

Scale in art

by Colleen Carroll

Clip & Save instructions: The monthly Art Print is meant to be removed from the center of the magazine, laminated or matted, and used as a resource in your art room.—Editor

ABOUT THE ART FORM, NETSUKE

The artwork featured in this month's Clip & Save Art Print, a netsuke (commonly pronounced *net-shek*) depicting a monkey with her young child, is as adorable as it is small. According to the International Netsuke Society, “A *netsuke* is a form of miniature sculpture, which developed in Japan over a period of more than 300 years.”

While netsuke collectors the world over value the form's intricately carved detail and imaginatively rendered subject matter, these objects were originally designed to serve a practical purpose.

In the years before the Japanese adopted Western styles of fashion, the kimono was the typical garment worn by both genders. The kimono, or robe, was closed with a sash called an *obi*. Men, in particular, used a small purse, called a *sagemono*, which hung from the obi by a silk cord. (The *sagemono* was used as a container to carry small items, such as tobacco, pipes and other possessions.)

A sliding bead, called an *ojime*, ran along the length

of the cord to both open and close the *sagemono*. The netsuke, or toggle, was attached to the cord and placed at the top of the obi to prevent the cord from slipping. The entire ensemble hung from the obi, functioning as a hanging pouch. (To view a line drawing of how netsuke were worn, visit en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Netsuke-p1030001.jpg.)

According to Carolyn M. Putney, associate curator of Asian Art at the Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio, “*Whatever the form of the container, the fastener that secured its cord at the top of the sash was a carved, button-like toggle called a netsuke. Such objects, often of great artistic merit, have a long history reflecting important aspects of Japanese life.*”

For example, one popular style of netsuke—mask netsuke—reflect the cultural significance of the *Noh* drama. A netsuke carved in the form of a rice cake reflects Japanese dietary preferences and nutrition. Netsuke carvers of the 19th century created more elaborately detailed works than their predecessors.

ABOUT THE ARTWORK

very popular subjects for netsuke carvers.

Carved in wood, the artist's skill in creating a highly realistic depiction of the subject is evident. The texture of the primates' fur and the naturalistic rendering of the mother as she lovingly and patiently moves through the

and these works became highly sought after by European collectors.

The earliest example of netsuke are from the 16th century. The art form continued through the 19th century, but waned as Japanese men abandoned the traditional dress for Western-style suiting. As a result, the demand for netsuke decreased, although the art form is still practiced today.

Netsuke was most commonly made from ivory, yet only carvers in the three main cities—Osaka, Kyoto and Edo (now Tokyo)—had access to the material. Carvers used a variety of other materials, including woods (mainly cherry and box), boar's tusk, bamboo, amber, antlers, clay and narwhal (marine ivory).

Some of the most elaborate netsuke are inlaid with materials such as precious metals, semiprecious stones, shell and coral. Figural subjects, like the netsuke featured as this month's Clip & Save Art Print, were the most common at the art form's peak in the second half of the 19th century.

baby's coat looking for the parasitic insects, captures the moment exactly as one would view it in life.

Given the level of detail displayed in this artwork, it is all the more fascinating to know the object stands just over 3 centimeters high.

This netsuke of a mother monkey and her son, by the artist Suzuki Tokuku (1846–1913), is an excellent example of the art form. Its subject matter—a monkey examining her youngster for nits—falls into the category of figural netsuke. Monkeys, in particular, were





Suzuki Tokuku (Japanese; 1846–1913). Netsuke depicting a mother monkey and her son, c. 1880–1900. Wood; 3.3 cm high. From a private collection. Photograph by Paul Freeman. ©The Bridgeman Art Library International.

arts & activities[®]

MAY 2011

clip & save art print CLASSROOM USE

PRIMARY

Younger students will adore this month's Clip & Save Art Print of a tiny sculpture of a mother monkey grooming her baby. Explain to students this type of artwork, called netsuke (formal pronunciation is *net-soo-kay*; informal pronunciation is *net-skeh*), hails from Japan. (Show students the country on a world map.)

Most importantly, impress on students just how small this sculpture actually is by comparing its size to a large marshmallow, the type sold in most grocery stores. Students will probably ask why the object is so small. Explain how the netsuke was used as a toggle to hold a corded bag to the waistband of a Japanese man's robe, or kimono. (See Art Notes for a website illustrating how the netsuke was worn.) Give students an opportunity to use modeling clay to sculpt a simple animal in the style of the netsuke.

ELEMENTARY

Littlest Pet Shop™, Polly Pocket™, LEGO®—children love small toys and objects. Share the Art Print with students, and explain how netsuke served both an aesthetic and practical purpose. Ask students if they can name any objects they use in their own lives that serve these dual purposes.

Have students brainstorm how they might create a similarly sized object that could be used today,

both decoratively and functionally. After students have had a chance to generate ideas, form student pairs. Give each group drawing paper to sketch designs. After design approval, provide each pair with a polymer, modeling or air-dry clay, to render their design three-dimensionally.

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Share the Art Print with students. Reminding the class this year's theme is scale in art, ask each student to predict if the object featured in the Art Print is of a small scale, or a large scale. Once all students have weighed in, hold up a large marshmallow and inform students the netsuke is a mere 3.3 centimeters high.

It's obvious this object was carved from wood, but inform students these objects were also made from a variety of materials, such as ivory, bone, amber and clay. Some of the objects were inlaid with precious metals, glass and semiprecious stone.

For Mother's Day, give students an opportunity to create small-scale, three-dimensional objects to present to their mothers, grandmothers or other women who play motherly roles in their lives. Using non-firing clay, have students sculpt a version of a netsuke—perhaps portraying the mother-and-child relationship. (To give

students ideas of subject matter, let them search online image bases for inspiration, or bring in a selection of images of netsuke or photographs of animals.) After basic modeling is completed, let students inlay their works with rhinestones, beads and other tiny objects.

HIGH SCHOOL

In many global-studies curricula around the country, students learn about the history and culture of Japan. Use the Art Print to build on what students have learned earlier in the school year, or are currently learning, about Japan, to add a cultural arts tie-in to the curriculum.

Share the Art Print with students, explaining all pertinent information described in the Art Notes. Give students time online to acquaint themselves with the hundreds of different styles and subjects netsuke carvers have created since the form emerged in the 16th century.

After students have adequately researched the subject, give them time to sketch a design for an original netsuke they will carve in wood. Designs should be created in front, back and side views.



Go to artsandactivities.com and click on this button for links to websites related to this article.