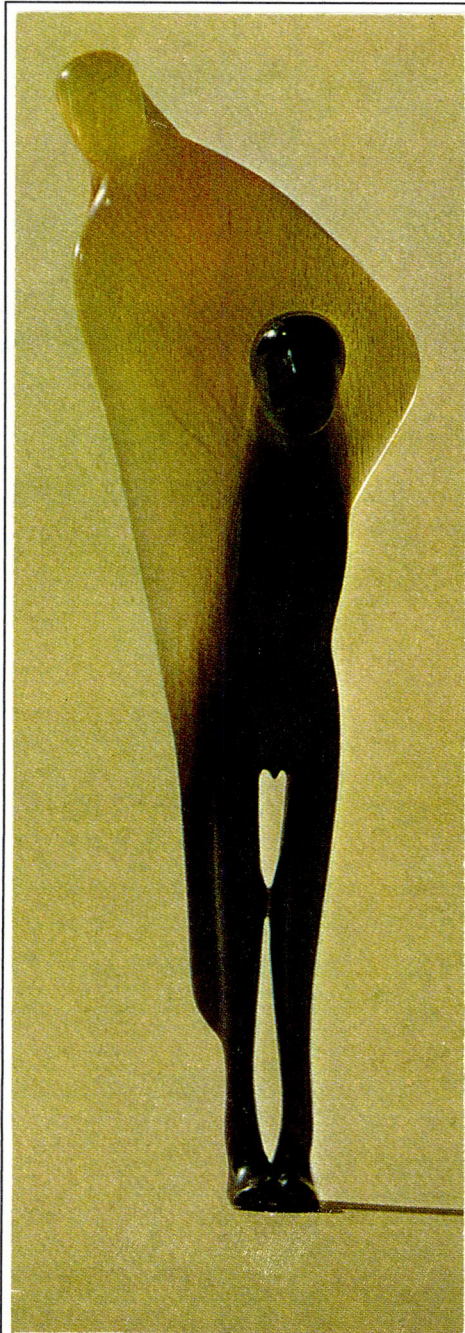


Fig. 26 - *Ashinaga and Tenaga*, Michael Birch, rhinoceros horn.

In the West conceptual thought is much more contrived and controlled than it is in Japanese culture. We are taught to question from a very early age, so conceptual views are often difficult to accept. They have to be tackled or consciously implemented in order to appear sensible. One often hears of someone 'taking a concept'. This is the act of choosing a line of thought and rationalizing it. Our two cultures differ in that the Japanese are subconsciously conceptual and we are rationally conceptual. Birch himself, although he works in a traditionally Japanese way, fits into the latter category. We can see this in his work by comparing his interpretation of a particular subject matter to an ancient carver's interpretation of the same. His treatment of *Ashinaga and Tenaga*⁶ is a working example of his decisively conceptual nature. His need to understand his subject has led him to form opinions which he then conveys through his carvings. Instead of carving *Ashinaga* and *Tenaga* as being straightforward and mutually beneficial, he prefers to add another dimension to the tale. In one carving he has made *Ashinaga* fatter than the slim *Tenaga*, because for every fish he catches for *Tenaga*, he eats two himself! As in real life, 'mutually beneficial' is rarely an equal

commodity. In figure 26 we see that he has interpreted *Tenaga* as black, which is unmistakably a comment on social racism. Compare this to figure 27, the work of Gessei, a well-known pre-eighteenth century netsuke carver. Although his style is simple,

full of movement and wonderfully grotesque, he has not embellished the story in any way. Having studied the works of many ancient netsuke carvers, I cannot think of a single case where the carver voiced his opinions or suggested alternative interpretations through his work.

From the above we see that while both cultures are conceptual, it is their approach to conceptuality that makes them different from one another. But perhaps there is a meeting point in our differences. I introduce *Mobius Daruma*⁷ (fig 28). *Daruma* is the monk credited with bringing Zen Buddhism to Japan, in 813 A.D. *Daruma* is said to have sat cross-legged in front of a wall in a silent meditation that lasted nine years⁸. During this time he had no outside influencing ideas so his thoughts simply rotated repeatedly in his mind. Birch has used the image of the mobius to describe this on-going thought, doubling as an interpretation of the philosophies of Zen Buddhism and of the meditating *Daruma*'s state of mind. It is interesting to note that although the mobius is an unnatural form, it presents a Japanese concept. The paradox is that it was transformed into a physical explanation, through the *Mobius Daruma* carving, by an Englishman using a Western analytical approach and arriving at a Japanese conclusion. The Crown Prince of Japan, Takemado, owns Birch's *Mobius Daruma* carving. He goes all over the world with this netsuke in his pocket and takes pride in producing it at dinner parties. He explains its concept and watches as guests tell him how intelligent the Japanese people are. Then he tells them with a smile that it is actually the work of a mere Englishman.

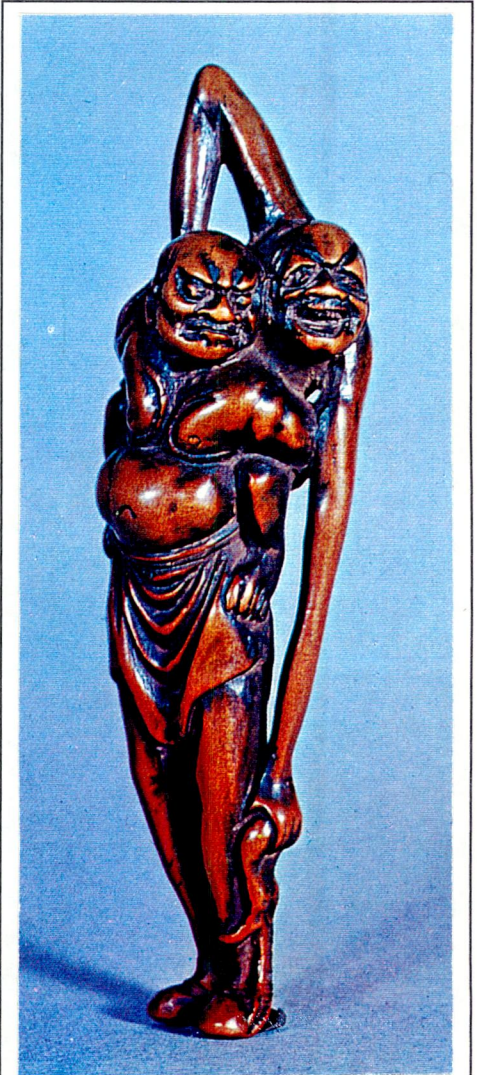


Fig. 27 - *Ashinaga and Tenaga*, Gessei, wood, 8.6 cm high, pre-1800's.

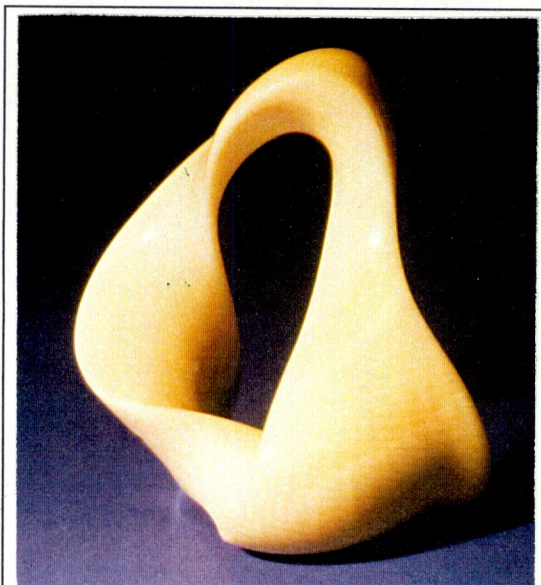


Fig. 28 - *Mobius Daruma*,
Michael Birch, ivory.

Birch is not alone in his vocation. He was the first non-Japanese person to carve netsuke for a living. Now, twenty years after he began carving, there are an estimated one-hundred non-Japanese carvers, many of them inspired by his work. One such man is Michael Webb. Webb wrote to Birch following his solo exhibition in 1976. He was referring to the *Bean Pod* (fig 20) when he wrote: "I cannot rest until I have told you what pleasure it gave me to see and handle such a marvellous work of art. Please accept

my congratulations and admiration"⁹. Shortly afterwards, Webb gave up his job as Director of the Japanese Department at Sotheby's in London and moved to Yorkshire to carve netsuke. He now carves animals in boxwood. However in Japan itself there are only about fifty living *netsuke-shi*. While Japan was an isolated country, the concept of art for the sake of aesthetic beauty did not exist there. Such a Western approach to materialism is popular in Japan today, but it came too late for netsuke. At the time netsuke lost their function, they lost their relevance and subsequently, the Japanese people lost interest in them. Once netsuke no longer filled a physical requirement, they became destined for the export trade. After that, they became a forgotten tradition. It is sad that, today, few Japanese people know what netsuke are. Having encountered much material on the subject of netsuke and ojime, I couldn't help noticing that none of these books or articles are written by the Japanese, although some are printed there. The contemporary Japanese carvers, scarce though they are, are awe-inspiring. Unfortunately, their incredible achievements and fresh approaches are only witnessed by a small group of people, usually fellow carvers and collectors.

Two of my own favourite carvers are Bishu and Kodo. I discovered them in the same book that I found Birch's work - Miriam Kinsey's *Living Masters of Netsuke* (1984). Bishu learned to carve in much the same way as Birch. He had a head-start though, as his father was an ivory carver and had taught him for two years before he died. After that, Bishu resorted to examining and copying antique netsuke in order to acquire skills. However, they faced similar difficulties in obtaining a market. Bishu emerged on the

Black is not alone in his country. It was
the first time I had seen a person of his
kind. I had heard that there were people
like him in the United States, but I had
never seen one. I had heard that there
were people like him in the United States,
but I had never seen one. I had heard
that there were people like him in the
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international market in 1971. He was one of forty-five exhibitors (all netsuke carvers) from the Japan Ivory Sculptors Association, exhibiting their original designs in honour of Miriam and Robert Kinsey¹⁰. The Kinseys chose to buy Bishu's *Alighting Swan* (fig 29), a visually pleasing and cleverly designed ivory netsuke. Bishu was elated. This had been a new design. The acceptance of his work by foreign collectors was so important to his career that he gave them this netsuke as a gift. It had taken six months to design and produce. This

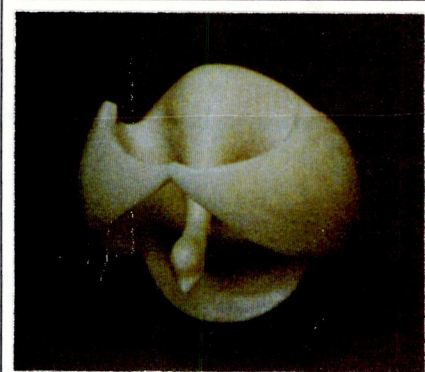


Fig. 29 - *Alighting Swan*, Bishu, ivory, 1971.

action underlines the importance to the netsuke-shi of developing a clientele of interested buyers. Another lovely carving by Bishu is the *Rabbit* (fig 30). This was carved in 1973, two years after he decided, with the encouragement of foreign interest, to phase out his business in commercial ivory carving in favour of becoming a nestuke-shi. *Rabbit* shows the humour and playfulness with which he often approaches his subjects. It also tells of his beautiful use of dynamics and movement.

Bishu is a traditionalist carver, true to the netsuke form and rules in every way. Kodo, on the other hand, began as a painter and became accomplished in this field. He is a master of Japanese traditionalism rather than of an individual Japanese craft, although he excels in many. His father was a carver and he admired the art of netsuke from the age of fifteen. However, he seems to have stumbled into carving as opposed to making carving a conscious career vocation. Kodo was slow to enter the netsuke market. In 1972, a dealer had apparently told him his first carvings were too unconventional¹¹. This discouragement set him back almost five years, but in the end, he followed his own artistic instincts and found much appreciation among buyers. Kodo does not carve with function in mind. For him, more than any of the other netsuke-shi, carving is a tool of expression. This does not mean that he is thoughtless in his approach. On the contrary, he designs down to the finest detail - nothing is left to chance. However, many of Kodo's carvings are too big, too delicate or too sharp to be functional netsuke. His work is influenced mainly by nature, Japanese historical artifacts and the artist's own sense of humour. In *Sea Poem* (fig 31), the very first netsuke he carved, the influence of Hokusai's wood block prints is obvious. I fell for this piece for the same reason I fell for Hokusai's work. They both use colour brilliantly, applying it strongly but maintaining a



Fig. 30 - *Rabbit*,
Bishu, ivory, 1973.

Fig. 31 - *Sea Poem*,
Kodo, ivory, 1971.



softness that allows the colours to fold into each other uninterrupted. The deep blue centre sweeps smoothly up to the curling white edges of *Sea Poem* without breaking the motion with an obvious divide in the colours. This is also why I am attracted to his *Three Hozuki*¹² (fig 32). These pieces are cleverly carved although they are too fragile to be functional. Inside each lantern a spider is busy at work. In the first he is tiny and has made little impact on the pod. The spider in the second has done more damage. The third spider is striped with a large green abdomen. He has made a hole in the pod¹³. The

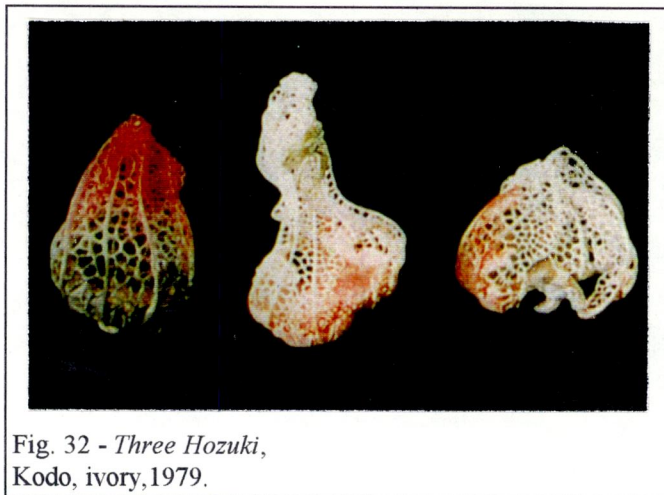


Fig. 32 - *Three Hozuki*,
Kodo, ivory, 1979.

ultimate irony of Kodo's approach is in his signature. He signs his work using a pictograph of a horse. On the cloth wrapping of the pieces, he draws the pictograph and beside it writes *Umaroku Bufunzan*. This translates literally as 'excrement mountain of six horses'! He had decided that

because he has a family name, his father's carving name and a painting name, his netsuke name should be comical.¹⁴

Yanagi Soetsu once said "It is deplorable that the world should think that there is such a difference between the East and the West. I do not believe in such a gap. I wish to destroy the idea of a gap. The meeting of the East and West will not be on a bridge over a gap, but upon the destruction of the idea of a gap"¹⁵. I believe that by choosing to carve netsuke, thoroughly exploring and actively participating in a traditional craft of Japan, Birch has taken a significant step towards the elimination of such a gap. Many more, inspired by the dynamics that he has achieved within this artform, have since set out to follow in his footsteps. He and his Japanese contemporaries have become brother carvers. For them, the gap is closed.



CONCLUSION

At the end of Chapter 3, I mentioned Yanagi's ideas of bringing the East and West together, and that in the cases of these netsuke carvers, this was already done. However, a closer look at Japanese sensibilities unearths some confusing contradictions. By looking at both Yanagi and Natsume Soseki, a prominent novelist of the earlier decades of this century, we can see a pattern that still reads in Japan today. Soseki, like many Japanese, resented his heritage that had kept Japan behind the rest of the world technically. He also resented the West for disturbing the peaceful lifestyle of Japan and filling it with haste and careless hurry. In slavish efforts to catch up with the West, Japan pushed its industry and economic status forward at a speed that was to the immediate detriment of the welfare of its population. It had become oppressed by both cultures, and Soseki angrily wrote "We do not study Western literature and art to be captured by them. We study them so that we can release ourselves from them."¹ This is underlined by Yanagi's admiration for the West alongside his inferiority complex towards the West, which together pushed him to search for a national identity through the *mingei* movement. However, "In Japan, the concept of *mingei* has been made out to be unique to that country, owing little, if anything, to Western aesthetics".²

From the above it is apparent that the union of East and West is an uneasy one. It juggles the differences discussed in chapter 3. An ideal arrangement would be for "Western logic and Eastern spirit"³ to co-exist. This has happened in so far as the Japanese today have

used Western knowledge and so become a force to be reckoned with in areas of international design, technology and production. However, Pauline Flynn, an Irish weaver who has lived and worked in Japan for over four years, has spoken of Japanese people today.⁴ She feels there is still a resentment of Westerners. This is evident in Brien Moeran's account of how Leach's and Yanagi's respective supporters viewed *mingei*: "For Leach, *mingei* offered a combination of Western orientalism and romanticism. For Yanagi, *mingei* was a means by which the Japanese could reassert their 'true'⁵ traditions, and thereby begin to assert the moral superiority of Japan over the materialism of Western civilisation."⁶ It is possible that when the Japanese are technically self-sufficient to the extent that they can break cultural ties with the West, they will retreat back into themselves again, just as Soseki suggests. The Japanese have a choice that will most likely be realised over the next fifty years. They can either do as Ireland did and 'rediscover' traditional values, or they can 'close' their country again, armed with their Western knowledge, experience and ample market for their goods.

As this study draws to a close, there remains a question to be answered. In the light of the precarious future of Japan's heritage, where does the art of netsuke carving go from here? While at the Japanese Studio Crafts Exhibition and seminar last July at the Victoria and Albert museum, I was pleased to find that the contemporary preservation of crafts displayed a very positive step by the Japanese into their own culture. But a new tradition has formed. No longer are craftsmen in Japan concerned with fifteen year apprenticeships (although these still exist there).⁷ The foundations for exploration and individuality as a tradition have been laid during the twentieth century and it will, most likely, be the heritage of the next century. At this exhibition I noticed that almost every traditional craft was covered, except that of netsuke carving. Despite the fact that the Japanese government recognised Birch's genius and honoured him by making him a Living National Treasure, there seems to be little sense of national heritage among modern Japanese people regarding the art of netsuke. As a traditional art form it has been culturally erased. At present, the only market for netsuke is through collectors. The survival of netsuke carving relies on the ability of individual carvers to awaken a creative urge in others through their work. Birch plays an invaluable role in this process. In his article and lecture entitled "The Netsuke Connexion" he preached to collectors that netsuke are everyone's art. Anyone can make netsuke by taking an object and altering it

slightly, or simply adopting it as it is. It's easy: "Netsuke are not only skilled carvings, they are found objects."⁸ They offer such potential for self-expression. Birch encourages people to create and enjoy their creations, to see carvings and become inspired to make more. The real future of netsuke lies with every individual who is touched by these carvings. Netsuke is a craft to protect and explore until such a time that the Japanese population hopefully turn back to their heritage. Then they can share in an art that has brought richness to those who appreciate its creative elements.

ENDNOTES:

Chapter One

¹ Michael Birch, Lecture, National College of Art and Design, Dec '95.

² E.A. Wrangham, Michael Birch - Netsuke and Sculpture, 1976.

³ Michael Birch, The Netsuke Connexion, Netsuke Kenkyukai Study Journal, July, 1980, pg 4-5.

⁴ Kato Shuichi, Japan: Spirit and Form, 1994, p 9.

⁵ Michael Birch, Lecture, NCAD, Dec '95.

⁶ *Netsuke-shi* is the proper term for a master carver of netsuke.

⁷ It has been mentioned to me by an associate who grew up in Japan, that if this rule were to be broken or if it was thought that an individual lacked the required measure of respect for a Samurai or court member, the punishment was instant death.

⁸ Alice Roden, an Irish weaver, studied weaving in Japan for ten weeks in 1985 after being inspired by her experiences of teaching a Japanese girl to weave in Ireland.

⁹ Alice Roden, Lecture at Chester Beatty Library, 'The Teaching of Japanese Traditional Crafts and its Effects on my Work', Nov. '95.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Miriam Kinsey quoting Michael Birch, Living Masters of Netsuke, (1984), p 154.

¹³ Good illustrated documentaries on Netsuke are few in number. For this reason it has happened that the five carvers I have chosen are all sourced in Raymond Bushell's book Collectors' Netsuke (1977).

¹⁴ Bushell, Collectors' Netsuke, (1977), p 16. All references to Bushell are from his book Collectors' Netsuke, unless otherwise stated.

¹⁵ Bushell, *op. cit.*, p 19.

¹⁶ The *kirin* is a mythical beast of Chinese origin. It is a good omen and is represented both in animal and humanoid forms. As an animal it has two horns, the body of a deer and a skin of fire.

¹⁷ *Hinoki* is the Japanese for cypress wood

¹⁸ Bushell, *op. cit.*, p 23.

¹⁹ *op. cit.*, p 79.

²⁰ A *chomei* is a signature found on netsuke carvings but, unlike a signature found on a painting, it includes details as to who taught the carver, whether he is lefthanded or whether, in rare cases, the carver is a woman.

²¹ *Kanji* are Chinese characters involving anything from two strokes to twenty-six strokes per character.

²² Bushell, *op. cit.*, p.53.

²³ *Ibid.*

Chapter Two

¹ Michael Birch, Lecture, National College of Art and Design, Dec '95. All material concerning Michael Birch refers to his lecture and interview in the National College of Art and Design, Dec '95, unless otherwise stated.

² *Ibid.*

³ The Oxford English Dictionary defines art as being "Produced by humans as opposed to nature".

⁴ Michael Birch, *op. cit.*

⁵ Luigi Bandini, Michael Birch - Netsuke and sculpture, 1976.

⁶ Michael Birch, *op. cit.*

⁷ Miriam Kinsey, Living Masters of Netsuke, (1984), p. 188

⁸ Kinsey, *op. cit.*, p. 157

⁹ Kinsey, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

¹⁰ Very long netsuke such as this *Bean Pod* are called *sashi*. They are not worn as toggles, but are thrust deep into the obi for support.

¹¹ Michael Birch, *op. cit.*

¹² *Ibid.*

Chapter Three

¹ Michael Birch, op. cit.

² Ibid.

³ Kinsey, op. cit., glossary.

⁴ Martina Margetts, 'The Eloquent Art of Synthesis', Crafts, Sept/Oct. '91, p 22.

⁵ Rupert Faulkner, Japanese Studio Crafts - Tradition and the Avant-Garde, (1995), p 13.

⁶ *Ashinaga and Tenaga* are popular subjects in netsuke, although they are not of Japanese origin. The story is of two tribes living either side of a river. One tribe has long arms but short legs and the other has short legs and long arms. Neither can catch fish on their own. In order to survive they adopt a system where the fishermen from the tribe with long arms ride piggy-back on the fishermen with long legs. In this way the one with long legs can wade into the deeper waters where the fish are while the one with the long arms can catch the fish.

⁷ *Daruma* travelled from his native country of India some time during the late eighth century. There he joined a temple and sat motionless for nine years contemplating the doctrines of Zen Buddhism, after which time he concluded that "nothing has ever really existed". He then crossed the sea on a reed and arrived in Japan in 813 AD, (account taken from Michael Birch - Netsuke and Sculpture, (1976), np.

⁸ Netsuke Kenkyukai Society, The Carvings of Henry Michael Birch, 1995.

⁹ Letter to Michael Birch from Michael Webb, dated March 14th 1976, Sotheby and Co., London.

¹⁰ Kinsey, op. cit., p 33.

¹¹ Kinsey, op. cit., p 138.

¹² Japanese Lanterns are pods from a plant known as *Huzuki*. There is a berry inside. When the pods decay or are eaten by insects, they are left as delicate skeletal forms.

¹³ Kinsey, op. cit., p 182.

¹⁴ Kinsey, op. cit., p 139.

¹⁵ Quotation taken from Yuko Kikuchi, 'The Myth of Yanagi's Originality: The Formation of *Mingei* Theory in its Social and Historical Context', Journal of Design History, (1994), p 253.

Conclusion.

¹ Yuko Kikuchi, op. cit., p 253.

² Brien Moeran, "Bernard Leach and the Japanese Folk Movement: the Formative Years", Journal of Design History, 1989, p 139.

³ op. cit., p 252.

⁴ Pauline Flynn, NCAD, Jan. '96.

⁵ Moeran has questioned 'true' here, suggesting that Japanese traditions, by the nature of the Japanese people themselves, are invented.

⁶ Moeran, op. cit., p 143.

⁷ Flynn, *ibid*.

⁸ Birch, "The Netsuke Connexion", Netsuke Kenkyukai Study Journal, July 1980, p 5.

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2. Michael Birch, Interview and Lecture, Dec. '95.
3. Pauline Flynn, Interview and Lecture regarding her experiences of Japanese culture, Jan. 1996.

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TO THE EDITOR OF THE JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN CHEMICAL SOCIETY
FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF CHEMISTRY, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

RE: [Illegible Title]

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INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL BIRCH, 6/12/'95

VENUE: Lecture Hall, National College of Art and Design - Post Lecture Open Discussion and Interview.

How did you start carving?

When I was nine years old my father gave me a birthday present of three netsuke. I was totally mesmerized and it was my ambition from then on. I started carving at the age of nine. Then the war came along. Then I started carving in 1947, got married, had children, couldn't support a family on netsuke, so I started a business. In 1970, I ended the business with 2000 employees in order to carve netsuke.

I had done a six foot head in 1946 on a bombsight in London in Portland Limestone. But I couldn't carry it away. After that I decided to do small things - netsuke. I still have this desire to carve netsuke. It never left me. So, around 1970/'71 I had already started collecting traditional antique netsuke. I bought the whole lot - quite cheap ones, broken ones or very good ones that I kept in the collection, and repaired the broken ones. I gradually acquired a certain amount of skill. I should say that before that I had worked in 1946 in a spectacle factory making spectacle frames start to finish by hand. So I merely had to apply the technique of making a spectacle frame by hand to making a netsuke. The same tools. It was really fairly easy.

What tools do you use?

I use the same tools as the Japanese. We use high powered dental drills. The only difference between the technique I use and the contemporary Japanese carvers use is that in part of the finishing process they use very sharp chisels to scrape, whereas I use riffler files - very fine-shaped Swiss files. The process hasn't changed for centuries. They used hand turned lathes before electric power drills.

It's simple to say that my father gave me a present of three netsuke and then I always wanted to carve. It sounds wonderfully romantic. No. I had a very important reason for carving netsuke which I explained earlier, which is working within rules. If you have rules, if you have a boundary, then you can push and expand that boundary a little bit. No boundary? - Where's the excitement? Within those boundaries anything goes. I do abstracts in its variety of meanings. Abstract work, very realistic work, representational work - all the categories of working that kind of artifact. And you can break one or two of the minor rules as well. There's a long standing argument between carvers. Now netsuke no longer perform their sartorial function, should we carve *himotoshi*? I always put in *himotoshi* as a kind of symbolic thing. I always carve it as though it may be worn, and in fact some of my netsuke are worn by Japanese on ceremonial occasions. If I had said to myself "I'm going to be a really smart guy and skip the *himotoshi*" these people wouldn't be wearing my carvings. I don't think that 'functional' has any meaning in art what-so-ever. Everything is functional. Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel painting - you couldn't find anything more functional than that.

What did Henry Moore advise you?

I was gatecrashing the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts - I couldn't afford to pay for tuition - and I found the conservatory at the back of the college was where they kept the clay and it had a gas room. So, I used to go there every day. The tutors used to come down. The sculpture tutor came down and saw me and said "Who are you?" He must have assumed was some kind of lone maverick sculptor belonging to some part of the school. By that time I was making tea. I was brewing a better cup of tea than the canteen. So, I used to get very individual tuition from these people. Henry Moore said to me "Now listen laddie - for a piece of sculpture to be important it has to be large". To which, with all the arrogance and pertinence of youth, I replied "I don't think so. I think that something that is small can be even greater." He made a wonderful incalculable contribution to sculpture but after a while his spirit became exhausted and he started to plagiarize himself. He copied himself endlessly.

I'm intrigued by the spiritual sense of your work...

All human beings have a desire for some degree of secular immortality. But certainly we want to be remembered. It's something that's built into our genetic make-up. We create children - that's a form of

1. The first part of the paper is devoted to a general discussion of the problem.

2. In the second part, we shall consider the case of a single particle. The results obtained in this case are of great importance for the understanding of the general case.

3. The third part of the paper is devoted to a detailed analysis of the results obtained in the previous sections.

4. In the fourth part, we shall discuss the physical interpretation of the results obtained. It will be shown that the results are in good agreement with the experimental data.

5. The fifth part of the paper is devoted to a summary of the results obtained and to some concluding remarks.

6. The sixth part of the paper is devoted to a bibliography of the work done in this field.

immortality. If my work ends up in a museum, heaven forbid, people will be looking at it in a thousand years time. We all instinctively make things with the thought "I'm going to be remembered for this".

Is there a sense of the wisdom of the Japanese that you are conveying through your carvings?

I don't think that there is any wisdom that I convey through my carvings. I think they are a highly idiosyncratic mirror, a highly personal mirror that I hold up to certain aspects of life. Whatever wisdom I may have goes into my books. My intuitive appreciation of the world about me goes into my carvings. They're two allies but separate functions.

How did you find out about Japanese legends?

I read about them in a book by Henry Joly. There are 10,000 Japanese legends. So many of them are borrowed from other cultures, so many of them have a parallel in other cultures. It's simply a readily accessible compendium on international subject matter. It just happens to be there. It's useful. So why go hunting around? When it comes to the interpretation of the execution of the piece - shape, contours, the design of the piece - I abandon the legends altogether. There I have been influenced by pre-Columbian art and Egyptian sculpture, least of all by Japan. For me the most fantastic piece of sculpture is the Wilendorf Venus. It's incredible. What we believe to be our primitive ancestors could produce such an elegant and dynamic creature as this female goddess of fecundity.

Which piece would you most like to be remembered by?

Janet Birch (wife) - It would have to be the broken cowry shell. It's very simple.

Michael Birch - If my immortality depended on that piece there would have to be a lengthy explanation on an indestructible piece of paper attached to it. On its own it's not enough. It's very realistic but it's not carved from shell. At first glance it could just be a shell but at second glance it isn't. It is this infinitely subtle difference between the object and the object made by a human being, barely perceptible. It's that difference that becomes so vast. Once you have appreciated and understood that that was not produced by nature - it was produced by a human being. And that is where the definition of art comes in the Oxford English dictionary - "Produced by humans as opposed to nature". For me there is something very dramatic about an object that is so realistic that it can fool the eye - infinitely subtle.

You were saying in Miriam Kinsey's book that the Japanese are very conceptual by nature. Is this not also true for your work?

Yes they stick to the root of the concept. If they do a Samurai they do all the details. For me, if I were to do a Samurai I would do him more as a warrior and not tend too much to the detail, but add just that degree of distortion to give him a little bit of a heart-beat. By saying that the Japanese are conceptual I didn't mean that I wasn't. I'm even more conceptual than the Japanese but in a different way. When the Japanese wanted to make me a member of their guild - a non Japanese person had never been appointed to a Japanese guild - it would have been a joke. A Westerner is not a member of the human race as far as their concerned. Being conceptual in a particular way, the Japanese worked the situation this way - Netsuke are essentially Japanese, Birch is a netsuke carver, therefore Birch is Japanese.

The way you treat your subject is very conceptual, whereas you have described the Japanese as being conceptual.

The Japanese are conceptual in seeing certain things that in Western eyes might seem quite contradictory. We would describe them as syllogisms. A cat is an animal, a cow is an animal, therefore a cow is a cat. The Japanese felt that this was an apt philosophical approach to a situation. They would create an aphorism and that would be a conceptual view. To them it would be real. Where I adopt a conceptual attitude towards the carving it means something quite different. It doesn't necessarily mean I see the subject matter as some concept. I introduce my own interpretation of the subject matter. If it happens to be Japanese or even something borrowed by the Japanese, like Ashinaga and Tenaga, they would always depict the fishermen in their own conceptual way - long arms, long legs. My concept takes it a little bit further. I don't even have arms on the one with the long legs or legs on the one with the long arms. I don't consider that necessary. The observer can contribute the missing arms and legs. It is a form, but one that clearly defines what it is supposed to be.

How did Egypt influence your work?

The fact that I was born in Egypt and lived the first twenty years of my life in Egypt is totally irrelevant. Speaking Arabic and being able to read the Koran obviously had some influence on me. I was possibly more influenced by Pre-Columbian art. Every culture produced small objects. They weren't necessarily for toggles, but they were small - carved, formed, shaped, cast in metal, whatever. And I have looked at small objects - Pre-Columbian, Byzantine, Etruscan, Mongolian horse bronzes. That has all gone into the reservoir of my brain. There it gets mixed up and emerges as an influence on what I do. I have been just as much influenced by the shape of bones, of growth. One of my most influential books is one called "On Growth and Form" by D'arcy Thompson in which practically every form found in nature is explained and analyzed as far as it is possible to do so. The growth pattern of antlers; there is a formula for the shape of the egg; the shapes of sea shells; the shape of the head of the femur and the acetabulum; ball and socket joints; fish bones; flowers; leaves; things that grow, particularly things that have a form that is due to their growth. I am not excited or influenced by the shape of pebbles, for instance, that are rounded off in streams. Those kind of forms that are created by erosion - I don't find that terribly interesting. But something that has grown cell by cell and has its own dynamics and inner-strength, like the shape of the cross section of the metatarsal bone of the eagle is an incredible construction of struts. The shape of the egg inspired Brancusi to make a bronze ovoid - one of the most beautiful pieces of sculpture. Growth and form have a greater influence than the unconscious influences. Sometimes I'm influenced by the material itself, but an artist must not allow the material to dictate.

Do you know the work of Bishu and Kodo?

Yes I do. They're good friends of mine. They're both totally different individuals. Bishu is a maverick. So is Kodo. Kodo doesn't belong to any guild. He lives in the hills outside Tokyo where there are wild ponies, pine trees and conifers. He has a particularly significant attitude towards nature. He goes for long walks. He is deeply moved by pony droppings. His carving name is *Bafunzan*. It means 'pony excrement'. I'm rather proud of the fact that in the 'alcove' in his house he has a painting of mine. Bishu is a bit of a nut. He speaks English. His English becomes increasingly fluent in direct relation to his intake of Johnny Walker Black Label Whiskey. At the point of about one fifth of a bottle we are exchanging philosophical views. I'm drinking a lot of sake in the meanwhile. We can communicate very well that way. Some of his carvings are really brilliant. Geniuses don't produce masterpieces everytime. Bishu is a genius.

How did you find out about Bishu and Kodo? Did you go looking for other netsuke artists?

I met them at a netsuke convention in Honolulu in 1975. We immediately became friends. When I went to Japan they invited me to their homes. It was great. they're great friends of mine - brother carvers.

Masatoshi carved a bat and so did Bishu. But Bishu's bat has, in your own words, a heartbeat.

Bishu's bat - is it round? Yes - I own that. Masatoshi is different. He was Raymond Bushell's captive carver. Raymond Bushell was his patron. I wrote a review for the book "Arts of Asia" in which I slapped him on the wrists for holding Masatoshi in bondage. He may have paid him well, but he stored away all of Masatoshi's work and never showed it to anybody, never sold it to anybody. So Masatoshi never got any feedback. I know Masatoshi quite well. He has this odd notion that you mustn't use a power drill - you can only use your hands. Meiki is a superb carver - very skillful but not very imaginative. And Ryushai - the lovely Ryushai....I can't go into them all. When I first started there were probably only about seven or eight practicing carvers who earned a living at it.

But you were the first non-Japanese...

...who did it professionally? Yes. Ever. Now there are over 100 non-Japanese. Altogether, probably about 150 living carvers. I had to do a lot of hard work in going to all the conventions, giving lectures, explaining the obvious to a lot of obstinate people who said "Oh, this is a contemporary netsuke, rubbish imitation netsuke" and there are still idiots who say that. Historically its nonsense of course. There has been an historical continuity in netsuke carving ever since the first netsuke was carved. The art goes on. You can't say "These are antique so they're valid". That would be producing an iconographic, very limited art-form pointlessly.

Where is the market for netsuke today?

Well, at the moment its a rather limited market among people who collect netsuke. Some of them are attracted by the work of living artists. There are collectors who always buy my work for instance. But there's still quite a bit of resistance, especially on a question of price.

How may netsuke do you make a year?

It varies. I may only make one or two when I'm writing a book. Or I may make 20 or 30 in a year where I'm doing nothing else but carving.

Is there alot of interest in netsuke from institutions like museums and galleries?

No. They don't know about them. Some museums have quite important collections of early netsuke and they don't know they there.

So the main business point of netsuke today would be at conventions?

Yes. And sometimes we get commissions.

Are the Japanese themselves interested at all?

No. They don't even know what they are.

So it is a primarily Western Interest?

The West became interested because there were some collectors who discovered netsuke and collected them. After WW2 when the Americans occupied Japan, they discovered them because some very poor Japanese had netsuke as family heirlooms, and for a couple of dollars would sell their netsuke. So the Americans brought back quite a large quantity of netsuke and formed collections that way. But as I said earlier, once a utilitarian object is no longer of use the Japanese forget about it.

When you were talking about the mobius, you were describing it as something that never ends, like a continuous thought in Zen Buddhism. Its interesting to note that Zen Buddhism is based on continuity and also on continuous change.

No. I was not referring to continuous change. The mobius is a formula which doesn't exist in nature. I have this semi-philosophical notion of the figure of Daruma sitting cross-legged facing a wall for nine years with his thoughts constantly repeating themselves. You couldn't have had any tremendously, wonderful, world-shattering thoughts during that nine years of silent meditation where he's not communication with anybody, there's no input, nothing. His thoughts are just rotation endlessly, never going over the edge. With the mobius you can have the illusion of being on one side or the other but in fact you're on the same surface. That is what fascinated the Japanese. Its unthinkable that a barbarian could have such an astonishingly original thought. The crown prince of Japan, Takemado, goes all over the world with this mobius Daruma in his pocket. Art should occasionally be serious but not solemn. Religion should be solemn but not serious. I don't believe that either should exist anyway.

Does religion influence your work?

Only in the sense that I'm a total devout atheist. I do not believe in any God of any kind.

When you work with a subject like Dosojin, Are you telling a story or is there a religious element?

Dosojin is the god of fertility. Its simply an historical thing. I just like the notion of stones carved in the shape of a phallus down the road, and imagining what the Japanese thought as they passed them. Did they touch them lightly? Did the kiss them? Who knows? The whole thing of primordial people thinking in terms of Gods of harvest and fecundity and fertility is a tremendous fun thing, but it has damn-all to do with Deities. Its nothing to do with God. The whole thing of fecundity and fertility as a subject appeal to me. I thought here are these roadside gods. Some of them are quite abstract. So I thought "Heck, I'll do one". I did one. I liked it . I did another one. I explored the subject and then I thought "enough" and moved on. The Japanese don't have the faintest notion who Dosojin is.

