

Japanese dolls: a tradition of charm

Archetypical Japanese dolls, such as those in the multi-tiered *Hina Matsuri* (Doll Festival, 3 March) displays, are known for an incredible attention to detail. Their costumes made from beautiful materials and immaculately styled hair amaze and speak of hours of work by their creators.

Single dolls often in protective cases can become prized possessions and the makers of dolls are highly regarded craftspeople. Then a small wooden stand will proudly announce the maker's and doll's name as we can see in the example below. Here the doll is simply called 童 *warabe* meaning child or juvenile and to the left is the maker's four-character name. It is a type of *musha-ningyo* or warrior doll, which is traditionally displayed around *Kodomo no Hi* (Children's Day, 5 May). This pint-sized warrior is obviously not real, but there is something about him—he certainly has attitude—that is quite lifelike. In fact, in Japan quite a number of people find dolls scary or creepy, believing them to possess a life of their own.

When you look at the Japanese word for doll, perhaps this isn't so surprising. The word is 人形 *ningyou*, which is 人 person + 形 form or shape. It can also be read as *hitogata* or human form. Early dolls were thought to contain their own souls. They



From simply formed wooden *kokeshi* dolls ...

to limbed realistic portrayals ...



and hand-painted clay or plaster moulded dolls



were used as effigies to carry away bad luck or malevolent spirits. This ancient belief can still be seen in the now unusual custom of *nagashibina*. Still practised in a few areas as part of *Hina Matsuri*, simple pairs of paper dolls are set adrift on rivers to be washed out to sea along with any bad luck.

Perhaps the simplest doll is the *kokeshi*, a plainly structured wooden doll with a hand painted design—originally a children's toy, but now regarded as a type of folk art. To the untrained eye, traditional *kokeshi* look pretty much the same, but there are avid collectors who value the dolls' subtle differences.

To end this article, let's round off with a mini *kokeshi* version of the Children's Day doll.



Like to know more about the Doll Festival (*Hina Matsuri*) and Children's Day (*Kodomo no Hi*)? See the 2013 Japan Reports article: http://www.sydney.au.emb-japan.go.jp/document/english/japan_reports/JR47-4/JReports%20Vol%2047-4%20p.7.pdf