

The Story of the Takahashi Bird Pins

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For over forty years—from the early 1940s until the 1980s—Yoneguma and Kiyoka Takahashi created hand-carved, hand-painted wooden bird pins in their home. He did the carving and she did the painting. The tiny wooden birds are treasured by collectors worldwide. They are sought after not only because of their wonderful handcrafted beauty, but also because of the inspiring family story surrounding their inception. For the most part, these lovely creations are unmarked and unsigned. They are true treasures that are American folk art. Still, to this day, these darling little birds are frequently found at flea markets, garage sales, estate sales, and antiques shops. I hope that this article will assist you in identifying these collectible, valuable, and treasured birds.

A Family Story

Yoneguma Takahashi was born an American citizen in 1909, in Torrance, California. His wife, Kiyoka, was born an American citizen in 1918, in Independence, California. When she was three, Kiyoka returned to Japan with her mother while her father stayed in the United States and continued to support his family by working as a cook. During the time Kiyoka lived in Japan, she studied art in high school and in college. Yoneguma was very well educated in the United States and was quite fluent in Japanese and English. In 1937 Kiyoka came back to the States as a “picture bride”—matched to a prospective husband through photographs and family recommendations—and married Yoneguma Takahashi. After their marriage the couple resided in Buena Park, California. By the time the year 1941 rolled around, the Takahashis had three sons. Yoneguma supported his family by working at a produce stand. The Takahashis lived a typical American life, building their family, as many people in the country

did. But on the tragic day of December 7, 1941, that life style was altered for most Americans. As most of us recall, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, everything changed immediately.

On the West Coast, mass hysteria and phobias erupted concerning people of Japanese heritage, and these wartime concerns reached ridiculous proportions. On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued an executive directive called Order 9066, which mandated the forced internment and relocation of 300 Americans of Italian descent, 5,000 Americans of German descent, and a shocking 110,000 Americans of Japanese descent. Nearly all of these individuals, including entire families, were forced into camps, ranging from the Poston War Relocation Center in Yuma County, Arizona, to nine other camps, from California to the state of Washington.

Yoneguma and Kiyoka Takahashi and their three sons were forced to relocate to the Poston internment camp. This was done with almost no prior notice. They were allowed to take only what they could carry and were crammed into buses for the trip to the camp. Their internment lasted for three and a half years. While in the camp these Americans of foreign ancestry suffered harsh, poor living conditions. They basically had little or no privacy and suffered from extreme hot and cold temperatures. Officials gave little thought to the comfort or personal health of the camp residents. Although these detainees were Americans, they were treated like spies and traitors, as a whole. They were humiliated and shamed for something of which they had no knowledge and had not taken part.

While the Takahashi family was in the Poston camp, they sought a way to pass the time and to fill the void left in

their creative lives. They learned to carve tiny birds and to delicately and realistically paint them. The birds' bodies were originally made of salvaged scraps of wood from wooden egg crates. Tiny wire feet were made of screen wire from the window screens at the camp. The birds were of various sizes, all fairly small, but probably averaged about three inches in length. Small pins were attached to the backs of the birds, which turned them into wearable jewelry. The pins were simply safety pins that had been inserted into the hand-carved birds. To make tools for woodworking, the Takahashis used blades from hacksaws that they fashioned into small knives. The camp had some magazines, such as *National Geographic*, and books such as those published by the Audubon Society, which Yoneguma and Kiyoka read and viewed, using them as their pictorial inspirations for the watercolor painting of the tiny birds.

Some of the first pieces were given away by their creators as gifts. Although the Takahashi family is credited with these pins and made them with excellence, others in the camp also learned to make little birds. Many of the small treasures were simply thrown out and never seen again.

When the internment camps were finally closed, the detainees were given bus tickets and shipped back to their points of origin. But they returned to nothing. They had no homes, no jobs, no money, no businesses. They received bitter looks and had inner feelings of unjust but always present shame.

After their internment the Takahashi family moved to Garden Grove, California. As the expression goes, when the going gets tough, the tough get going, and so they did. Rather than breaking their spirit, the internment mess boosted the family into their own pursuit of the



American dream. Working out of their home, the family started making the lovely little birds again. These darling, high-quality birds sent the family spirit soaring. Yoneguma and Kiyoka used their creative talents to provide money for a home and the education for their children. They created the birds for over forty years. During this time, they changed and improved the designs and used better materials. The creators' craftsmanship, already at a high level, became excellent.

How Do You Recognize Takahashi Birds?

There are several characteristics that distinguish the Takahashi birds:

- sculpted feathers on the first and early pieces
- open or closed mouths
- curved wings
- hand-wrapped wire feet
- smooth bodies
- bright colors
- tiny paint strokes
- great detail
- layered lacquer coatings that sealed and protected the painted bodies

Some of the birds are signed K.T.; K.T., under a half circle; K.T., in a circle; K.T., with the name of the species (these are very rare); K.T., with a date; or K.T., marked in red. Many of the birds came perched on small branches; others were portrayed in flight.

The oldest birds have the screen-wire wrapped feet. These are rare and offer a true vision of the early pieces. Those with safety-pin backs are also early ones, from the era of the internment camp. The typical pin backs of the later years were push-in pins rather than pins attached with screws. A back clasp with arrow-shaped holes in the clasp is a simple but authentic Takahashi clasp. It too is a sign of the early birds. The birds from the 1940s and 1950s are now selling for between \$500 and \$3,000, so keep your eyes out for them.

A great number of types of birds are shown in the Takahashi carvings. These include the green hummingbird, Anna hummingbird, goldfinch, golden crown kinglet, mountain bluebird, Eastern bluebird, thrush, tanager, canary, bunting, oriole, wren, owl, pheasant, Amherst pheasant, blue jay, cardinal (some cardinal pins feature one eye, others show two eyes), parakeet, mallard duck, quail, cuckoo, meadowlark, scissor-tail flycatcher, red-winged blackbird, bald eagle, Canada goose, and male and female crested cardinal. The cuckoo bird has a round, red berry in its open beak. The goldfinch pin is a

shape that was reused and painted in a different style to create a different bird.

Reproductions and Replicas

Beware of reproductions or forgeries of the Takahashi birds. Some of these are signed "Japan Gumps." These have pin backs attached with screws. However, the Takahashts never signed their pins like this, nor did they use screws to attach pin backs. Remember, the originals are well painted, detailed, smooth bodied, and of super-high quality. The Takahashi bird designs are copy protected. The rights are owned by Carol Takahashi, a granddaughter of Yoneguma and Kiyoka Takahashi. She has authorized the production of *replicas* of four of the original designs. These replicas depict the road runner, California quail, rufous hummingbird, and redpoll. They are created by a renowned Montana woodcarver, Jerry Simchuk, for display and sale at the gift shop of the Manzanar National Historic Site in Independence, California. These are clearly marketed as replicas and are not meant to deceive. Sales of the replicas go toward the support of the Manzanar History Museum, which is located on the grounds of another of the World War II internment camps.

The Rarity of the Birds

Some of the original birds were made in very limited editions for friends, business associates, and long-time collectors. Only a portion of the Takahashi birds were ever signed. Some of the birds are so strongly sought after because of their very limited number. For example, only six of the swooping eagles were ever made, so they are extremely valuable. According to a family member, only a few of these were made because they were very labor intensive to produce.

Many of the Takahashi birds came to be in great demand, and the family at one time tried to create ten a day in order to meet their order quotas. Male birds sold better than the females because of their vibrant coloration, so pins depicting female birds are more rare and difficult to find. Each bird pin that was sold came in a yellow box with an identification card saying what species of bird it was. An original Takahashi card read "Takahashi—originals; American Bird Brooches." According to Carol Takahashi, her grandmother signed only the highest-quality pieces. Signed birds are of special value and interest to serious collectors.

The End of an Era

On April 15, 1994, Kiyoka died from complications of Lou Gehrig's disease. She had tried for several years to retire



Takahashi bird pin. Collection of the author.

but could not because of good clients who still loved and paid dearly for their beautiful birds. Yoneguma lived for ten more years after his wife's death.

Buying and Viewing Takahashi Birds

During the 1960s Takahashi birds were sold in fancy stores from Chicago to California. They were handled by Abercrombie and Fitch, and at Gump's in San Francisco, an establishment known for its fine luxury gifts and art objects. Von Lengerke and Antoine, a store in Chicago, also sold the birds. The Takahashi family never personally sold their birds to the department stores. Wholesalers would do the selling for their products.

As mentioned above, authorized Takahashi bird replicas may be purchased at the museum store of the Manzanar National Historic Site in Independence, California. The education and interpretive programs of the historic site benefit from the sale of the replicas. To learn more about Manzanar, visit <http://www.nps.gov/manz/index.htm>. The museum store's wares are shown and may be ordered at <http://store.manzanarstore.com/gifts.html>.

One hundred fifty original Takahashi birds are now in the permanent collection of the Japanese American National Museum, 369 East First Street, Los Angeles, California 90012. The museum's Web site is at www.janm.org. Original Takahashi birds are also part of the permanent collection of the Eastern California Museum in Independence, California. Its Web site may be viewed at <http://www.inyocounty.us/ecmuseum/index.html>. Takahashi birds also have been the subject of special museum exhibits. For example, in 1999 they were on view at the Gerald R. Ford Museum in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Sources

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge my sources for this article. I read and would encourage others to read a series of books called *Collecting Costume Jewelry*, by Julia C. Carroll, published by Collector Books. The volume entitled *Collecting Costume Jewelry 303: The Flip Side, Exploring Costume Jewelry from the Back*, was particularly helpful. Carroll's books are great for offering identification of pieces and a price guide. I thank Carol Takahashi for her wonderfully illustrated Web site at www.takahashibirds.com, which includes contact information and links to clippings about her grandparents and their work. A special thank you also goes to the re-creator and artist Jerry Simchuk and his Web site, www.simchuk.com.

At this writing, a new book is about to appear that is devoted entirely to the Takahashi birds. *The Inspiring Story of Takahashi Bird Pins*, by Julia C. Carroll and Carol Takahashi has a publication date of November 30, 2010.

The 256-page book is published by Collector Books and can be ordered at the company's Web site, www.collectorbooks.com, which offers a preview of a few pages from this volume. Advance publicity for the book mentions that it contains numerous full-color illustrations, prices of pins, and an explanation of the carving and painting methods used by Yoneguma and Kiyoka Takahashi.

About the Author

Denni K. Hubert is a longtime jewelry collector and authority on costume jewelry. She and her husband, Charlie Hubert, operate Second Hand Rose Antiques, 901 E. Main Street, Urbana, IL 61820. The Huberts specialize in costume and "real" jewelry and identification. They own several of the Takahashi bird pins. The Huberts serve as guest speakers throughout the U.S. on the subject of vintage costume jewelry.