

An Enduring Heritage

The Traditional Dollmakers of Naruko

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY TERRY MARTIN



It is easy to forget that in many countries woodturning is still a simple production craft which remains untouched by the hype and glamour of the recent woodturning revolution. Across Africa, the Middle East, the Indian sub-continent, and Asia, turners are still producing work little different from that produced by their ancestors. Nowhere is this more true than in Japan, a land where thousands of professional turners continue to make functional wares for daily use and simple decorative items which have not changed for hundreds of years. A stroll through any large Japanese department store will eventually bring you to a section which sells work usually referred to as lacquerware, but which anyone inter-

A gathering of wooden dolls from the national *kokeshi* museum in Naruko. Located in a rural area of northern Japan, the village is famous for these lathe-turned dolls.

ested in turning will quickly recognize as a wonderful expression of the traditional craft, with a superb technique and design philosophy all its own. The fact that there is never a “woodturning section” tells us a lot about the status of turning itself in Japan. It is looked upon simply as job-work, or a way to produce the raw material for those who apply the lacquer and who are considered artists of the highest degree. There are many reasons for this difference, but it is not very difficult to understand when we reflect on the status of our own turners not so long ago.

I have spent many years trying to pene-

trate the world of Japanese turning, and it has been both a frustrating and rewarding experience. The frustration comes from the fact that Japanese turners have often been secretive about their work. Each turner has to serve a long and arduous apprenticeship and, with a different design tradition in each region, the turners have jealously protected their ideas. Even the lathes vary from region to region, and techniques are accordingly different. They are so accustomed to working without any public attention that it is quite disconcerting for them to see a foreigner at their door, especially one who introduces

himself as a turner. Rural Japan, where most turners work, has not experienced many Westerners nosing around, so it has taken years of accumulated contacts and well-polished Japanese manners to open the door even slightly.

One exception to this rule is the village of Naruko, which relies on woodturning for much of its income, and which has taken promotion of the craft to a fine art. Throughout Japan, different turning regions produce distinctive turned dolls called *kokeshi*, which are sold as souvenirs. But no village is as famous for its *kokeshi* as Naruko, which also has the national *kokeshi* museum. It is a big tourist attraction and is visited by huge numbers of Japanese throughout the year. Also, the village itself is a kind of living museum, where you can watch the turners at work.

Naruko lies in the northern Miyagi district on the main island of Honshu. The region is heavily forested, and fast-running streams tumble down improbably steep gorges. Because Naruko lies in such a steep-sided valley, the village has grown along one winding street lined with curiosity shops and restaurants catering to the tourist trade (1). There are about 100 turners active in Naruko, and many work behind big glass windows in the same shops where the work is sold, so you can stand outside and watch the dolls being made.

I strolled along the street one wet wintry day, searching for a friendly face to introduce myself to. Outside one impressive establishment I watched the turner for a while, until a friendly glance encouraged me to go in and introduce myself. His name was Hitoshi Okazaki, and he was happy to talk about his work and let me take photographs. Japanese houses and shops are rarely centrally heated, so some tea to stave off the cold was very welcome.

After tea, Okazaki-san showed me the lathe he uses to rough out the blanks for his dolls. He uses local dogwood, a creamy white timber which produces the most amazing shavings. The lathe was a cross between a metal lathe and a wood lathe, and by quickly manipulating a cross-slide, Okazaki-san roughed a blank in around five seconds (2).

Back in the glass-fronted workshop, he showed me his tools. As with all other professional turners in Japan, he forges his own hook tools. Because of this



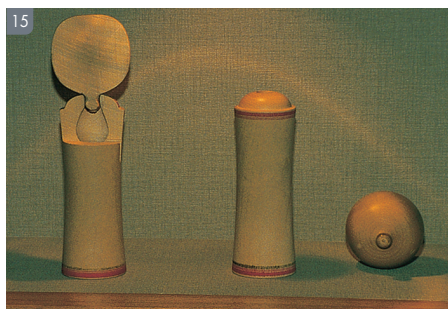
home-forging, Japanese turners do not use high-speed steel and need to hone their tools constantly on a set of quality water stones kept beside the lathe (3).

He mounted the first blank on the lathe by hammering it onto a ring chuck, a sharpened circle rather like a sharp-edged cup chuck. The ring-shaped mark this chuck makes in the base of the doll is left afterwards and serves as a decorative frame for the maker's signature. With two mighty blows of a heavy hammer (4), he mounted the piece. It is surprising to see this common technique for two reasons. Firstly, the accumulated impact on the bearings must be considerable, and this may partly account for the fact that shafts and bearings on Japanese lathes

are the heaviest I have seen anywhere. Secondly, the blank ran absolutely true after two blows and needed no further adjustment. I have seen many turners do this repeatedly, so it is obviously a standard technique, but I once tried it myself, which really made me appreciate the skill involved.

Every turning region in Japan tends to have a different style of toolrest. In Naruko it is a simple wooden bar, which rests on a beam at each end of the lathe. It is secured by the left hand, which holds the tool in position with strong downward pressure (5). By easing off the pressure, the toolrest can be moved to different positions for different cuts.

Okazaki-san quickly started to turn



the doll's body with side-to-side swinging movements of the tool, his body gently rocking with the tool handle locked against his chest and the cutting end held in an extreme trailing position. All Japanese turners work in this tool-down position, and frequently have as much of the tool hanging over the toolrest as is on the handle side. From personal experience I can confirm it makes the tool very difficult to control, although it does allow a widely sweeping cut. This difficulty of control might account for the white knuckles on Okazaki-san's hands, although it never translates into poor cuts. When the blank was transformed into a concave cylinder,

the end was quickly rounded over with a few deft rolling cuts to form the "shoulders" of the doll (6). Next, the finish was refined with a small scraper, held freehand, which produced fine, feathery scrapings (7).

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Sanding was done with a kind of "duck-bill" technique, where the sandpaper is folded and held in both hands, which are then locked to form a "bill" (8). Final finishing was done with two bunches of stalks of the horsetail plant, a fibrous locally-grown material which, along with sharkskin, was the traditional sanding material in Japan (9). When the sanding was complete, the body was burnished with a handful of shavings.

In the next stage, decorative rings of brightly-colored ink were applied by brush to each end of the body while the lathe turned. It was delightful to watch these rings leap into view with the lightest

touch of the brush (10, 11). The water-based ink dried almost immediately, and a final coat of wax was applied to the painted areas (12). The rest of the body was not waxed, as it was going to be painted off the lathe.

Naruko dolls are different from any other dolls turned in Japan because the head is turned separately from the body. Okazaki-san used a kind of ploughing cut to bore a hole in the body with a hook tool unsupported by the toolrest (13). Okazaki-san's experience showed as he didn't pause to measure the diameter of the hole, even though the need for accuracy soon became apparent. The neck of the head is a small ball-shaped nub, the diameter of which is slightly larger than the internal diameter of the hole in the body. With the lathe turning, he pushed the neck into the hole with a quick twist. There was a momentary resistance, a puff of smoke as the wood burnt slightly and then, with an audible click, the head snapped into place (14). I was best able to understand how this worked when I later visited the museum and saw a cut-away example showing how the nub snugly fit in place (15).

I watched Okazaki-san for a few hours and then, after another warming tea, he took me into his house and introduced me to his father, who had trained him. Now in his late 70s, Okazaki-san senior spends his days sitting quietly, painting the final decoration on the dolls. The patterns used are the same for all local turners, with only minor variations, as they identify the dolls as "Naruko work." With remarkable aplomb, considering the intruding foreigner, Okazaki senior showed me how he works.

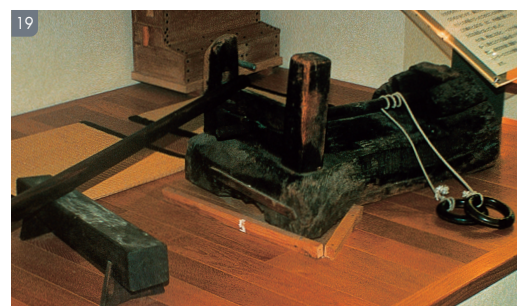
Concentrating intensely, he rapidly painted the central part of the body with flower themes, and then filled in the hair on the head. He wore a clean white glove so that oil from his skin wouldn't prevent the paint from adhering to the wood (16). When the body was finished, he stopped and gazed at the face for a long time, as if he was lost in a reverie. Just when I started to wonder, he began slowly painting the face (17). After every stroke he paused to examine the work intently and, when it was finished, he grunted with satisfaction.

As he reached for the next doll, I couldn't resist asking, "Why did you do most of the work so quickly, then take so much time with the face?" He looked

at me over his glasses and smiled. "If the face isn't right, the rest is a waste of time. The expression must be just so!" He finally turned the doll upside down, and with a few quick strokes signed the family name inside the circle left by the chuck. As he reached for another doll, he handed me the finished one. When I looked at the face it certainly was "just so." With a few simple lines he had created a sad, winsome expression (18).

Later in the day I visited the Naruko doll museum, which is a beautiful building high on a ridge overlooking the village. I particularly enjoyed the audio-visual presentations and the display of old tools. Among these was the only actu-

ferent, but all recognizably of the same heritage. I was also told why the Naruko dolls are the only ones to be made in two parts. If you twist the head it gives off a high squeaking sound, because of the tight fit. Legend has it that the noise represents the cry of a departed child, hence the name of the village Naruko, which can be read as meaning "crying child." I was suitably moved and it made me realize why these dolls are so popular as unique souvenirs. Later, however, a knowledgeable innkeeper rather spoiled the story by telling me that the town had been named Naruko long before the dolls were made and the story was made up just to add value to them—another



al example I have ever seen of the old Japanese pull-pull lathe. I had seen them represented in old scrolls, but the lathe I saw brought home the reality of the hard work involved (19). The lathe was powered by an assistant who braced his/her legs (I have seen both sexes represented) against the body of the lathe, leaned back and pulled alternately on the ends of a rope wrapped around the shaft. The turner worked in the same way as with other reciprocating lathes around the world, such as the pole lathe or bow lathe.

There is an astonishing number of turned dolls on display, each slightly dif-

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Terry Martin is a contributing editor for Woodwork magazine.