

A Follower of Dreams

The Netsuke of Susan Wraight

BY TERRY MARTIN



PHOTO BY TERRY MARTIN

The traditional Japanese art of netsuke, dating back hundreds of years, has evolved into a highly respected contemporary art form with a sophisticated following of collectors all over the world. Originally, netsuke were functional toggles attached to cords to hold small cases or pouches on the sash of the traditional Japanese garment, the kimono. Now the original function, although still nominally preserved in many netsuke, has become less important than the exploration of the artistic potential of this intriguing miniature genre of the carver's art.

All artists work within limits, some

externally imposed—such as finances or available materials—and some self-imposed—such as choice of material or technique. The ability to meaningfully and creatively explore limits can be the hallmark of a true artist. In the exploration of limits, netsuke take wood art to a level of sophistication not achieved by any other use of the medium.

Originally, the netsuke had to be slipped through the sash easily without snagging on the folds of cloth, so they had to be smooth and without projecting corners. Another obvious limit was size. The most favored materials have always been

ivory and wood, both durable but still able to take the detailed carving necessary in such fine work. The themes of the art were usually figurative, depicting legendary heroes, animals, and so on. All of this might seem very restricting, but within such a constrained genre generations of artists have produced a veritable universe of imagery, unsurpassed in its delicacy and refinement.

The history of this art goes back many hundreds of years, but netsuke came into their own in the 17th century and most of the earliest existing works date from this time. The art continuously evolved and

when Japan opened to the West in the 1860s, netsuke attracted the attention of non-Japanese collectors. This interest continues, so designs and themes have broadened to cater for the international market. Although the number is not large, several non-Japanese netsuke makers, including Americans, British, and Australians, have now joined the ranks of famous artists.

Susan Wraight is one of the most highly respected contemporary netsuke artists. Her work is found in collections around the world, including those of the White House in Washington, D.C and, most significantly, the Japanese Imperial Family. In 1993, she was the inaugural winner of the Broken Thumb Award, which is given by the International Netsuke Society to the most promising newcomer. The name of this award is rather tongue-in-cheek, as it refers to the person other netsuke carvers would like to see have their thumbs broken by the yakuza to stop the competition! Although it is treated as fun, it is also a remarkable compliment.

Susan was born in England and completed her Master's Degree in Jewelry and Silversmithing at the Royal College of Art in London in 1980. She migrated to Australia in 1983 and now works from her beautiful studio in the city of Melbourne, in the southern Australian state of Victoria. Susan initially had no idea that she would attempt a career as a carver of such pieces. Her teachers had already commented on a tendency towards realism in her work, and visits to the museums of London where she first saw netsuke inspired her to try her hand. "Netsuke seemed to have a potency out of all proportion to their size," she explains. When her professor saw her first attempts he pronounced that she would never make a living out of such work, then promptly offered to buy a piece from her!

Twenty years on, with her reputation secure and earning a good income, Wraight has many reasons to be glad of that early choice. She explains: "I can work in a small space almost anywhere. A whole exhibition can go into a small box and be sent around the world with ease. I can't help feeling smug when friends of mine who make furniture or sculpture have to move huge slabs of timber around in their enormous workshops. Best of all, my method of working is so contemplative."

I visited Susan at her home on a sunny

summer day, and we sat in her studio with the green-tinted light pouring through the garden and across her workbench. It is a gem of a workspace, with the equipment all neatly laid out, and small billets of timber stacked on shelves with the dates clearly marked on the end. Susan has a charmingly modest manner, but there is no doubting the strong determination which has led her to such success. In an esoteric world often thought of as totally

Japanese, her work is a rare combination of talent, skill, originality, and total dedication.

The pieces Susan makes have a true sense of life. She does not tell a story, but rather, she brings creatures to life so they actually are the story. They are imbued with a personality, often humorous, which subtly conveys what she wants to say about the subject. All her pieces come alive in your hand—gesture, expression,

and action captured in time. The best thing about netsuke is that they are meant to be handled and closely admired. It is a joy to pick up such a tiny sculpture, feel its contrasting textures and smooth lines, hold it close to your face and explore the exquisite detail. It is possible to become lost in admiration while enjoying such an experience, in awe of Susan's vision and ability to express it in such a tiny form. She enjoys working within these limits, creating a balance between the demands of the original function and

expression of her ideas in miniature. "It's a tight framework," she says, "but the discipline makes the work crisp."

Susan is able to make between fifteen and twenty pieces a year, taking two to four weeks for each, depending on the detail. The timbers she uses include boxwood, blackwood, pink ivory, holly, myrtle, and sassafras. Other materials, such as amber or buffalo horn, are inlaid for the eyes. Most pieces are around 50 mm high (less than 2").

With such intensive work, there is no room to leave things to chance, so Susan researches her subjects carefully. When she has all the ideas and information, she makes models in plasticine until she is happy with the balance and is clear about how the piece will be developed. This model is then used as a template to mark the timber for band-sawing the basic shape. The roughing out is continued using a flexible shaft tool driving



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OPPOSITE PAGE—Australian netsuke artist Susan Wraight at her workbench.

THIS PAGE—"Scratching Two Itches" [two views]; H: 45 mm; boxwood.



“Hatching Gecko”; L: 50 mm; partly stained holly, amber inset over gold leaf (eyes).

“The Monkey and the Dolphin”; H: 64 mm; boxwood, buffalo horn (eyes).

“Basilisk”; H: 45 mm; tagua nut, boxwood, amber inset over gold leaf (eyes).

“Chameleon”; H: 42 mm; boxwood, buffalo horn (eyes).

“Rat on a Pumpkin”; H: 45 mm; stained boxwood, buffalo horn (eyes).



Australian creatures, “because that’s my experience. It’s also a very personal story.” One of Susan’s wonderful Australian creatures is “Scratching Two Itches,” which depicts a koala. Made from boxwood, it is only 45mm high. The expression on the face of the koala creates an overwhelming sense of empathy with what he is feeling. Susan explains: “The first itch is his hunger, hence the gum leaves, and the other is just behind his ear.” His scrunched-up left eye and his delightful expression tell us just how good it feels to reach that itch. But this is not an anthropomorphic piece of sentimentalism. This is an animal and we are relating to his world, not the other way around.

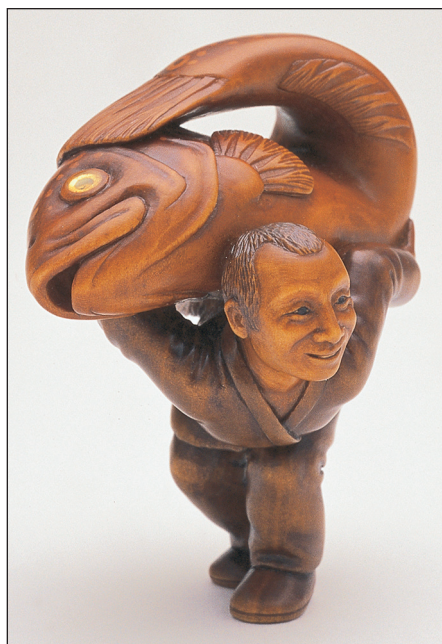
“Hatching Gecko” has a similar ability to draw us into the world of the animal. Susan explains that this tiny lizard is “hatching from the fragile security of its shell and seeing the world for the first time.” Still clinging to its temporary home, it raises its head—we can’t help but wonder what it sees. Susan has used a traditional Japanese texturing technique on this piece to produce the tiny bumps on the skin surface. Called *uki-bori*, it is done by pressing a tiny tool in even patterns across the wood. The surface is then pared down to the bottom of the small dents in the wood. Warm water is applied and the compressed fibers swell up again to produce the small bumps across the surface. The amber eyes are inlaid over gold leaf, which injects a life-like glow into the expression.

Based on an Aesop fable, “The Monkey and the Dolphin” captures an extraordinary moment. Surfing down the back of a Hokusai-like wave, the dolphin glances mischievously back at the monkey who is clinging, terrified, to its back. The moral

a cutting burr. As she works, Susan often redraws the form on the evolving block to highlight parts that should not be touched. But it is the handwork which requires the most time and patience. “Motor tools are not accurate enough,” she explains, “and I enjoy carving by hand more than the noise and dust of the motor tool.” For the fine work, her training as a jeweler is invaluable and she uses jeweler’s engravers, dental

tools, and scrapers. She relies on 3x magnifying glasses for the carving and a 10x jeweler’s loupe for very small work.

Susan ranges widely in her themes and has always been conscious that she should not try to make her work too Japanese, preferring to develop her own interest in themes of nature and express them through her own cultural base. She explains that nowadays she usually carves



"Spring: Frog on a Taro Leaf"; L: 58 mm; boxwood, amber (eyes).

"The Two Bags"; H: 55 mm; boxwood.

"Summer Maize"; H: 60 mm; boxwood.

"The Happy Angler"; H: 58 mm; boxwood, amber inset over gold leaf (fish eyes).

"Mouse in a Sugar Jar"; H: 45 mm; snakewood (jar), boxwood (mouse).

is that pretending to be what you are not will get you into deep water eventually. But even without knowing the story, it is easy to relate to this monkey's feelings. Susan uses fabric dyes to create contrasting tones and here it is done so well that it is difficult to believe the piece is carved from only one piece of wood.

"Basilisk" is a wonderful contrast with

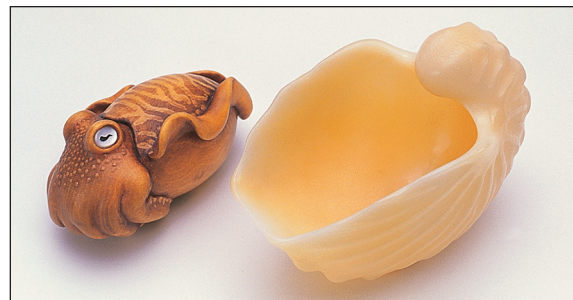
"Hatching Gecko." This mythical creature is not leaving the egg awed by the world. "Let me at it!" it seems to be saying and, as a creature which could kill with its stare, it glares at the world. The egg is carved from tagua nut and the boxwood basilisk is beautifully inlaid in the cracked egg. Susan's pieces each have an inlaid 18-carat gold plaque with her initials "SW" and in this piece the gold contrasts wonderfully with the smooth white tagua surface.

Meaningful glances are one way Susan imbues her creatures with character and life. There is no mistaking the glance that "Chameleon" is giving to the fly on the leaf. We can feel the tension quivering in this piece. "The Rat on a Pumpkin," by contrast, may also be sitting by his next meal, but this is a contemplative creature. Perhaps the pumpkin is just too big. Where to start?

As part of a series representing the four seasons, "Spring: Frog on a Taro Leaf"

was inspired, in her words, "by the arrival of Spring in my garden." The frog has a particularly pleased expression, but this is no muppet-like pseudo frog. It is just a frog, but a frog we can somehow relate to. Another in this series is "Summer Maize," which depicts a wasp on three corn cobs. The carving in this piece is uncanny in its detail and realism.

Although animals feature in many of her works, Susan also likes to explore human nature. She describes "The Happy Angler" as "a comment on the stories anglers tell of the one that got away. This time he's caught it and is hurrying home to show his disbelieving family and friends." The expression on his face is a study in joy, in contrast with the mischievous glee on the face of the old woman in "The Two Bags." Also based on an Aesop fable, Susan treats this piece as a cautionary tale for herself. "It's a self portrait of me as the old woman I could become if



I am not careful—gleefully rummaging in other people's faults in the small bag in front, whilst ignoring my own faults in the huge one behind."

Prince Takamodo of the Japanese Imperial family has the largest private collection of Susan's work, with over sixteen pieces. He first purchased one of her netsuke from an exhibition in Tokyo in 1989 and has been an enthusiastic patron since then. Needless to say, this royal patronage has not hurt Susan's reputation among other Japanese collectors. It was because of his influence that she made "Mouse in a Sugar Jar." Susan explains: "This came from a discussion with Prince Takamodo about the Mad Hatter's tea party. He has a piece of mine featuring the dormouse asleep in a silver teapot and I wondered why the mouse might have been so tired, so I made this carving of the mouse raiding the sugar bowl. He pops up when you lift the lid. It's fun to watch people discovering it."

When you closely examine these wonderful pieces, there are several stages of appreciation. The first is the delight in the exquisite accuracy and amazement that such a small piece of hand work can be so full of rich detail. The realism of the pieces quickly draws you in to wonder at their meaning—anything so accurate must surely represent

some reality. Why is the man carrying the fish so happy? It must be incredibly heavy. Is she putting something in the bag? I wonder what it is? This sense of exploration of a tiny but real world is part of the fascination of Wraith's netsuke. Often the meaning of the work immediately seems clear, but when Wraith explains her purpose more deeply it is clear just how much of herself she puts into every piece. A good example is "Cicada": "I love cicadas. Their shrill song greets the warmest summer days and on close inspection their bodies reveal wonderful patterns, folds, articulations...a carver's dream. I carved this cicada from boxwood after I found the dry pupal husks left behind after these creatures had hatched in the garden and then laboriously climbed up the trunks of the gum trees. I could see that the cicadas hatch into their fresh new forms, leaving behind their dry, fragile cases. In a similar way, the gum trees shed strips of fragile brown bark to reveal the fresh, moist new wood beneath. It seemed a lovely symbol for renewal and the excitement of moving into a new phase of life, so I placed the cicada on a curled strip of bark to make the link."

Cradle was inspired by a fable called *Blueback*, written by Australian author Tim Winton, and is part of a series of pieces which consider the perilous state of the

"Cradle [with three different contents]"; L: 70 mm; boxwood (Cuttlefish), Pink Ivory and tagua nut (Mermaid Papoose), boxwood (Fish).

"Cicada"; L: 113 mm; boxwood.

"Possum's Nest"; H: 50 mm; boxwood, buffalo horn (eyes).

ecology of the ocean. The milky-smooth tagua nut is carved into a shell which contains one of three different interpretations of the theme. The cuttlefish, threatened and fragile, peers out of the shell, the tiny reef fish hides in the waving fronds of sea plant, and the swaddled mer-baby lies blissfully unaware of the encroaching threat to its security. All are cradled and yet vulnerable.

"Possum's Nest" also evokes feelings of the vulnerability of nature. This tiny nested creature is a perfect example of Susan's art. When you hold the small and intricate carving in your hand it makes you ponder how we all hold the future of such creatures in our collective hands.

Sight and touch are equally important in the appreciation of this work, but in "Beetle on a Lotus Pod" Susan wanted to involve other senses. The lotus seeds in the pod are made from buffalo horn, and when the piece is shaken they rattle. Susan smiles whimsically when she thinks about this piece. "I

"Paradise Courtship [two views]";
D: 42 mm; boxwood.

"Pitcher"; H: 40 mm; boxwood.

"Beetle on a Lotus Pod"; H: 45 mm; boxwood,
buffalo horn (lotus seeds in the pod).

Susan Wraight.

liked the idea of a piece that had the element of sound built into it," she says.

Of all of Susan's pieces I have seen, "Paradise Courtship" is probably closest to a classical Japanese netsuke. These Birds-of-Paradise are exactly carved in flowing lines. The male, on the front, is displaying for his mate and she is on the back, engulfed by his feathers. The hole on the back is the *himitoshi* where the suspending cord would knot. The fact that the piece is hollowed gives it a lightness which enhances the feeling of flight and movement.

An accessory to netsuke is the *ojime*, a small toggle placed between the netsuke and the suspended container to hold the container closed. Sometimes the *ojime* is just a bead, but it is sometimes carved to fit in with the theme of the netsuke itself. Susan has created a wonderful pairing with "Pitcher." The pitcher plant has a lid that opens and shuts and the *ojime* is a leaf turned in and over itself, resembling a cup to go with the pitcher. Susan's sense of discovery is strong in this piece, but she resisted the temptation to put something in the pitcher. "You can imagine whatever you want to be inside," she says, "...from a frog to a secret."

Susan Wraight sees herself as a follower of her dreams. She is a traveller in the realms of refined senses and heightened perception, a world which few can see. I am in awe of her perceptiveness and ability to share it with us. Perhaps her level of awareness of the world is best conveyed by a story she tells about a frog. A friend brought the tiny frog as a gift and she released him in her garden in the hope that he would make his home there. She explains: "For days, I watered the garden, hoping to help him settle in, but there was no sign that he was alive. Then a big storm came and fat raindrops started to fall. All of a sudden I heard him. Such a little frog, such a big noise! He knew the difference between my pretend rain and

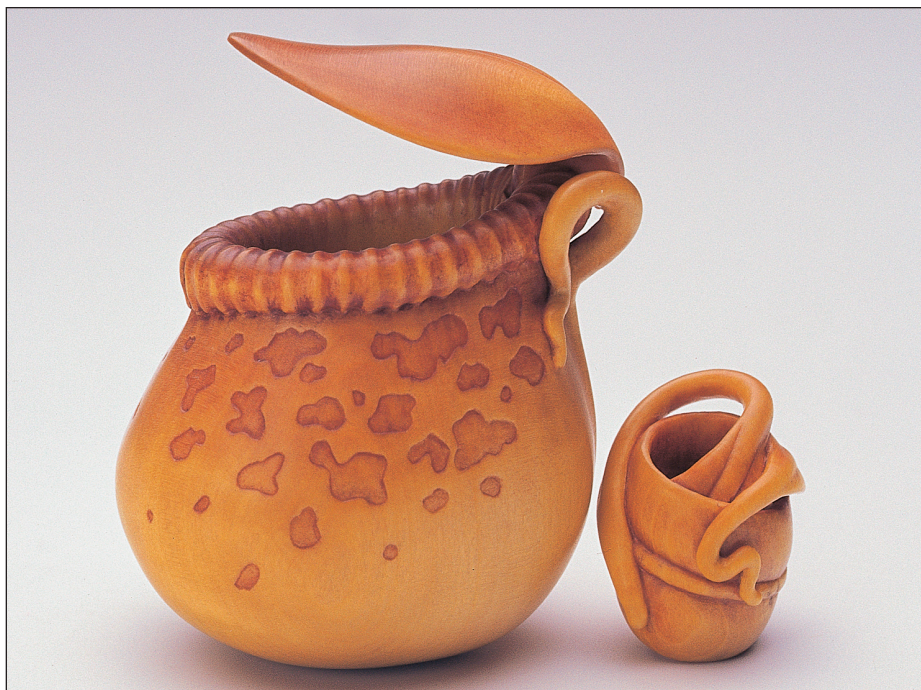


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God's rain!"

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