

Collection of the National Bunraku Theatre, Osaka

EXHIBITION GUIDE

BUNRAKU BACKSTAGE

OCTOBER 4, 2024 - JANUARY 19, 2025



INTRODUCTION



Bunraku Backstage

Bunraku, one of Japan's representative traditional theaters, was born around 1600 from the unification of three itinerant folk arts: puppetry, narrative recitation, and shamisen music. Literally translated as "delighting in the literary arts," bunraku brings to life real and imaginary stories, captivating audiences with historical tales, war epics, and love tragedies. Opening in conjunction with the bunraku performances held at Japan Society this fall, ***Bunraku Backstage*** offers a rare behind-the-scenes glimpse of the theater. It presents puppets and props on loan from the National Bunraku Theatre in Osaka, archival photographs and interview excerpts with performers and artisans from the Barbara Curtis Adachi Bunraku Collection, and works of contemporary art exploring the aesthetic language of bunraku.



Collection of the National Bunraku Theatre, Osaka

The Artisans of Bunraku: Onstage and Backstage

Bunraku, Japanese puppet theater, is created through the close collaboration of many skilled performers and craftspeople. The puppets, with their distinctive and artfully carved faces, coiffed wigs, and period costumes, are the most recognizable tangible elements of bunraku. They are brought to life by the puppeteers' ability to manipulate them in unison with lyrical narration and musical accompaniment to forge the unique experience of bunraku theater. Puppeteering teams, a narrator (*tayū*), and a shamisen player perform together in view of the audience. But the performances rely on a large cast of backstage musicians and behind-the-scenes artisans who remain largely invisible.

This installation highlights the rarely seen backstage world of bunraku. Here is where artisans temporarily assemble each puppet for a specific role in a particular play, where specialists—wig masters, makeup artisans, costume directors, and the puppeteers themselves—outfit puppets during the weeks leading up to the play. Each of these separate yet highly coordinated skill sets is featured in this installation with select photographs, interviews, and observations by researcher Barbara Adachi, who studied and documented bunraku with the National Bunraku Troupe for four decades.

The Barbara Curtis Adachi Archive Bunraku Collection

Barbara Curtis Adachi (1924-2004) was an exceptionally knowledgeable and steadfast documentarian of bunraku theater. An American columnist for the Mainichi Daily News and the Asahi Evening News, the English editions of two major Japanese newspapers, Adachi lived in Tokyo most of her life. Adachi worked closely with the National Bunraku Troupe starting in the 1960s through 2000. She attended hundreds of performances, conducted extensive interviews, published numerous articles and books, and took thousands of photographs.

Adachi's archive is housed at the C.V. Starr East Asian Library at Columbia University. It is one of the most extensive visual and oral documentations of bunraku production in its tangible and intangible forms. In this exhibition, Adachi's lifelong project is reunited with its subject and collaborators, known since 1984 as the National Bunraku Theatre. The quotations given here are extracted from Adachi's papers.

Bunraku might be described as the "art of threes." The spellbinding coordination of the three puppeteers manipulating one doll, the unity achieved by the three independent elements—puppet, narrator, and musician—and the intersecting lines of communication established between puppeteer and narrator, narrator and musician, musician and puppet, as well as between and among the trios of puppeteers. This interlocking and continual shifting of artistic triangles formed by words, music, and movement continues to fascinate, puzzle, and intrigue theatregoers.

—Barbara Curtis Adachi

Image courtesy of The Barbara Curtis Adachi Bunraku Collection,
C.V. Starr East Asian library, Columbia University.

ONSTAGE

Image courtesy of The Barbara Curtis Adachi Bunraku Collection,
C.V. Starr East Asian Library, Columbia University.



Image courtesy of The Barbara Curtis Adachi Bunraku Collection,
C.V. Starr East Asian Library, Columbia University.

Puppeteers

Each puppet is brought to life by the careful choreography of a three-person team. The main puppeteer (*omo-zukai*) is always the most senior member of the trio and operates the head and right arm of the puppet. The left puppeteer moves the left hand. The foot puppeteer, the most junior member, controls the feet. The main puppeteer typically wears a black kimono and a skirt-like garment (*hakama*), and performs with his face uncovered. The supporting puppeteers, meanwhile, are cloaked in black cotton robes (*kurogo*) with their faces obscured entirely by black hoods (*zugin*) so that they don't distract attention from the puppets.

Puppets are deftly manipulated to mimic human behaviors (*furi*) such as weeping, heavy breathing, and dancing. Puppets also strike bunraku-specific poses and perform stylized movements (*kata*) that focus audience attention on the graceful lines of the puppet's form or heighten emotion in a climactic scene.

The puppet has no words, but shoulders can be moved in bravado or resignation, arms raised in horror or threat, hands clenched in determination or opened in insult. A puppet's gait can express weariness or joyous expectation, the innocence of youth or the despair of old age. It is the artistry of revealing the hara—the inner center of emotion and spirit—that the chief puppeteer wants to attain as he works with the left-arm operator and the leg operator.

—Yoshida Tamao, puppeteer

Narrator

The narrator (*tayū*) performs all of the spoken language of the bunraku play: describing the scenes, narrating the plot, and reciting all dialogue. To distinguish between these different elements, the narrator's voice must have an enormous range. He must be able to handle melodic and conversational recitation, shift between male and female voices, convey emotions and dramatize both soft-spoken and bellowed parts of the text.

*The whole point of bunraku is to portray human emotions and situations in life so that people's hearts are moved, so that they feel something special about the particular aspect of life the play deals with, whether loyalty, sacrifice, one of the many forms of love, or a dilemma one encounters in life. No, we are not mere storytellers. The *tayū* is the story, he is the play.*

—Takemoto Tsudayū, narrator

Shamisen Player

The shamisen player sits beside the narrator, an equal partner contributing more than mere accompaniment. Music is the thread that weaves the play together by punctuating and emphasizing the narrator's words. The shamisen music also introduces, guides, and concludes puppets' actions on stage. The music can reveal underlying emotions and create atmosphere. It can amplify or dispel plot tension—alternating between strummed notes or silence. The shamisen player also sets the tempo, driving the play and pushing the action along, even if there is no spoken narration.

You don't just pick up a shamisen and go out on stage to play. You really have to work with it, establish a relationship with it by playing notes, passages, and melodies to get it into the proper musical condition and to bring the shamisen into harmony with yourself.

—Tsuruzawa Jüzō IV, shamisen player

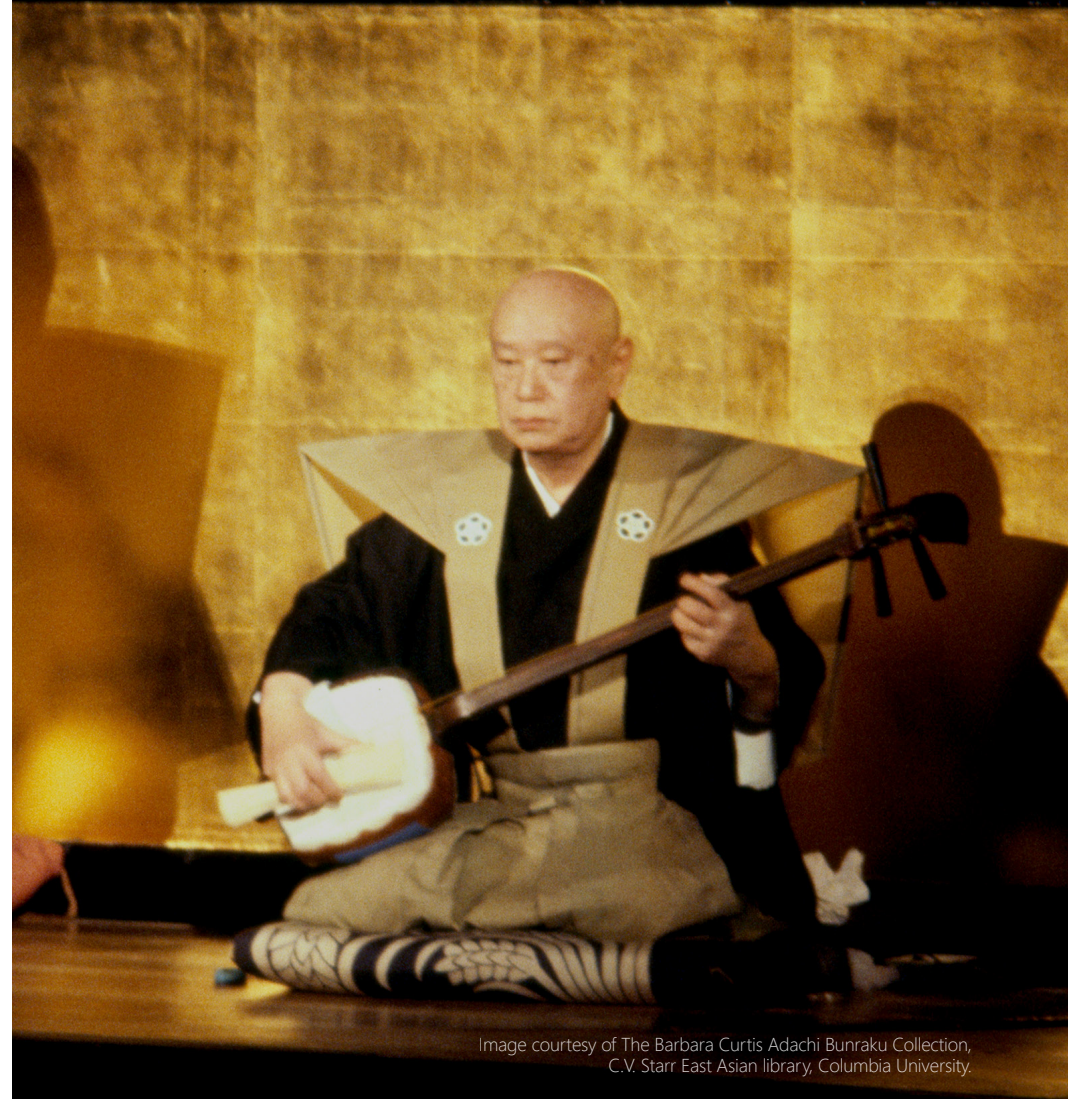


Image courtesy of The Barbara Curtis Adachi Bunraku Collection,
C.V. Starr East Asian Library, Columbia University.

BUNRAKU BACKSTAGE

October 4, 2024 — January 19, 2025

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BACKSTAGE



Carver of Heads



Image courtesy of The Barbara Curtis Adachi Bunraku Collection,
C.V. Starr East Asian Library, Columbia University.

During World War II, the bombing of Osaka destroyed all puppet heads. In the aftermath, the late master carver and Living National Treasure Ōe Minosuke IV (1907-1997) dedicated himself to resuscitating the tradition of carving puppet heads. With few exceptions, puppet heads in bunraku performances today are Ōe's creations, making them highly functional but also extremely precious.

This is not sculpture for decoration. A kashira (puppet head) portrays character. The head grip I carve allows the puppeteer to show his artistry. It is my link with his heart. In bunraku, the play's the thing. The puppeteer and I work independently to bring it alive together. I carve. He moves. But it's the play that counts.

—Ōe Minosuke IV, puppet head carver



Image courtesy of The Barbara Curtis Adachi Bunraku Collection,
C.V. Starr East Asian Library, Columbia University.

Costume Director and Costume Sewer

Costumes for bunraku puppets are sewn by hand from woven silk and cotton. The costume directors refer to historical records when selecting the materials, colors, and patterns for each puppet's robes. They then meticulously record which costumes are used for which plays. Costume sewers not only make new robes, but also maintain and repair them after heavy use on stage.

This is funny work, lonely work. We're hidden up here in the shadows, and there's never any applause and not even the puppeteers say much of anything unless something is wrong. But there is a satisfaction that comes when I peek at a scene or two and notice that things look right.

—Ishibashi Osamu, costume director

Wig Master

Because puppet heads are not created with hair, the wig master is responsible for making, attaching, changing, and styling the hair of each puppet. Like bunraku puppet costumes, hairstyles follow those of the Edo period and reflect the status and occupation of the role. The wig master expresses the character—and even the action—of the role through hairstyle. For example, a neat topknot might be undone and left loose to convey the drama of a fight scene.

Why, a wig can change a stern samurai into a genial country gentleman or can show that the fisherman is really an important court official in hiding.

—Nakoshi Shōji, wig master

Image courtesy of The Barbara Curtis Adachi Bunraku Collection,
C.V. Starr East Asian Library, Columbia University.

Distributor of Heads

In most cases, puppet heads are not carved to represent a single character, but rather a general type. Puppet roles in bunraku plays can be played by any head of the appropriate type. A senior puppeteer who is designated as the “distributor of heads” selects which head will be used for which role. This is a critical task.

The choice of puppet heads sometimes even determines the character of the shamisen music; additionally, the tayū bases his tone and style on the personality conveyed by the particular head that is chosen. So you can really say that the entire temper of the play rests on the selection of the heads.

—Yoshida Bunjaku, puppeteer

Image courtesy of The Barbara Curtis Adachi Bunraku Collection, C.V. Starr East Asian Library, Columbia University.



Puppet Creators

The simple wooden frames that comprise the bodies of the puppets are assembled by the puppeteers themselves, not by dedicated artisans.

Puppeteers cut the wood pieces and join the components together. Puppeteers typically have a collection of approximately 10-20 frames, each tailored for various roles and in accordance with personal taste. Appropriate heads—fitted with wigs and makeup applied—are attached to the frames before the performances.

*If a puppeteer can't make a good doll,
he'll never be good himself, and if he
doesn't make his puppet himself,
he doesn't have a doll.*

—Yoshida Minosuke III, puppeteer

Image courtesy of The Barbara Curtis Adachi Bunraku Collection,
C.V. Starr East Asian Library, Columbia University.

Repairer and Keeper of Heads

To keep the invaluable puppet heads in working order, a repairer and keeper is charged with refinishing heads, applying makeup made with mineral pigments to the faces, and maintaining the strings and toggles that operate each head's movable facial features. These craftspeople are also responsible for repairing the puppets' limbs.

I've got to be sure that the complexion is the right shade of beige or pink, or a uniform white. But the details—the lines around the eyes, nose, and mouth and the bluish shading indicating shaved forelocks—vary according to the particular role in a play.

—Hishida Kōji, keeper of heads

Image courtesy of The Barbara Curtis Adachi Bunraku Collection,
C.V. Starr East Asian Library, Columbia University.

Off-stage Musicians

While the narrator and shamisen player shape the action from on stage, off-stage musicians enhance the drama from a small room above one of the stage entrances. Their music, played with flutes, drums, and other percussion instruments, helps evoke the atmosphere of everything from battle scenes to light flurries of snow. These off-stage musicians produce musical effects timed precisely to the puppets' movements and the narrator or shamisen player's storytelling.

We're filling out the empty corners, underlining plot lines, intensifying emotions. We don't want to call attention to ourselves, we just want to make the play a more moving and entertaining experience.

—Mochizuki Haruo, off-stage musician

Image courtesy of The Barbara Curtis Adachi Bunraku Collection, C.V. Starr East Asian Library, Columbia University.



Sugimoto Bunraku *Sonezaki Shinjū* Poster

2011

Courtesy of Sugimoto Hiroshi

Multidisciplinary contemporary artist Sugimoto Hiroshi is fascinated by history, which he explores, revives, and reinterprets in his artworks. Seeking to address international and younger audiences, Sugimoto experiments with merging classical Japanese arts and avant-garde artistic expression.

In 2012, Sugimoto staged his own bunraku production of *Sonezaki Shinjū* ("The Love Suicides at Sonezaki"). Masters of bunraku theater participated in the premiere and international tours. Sugimoto's production resurrected a poignant scene from the original 1703 narrator's script that is not typically performed today: Ohatsu's pilgrimage prior to the double-suicide. The staging also deployed striking innovations to bunraku traditions: narration and shamisen inspired by rock and rap music, faster puppeteering, a dramatically illuminated stage, and an animated video backdrop by the artist Tabaimo.

Sonezaki Shinjū

("The Love Suicides at Sonezaki")

Sonezaki Shinjū ("The Love Suicides at Sonezaki") is based on the true story of a lovers' double-suicide in Osaka in 1703. Less than a month after the scandal occurred, it was dramatized in a bunraku play by the legendary playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1724).

The play follows the tragic love affair between two commoners and underscores social conflict in early modern Japan. Tokubei is an apprentice at a soy sauce shop, Ohatsu a prostitute at a nearby teahouse. Following a series of unlucky incidents, the lovers realize that they cannot wed. In despair, Ohatsu suggests that they die together so they may be united in the afterlife. The final scene takes place in the dark woods of Sonezaki, where Tokubei stabs Ohatsu and then impales himself.

Sonezaki Shinjū was revolutionary for depicting a contemporary scandal involving average people, rather than esteemed aristocrats and warriors residing in distant history. The play was a huge hit among Chikamatsu's Osaka audiences, attended increasingly by commoners. They were thrilled to see themselves in the characters on stage. The play was banned soon after its premiere, as it spurred a spate of other double-suicides. *Sonezaki Shinjū* was revived in 1955 and remains popular today as a timeless tale of tragic yet eternal love.

Courtesy of Odawara Art Foundation



Courtesy of Odawara Art Foundation

Puppet Ohatsu

Kiritake Kanjūrō

2011

Collection of Odawara Art Foundation

Sugimoto Hiroshi collaborated with Kiritake Kanjūrō, an esteemed puppet master and Living National Treasure, to create a contemporary design for the puppet Ohatsu, the main female character in *Sonezaki Shinjū*. Harkening back to the early days of bunraku, before the development of three-man puppeteering teams, this version of Ohatsu is designed to be operated by a single puppeteer. Silk scarves designed in partnership with French design house Hermès give her costume contemporary flair. The bright colors of her kimono indicate Ohatsu's youth, while the contrasting black and silver *obi* (sash) tied in the front reminds us that she is a prostitute. Despite Ohatsu's unfortunate circumstances, the elegantly draped costume alludes to the sweetness, delicacy, and grace of her character.

THE NATIONAL BUNRAKU THEATRE, OSAKA



The National Bunraku Theatre, Osaka

Bunraku blossomed into its modern form in Osaka with the collaboration of the playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1724) and the narrator Takemoto Gidayū (1651-1714), and soon became one of the most prominent forms of theater in Japan. By 1734, puppets, previously only 15 inches tall and controlled by a single person, had grown to approximately two-thirds life-size. The large, exquisitely crafted puppets have been operated by teams of silent puppeteers ever since, enacting a plot recited by a narrator (*tayū*) while accompanied by the strumming of a shamisen player.

Bunraku's popularity endured monumental cultural shifts over the years. Following a period of decline in the 19th century, it was revitalized by the Bunraku-za (Bunraku Theatre). The performances were so masterful that puppet theater widely became known as bunraku. In 1984, the National Bunraku Theatre opened and has since proudly preserved bunraku's legacy in its hometown of Osaka. In 2003, UNESCO recognized bunraku as a "masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity." The year of this exhibition, 2024, commemorates both the 40th anniversary of the National Bunraku Theatre's establishment, and just over 30 years since its last performance in New York.

This gallery spotlights key bunraku objects currently in use by the performers and artisans of the National Bunraku Theatre. These are not museum artifacts, but actual working puppets, props, and instruments taking a break from their active onstage and backstage lives to appear in this installation.



Collection of the National Bunraku Theatre, Osaka



Stage Model

**Commissioned by Japan Society
as gift to the National Bunraku Theatre, Osaka**

The modern bunraku stage, in operation since the early 19th century, is designed to present the puppets with little distraction of the puppeteers. It is typically 40 feet wide by 15 feet deep, has curtained entrances at the right and the left sides, and a small room (*geza*) over the right entrance of the stage where the offstage musicians are positioned.

The puppets appear on the central stage that has two levels: a lower level for outdoor scenes, and an upper level for indoor scenes. When performing in the lower level, puppeteers stand behind a raised partition in a sunken corridor, 14 inches below the stage level. The partition hides the movement of the puppeteers' feet, and serves as the outdoor "ground" for the puppets during the play. The sunken zone allows for the ideal height differentiation, enabling the puppeteers to hold puppets at the correct position. The indoor set is connected to another partition, which works similarly for indoor scenes.

To the side of the stage, the narrator (*tayū*) and shamisen player sit on a platform (*yuka*) that revolves—from onstage to backstage—allowing teams to switch without interrupting the puppet performance.

Puppet's Tabi Socks and Straw Sandals

These feet, clad in tabi socks and straw sandals, are made to be attached to a male puppet and operated by the foot puppeteer, while keeping in sync with the main puppeteer's movements. Female puppet bodies typically do not have feet. Rather, foot puppeteers create the illusion of feet and knees by manipulating the puppet's long robes with their hands.



Props

The props held by bunraku puppets are smaller than actual size, but for visibility are rather large in scale compared to the size of puppets. Many have handles for the puppeteer to manipulate. The left-hand puppeteer is responsible for handling the props and passing them to the main puppeteer. The props on view include the warrior-monk Benkei's sword and his famous "seven tools": a rake, a scythe, an iron bar, a wooden mallet, a saw, an ax, and a pole arm.



Drum (*tsuzumi*)

In the famous play *Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura* (Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees), this drum (*tsuzumi*) is a valuable imperial instrument gifted to the main character, Yoshitsune. He leaves it in the care of his mistress, Shizuka Gozen, who discovers that the drum summons a fox spirit when played. The fox spirit explains that the drum was made from the skins of his parents, and that he has been seeking it for centuries. Shizuka and Yoshitsune ultimately give the drum to the fox. Note that the attached handle makes the prop easier for the puppeteer to manipulate.



Puppet Dressed as Shizuka Gozen

Shizuka Gozen was the young mistress of the warrior Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159-1189), the half-brother of the first shogun Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147-1199). Here Shizuka Gozen wears a vibrant red kimono and an elaborate headdress. The miniature headdress is fashioned from silver-colored paper flowers to prevent excess weight. Many female puppet heads also feature a needle protruding from the mouth, which puppeteers can use to catch the sleeve of the costume as a sign of regret or weeping.



Puppet Dressed as Benkei

This male puppet is dressed as Benkei, a warrior-monk who served the legendary samurai Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159-1189). Here Benkei is clad in a costume for a scene from the play *Kiichi Hōgen Sanryaku no Maki* (*Kiichi's Book of Strategy*), in which Benkei and Yoshitsune first meet in a duel on the Gojō Bridge in Kyoto. Benkei wears his characteristic red-and-white headband (*hachimaki*) with a warrior's outfit.



Puppet Head Blocks and Parts

The heads of bunraku puppets are carved from solid blocks of Japanese cypress (*hinoki*). The puppet head carver first outlines the head and head grip (*dogushi*), the stick used to control the head and its facial features, on to the wood block. Next, the head and face are extracted from the block, at first carved roughly, then in exacting detail.

Once the carving is complete, the head is split in two vertically, then the interior is hollowed out to create space for various mechanisms. In this example, the eyes and eyebrows will move when operated by strong silk cords. Traditionally, pieces of baleen (whale bone) were fitted into the mechanisms and worked as springs to make the movements of the head more realistic, although today these have been replaced with plastic. The strings are connected to the head grip and fitted with toggles for the main puppeteer to operate. Finally, the two halves of the head are glued together.



Collection of the National Bunraku Theatre, Osaka

Stage Clogs (*butai geta*)

The main puppeteer wears wooden platform shoes (*butai geta*) during performances, making him approximately 6-12 inches taller than the other two puppeteers. The additional height makes it easier to keep the large puppet upright and in a position appropriate for the raised partitions of the stage set. This also allows the foot puppeteer space to maneuver more effectively. The soles of the clogs are padded with straw to reduce distracting noise.



Shamisen

The shamisen derives from the Chinese *sanxian*, a similar three-stringed lute. Its earliest version was introduced to Japan via the Ryūkyū Kingdom in the 16th century. Traditionally crafted shamisen were covered in animal skin and fitted with twisted silk strings. There are several sizes of the instrument, but bunraku requires the largest size to achieve a deep, strong tone that matches the powerful performance of the narrator. Not unlike a narrative recitation, shamisen can be tuned to nuance solemn, joyful, or melancholy emotions, and its range and depth parallel that of the human voice.

In addition to strumming and plucking, the shamisen can be used as a percussive instrument. The player can strike the strings and the head of the instrument at the same time, creating a characteristic sound that Adachi calls a “guttural snap.”

Collection of the National Bunraku Theatre, Osaka



Bridge (*koma*)

There are different types of bridges available for the shamisen. Each adjusts the strings to produce different musical effects. This bridge is made from horn with lead weights, which is said to create deeper and cleaner tones. Bridges can also be changed in the middle of a performance if a shift in tone is needed.

Plectrum (*bachī*)

The shamisen plectrum has a significant effect on the playability and sound of the instrument. Traditionally plectrums were made of ivory, making them light and easy to strum, and producing a fine, clean tone.

Ivory plectrums are still used today for performances. However, musicians tend to practice with affordable plastic plectrums.

Costume for Female Puppet

Costumes for bunraku puppets are not just clothing in smaller sizes. They have customized features that help animate the puppet. An opening at the back of the kimono allows the main puppeteer to insert his hand to operate the puppet's head. Most costumes are lightly padded with cotton to create the impression of a body underneath the puppet's clothing. Costumes are sewn from heavy silk and cotton so that the fabric drapes elegantly over the frame but also accommodates the wear and tear caused by constant movement.

Almost all puppet costumes follow human fashions in vogue during the Edo period, bunraku's Golden Era. Edo-period clothing indicated the wearer's status in society: those of humble means wore muted hues and simple patterns, whereas the nobility favored clothing of sophisticated colors created by expensive dyes. Likewise, a puppet's costume is meant to reveal its character. This kimono and outer robe (*uchikake*) for a female puppet are typically worn by young aristocratic characters. The vivid red silk is elegantly embroidered with flowers and leaves of the four seasons.



Undressed Puppet Head and Torso

Bunraku puppets are simple constructions made by puppeteers. The audience only sees them clothed. The puppet's torso is actually a wood plank that the puppeteer pads with loofah to create shoulders. The carved head is then inserted into the plank. The shape of the shoulders can be formed to appear strong or slender, straight or slumped, depending on the character. The waist is created from a hoop, and the legs and arms are attached with strings. In general, male puppets, such as this one, are larger and heavier than female puppets.

Puppet head types are divided by gender, age, and whether they play main roles or side parts. This head type, known as *bunhichi*, is used for male lead characters. Puppet faces are painted in white pigment darkened to varying degrees with red pigment. Increased red pigment can indicate dynamic character or advancing age.

To transform a bare head from a general type into a specific character, an individually styled wig—made from either human hair or yak hair—is sewn to a copper plate then affixed securely to the head.



Libretto (*yukahon*)

The script rests on the bookstand (*kendai*) and is positioned in front of the narrator (*tayū*) on stage. The text is brushed in the distinct calligraphy of bunraku libretti, with large characters arranged in five vertical lines. Appending the calligraphy, vermillion-colored marks denote vocalization patterns. Books can be copied by the narrators themselves as a way to help memorize the texts. They can also be brushed by a copyist or handed down by a teacher. The books have a special durable binding for frequent opening and closing.

Bookstand (*kendai*)

The bookstand (*kendai*) supports the libretto that the narrative performer (*tayū*) follows on stage. These are personal possessions of the narrator, who selects the stand for each performance so that the lacquerware motifs harmonize with the story. The entire stand is made without a single nail and is easily dismantled between performances. Stands are particularly precious today as there are no remaining artisans who craft them.



Stool (*shirihiki*)

Although narrators (*tayū*) appear to be sitting with their legs folded underneath, they are supported by a small stool which takes some of the weight off of their knees and feet. The stool enables deep breathing and muscle engagement through the diaphragm. This is necessary for prolonged chanting and vocal projection, as narrators do not use a microphone. Another physical aid for the narrator is the supportive sash (*hara obi*) tied firmly under the hips.





INVISIBLE HANDS

Collection of Mori Art Museum, Tokyo. Photo © Furukawa Yuya

Invisible Hands **Tamura Yūichiro**

2022

Collection of Mori Art Museum, Tokyo

In this multimedia installation contemporary artist Tamura Yūichiro uses bunraku as an aesthetic language to explore the impact of global political and economic forces on Japan's local industries. In this work, he considers the adverse effects of the 1985 Plaza Accord on Japan's export ceramic industry that was based in Seto and Tokoname, Aichi prefecture. Tamura's interweaving of fact and fiction encourages a rethinking of political and economic policies while generating new meanings.

The Plaza Accord, signed by France, West Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States, orchestrated a strengthening of the Japanese yen against the U.S. dollar. The stronger yen made Seto porcelain figurines significantly more expensive in export markets, leading to the collapse of its production.

Tamura renders the five finance ministers of the Plaza Accord as ceramic portraits, recalling porcelain figurines. Each takes the form of a carved puppet head from the bunraku tradition. The three puppeteers of these heads, clad in all-black bunraku garments (*kurogo*), appear across a three-channel video. They represent the economists Karl Marx, Adam Smith, and John Maynard Keynes. Tamura imagines these economic leaders discussing the impact of their respective philosophies: communism, free-market capitalism, and government intervention.

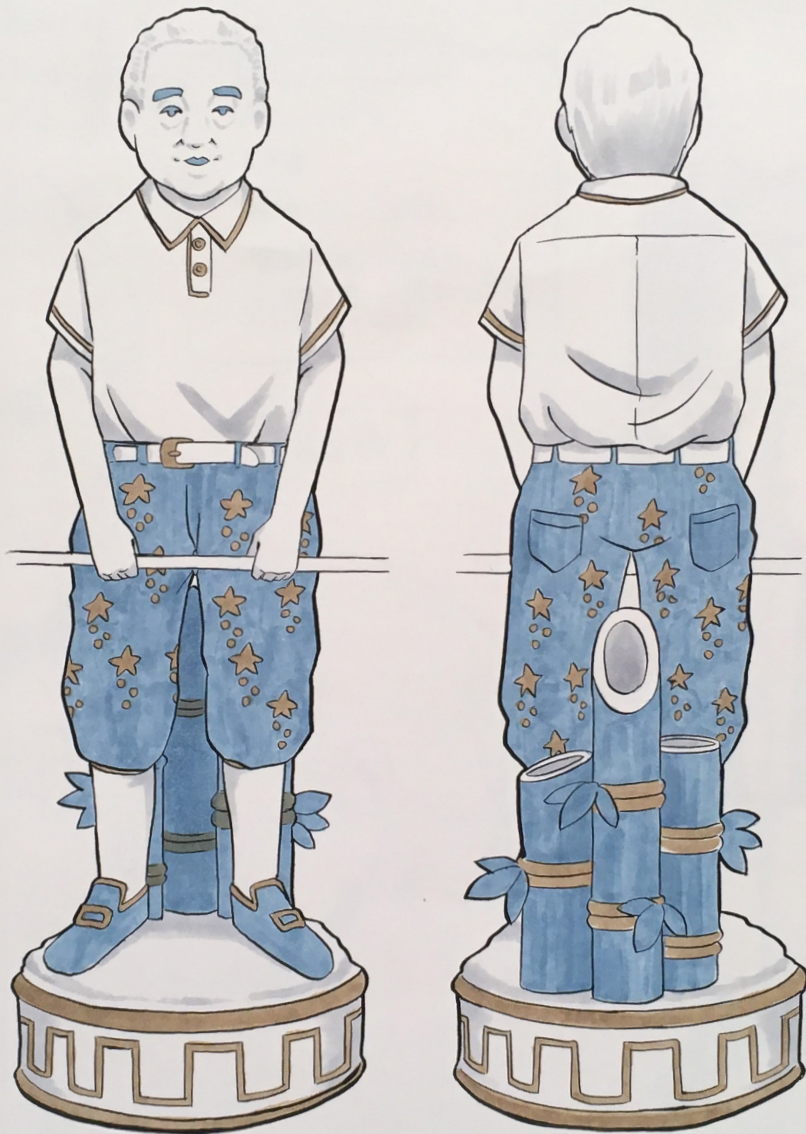
The title for the work comes from Smith's metaphor for the hidden forces that guide an economy, but it might also allude to the hands of puppeteers. Tamura gives "Invisible Hands" a satirical spin: are other industries at risk of declining in our current global market? And who are the "puppeteers" in our economies today?

Collection of Mori Art Museum, Tokyo. Photo © Furukawa Yuya

Process Documents for *Invisible Hands* Tamura Yūichiro Illustration by Seko Ryōga

2022

Courtesy of Tamura Yūichiro



These illustrations by Seko Ryōga reveal Tamura Yūichiro's collaborative process behind the production of the ceramic puppet heads in *Invisible Hands*. Seko's manga-like sketches convey the facial and character idiosyncrasies of each finance minister. Based on these interpretive illustrations, the ceramic heads are imbued with each actor's personality and perspective as they step out onto the "stage" of the historic meeting at the Plaza Hotel. The drawing depicting a human heart references Keynes, who died of a heart attack, and whose chest is massaged by a set of "invisible hands" in the video.

The shade of blue running through these drawings and the corresponding ceramics featured in the work is also prominent in the ceramic figurines produced at Seto. The Seto figurines themselves were inspired by blue-and-white Meissen porcelain from Germany. Tamura activates this transnational blue across the media of this work, using it to unify bunraku, ceramic traditions, and global history.



Stage Set for *Dōgugaeshi* Basil Twist

Courtesy of Basil Twist

Dōgugaeshi is a stage technique used in a form of traditional Japanese puppet theater that originated on Awaji Island in the Seto Inland Sea. It is thought to be a predecessor of bunraku. Literally meaning “the changing of sets,” painted sliding screens or *fusuma* serve as changing stage backdrops. Puppeteers slide the *fusuma* open, in succession, often rapidly, to change the scenery for dramatic effect. Painted on both sides, multiple *fusuma* provide a rich variety of settings. Moreover, the perspective paintings give the compact stage an impression of deep and vast space.

The Awaji Puppet Theatre is the last remaining troupe to use *dōgugaeshi* professionally, and was designated an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property in 1998. *Dōgugaeshi* has enjoyed an international resurgence with a popular performance by the New York-based, third-generation puppet artist Basil Twist. Fascinated by the magical effect of *dōgugaeshi*, Basil Twist traveled to Awaji Island to learn the dying stage technique.

Twist’s contemporary production, entitled *Dōgugaeshi*, fuses the historical technique with new elements: video projection and original shamisen music written and performed by master musician Yumiko Tanaka. The self-contained set consists of intricate overlapping screens, all operated by hand. In *Dōgugaeshi*, the stage itself is the star of the puppet show.

Dōgugaeshi was originally commissioned by Japan Society in 2003. The World Premiere was presented at Japan Society in New York in 2004.

CURATION

Michele Bambling, Senior Director, Gallery, Japan Society

RESEARCH

Naomi Kuromiya

EXHIBITION LOGISTICS

Stefani Oh

EXHIBITION AND GRAPHIC DESIGN

Milk Train - Rome

FABRICATION

Miles Huston
Sebastijan Jemec
McKeever Donovan
Meris Rosenberg

INSTALLATION & ART HANDLING

WittsART

VINYL INSTALLATION

DaSign Guy

PHOTOGRAPHY

Naho Kubota
Richard Jopson
Yeeun Joo

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Yeonjoo Kim

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