

The Carved Wooden Bears of Yakumo Town, Hokkaido

Bear woodcarvings, a well-known souvenir of Japan's northern island, Hokkaido, originated in Yakumo Town, which is located in the center of the Oshima Peninsula in the southwestern area of the island. We asked Oya Shigeyuki, curator of the Yakumo Town Museum and Bear Woodcarving Museum, about the history of wooden bear carvings. (Text: Tanaka Nozomi)

The town of Yakumo developed after retainers of the Owari Tokugawa family¹ moved to the area in 1878 to cultivate farmland and residential areas. In order to improve the lives of poor farmers, efforts were made to improve the land and mechanize farming. Another effort was the production of carved wooden bears. "In 1922, when the farm owner Tokugawa Yoshichika² was in Bern, Switzerland on his trip and saw carved wooden bears, trays, bowls, and other peasant art³ made by farmers sold as souvenirs, he thought that the same thing could be done in Yakumo. He bought carved wooden bears and other crafts of Bern and brought them to Yakumo. He encouraged the farmers of to make handicrafts mod-



Photo: Yakumo Town Museum

Workers carve wooden bears at the Tokugawa Farm.



Photo: Yakumo Sangyo Co., Ltd.

A wooden bear carving from Switzerland (right) and "Hokkaido's First Bear Woodcarving" by Ito Masao (left), which was carved using the former as reference.



The work of and tools used by Shibasaki Shigeyuki, whose abstract style is characterized by *menbori* surface engraving.

Photo: Yakumo Town Museum

eled after the carved wooden bears as a specialty product to realize a rich rural life. In 1924, a fair was held to exhibit and sell their works, which quickly became popular. After that, making wood carving handicrafts spread throughout Hokkaido.”

In addition to bears, a variety of other farm art was created, but Yakumo stayed focused on bears. With Japanese-style painter Tokura Kaneyuki⁴ as instructor, the town devised its own carving method, which became widely known as “*kumabori*” (bear carving). “As *kumabori* became popular nationwide, the town branded it and registered it as a trademark in order to distinguish itself from other regions. Today, we call this ‘regional branding.’ The *kebori* (hairline engraving) technique, which incorporates Japanese painting techniques, and the *menbori* (surface engraving) technique, which expresses the surface, are also distinctive characteristics of Yakumo carved wooden bears. Among these, I recommend the humorous cute bears with human characteristics. These works were influenced by their artist being familiar with two real bears that were kept on the farm for reference in creating the wooden carvings.” Yakumo’s bears became so famous that a weekly magazine published in 1932 proclaimed, ‘Yakumo’s carved wooden bears are the most pleasing souvenir for tourists in Hokkaido.’

Later, a tourism boom in Hokkaido further popularized the carved wooden bears. Oya adds, “Two areas

of Hokkaido were designated as national parks in 1934, and from around 1955, Hokkaido also became a popular destination for commemorative trips to celebrate events such as marriages and retirements. The bears were sold in huge quantities as souvenirs. They were also displayed and sold at Hokkaido product exhibitions held throughout Japan. However, after 1945, most carved wooden bears in distribution were made outside of Yakumo, and items from Yakumo only got distributed in a small portion of the country.”



Photo: Yakumo Town Museum

Bears at school. A math class is in session.

Oya recalls that, after 1990, with the end of the tourism boom, there was a period of time when the bears made in Yakumo did not sell. However, in recent years, they have begun to attract renewed attention, and stores selling the bears have opened in the town. New young artists have also appeared in Yakumo and elsewhere across Japan, and they are creating carved wooden bears in various styles. Furthermore, the town’s museum has seen an increase in the number of tourists visiting from overseas, and Oya feels this indicates a growing interest in carved wooden bears both in Japan and internationally. He adds, “I hope they will be preserved for future generations as a cultural form born in Hokkaido.” Bear woodcarvings are now

being reevaluated as cultural item unique to Hokkaido, rather than as souvenirs. 7



A carved wooden bear band

Photo: Yakumo Town Museum

1. A branch of the Tokugawa clan that was founded in the 17th century.
2. 1886-1976. Politician, botanist, hunter, and 19th head of the Owari Tokugawa family. Served as a member of the House of Peers in the new government after the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate.
3. Simple wooden furniture and household items made by European farmers.
4. A Japanese painter. When he returned to Yakumo, where his parents were living, to rest after falling ill, he started teaching wooden bear carving.