

Ivory Netsuke of Ono-Komachi as Old Woman

BATEA 1130

This is an early 19th century Japanese ivory netsuke of the renowned waka poet Ono No-Komachi.

Since kimonos did not have pockets, men's kimonos featured a small container to store belongings in which were suspended from the sash of the kimono via a cord connected to a netsuke, which acted as a counterweight. Netsukes came in many different designs and their elaborate and detailed decoration signalled the wearer's wealth and culture to those around them. In this netsuke you can see the poet Ono No-Komachi depicted as a hunched old woman sat on a log with a basket.

But who is Komachi? She was a famous poet during the Heian period who was renowned for her beauty, to such an extent that her name continues to be associated with beauty today. But why is this woman, who is remembered for her exceptional beauty, depicted as a destitute and decrepit old woman in this netsuke?

Well, although little is known about Komachi's life, there are many legends about her which assert that her beauty made her the target of much male attention and eventually led to her downfall. These legends were spread via classical Japanese Noh plays. One of the plays tells the story of her courtship with a young captain whom she promised to meet if he visited her for one hundred nights. The young man visited her for 99 nights but never made it for his 100th visit, dying on his way as a result of the relentless travel and his longing for Komachi.

Her treatment towards men is said to have had karmic consequences which led to increasing hardship in her old age. This is demonstrated in this netsuke, which presents Komachi sat on a log in tattered clothes, holding a wicker basket to beg from passers-by.

These tales reductively frame Komachi as an archetypal femme fatale, which is the cliché that undermines her legacy as a poet. It is vital to bear in mind that these legends were largely written by men influenced by their view of women as objects of male desire and should not overshadow Komachi's immense poetic talent.