

# Menko Corner Set Identification

*by Ryan Laughton*

Menko were never intended to be collected, but rather they were made to be destroyed. Even during the last few years when children actually would collect them instead of playing with them, menko companies continued to produce menko with typical battle features right to the very end when production ceased due to the advent of TV and other social advances. And believe it or not, not one single checklist was ever produced for menko sets that detailed what menko were in those sets.

Menko companies never released any of that information and, in fact, probably never compiled that information in the 30 years of sumo menko production which makes sumo menko collecting and set identification fun, interesting and a worthy effort to the advancement of the hobby. Today I'm going to discuss a few tips and techniques to identifying sets to give you a better appreciation of the 'science' and art behind such a hobby. Let's dive in and have some fun...

Basic set identification is no more than a process of elimination. What I mean by set identification is to narrow down which year the menko set was produced. The accompanying manufacturing identification that goes along with this is a lot harder to research so I'll present that information in a future topic when I get a better grasp on it myself having done more research. This information is not even readily available in the Japanese language so it will take some time before a useful resource can be made available in English. HakkeYoi.net used to be my

favorite resource in narrowing down a year until sadly it went away. Thankfully, Sumo Reference (SR) came along and itself carries a lot of the old HakkeYoi.net features. Pre-1956 menko are a lot easier to identify than those manufactured after 1956 because Pre-1956 menko typically had the rank information printed on the back of the menko. Post-1956 menko almost always were produced without rank because of the 1958 introduction of 6 basho a year and the forever changing banzuke rankings. The key to set identification is to have several different menko from the same set. Using a database such as SR you can narrow down the year by checking when rikishi were at the rank listed on the menko. For example, if you have three menko from a set, Sekiwake Matsunobori, Sekiwake Wakanohana I and Ozeki Tochinishiki, you can safely presume that this set was printed in the middle of 1954 because Sekiwake Matsunobori held this rank from March 1954 to September 1955 and in January 1959, Sekiwake Wakanohana I held this rank from January 1954 to September 1955 and Ozeki Tochinishiki held this rank from January 1953 to September 1954. It's always important to verify with as many menko as possible because many rikishi bounced up and down the banzuke throughout their careers and held the same rank on several occasions – as was the case with Matsunobori in this example.

Menko without rank information requires a broader search but is done in a similar manner. One good thing to know is that most

companies only produced menko of the most popular rikishi of the time and that was almost always makuuchi rikishi but with a (very) few juryo rikishi thrown in for good measure. With dozens of rikishi in the makuuchi division, it would have been hard to print menko for every rikishi on the banzuke and in all likelihood, demand to play menko with lower ranked rikishi cards was probably slim to none. So we can assume for set identification purposes that the rikishi featured on the menko were in the makuuchi division at time of printing. For example, if we have a Chiyonoyama menko with his tsuna, a Yasome menko and an Oikawa menko we know that this set was probably produced in the early part of 1958. The reasoning that Chiyonoyama was a yokozuna from 1951 to January 1959, Yasome was ranked in the makuuchi division from May 1956 to May 1958 and Oikawa was ranked in the makuuchi division from September 1957 to January 1961. Given the fact that companies probably waited a basho or two before printing a rikishi to make sure he didn't fall straight back down to juryo, they probably printed the Oikawa menko in early 1958 just before Yasome dropped out of the division. The Chiyonoyama menko in this instance is a great way to verify this assumed year is correct.

One "advanced" technique that can also help out with set identification is shikona changes. Whether it's a complete shikona change or just one of the kanji in the shikona, this can help narrow down when a certain menko was printed. Banzuke.com is a great

resource for info along these lines as they list shikona and kanji changes on their banzuke listings. However, the site only lists the fact that the change occurred and not specifically what the change was so there is still a little bit of background work required to see specifically what that change was. I hope to compile those changes and publish them on the web here in the near future. Some of the big name rikishi including Wakanohana, Asashio, Togashi/Kashiwado and Araiwa/Wakanoumi all went through various changes to their shikona and fortunately these menko are some of the easiest to

find on the market.

Another minor but still “advanced” technique is the identification of the visual clues on the menko. The best example of this is in the 1956 Tsuruyane 7-8 set. The set manufacturers were kind enough to write on Ozeki Wakanohana’s menko “Shin-Ozeki” or “New-Ozeki” so we can very quickly narrow down that this set was printed when he was a new ozeki – in 1956. Also, several sets list haridashi rank so you can narrow down which specific basho this menko actually represents. This was common on Pre-1956 menko and can of course be very useful.

I’m sure there are several other techniques out there, but these have been the most useful for myself thus far. As time permits, I hope to get more and more resources uploaded for everyone to use, but for now I hope these techniques will give you a running start. Next issue of SFM I’ll talk about the ‘dagashiya’ and ‘menko lotteries,’ or, more specifically, how Japanese children could acquire sumo menko and blow their sen\*. Until then, cheers...!

\* an old, now largely unused unit of Japanese currency smaller than the current ‘yen’



*Using only Sumo Reference can you guess which year this set was made*