

## NINGYÔ: Japanese Dolls and Textiles

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Courtesy of Antique Japanese Dolls

STARTLING DOLL-LIKE FIGURES swathed in rich textiles. Haunting white faces set off starkly by layers of fabrics of untold varieties: brocades highlighted with designs in gold-backed paper thread, elaborate embroidery on silk crepe sleeves, intricate patterns executed in sophisticated figured silks, lush velvets, open gauzes with painted details. Japanese dolls represent the ultimate fusion of textile and sculpture, each element only furthering the beauty and mystery of the other.



*Gosho-ningyô: Mitsuore wakagimi-himegimi (triple-jointed young prince and princess), nineteenth century; 22" and 20-1/2" tall. Rosen Collection.*

*Gosho-ningyô ("palace dolls") depict children and were given as gifts to convey auspicious wishes.*

Japan has long been celebrated for its rich textile culture and history. Most people are familiar with its fantastic silk kimono and sumptuous brocade obi, but Japanese doll forms known as ningyô (literally, "human figure") share an equally rich tradition and history.

I've been researching these forms for ten years and recently curated the largest exhibition of antique ningyô to date in the United States. More than 250 dolls were exhibited at the Mingei International Museum in San Diego, California, June 2005-February 2006.

Dolls that commemorate theatrical performances, dolls that protect children from disease, dolls for studying acupuncture, mechanical dolls, life-size dolls, dolls so small that the facial depictions can barely be discerned with the naked eye - all form a part of a sophisticated doll culture, which is celebrated in doll festivals throughout Japan. As with textiles, most of these forms are known on only a cursory level, when known at all, by the general public. Even in Japan, many of the early traditions and layered meanings of these amazing figures are forgotten or misunderstood. Some forms have faded completely into oblivion, others survive only as commercialized shadows of their former selves.



*The padded hem of a Kyôho-style me-bina (female doll) from the Girl's Day doll festival, late eighteenth century.*

On a historical level, Japan's textile and doll cultures arguably reached their zenith during the Edo period (1600-1868).

Ningyô of the Edo period represent a perfect time capsule for textile study, giving vivid evidence of the dominant weave structures, dyes, and decorative techniques; of how color and patterns were paired; and of how textiles were employed. Further, the various forms of ningyô provide a fathomless window into Japanese history and culture as a whole. A detailed, richly illustrated 288-page book accompanied the Mingei exhibition; for ordering information, please call (406) 745-6717.

This wooden figure has human hair and arms of padded fabric covering a flexible metal rod. Its silk garments reflect the high quality of dolls made for the prestigious daimyô class.



*Goshon-ningyô: Daimyô youth, late eighteenth century; 19" tall.*

*Collection of the author.*

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