

## Girton 150 Anniversary Lectures

The 58<sup>th</sup> Founders' Memorial Lecture by HIH Princess Hisako Takamado



On Friday 15<sup>th</sup> February 2019 Girton College was honoured to welcome Her Imperial Highness Princess Takamado to give the 58<sup>th</sup> Founders' Memorial Lecture, the first of a special series of five public lectures in Girton's 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Year. The packed audience included Her Highness's youngest daughter and her husband, the Japanese Ambassador to the UK, distinguished guests of the Princess, representatives of Birdlife International (of which the Princess is Honorary President), and Fellows and Scholars of the College and their guests.

Princess Takamado expressed her sense of honour at being asked to give this lecture in such a significant year for Girton College, and her delight to be back in the College of which she is an alumna. As an undergraduate, she had studied Chinese Studies, proceeding to Chinese History in her third year, but later changed to Archaeology and Anthropology, both subjects read under the direction of Dr Joan Oates. She explained that her change of direction stemmed from Dr Oates encouraging her to study what she was really interested in. Later she went on to write her doctoral thesis on netsuke, netsuke collections, and their historical and cultural significance to Japan. Her lecture is therefore entitled:

### ***Netsuke and their role in introducing Japan to the West***

The collection of netsuke amassed by Princess Takamado's late husband and herself is one of the world's most renowned collections. They had both felt that netsuke were a way of introducing the history and culture of Japan to the West and indeed to Japan itself. 'Itinerant' netsuke, highly sought after by collectors and also carried by Japanese travellers, served as 'ambassadors' for Japan after Japan opened its ports to foreign trade in 1854. By the end of the nineteenth century, collections could be found in all the great houses of Europe and the national museums also began to build significant collections, one notable example being the British Museum in London.

Princess Takamado explained the origins and functions of netsuke. From the seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century (the Edo period), Japanese citizens of all classes wore the kimono which was held in place by a sash or *obi*. *Sagemono* – literally ‘suspended items’ - such as tobacco containers, *kinchaku* pouches and *inrō* were devised to hang from the *obi*. These were counterweighted by netsuke which sat above the *obi* and were connected to the *sagemono* by a knotted cord and sliding bead. Early netsuke were rings through which the *obi* belt passed. Princess Takamado pointed out that the envoys to China in the mid-eighth century brought back ornaments that hung from belts and argued that there is evidence of similar ornaments being worn dating back to the eleventh century amongst nomadic tribes in China. However, in the seventeenth century the functionality of the devices gave way to fashion and decoration. The *obi* no longer had to be threaded through the netsuke so the hole became smaller and the object potentially more delicate. Amongst the warrior class, closely followed by the farmer and merchant classes, exquisitely-carved netsuke became a mark of wealth and status.

With the opening up of Japan to the rest of the world in the mid-nineteenth century, interest in netsuke began to grow and they became highly sought after by western collectors. This marked the end of the isolationist Edo period and the beginning of the outward-looking Meiji restoration in 1868. The Princess drew attention to the close correlation of dates between the beginning of this period of Japanese history and the founding date of Girton College in 1869, perhaps a shared period of expanding horizons and new opportunities. The Paris Expo of 1867 displayed Japanese art for the very first time in an international exhibition and included a small collection of netsuke. By the Vienna Expo of 1873 this had increased hugely, illustrating the burgeoning western interest in all things Japanese and netsuke in particular. Specialist dealers were established in Paris and the term netsuke began to appear in western dictionaries. By 1892 there were attempts to stem the flow of netsuke to the west by encouraging the establishment of Japanese collections.

Princess Takamado began collecting netsuke just after she graduated and her husband, Prince Norihito, became an avid collector too. Together they aimed to establish an Imperial collection that would show the whole range of Japanese netsuke production in terms of type, design, material and cultural reference so that the study of netsuke would provide a gateway to Japanese culture. The Princess set out and illustrated some of the many different types of netsuke with examples by masters of the craft. These include the *kagamibuta* or mirror-lid netsuke, made of

metal and consisting of a round bowl-shaped base and a flat lid, or the *manju*, round shaped netsuke evoking the sweet bean cake, but also lending themselves to other depictions such as the chrysanthemum. Three-dimensional figures (*katabori*) are the most numerous netsuke. These draw from Japanese mythology, nature, history and religious beliefs including gods and demons. Zodiac symbols are also common and animals, bird and reptiles such as rats, tigers, oxen, boar, dragons and snakes, all of which have particular symbolism, were also popular. Frogs, for example, represent the idea of 'return' or coming home, so such netsuke can become precious, personal talisman. Indeed people will carry netsukes with them constantly on their travels, as does Princess Takamado herself. 'Living' material is favoured for the creation of netsuke – wood, shell, coral, ivory, for example - and the Princess showed beautiful examples by masters of netsuke sculpture, such as a cow with calf by Tomotada and a tigress with cub by Minkō. There is, it was explained, a sense of life transference in the medium from one manifestation to another.

Princess Takamado is continuing the work of her late husband in 'introducing Japan to the Japanese' as well as to the West. Since so many netsuke left Japan for western collections in the nineteenth century, she has been concerned to see the establishment of national Japanese collections that acquire and celebrate historic Japanese objects and particularly netsuke. She has donated items from the Takamado collection to such foundations. However, she also explained that the creation of netsuke did not end with the nineteenth century nor is it limited to Japan. Netsuke are now created by many contemporary artists of different nationalities. However, in emulating the concept, netsuke are confirmed as goodwill ambassadors for Japan in their own right and, as Princess Takamado concluded in this fascinating lecture, quoting from the *Pillow Book* of Sei Shōnagon "All small things are most adorable".

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