

DRAGONS, GODS, DEMONS – OJIME – SYMBOLIC CONTENT HIDDEN IN MINIATURE FORM

The symbolic aspect of an object reveals another aspect, discovered nowadays through acquaintance with literature, beliefs, myths and legends. Thanks to this knowledge, a piece of art can be perceived not only with regards to its external form, but also to its content. This presentation aims to disclose some external features with a primary focus on the iconographic analysis of miniature art subjects – the collection of forty four 19th century Japanese ojime. Ojime is a bead – an ornamental element also used practically on a personal lacquered box (*inrō*) and its accompanying *netsuke*.¹⁾ The set of ojime under discussion here is a private collection which remains one of the largest in Poland.

This Ojime collection once belonged to professor Józef Rancewicz, a dental surgeon from Warsaw,²⁾ and was made available to me for my research thanks to doctor Zofia Rancewicz.

¹⁾ Michalska (2008: 22); see: Hutt (2003: 1).

²⁾ Lived 1906–1962; parents: Józef Rancewicz and Rozalia Kopec; (<http:wielcy.pl>); studied at The Faculty of Odontology of the Danylo Halytsky Medical University in Lviv as a continuation of the Antoni Cieszyński Dental School in Lviv; after WWII left Lviv [Lwow], settled in Warsaw; (<http:czas.stomat.net>), wrote his PhD in 1950 as the first doctoral student of the Medical Academy in Wrocław in the field of dentistry (<http:osk.am.wroc.pl>); In 1946 he purchased a villa in Warsaw at nr. 18 Ludwika Narbutta st. from the well known Hiszpański family (pre-war luxurious footwear makers), ruined during the uprising; renovated it two years later; (<http:lub czasopismo.salon24.pl>). He kept his art collection in that villa – thesis by courtesy of Dr. Zofia Rancewicz.

The collector had shown a passion for many art forms, artistic craftsmanship and presented immense intuition and knowledge of fine arts together with an instinct that is essential to the collector. It was this very instinct that helped the Professor build up his ojime collection, as it seems unlikely that he was aware of ojime's true purpose. The Professor suspected their value as works of art, although he perceived them more as decorative beads, or jewelry, rather than as objects of more significance. This theory may be supported by the method in which he kept them – binding them together with a leather strap into two necklaces, adding them to each other one at a time as he collected them. How did he obtain those unique objects? Professor Rancewicz's patients were, among others, the impoverished aristocracy, who could not pay for the doctor's appointment with cash. They used to bring valuables, including ojime, instead.³⁾ Most certainly, the majority of the Professor's collection was created by traditional antiquarian purchases and journeys, although the ojime fell into his hands as a result of the worsening toothache of his aristocratic patients.

The collection consists of forty four pieces. However, I will mention only some of them, the most interesting in terms of their symbolic aspect.

One very popular motif is the pleasant figure of a plump, bald, cheerful old man, sitting in a very casual pose. He is known as Hotei – one of the Seven Gods of Fortune⁴⁾ (Shichi Fukujin), although it is believed he could be Buddha Maitreya. The Seven Gods of Fortune are very popular in Japan. A Shichi Fukujin cult began in 16th or 17th century. Their beliefs were based on a specific combination of local lore, Chinese legends and Buddhist stories⁵⁾. From Buddhism come gods like Benten (in the Buddhist pantheon Saraswati) and Bishamon (Vaiśravaṇa). The gods Juroin, Hotei and Fukurokuju come from the legends about Chinese monks and eremites; however the Daikoku and Ebisu characters are attributed to local Japanese tradition⁶⁾ In the 17th century The Seven Gods of Fortune were considered to be a personification of the seven virtues and Hotei is a symbol of generosity. He was also described as a god of wealth, happiness and good luck. Hotei was a real figure from history, a Buddhist monk who came from China and led nomadic life. Thanks to his knowledge and wisdom,

³⁾ Thesis by courtesy of Dr. Zofia Rancewicz.

⁴⁾ Rybalko (2006: 11).

⁵⁾ The Seven Gods of Fortune were set together by Tenkai monk because each of them represents another kind of happiness. The Gods symbolized: generosity, honesty, honour, popularity, longevity, kindness and happiness; Warsiński (2002: 391).

⁶⁾ Arutjunow, Swietłow (1973: 128).

he was able to give people advice. After his death he was appropriated a divine nature. The divine being is a picture of generosity and *joie de vivre*⁷⁾ as well as a symbol of happiness⁸⁾ Hotei is presented in a robe displaying his rotund belly. His attribute is a cloth sack where he carries his possessions and which he gives away to people.⁹⁾ The monk is bald; he is usually depicted reclining, sometimes surrounded by children gathering around his cloth sack¹⁰⁾ There is Hotei with a cloth sack on the ojime bead; this item is round and made of metal with a measurement of 18 millimeters (Fig. 1).

The next ojime bead presents a phoenix – a Japanese hoo hoo bird. Ojime is made of a golden-hued metal, probably brass, with black enamel on it. It measures 17 millimeters. Its craftsmanship deserves much credit, just like another bead also depicting a hoo hoo bird sitting on a branch. The bead is oblong, made of metal, probably brass. The openings are finished off with silver and a golden metal. The item is engraved, incusted with silver and gold, signed and it measures 24 millimeters. The phoenix (Chinese *feng huang*) is a synonym of the Japanese hoo hoo bird and is a symbol of empresses.¹¹⁾ Together with the turtle, the dragon and the kirin, they comprise the Four Miraculous Creatures¹²⁾

The dragon is a leitmotif of the next two ojime. The first one is round, made of metal and silver; the dragon itself is a relief. It has silver body and gold eyes and measures 16 millimeters (Fig. 2). The second ojime is made of bone with the dragon as a deep relief, presented among the clouds; his eye is incusted with metal and the object measures 17 mm (Fig. 3). According to certain beliefs, a dragon had the head of an imaginary creature called *chi* with a deer's antler, demon's eyes, ox's ears, snake's neck and the belly of a shin creature. His body was covered with fish scales and he had tiger's paws with falcon's claws.¹³⁾ According to the beliefs, some dragons didn't have ears but were able to hear by means of horns.¹⁴⁾ A dragon makes clouds when he breaths; he has the ability to change himself into fire or water. In spring a dragon flies up to the

⁷⁾ Mularczyk (1999: 2).

⁸⁾ Kinsey (1991:37).

⁹⁾ The sack contains treasures which can be requested by people; Mularczyk (1999: 2).

¹⁰⁾ Kinsey (1991: 37); see: Hartmann (2004: 40).

¹¹⁾ Savage (1977: 120).

¹²⁾ Savage (1977: 122).

¹³⁾ Arakawa (1983: 206)

¹⁴⁾ Savage (1977: 122).

sky; in autumn he dives into the sea.¹⁵⁾ A dragon is also one of zodiac signs.¹⁶⁾ This creature has a complex and fascinating origin. In art, a dragon was often presented surrounded by clouds. This type of a depiction is based on a Chinese archetype called *long*¹⁷⁾ – a dragon in its kingdom of clouds. In China, as well as in Japan, there was a belief that “if you see a dragon in its entirety, not covered in any way, it will bring you sudden death”.¹⁸⁾ This superstition meant that a dragon would be portrayed hidden behind the clouds, the people being afraid of its destructive brightness. In Chinese culture, a dragon was regarded as a positive symbol, quite the reverse of western perception.

In the 9th century B.C. in the text called *Hung-fan*, the rules of compatibility between a human and the universe were condensed into five basic elements concerning the five cardinal directions of the world and the five colours related to them. These elements were personified by five legendary creatures. The East was linked with a green colour; its symbol was a tree and was represented by a Green Dragon. The dragon personified the light green colour of life, of the sunrise; whereas in terms of the seasons, the dragon represented spring, the coming of light and warmth¹⁹⁾. This original doctrine was replaced around the turn of the 5th and the 6th centuries B.C. by one which explained the rules of the world with the help of two complementary elements – Yin and Yang²⁰⁾. The order in the universe is kept thanks to the balance between these elements with both aspiring to transform into its antithesis.²¹⁾ In art there were often used as references to the dualistic conception of nature, especially when it was presented by means of animal symbols, mainly the dragon which stood for the active, bright element – Yang. The dragon was also associated with heavenly powers.

The next item worthy of attention is a cylindrical *ojime* made of metal. The motif, a tiger in a bamboo grove, is engraved. The bead measures 18 mm. The tiger is also the zodiac sign in the third position²²⁾ and is additionally a symbol of courage, with the ability to ward off demons as well as to protect when worn as an amulet. In China, the tiger was identified with strength. It represented the

¹⁵⁾ Savage (1977: 120).

¹⁶⁾ Tomaszewska-Bolalek (2007: 64).

¹⁷⁾ A four-legged dragon which lives in water as well as among clouds ; Alberowa (1973: 135).

¹⁸⁾ Alberowa (1973: 136).

¹⁹⁾ Alberowa (1973: 136).

²⁰⁾ Michalska (2008: 94).

²¹⁾ Alberowa (1973: 136).

²²⁾ Earle (2001: 285–297).

Earth's powers, whereas a dragon was associated with heavenly powers. During the Shang-Yin (1500–1027 B.C.) period, the first bronze sculptures with images of tigers appeared. The Chinese stylization tendencies meant that animals were depicted in a slightly non-realistic way; in other words, they had longer bodies, cat's paws and short, open mouths.²³⁾ In Japan, where the tiger motif in art was very popular, the image of this animal was slightly unreal. That was because the Japanese artists followed the example of Chinese paintings,²⁴⁾ although in further years they became more independent as artists.

The next unusual ojime is a miniature sculpture made of metal representing a badger. This small sculpture has gold elements, is signed and measures 19 mm (Fig 4). It is worth looking at the detailed metalwork with its great precision. The badger takes the form of a teakettle with tails on both sides as handles and his hat for a cover. This is a reference to one old Japanese fairy tale (*mukashi banashi*) called *Bumbuku Chagama*. The story involves a badger cursed and transformed into a teakettle which has been purchased by a monk. When he wanted to heat up some water in it, the kettle suddenly jumped off the fire; it had four badger feet, a badger tail and a badger head. The monk didn't want this strange creature in his temple so he sold the magic kettle to a rag-and-bone man. The kettle – a badger, whose name *Bumbuku* meant happiness – promised the rag-and-bone man to help him make a fortune in return for some good treatment such as keeping him away from fire and feeding him with rice cakes. The badger said that he knew many tricks and he could walk across a tight rope and then the rag-and-bone man would earn money by selling tickets for the show. More and more satisfied people came to see the *Bumbuku* show and finally the rag-and-bone man became extremely rich. Then, after talking to the monk, he suggested a proper place for *Bumbuku* to rest like the quiet temple where he is said to have lived in prosperity and happiness until this day.²⁵⁾

Another interesting item is an ojime in the form of the monk *Daruma*. The bead is probably made of copper and measures 18 mm (Fig. 5). *Bodhidharma*, i.e. *Daruma*, is traditionally identified as a founder of Zen Buddhism. *Bodhidharma* was the third prince of a Southern Indian Kingdom. When he realized his religious calling in life, he went to China (he came to China from India in the 6th century), where in the Shaolin monastery (jap. *Shorin-ji*) he meditated for nine years in front of a bare wall, unaffected and maintaining the same position con-

²³⁾ Alberowa (1973: 140).

²⁴⁾ Alberowa (1994: 66).

²⁵⁾ Magic teakettle <<http://www.japanippon.com/fairytales/magictteakettle.html>>

stantly. The side effect was the loss of his legs. Finally, he received enlightenment. The figure of Daruma is a very popular motif, often used in making netsuke²⁶⁾ and ojime, usually with some humour²⁷⁾ It is popular to present Daruma in the very idiosyncratic round form of a doll called “getting up little priest” (okiagari koboshi), because when knocked over it always wobbles back to an upright position. It corresponds with the words of a song about Daruma saying that human life reflects the rule “Seven times down, eight times up” which indicates the possibility of revival after failure. The dolls were very popular in the sixteenth century and during the Edo period (1600–1868)²⁸⁾ Daruma as a doll, netsuke or ojime is a symbol of good luck, perseverance in fighting with adversities and is also an amulet supporting our struggle with failure²⁹⁾ When making netsuke as well as ojime it was a practice to show the monk contemplating during his long meditation. This form underwent a simplification in miniature art and ended up almost round, as in the case under discussion.

Another ojime with interesting symbolism is the one shaped like a vase. On the one side there is the figure of a boy and on the other side there's another boy poking out of a cracked part of vase. The scene is a reference to the heroic deed of one boy named Shiba Onko. Four boys gathered around a vase to look at the gold fish swimming inside it. Suddenly one of them fell into the vase. Most boys were horrified but Shiba Onko picked up a stone and by making a hole in the vase, he rescued his friend from drowning³⁰⁾ This boy is a symbol of heroism and courage. The Ojime is made of various kinds of metal and measures 18 mm (Fig. 6).

Both the next two items of the collection have a uniquely interesting form. Both are made of metal, are spherical and two-sided. The form is the combination of two masks – on the one side there is an okame face, on the second – an image of a demon. The pictures are sculptured in detail, colouristically differentiated, and made of different kinds of metal. Both beads measure about 19 mm (Fig. 7).

The Ofuku, otafuku or okame motif is characterized by a round face, tiny nose and extremely chubby cheeks. When this figure is presented as a mask it is called otogozen³¹⁾ The character is a goddess of cheerfulness and happiness;

²⁶⁾ Singer (1995: 78).

²⁷⁾ Arakawa (1983: 204).

²⁸⁾ Singer (1995: 78).

²⁹⁾ Symmes (1991: 158).

³⁰⁾ Shiba Onko legend, <[http://orientationsgallery.com/shiba onko/html](http://orientationsgallery.com/shiba_onko/html)>.

³¹⁾ Arakawa (1983: 205).

the okame mask is part of a traditional Japanese form of theatre called Kyogen. On the other side there appears a demonic face. This demon or devil is also the theme of another ojime, where this character is presented as an oni devil³²⁾ Ojime has a round shape, is made of ivory, and deep curved. The holes are finished with metal; it measures 18 mm.

Another ojime made of porcelain for a change is decorated with a painting of two Chinese children – karako, one with an uchiwa fan. The bead is small, measuring only 12 mm. The Karako motif is popular in Japanese art. The Karako term (prefix kara means “Chinese”) defines children wearing Chinese clothes.³³⁾ A boy depicted on the ojime has a hairstyle in the form of two characteristic small knots. The fan in his hand is an uchiwa – a traditional Japanese fan in an oval form, made of paper outstretched on a bamboo frame.³⁴⁾

The themes that were an inspiration for the artists making ojime were not only taken from the world of animals or mythical creatures, but also came from the botanical world – for example, an ojime showing a plum tree. This bead is made of metal and is silver in colour. It is round and measures 14 mm. The plum tree is a symbol of winter, because it blossoms as the first tree, when winter has not quite finished yet. It is also a symbol of innocence.³⁵⁾ A plum tree is perceived as a “male” plant as an opposite to the “female” cherry tree. These meanings were popular in the Edo period, when this particular ojime was crafted. The plum tree was also a symbol of the elderly man, a synonym of manhood.

Willingness to be surrounded by beauty, even by the smallest of things, belongs to human nature the world over. Feliks Manggha Jasiński described Japanese art as “the most distinguished and the most tremendous manifestation of the human spirit”³⁶⁾ While delving into and admiring Japanese art, it is hard not to agree with these words. Beauty and mastery, including intriguing symbolics, are present even in such small objects as ojime. Their essence, similarly to that of the netsuke I have had the opportunity to study, astonishes us by their variety of reference points and complexity of meanings. What most netsuke have in common as symbols is their protective function. This is similar in the case of ojime which were also treated as talismans or charms for their

³²⁾ Piggott (1997: 61).

³³⁾ Arakawa (1983: 205).

³⁴⁾ Art glossary, uchiwa, <<http://www.artelino.com>>; Socha (2010: 272–273).

³⁵⁾ Eberhard (2001: 248).

³⁶⁾ Alberowa (1983: 5).

owner. They emphasized particular features or roles played within society; they referred to a year of birth, assuming for example the form of a zodiac sign. Netsuke and ojime illustrate legends by referring to some myths or beliefs. They are inspired by traditional Japanese forms of theatre called no and kyogen. These items reflect the complex spectrum of Japanese culture.

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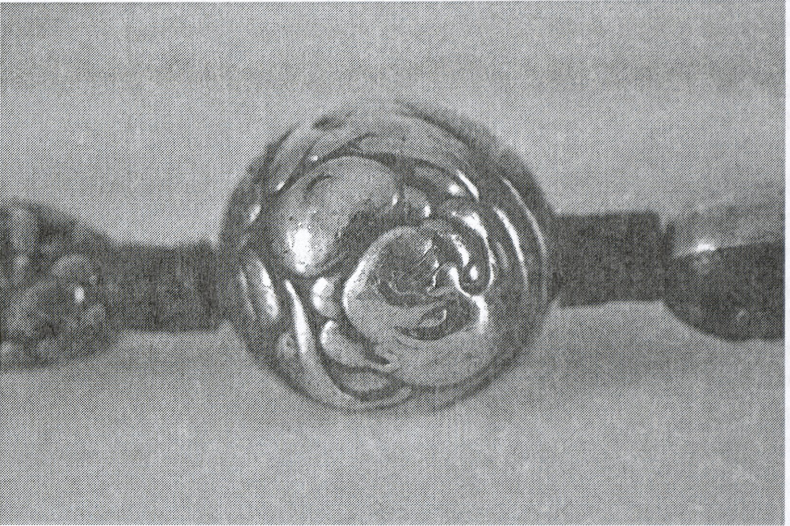


Fig. 1. *Ojime* – *Hotei* with a cloth sack, round shape, metal, measures 18 millimeters, photo by Adam Łuczak



Fig. 2. *Ojime* – dragon with silver body and gold eyes, measures 16 millimeters, photo by Adam Łuczak



Fig. 3. *Ojime* – dragon made of bone, is a deep relief, presented among clouds; his eye is incrustated with metal, measures 17 millimeters, photo by Adam Łuczak



Fig. 4. *Ojime* – badger *Bambuku*, metal, gold elements, signed, measures 19 millimeters, photo by Adam Łuczak

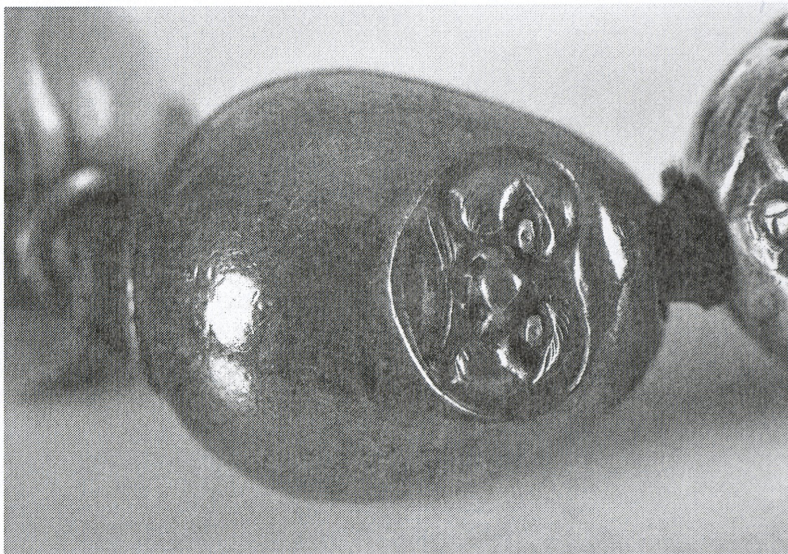


Fig. 5. *Ojime – Daruma*, copper, measures 18 millimeters, photo by Adam Łuczak



Fig. 6. *Ojime – Shiba Onko*, various kinds of metal, measures 18 millimeters, photo by Adam Łuczak



Fig. 7. *Ojime – Okame*, metal, measures 19 millimeters, photo by Adam Łuczak