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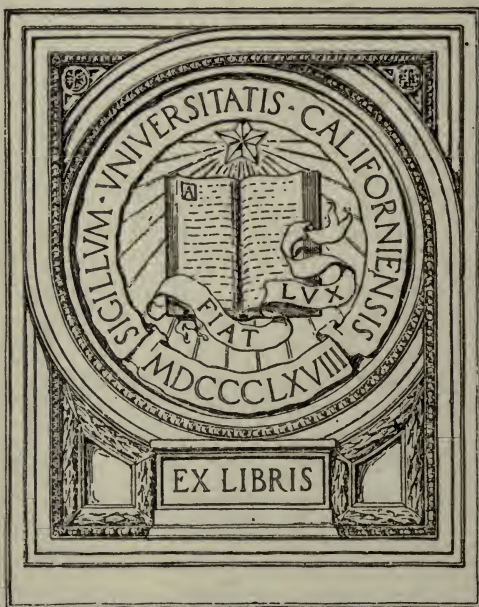
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Japanese Collectors

By Frederick Starr



Japanese Collectors and What They Collect


by Frederick Starr



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Japanese Collectors
and What They Collect

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JAPANESE COLLECTORS AND WHAT THEY COLLECT

AN unexpected message from Professor Tsuboi: "It would be very convenient for you to see the exhibition of Japanese toys at Marquis Tokugawa's. I will go with you." Knowing that the Professor was the "adviser" of the Marquis in his scientific interests, we accepted the invitation as official and were soon on the way. The Marquis is the head of one of the three divisions of the famous old family which for more than two hundred years furnished the actual rulers of Japan, the Tokugawa Shoguns, beginning with Iyeyasu about the year 1600 and ending with the restoration of the Mikado to actual power in 1868. He is a man of taste and public spirit. He maintains a great library, semi-public, on his splendid grounds and it was in this library building that the exhibition was being held and that we were received. A crowd of guests was present, but companions of his adviser demanded personal attention and we were shown distinguished courtesy. Taken into a private tea-room, four of us — the Marquis, his secretary, Professor Tsuboi and myself — took tea and ate daimyal cakes bearing the famous *mon* or crest of the Tokugawa family. As we chatted together the Marquis suddenly cried, "Gentlemen!

What a curious thing; here we are four gentlemen together, and the only one in Japanese dress is the foreigner!" Apparently the fact struck home; I have several times since had occasion to visit the Marquis; I am always kept waiting a few minutes, but when he appears he, too, is in Japanese dress. But to the exhibition. It was really interesting. It filled various cases and covered several tables. There were dolls and tops and kites; there were the old traditional toys from out-of-the-way towns, toys known throughout Japan for quaintness or crudeness; there were modern toys showing foreign influence; there were scientific toys, devised by Professor Tsuboi, for the combination of amusement and instruction — combination oft attempted but usually a dismal failure. Science and pedagogy underlay the exhibition; addresses on the significance of play and the pedagogical value of toys were to be given; many teachers were among the guests. One most interesting feature was the great horizontal map of Japan showing the geographical distribution of toys; it was done by placing specimens upon the appropriate districts. Here one could see the homes of the quaint "traditionals;" still more interesting, one could trace the local variations of one and another widely spread type. Thus, a pottery whistle in the shape of a dove occurs almost everywhere in Japan; but the dove-whistles of different places vary interestingly in size and form and color and grade of workmanship and quality as whistles.

* * * *

The Marquis and his toys are typical of a certain high class of collectors. There are many such. They have means, they have taste, they have good advisers. They go in for all sorts of things. Their collections range from veritable museums to a few choice and beautiful things, often family heirlooms, which no money can buy. Mr. Okura's collection is famous. It comprises all the choice things of Japanese art — paintings, ceramics, wood-carving, lacquer, metalwork; in number, beauty and value of the objects, it outranks many a famous public museum. At the outbreak of the Japanese-Russian war, he was minded to sell it, in order to turn the proceeds into the national war-chest. It required strong, friendly influences to prevent his doing so. It is permanently displayed in a series of rooms; it is in no sense public and pay-guests would not be welcome. But it is gladly opened to such visitors as are recommended as competent to appreciate and enjoy it. We have said that his collection covers a wide range of objects. Most wealthy collectors in Japan have some specialty — this one collects strange objects, another mirrors, another choice lacquer; hundreds collect swords or *tsuba* (sword-guards), or the other delicate and beautiful adornments of metalwork that accompany and form parts of swords; armor is a favorite subject for collectors — and fine ceramics, tea ceremonial outfits, wood carvings, Buddhist objects. Everyone has some *kakemono* (hanging scroll pictures), and true collections of them are innumerable. Today there are collectors of color-prints in Japan, but in the past

such were few; judges of Japanese art for the most part looked upon the *ukioye* with contempt and have rather wondered at the western craze for them. So too — while beautiful *netsukes* have always been appreciated and a man's taste would be judged by the quality of those he owned and used — collections of *netsukes* have not been common and probably there are more of them today outside than inside Japan. Whatever his line of interest, the collector becomes an expert and through repeated handling and viewing of his treasures comes to see beauties and distinctions which are non-existent to the uninitiated.

* * * *

The Japanese collector is passionately interested in his line, but only while it remains truly Japanese. He does indeed admit a certain interest in Chinese things, less in Korean. Outside this he cannot arouse enthusiasm. He will go wild over Japanese weapons and armor; but for weapons and armor in general he has not even a languid interest. He will study Japanese dolls in all their range of variation; he will know the minutest characteristics; he can talk learnedly of maker and date and place of origin. But he does not care at all for the dolls of Africa or Europe or India, and will barely give space for *Loo Choo* dolls. If some foreign friend gives him specimens from abroad, he will receive them politely, treat them with courteous respect, show them to others when the donor is present — but in reality the things do not appeal to him, in truth they bore him. This is very curious when we remember how ready the Japanese in

general are to borrow all things new and foreign; when we recall the enthusiasm they show at the present for Shakespearean drama. We might suppose the collector would be like the people at large in these practical directions; but not so—he is impervious.

The Japanese collector does not show his things at all times or to all persons. There are various reasons. One should never drop in upon a collector to see his objects. If he has many pieces and choice ones, they are not immediately accessible. There is no furniture in our sense of the word in Japanese rooms; nor are the walls hung with a vulgar profusion of art treasures as ours are. Usually all that one finds in the living room are the clean walls, the clean mats upon the floor, a low writing table perhaps, and in the *tokonoma* (alcove) one suspended scroll and a small stand on which is an arrangement of flowers or one single curious or beautiful object. If the owner of the house is a rich man, his prized possessions are in a little fireproof construction quite distinct from his house proper; if he is a man of modest means or poor his things are stored away in chests or boxes. To really get out a collection to show a guest may be the work of hours. So inspection should always be a matter of previous arrangement; the time of the appointment being best left to the owner. Then when the guest appears, he is likely to find elaborate preparation made for him. Things have been brought out; all kinds of stands or tables have been found or improvised; objects will

be spread out upon them. There is also usually a pile of boxes on the matting, near the master; each box contains some precious object. Inspection will first be made of the objects laid out for display. Then the guest, sitting before the host, is shown the things from boxes. A box is opened; the object, wrapped in cloth, is carefully taken out; when unrolled it is found to be perhaps in another wrapping, or another, or another; finally the prize is exposed and enjoyed by the guest and owner. Probably it will be re-wrapped and carefully replaced in its neat, clean wooden box before the next is opened. But when the visit is finished do not imagine that you have seen all his treasures. The next time you speak with some mutual friend you find that there are other things, finer perhaps than those you saw! Is it that he reserves something for a later visit? Does he hope to force you to come again? Or is he unable to bring himself to share the highest delight with another?

There is a dear and famous ancient inn at Hikone. It has many attractions—hot baths, beautiful garden, a handsome neighboring castle. Best, however, is its service of wares at meals. Anyone who has taste, or a sense for elegance, or an eye for beauty, instinctively appreciates when his first meal is served that here is something unusual and fine. And, if he seems worthy, the maid will tell him about the dishes he is handling—what ware, their age, their quality, their historic associations, their ancient owners. Perhaps—probably—she will not tell him more. But at the second meal, all the dishes are different; he

may not be a judge — but they are even better, more beautiful, choicer for one or another reason. At the next meal again, there is no repetition and again the grade is higher. And it is the inn's greatest glory, that no guest is likely to stay long enough to exhaust its splendid stock and to see and handle its greatest prizes. Yet its supremest joy would come on such a final, culminating occasion. Would it, or not?

* * * *

I have seen many, many choice collections. I *should* be a connoisseur, for much pains has been taken in my education. But these are sad days for Japanese collections. The world war has wrought destruction. Hundreds of men who through twenty, thirty, forty years labored to bring together some great collection, collect no more. Men whose heart, whose joy in life, whose every thought had been in their collections, where each piece had its association and memory; men who handled their loved objects with tenderness; men who owned things so prized that they begrudged the very sight of them to others — such men are, today, stripped bare. Two influences have been at work — the high cost of living and the *narikin*. As to high cost of living, Tokyo has suffered more than London or New York. And collectors, men of taste, who have tied up relatively large sums of money, in something absolutely non-productive, are one of the classes who have suffered most. As to the *narikin*; in the early days of the great war there was much money made by individuals in Japan. New millionaires were many. The word *narikin* was

quickly applied to them, and of all *nouveaux riches*, the *narikin* has proved most vulgar. They have indulged in every extravagance; they have practiced every ostentation; curiously, no doubt because blatantly patriotic, they have gone in for the fad of buying things Japanese. They demand *kakemonos*, color-prints, ivory carvings, mirrors, swords, armor — all the long list of lovely things that once had sensitive, appreciative and expert owners. They spoiled the market for all other buyers. Money was no object; prices were best when highest; wholesale business was in the air — so they were ready to buy complete collections at any price. Yet they were incapable of knowing what they bought, or why it was interesting and precious. The real collectors were hopelessly entrapped. Unable to buy because of the high prices, unable to refuse to sell, they let their treasures go that they might live. It was a tragedy akin to that of the seventies and eighties, when the *samurai* families and the Buddhist priests, unadjusted to new conditions, had to let their heirlooms go to foreign buyers.

* * * *

I have attended several meetings of the “Old Babies,” one of the best known of the many clubs of toy collectors. It was pre-eminently composed of *those who know*. The center of the group was Shimizu Seifu and the meetings were regularly at his house. The meeting-room was small but so was the attendance; rarely were there more than a half dozen persons. There were tea and cakes at hand throughout the evening. While there was always a set topic

and cards of announcement were sent out, there was no such thing as an address or formal paper. Everyone was supposed to bring something with him that was pertinent to the subject, but whether he produced it or not depended on the atmosphere. Perhaps interest seemed lacking; or some one person showed a tendency to monopolize; or, after all, they might not prove appreciative, so what had been brought remained in the sleeve and was carried away unknown. There was no haste; there was no horror lest a minute be without conversation; there was no fear lest time be lost. But as they were moved, one and another produced what he had brought and laid it on the matting; it was examined, perhaps commented upon, similar ones elsewhere might be mentioned, some book or article in which matter pertinent was to be found was named. There were four great lights in the little group. Shimizu Seifu himself was author of a beautiful picture book of toys, which is still standard; on disputed questions, he was a final authority for many. Far from rich, of no great station, simple in life and appearance, he was known throughout Japan. Nishizawa San was noted for refined and delicate tastes; a gentlemen in manner and appearance, he had retired from active banking business, with ample means for the indulgence of his fancies; a connoisseur in things of Old Japan in general, he was especially a collector of dolls; rare was the meeting of "Old Babies," when he was absent. Hayashi San and Hirose still live. Hayashi is one of two or three men in Japan today, who speak with authority upon any-

thing concerning the past of the country. Whether it is history or literature or art — whether it is books, or prints, pictures or toys, he is the amateur pre-eminent. Hirose San is professionally in toys — in other words he is a manufacturer and exporter; at his house first I found that certain toys which I had seen for sale on the streets of the City of Mexico and which I supposed typically Mexican, were “made in Japan;” but while his business is toy-export, involving contact with the latest ideas and fancies, he knows the old toys as well. Incidentally, it may be said that he was one of the few early Japanese collectors of color-prints. These four were almost always present at the meetings. One night our subject was Tenjin, god of letters. In life he was Sugawara Michizane, loyal minister to an ungrateful sovereign; he lived about a thousand years ago; today he is worshipped throughout Japan and schoolboys offer their choicest specimens of handwriting at his shrine. He is one of my four favorite great Japanese. Shimizu San had hung a *kakemono* in the alcove, on which were painted the wooden bullfinches given out at different Tenjin shrines — among them Dazaifu, Osaka Temmangu, Kameido. Everywhere the quaint, unnatural little figure is believed to bring good fortune. A curious bullfinch exchange used to take place at Dazaifu, where everyone in the great crowd, exchanging figures in the dark, hoped to get the *gold* bullfinch in return for his own of wood. The figures from each shrine differ from those of others in some peculiarity of whittling or color. At our meeting speci-

mens of these wooden bullfinches were shown, and toy figures of Tenjin himself, some of them quaint and old; his famous black bullock, faithful unto death, came in for consideration, as figures of him of all grades and kinds are common; and his plum tree, his plum *mon* or crest, and his fame as a calligrapher came up for conversation or illustration.

* * * *

We have said that Nishizawa San was a collector of dolls. He had 2500 of them; dolls cheap and precious, dolls ancient and modern, dolls large and small; dolls designed by famous artists and dolls in variety and great beauty invented by himself. There are two kinds of dolls, sharply differentiated by the Japanese — *hina* and *nigyo*. *Hina* are ceremonial dolls; they are made in pairs, male and female. They are symbolical — so deeply so that few Japanese realize their significance; so deeply so, that no Japanese can think of them as merely toys. Between the *hina* laid out at the dolls' festival and the family there is a mystical bond of union. *Nigyo* are simple figures, human or animal, meant to be played with. Our dolls are *nigyo*, nothing more. But there is more to a *nigyo* with which a child has played and which is displayed later at the dolls' festival than to our dolls; here again there is a mystical bond of union, this time between the child owner and the doll. It is not, however, our intention to deal here with the dolls' festival. Nishizawa San never displayed all his dolls at once. Four times a year he made a formal showing. One of course was on the third day of the third

month, the date of the regular dolls' festival, when the collection shown was appropriate to the day. *Hina* largely, with the Emperor and Empress above; but there were *nigyo* too and all the gay lay-out of miniature utensils and implements and the food and drink offerings, with every detail of the formal arrangement carried through. On the fifth month, the display was of the boy dolls suited to the boys' festival. Foreigners all know of the girls' festival; few know that there is a whole series of dolls suitable for the boys' festival. The other occasions when Nishizawa San made his displays were, I think, September and December. We have mentioned dolls of his designing. Each year for some time before his death he designed a pair of *hina*. His aim was to produce strikingly different and unusual, but beautiful, designs. They were marvels of art in moulding, in dress, in careful ornamental detail; they were made of the choicest paste, colored with the greatest care, fired with the utmost skill. From the design, he had just twenty pairs made, and on the first of January, these were sent as gifts to friends who could and would appreciate them. They are today among the most prized of recent *hina*. In 1910 I decided to follow his example and invoked his aid, leaving the details largely in his hands. The male doll is intended to be my portrait; in ancient ceremonial dress, there are details in the decoration that show not only that I am an American but the representative of my nation. The female is also in ceremonial dress, but it too shows that she is conceived not as an individual

Japanese, but as a national representative. Twenty pairs were made and great was my satisfaction, until a discriminating critic wondered that a bachelor should have a pair of *hina*. He was correct in his criticism; it was incongruous. It might have been excused in one who knew nothing of the inner meaning of the dolls' festival.

* * * *

Such dolls as foreign children use are *nigyo*. Japanese have used them in variety for any length of time. But any toy figure, human or animal, is *nigyo*. A figure of Daruma, considered merely as a toy or ornament, would be *nigyo*. Daruma is very popular, and *nigyos* of him abound. He is the ancient ascetic who sat for so many years in meditation that his legs rotted away; hence he is usually represented without legs, wrapped in a great red blanket that serves at once as hood and cloak. His face scowls; his deep eyes gleam; his unkempt hair and his neglected sprouting beard sometimes impart an almost ferocious aspect to him. He is the patron of the meditative Zen sect of Buddhism and in Zen temples his scowling face frowns at the visitor from many a gigantic *kakemono*. Foreigners usually see only the amusing or the terrifying in such representations; but the Japanese have nothing of that feeling with reference to these great pictures, which are not meant to caricature, or ridicule, or belittle one of the most respected figures in Buddhism. The common people, however, delight in every quaint conception of the old saint. Toy figures of him are everywhere — in wood,

in clay, but pre-eminently in papier-maché. Boys make snow Darumas, inserting black coals for eyes; Daruma is pressed in puff-rice or other sweet-meats and sold for eating; most of all Darumas of papier-maché are weighted for tumbling toys, which right themselves however placed. You have heard no doubt of blind Darumas, papier-maché figures of the usual type but with white spots as sockets instead of eyes. One who has a favor to ask of the god, buys a blind Daruma, makes his prayer and sets the figure on his god-shelf at home. If the wish is granted, he inks in a black eye on the white spot. A second gift granted gives the figure a second eye. It should then be carried to the temple and left there as evidence of a favor granted. The weighted, tumbling Daruma has given rise to a common saying that runs something like this:—“Daruma, though he falls six times, rises a seventh.” I had known for years that in Isé province there was a man who had a collection of Darumas; from time to time I read of him in papers or heard of him from friends. Finally, being in the neighborhood, we went to see him. We were too late; the good man had died some months before. Still everyone was able to direct us to “the Daruma house,” where we found his son who gladly showed us the collection. With this collection goes a story. This man had failed in business; nothing he undertook prospered; finally, in despair, he contemplated suicide. Just at the critical moment the saying flashed through his mind:—“Daruma, though he falls six times, rises a seventh.” He determined to try again;

he bought a Daruma; he prayed for success; he went upon our principle that the god helps him who helps himself and he worked with energy. The change came in his affairs; his business prospered and with prosperity he became a devotee of Daruma. He collected Darumas of every kind and size and quality. At his death, his collection numbered more than 700 pieces. There were Darumas of wood and ivory, metal, porcelain, papier-maché; there were Darumas less than an inch and more than a yard in height; there were Darumas that cost a *sen*, there were others that cost many *yen*. He had not only figures; there were Daruma *kakemono* by famous artists, and poems in praise of Daruma written by well known poets. Because of the fame of his collection, visitors came from near and far to view it and to these he gave some kind of souvenir, always of course with Daruma association. Thus, we were given saké cups, with a figure of the red-robed saint and a poem on them.

* * * *

Among the Japanese I am widely known by the nick-name of *Ô.fuda Hakushi*, which means "doctor of honorable placards." The doctor here is like our Ph. D.; *fuda*, means a slip of paper with some inscription, usually a name; *Ô* is honorific. Notice, it is not the doctor that is honorable, it is the placards! I have already printed too much about the *Nosatsu-Kai* to go into it at length here — but it illustrates a certain type of collectors and collections. *Nosatsu*, the *ô-fuda*, are pasted up at temples and shrines as an act of minor devotion. Those who paste them col-

lect them also and they sometimes have books with hundreds of such *fuda* in them. But besides the simple, plain, name-placards for posting up at temples, there is another kind of *nosatsu*; these are pictorial, color-prints; they are in size like the pasting *fuda* — though often larger — and were suggested by them. They are made only for exchange at the monthly meetings of the collectors; a new, special, *nosatsu* is made for each meeting and is never used again; at such meetings, each attendant brings his *nosatsu* in quantity to supply all and when he leaves he carries with him the entire series of that occasion. Old devotees have fat volumes pasted full of these placards, arranged meeting by meeting. The society has been in existence more than one hundred and twenty years and there is really much of interest in their often quaint and beautiful placards:

* * * *

The first meeting of the *Nosatsu-Kai* that I attended chanced to be a joint meeting with the match-papers society. You know match-papers? They are the labels, usually pictorial and gaudy, that are pasted on the boxes in which matches are sold. Collection of match-papers seems about on a par with the strings of buttons, which as children we used to gather; the main purpose was numbers, but beauty and variety had a part in the matter. At that meeting I met the president of the match-papers society, who some days later did me the honor of calling upon me. He then had thousands of match-papers. There was really a wide range of designs and some of them were

unquestionably pretty; as for the wording on them, it was Japanese for the most part, though there were some strange jumbings in which English and Swedish appeared. Finally, we ventured to ask the man his occupation. "Why, I collect match-papers," was his reply. "Yes, but how do you make your living?" "But I have no time for anything else." We met on two or three subsequent occasions and then he dropped out of sight. Seven years later a great *nosatsu* meeting was given in my honor in the city of Sakai, perhaps 400 miles from Tokyo; it was a red-letter day on which probably my stock went to its highest record; at the meeting in the afternoon, 250 persons were present, each with an honorable-placard commemorative of the occasion, for exchange. Among them appeared my match-paper friend. He had his *nosatsu*, of course; more than that, he had a pasting *nosatsu* with my name upon it, which he said was to be pasted on every shrine and temple in southwest Japan. But, best of all, he presented me—in a neat, wooden box appropriately inscribed— with a book containing a collection of 1700 match-papers, all different, arranged according to his system of classification. Most of them were *real* match-papers, actually intended for labelling match boxes. Some, however, were commemorative papers, that had been exchanged at meetings, on the same principle as the *nosatsu* exchange. These were the same size as the real match-papers but the designs are placed vertically instead of horizontally; they are less gaudy, more artistic; they are made for the one meeting, not for repeated

use. As we turned the pages and examined my collection, the variety, the quaint designs, the lettering, — our wonder grew and we began to see what match-papers might mean to the enthusiast. Questioning our friend, we learned that almost immediately after our last meeting he had come down to this western district to study its match-papers; he had devoted his entire time for seven years to it, but now felt that his task was completed; there were practically none with which he was unacquainted; he should soon return to Tokyo. Some weeks later, we stumbled upon him in the capital city, where he had a little shop devoted to match-papers. A great meeting of the society had welcomed his return, the month before; at the meeting many beautiful designs, all in his honor, were exchanged. He has established a monthly magazine devoted to match-papers. We were urged to come to the next meeting, November 25. It was a Sunday afternoon. The place was one often used by collectors' clubs as a gathering place. The meeting was in an upper room which, even from the street, we saw was decorated in our honor. The flags of Japan and the United States were crossed outside and some of our own commemorative towel-banners were in evidence. We found the ceiling of the room covered with a network of strings from which were pendent gaudy match-papers of the largest size (such as are used on packages of a dozen boxes of matches). The walls were covered with exhibits, mostly frames full of match-papers. For instance, in one frame all the designs were Mount Fuji in honor of our recent as-

cent. Another frame was filled with rarities — a dozen match-papers, worth 100 *yen* (\$50) in the open market. Single match-papers have actually sold for more than that. But we have not space to tell all the curious things displayed. Forty-two members, all men but one, were present. The meeting was the 58th in the society's history. After some hours of tea-drinking, conversation, inspection of exhibits, the exchange took place. It was of the nature of the *Nosatsu-Kai* exchange. Each person present had a commemorative match-paper, special to that meeting; each one carried away with him the entire series of 42. Eight of these were designed with reference to my presence; among them was one which had for its design the old seal of the city of Chicago. Where and how was it unearthed?

* * * *

In the *Nosatsu-Kai* and the Match-papers Society much of the pleasure is in the meeting. In the Old Babies and in the great art collecting, the principle of rivalry must count for something. But there are collectors and collections that lack either of those motives, where in fact the zest and joy come largely in doing what no one else has done. My good friend Ozawa has various claims to consideration. He loves to engrave and does his own drawing, cutting of the wood block and printing. He collects *ema* (votive pictures crudely painted on little boards) and is working out an illustrated book upon them in which his choicest hundred are to be represented in miniature, the art-work being his own. He is a match-

papers man. He prints a magazine devoted to his hobbies, which is completely printed from wood blocks of his own cutting, and which he distributes free of charge to his friends. But all these are secondary; his chief claim to fame is that he is a frog-man. His one real interest in life is that leaping batrachian. Anything in any way connected with frogs charms him. He has 300 frog items in his collection. He has figures, utensils, articles of all sorts, toys, pictures, picture post-cards, books, advertisements,—but all must be frogs or somehow related to frogs. His visiting-cards, his seals (and every Japanese carries a seal), bear frog-designs. His collection has become famous and well-known artists have painted frog-*kakemono* for him. One of these, by a really famous artist, represents a lady standing beautifully dressed; every article of her clothing is, however, in some way “ranine” — it may be in the outline, or in the draping, or in the delicate figuring, but there are frogs everywhere. Another *kakemono* by our good friend, Awashima San, represents a battle of frogs.

* * * *

We might run on indefinitely, but refrain. There is no land where collectors more abound; there is none where the collector is more tolerantly treated. With us, outside of a few lines of generally recognized respectability, collecting is worse than an amiable weakness; the collector is queer at least and meets little sympathy; if enthusiastic he is *mad*. In Japan no one questions the legitimacy of any fad and sympathy with the collector is general. One may be-

long to the *Nosatsu-Kai* or the Match-papers Society and still be in his right mind; one may be a Daruma-man, or a frog-man, or a snake-man without fear or offence. Is it not curious that among a people whose fundamental idea of social organization is the group and not the individual, the most astonishing independence in personal fads and fancies is so happily tolerated?

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