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"What do you do if you haven't got a pocket? And I speak in the happy confidence of a nun with two very large pockets. Well, the kimono was a most elegant dress, but it had no pocket space. And the Japanese solved it.... Now these little works of art are among the most beautiful things in the world."

— Sister Wendy Beckett

## Netsuke

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

*Baku, Monster Who Eats Nightmares*

Attributed to Gechu, Japanese

18th century

Ivory

3 3/4 x 1 5/8 x 1 1/4 in. (9.5 x 3.1 x 4 cm)

Raymond and Frances Bushell Collection

(1998)

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Raymond and Frances Bushell Collection

The decorative little toggles called netsuke (pronounced "netskeh" and literally meaning "root for fastening") made their debut in late 17th-century Japan. The rise of the netsuke coincided with the repeal of Japanese laws against tobacco and the subsequent, almost universal adoption of pipe smoking in Japan. Because the traditional kimono was pocketless, men in particular had to carry personal belongings -- purses, writing implements, and of course pipes -- suspended from a pouch worn around their waists. (Women's kimonos also lacked pockets, but had wider sleeves that could accommodate a few small items.) Netsuke secured the pouch. Initially carved simply from everyday materials, netsuke became artistic sculpture as their popularity increased.

In Japan strict rules of dress forbade ostentatious displays of wealth. Netsuke were not subject to these laws because they were not technically clothing; nor were they subject to restrictions placed on art, where representations of religious matter were forbidden. As a result, no subject or material was off limits to netsuke artisans: Flowers, animals, and characters from No or Kabuki theater, religion, or mythology were carved from ivory, bone, wood, clay, lacquer, and precious metals. While many netsuke remained plain and purely functional, wealthier Japanese displayed netsuke that were wearable art. Thus, social status could be revealed through netsuke in ways it could not through dress.

After their heyday during the 18th and 19th centuries, the importance of netsuke waned. By the end of the 1800s Japan was becoming Westernized; suits with pockets replaced the long-worn kimono, and rolled cigarettes did away with the need for pipes and loose tobacco. For a form of sculpture usually no more than three inches tall, netsuke played a sizable role in Japanese culture: functional, social, and aesthetic.

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art has the greatest collection of netsuke in the United States, with a collection totaling 600 and a permanent exhibition of 150 from the Raymond and Frances Bushell collection.

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