I can learn anything further from them.

OBJECTS AND STORIES

Nanika en ga aru, which I am translating here as ‘no coincidence, no story’, has been a major theme in my life. The coincidence that started my journey with Japan started in Germany. It started with my German host father who encouraged me to study Asian languages, rather than European languages, as Australia was part of Asia. There were a lot of serendipitous circumstances in between that took me on my journey to set up an antique shop specialising in Japanese art in Melbourne in 1983.

I have faced significant challenges on my journey. In the 1980s my antique shop selling Japanese art was not always well-received, especially by Australian war widows who felt some lingering hostility to Japan. This reminds me of the Japanese concept of kintsugi, which is the idea of cherishing the breaks, the difficulties and the vicissitudes of life. While the relationship between Australia and Japan has, of course, not always been easy, that relationship has grown.

When I started selling Japanese art in the 1980s, netsuke [small, carved ornaments], along with ukiyo-e [wood block prints], were the most popular Japanese objects in Australia. When one of the first netsuke I ever received came into my hands, I sent it to Sotheby’s, hoping that I would be able to learn more about the object and the artist. Sotheby’s, however, placed the object in their catalogue with only the transliterated name of the artist, and I was not able to
decided to bring the object back to Australia and investigate it myself. That experience taught me to trust my own judgment. Serendipitously, I found another netsuke by the same artist and was able to discover that the artist was in fact one of the most prominent netsuke artists in Tokyo.

One of the most interesting things that happened along the way with netsuke was a chance meeting with Rudi Mineur. Rudi came into my antique shop one day and asked if I handled objects that had been repaired. I said that we did not. He then showed me a piece that he had and asked what I could tell him about it. I informed him that it was a genuine piece and I was shocked to hear that he had repaired it himself. I considered myself something of an expert on netsuke and I could not identify where it had been repaired. He revealed that he had replaced an entire head of one of the figures! This is when I first realised that we had Australian netsuke.

Rudi is an Australian netsuke artist who tries to express things about Australia and the Australian landscape through his own netsuke carvings. He forages for objects in the desert, such as bone, to use as the basis of his netsuke. Rudi is attracted to netsuke...
The object depicted in the cover image of this symposium is an eighteenth-century lacquer zushidana. It is one of the three main pieces (or sandana) that makes up an aristocratic daughter’s wedding trousseau.

because it is a functional form and he always carries at least one netsuke in his pocket. This connection between Rudi as an Australian artist, myself and the Galleries’ international activities has seen Rudi’s works enter the collection of Princess Takamado and, through her philanthropy, the collection of the Tokyo National Museum—a significant story in the Australia–Japan relationship born from a chance meeting.

The object I selected for this symposium is an eighteenth-century lacquer zushidana. It is one of the three main pieces (or sandana) that makes up an aristocratic daughter’s wedding trousseau. This particular zushidana belonged to Lieutenant General Sir Horace Robertson, who was the commander of the British Commonwealth occupation forces in Japan following World War II. He died in 1960 and his estate was sold at auction. Sometime in the 1980s a couple walked into my antique shop and showed me photographs of this, and some original documentation, asking if I could tell them anything about the object. I was speechless that something of this quality and historical significance existed in Australia. I was able to gather together some money to purchase this object and held it in my gallery for a number of years.
Later when I was in Japan, I visited a very small shop called *Nihon token* that was selling Japanese swords. I had been interested in Japanese sword furniture for a long time. I was introduced to the shop owner who told me that he had met someone from Adelaide who had an amazing sword, made by a famous lacquer artist, which looked like bamboo.

Two or three days after I returned to Australia, a man walked into my shop carrying that very sword—a *wakizashi*—wrapped up in a cloth. The man was Commander Robertson’s nephew. The *wakizashi* scabbard was created with lacquer to resemble bamboo (*gomatake*, or sesame bamboo) by Ikeda Taishin, who was the main lacquer artist in Shibata Zeshin’s studio. Shibata Zeshin is regarded as perhaps the greatest lacquer artist of all time, so this was a very important piece. The blade itself turned out to be made by a very famous swordsmith from the seventeenth century, Noda Hankei.

The *zushidana* eventually found a home in Pauline Gandel’s private collection of Japanese lacquer. Pauline decided to commission the most highly skilled lacquer artist in contemporary Japan, Unryūan Kitamura Tatsuo, to create the
accessories that would have originally accompanied the *zushidana*. So, this *zushidana* now has two major connections to Australia. It is an educational piece in our shared cultural estate.

From a serendipitous start in the world of art, which I then regarded as a temporary stop on the path to a doctorate, my relationship with Japan has broadened and deepened. It started from an immersion in the challenges of the language, a personal fascination with objects, and with an unknown and seductive culture. It developed to that of cultural ambassador for Japan. Japanese artists, past and present, maintain a respect for material and a self-discipline to achieve mastery that remains an instructive and qualitative example for all artists. This is true particularly for Australian artists, most of whom have little international experience. With now over thirty years of experience, I can attest to the impact this work has had on the lives of many Australians and on the lives of the contemporary Japanese artists the Galleries represent. Through an initial fascination with a beautiful object to curiosity about its sociological, philosophical and historical background, clients are ushered into a different world. There is romance in this journey for all concerned. What was different, exotic and unapproachable, becomes cherished and accepted—without doubt contributing to the human capacity for tolerance and mutual understanding.

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Lesley J Kehoe has been honing her specialisation in Japanese Art and Art Culture for over thirty years, and was recently awarded a foreign minister’s commendation by the Japanese government for significant contributions to the promotion of Japanese culture in Australia. As owner of Lesley Kehoe Galleries since 1982, her works have been placed in major international museums and many of Australia’s national institutions. With a significant reputation for scholarship in Japanese Art and Art Culture, Lesley is a regular lecturer and writer contributing internationally.