

# The History and Culture of Japanese Dolls



Hayashi Naoteru, director of the Japan Doll Culture Research Laboratory, holding a Daruma doll  
Photo : Courtesy of Hayashi Naoteru

JAPANESE people have lived alongside a variety of *ningyo* (dolls) since ancient times. We spoke to Hayashi Naoteru, director of the Japan Doll Culture Research Laboratory, about the history and features of Japanese dolls.

## Tell us about how Japanese dolls began.

One of the origins of Japanese dolls was the *hitogata*, a human-shaped doll made from materials such as wood and paper. To protect oneself from misfortunes, including illness and disaster, there was a custom in Japan of driving away evil spirits by attaching misfortune to a *hitogata* and then burning it or sending it into a river or the ocean. *Hitogata* made of wooden board have been unearthed from seventh-century archeological sites, and it is thought that the custom had begun by at least this period.

Separate from this, dolls have been used as toys in Japan since more than 1,000 years ago. In *The Tale of Genji*, a long novel with aristocratic society as its setting written by

Murasaki Shikibu in the early eleventh century, there is a scene where a girl enjoys playing with a doll that is referred to as *hiina asobi*, or playing with *hiina*. In *hiina asobi*, a child would use small furniture and doll's houses and play with the dolls in a variety of roles, in the same way that children play with dolls today. Unfortunately, there aren't any dolls remaining that were used in the *hiina asobi* from this period, but considering the high level of craftsmanship of the time, we can assume that highly sophisticated dolls were made as toys for the aristocracy.

**Nowadays, we celebrate the Hina Matsuri (Doll Festival) on March 3 each year by displaying Hina Ningyo (Hina dolls). How did this festival come to be?**

Since ancient times in Japan, there has been a rite to drive away evil spirits using *hitogata* on a day known as *Joshi* held at the beginning of March. It is thought that this custom merged with *hiina asobi* as time went on, and became the Hina Matsuri where people display Hina Ningyo and pray for the health and growth of young girls. The first such festival recorded in written accounts is a Hina Matsuri that was celebrated within the Imperial court at the end of the sixteenth century. After that, the festival spread to samurai families, and by the first half of the seventeenth century, ordinary people were also celebrating the festival. The Hina Ningyo used in the Hina Matsuri were originally a pair of male and female dolls in simple clothing, but they



Examples of *kokin-bina* made during the nineteenth century. Left: *mebina* (female hina doll) (66.5 cm tall), right: *obina* (male hina doll) (57.5 cm tall)  
Photo : Courtesy of Hayashi Naoteru

Isho Ningyo (Costume doll) of a kabuki actor made in the eighteenth century (16.2 cm tall)  
Photo : Courtesy of Hayashi Naoteru



traditional performing arts or the everyday lives of ordinary people. During the Edo period, popular *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints were created with similar themes, and you could say that Isho Ningyo are three-dimensional versions of *ukiyo-e*. Ichimatsu Ningyo were a type of Isho Ningyo that can be traced back to Sanogawa Ichimatsu, an eighteenth-century kabuki actor known for his handsome appearance. Similar to today's model figures of "idols" (celebrities), dolls were created that resembled the actor and they became quite popular among fans. Later, these Ichimatsu Ningyo developed as toys that could be dressed up, embraced and loved. Nowadays, Ichimatsu Ningyo mainly refers to dolls of young girls wearing kimono with bobbed hair, and which are made to be displayed.

During the Edo period, simple dolls came to be created all over Japan. Tsuchi Ningyo (Clay dolls) are one such type of doll. One type of Tsuchi Ningyo is the Fushimi Ningyo, said to be the first Tsuchi Ningyo and still made today in the traditional way in Fushimi, Kyoto. These dolls were made from clay found near Fushimi Inari Taisha (see *Highlighting Japan*, October 2020), a shrine which has attracted the deep faith of people wishing for a bountiful harvest, and also spread across Japan as souvenirs from Kyoto. Tsuchi Ningyo modeled after these Fushimi Ningyo then came to be made all over Japan. Hina Ningyo, Gogatsu Ningyo, kabuki actor dolls and more were made as inexpensive

evolved into splendid dolls dressed in clothing of court nobles, growing in size and number. While these changes were occurring, dolls known as *Kokin-bina* were made in Edo (today's Tokyo) at the end of the eighteenth century, and these dolls reflected ordinary people's image of court nobles of the time. With splendid clothing and beautiful faces, these dolls were quite popular.

During the same period, meanwhile, on May 5, a day known as Tango, samurai families held a grand celebration to pray for the health and growth of young boys, which included decorating the house with helmets and flags. Ordinary people followed suit and the rite spread to become a custom of praying for the growth of young boys and decorating houses with Gogatsu Ningyo (May dolls) that represented famous heroes of history and legend. Behind the establishment of this custom of displaying Gogatsu Ningyo is the fact that during the Edo period, for about 260 years from the start of the seventeenth century, there were no major wars and there was emotional and economic room for people to enjoy cultural events.

### Can you tell us what other kinds of dolls were created during the Edo period?

For example, there are Isho Ningyo (Costume dolls). These dolls have cloth or paper clothing over bodies made of wood or straw. They were made with a variety of themes, such as scenes from *noh*, kabuki and other Japanese



A modern, ordinary Ichimatsu Ningyo with a kimono and bobbed hair  
Photo: yellow\_rail/PIXTA



Fushimi Ningyo of a kabuki actor made in the nineteenth century (23.8 cm tall)  
Photo : Courtesy of Hayashi Naoteru

Tsuchi Ningyo and loved by the people.

Paper Daruma dolls, which mimic the seated meditation pose of Buddhist monk Bodhidharma (known in Japan as Daruma), also began to be created in the eighteenth century in Edo as good luck charms for the prosperity of one's descendants or to ward off misfortune, and they eventually spread across Japan. Fuji City in Shizuoka Prefecture where I live is one area of production for these dolls. Fuji City hosts the Bishamonten Daruma Market, one of the three largest Daruma markets in Japan alongside the Takasaki Daruma Market in Takasaki City, Gunma Prefecture, and the Jindaiji Temple Daruma Market in Chofu City, Tokyo. In recent years, Daruma dolls have become a popular souvenir from Japan for foreign visitors along with *maneki-neko* (beckoning cat) dolls, which are said to invite good luck.

**Various dolls have been made in Japan since ancient times. Can you tell us about the appeal of these dolls?**

It is no exaggeration to say that the Hina and Gogatsu Ningyo dolls in particular represent the best of traditional arts and crafts. They were created with materials and techniques from a variety of fields, including painting, carving, dyeing, metal working, lacquer art, pottery, and more, and they are full of artistic and craft charm. When the first holders of Important Intangible Cultural Property (Living National Treasures) were recognized in 1955 by the government, Hirata Goyo (1903-1981), a doll craftsman, was chosen as one of them. This shows how dolls are recognized as having extremely high value as works of art and as crafts in Japan.

In many countries, the word “doll” refers to toy dolls. But in Japan, in addition to toys, ningyo have also come



*Maneki-neko* (center) and Daruma dolls for sale at the Bishamonten Daruma Market in Fuji City, Shizuoka Prefecture  
Photo : Courtesy of Hayashi Naoteru

to exist as works of art, crafts, and as objects full of wishes such as with the hitogata and Hina Ningyo. There is still today a strong idea in Japan that anything made into the shape of living creatures should not be mistreated. When someone is no longer able to hold on to a doll that they have cherished, they do not throw them away as garbage. Instead, they dedicate the dolls to shrines or temples and ask for a *ningyo kuyo*, or a doll funeral service, something that has happened since ancient times up to now.

As you can see from these doll funeral services, to Japanese people, dolls are not simple objects. They are special, and treated as if the dolls themselves are alive in people's lives. I think this is an integral point in considering the relationship between Japanese people and dolls. 📖

Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU



Gogatsu Ningyo (May doll) by Hirata Goyo who was recognized as a Living National Treasure (35.5 cm tall)  
Photo : Courtesy of Hayashi Naoteru