

Menko Corner

Sumo Menko Myths

by Ryan Laughton

Let's make no bones about it, being a sumo menko collector in America isn't glamorous nor does it lend to getting the proverbial babes. In fact, it commands very little attention in the world of sports card collecting here in the United States and outside of Japan. To be honest, I know of only a few collectors even in Japan that search for and actively buy sumo menko.

The hobby of sumo menko collecting is still in its infancy and probably won't emerge as a thriving hobby until many years from now, if ever. The main reason is sumo menko no longer existed after 1964 and sumo card production just recently ramped up again in 1997.

Unlike the American baseball/football/basketball card hobby, where there was a steady flow of cards from the early 1950s until now, sumo menko collecting became a thing of the past with the few collectors that existed when production ceased in 1965. There was nothing to keep collectors interested in the "hobby" anymore and let's not forget that menko were meant to be destroyed, not collected.

The culmination, in 2008, is a hobby that has very little collector demand with a very small supply at low and reasonable prices. Fortunately, from my perception, it means that everyone in the hobby now is in it for the pure enjoyment of collecting and appreciation of the sport of sumo and not for money or profit: thus, I figured it would be a great time to talk about a few of the myths or

perceptions surrounding the hobby today.

Myth #1: Menko of yokozuna are the only menko worth anything

False! As with any sports card hobby, the reasons for collecting vary, but all sumo menko have little value beyond what the collector thinks they are worth, despite the image on the front. True, yokozuna are probably the most well known rikishi and many yokozuna will forever become immortalized in the hobby. However, there are a few factors to consider when deciding who/what to collect. If you are a specific rikishi collector, you will have a hard time finding single menko of your favorite rikishi. Out of the thousands of sumo menko auctions I have watched or participated in, 95% of them are sold in lots with 5 or more menko. It is very difficult to buy one specific menko and you will have to end up buying the whole lot, resulting in many unwanted menko. What this means is the majority of the time, yokozuna and "common" rikishi get lumped together and there is no additional price paid for a yokozuna versus a low ranked rikishi.

For a set collector like me, I'm looking at what menko I need to document and complete menko sets. If I can get a famous yokozuna menko at an early point in his career, say at maegashira or juryo, that is bonus, but it's not what motivates me. Unfortunately, there was never any written documentation on which menko were in which sets and, in fact, how many different sets there even

were. On the other hand, it makes for a fun time tracking down and documenting all these menko.

Another thing to consider is that some rikishi barely broke into the maegashira ranks for one or two basho and then fell out of the makuuchi ranks for ever. These rikishi have had only one, maybe two, menko of them ever printed. These menko are far more valuable to me than many common yokozuna menko.



Ozeki Wakanohana and maegashira Yasome – both equally appealing and collectible even though Wakanohana went on to become one of the great yokozuna and Yasome fluttered in the low maegashira ranks for a year or so. This is one of only 3-4 menko ever made of Yasome.

Myth #2: Only menko in great condition are worth collecting

False! This is one that has bitten me a few times, especially early on in my collecting days before I knew any better. Back to my thousands of auctions reference; it is extremely tough to find menko in mint or even near-mint condition. Why is that? Menko were meant to be thrown toward the hard, rock strewn ground at thousands of miles per hour

towards another menko. Or, if they were on the receiving end, were expected to be hit by another, often heavier menko, while resting on a variety of surfaces. In short, menko were expected to be played with and destroyed. The result is simple – almost all menko have some sort of game use marks. And if menko battles didn't do them in, kids often had to hand-cut menko from sheets resulting in a majority of menko having very poorly cut borders. The menko that I end up passing on are really bad ones where you can't tell what is written on the back or the front is so creased that it detracts from the overall image. A menko with slightly rounded corners, a few stains here and there and hand-cut edges doesn't bother me because I know that I may never see this menko again. When I first started collecting, there was a large lot of 1953 Kagome Rikishi 7 for sale that I ended up passing on because a few of them had bad edges and were stained. Many years later, that, still, was the first and only time I had seen a lot of those menko.



Sekiwake Kotogahama and maegashira Naruyama from the rare 1957 Basho 7 set. Menko only came in sheets and had to be hand-cut by kids resulting in almost all having poorly cut edges. Menko in any condition in this set are historically important.

Also, the professional grading card business hasn't reached into the sumo menko market because there is no documentation (yet) that tells them what they are grading. Not only do they grade the condition of the cards, but they need to know set information so they can track

which cards they have graded and categorize them. So, for now, there is no standardized condition evaluation system for sumo menko and beauty is in the eye of the collector.

Myth #3: Pre-war menko are worth their weight in yen

True! The simple fact is that many menko were turned in for paper drives for the war effort in the 1930s and 1940s, and a great percentage of the metropolitan area in Japan was fire-bombed in 1944 and 1945. As you can imagine, the result is that few examples of these menko survive today. And, when the Japanese started losing WW2 from 1942 to 1945, menko production almost halted because paper was so valuable and manpower was needed elsewhere. In fact, there are only 3 known sets to have been printed during this time with probably no more than 6 total ever being produced.



One of the greatest yokozuna of all time, Futabayama. This is Futabayama's earliest known menko (as an ozeki) from the extremely rare 1937 Rikishi 4-5 set. It's amazing this menko ever survived the war, the subsequent occupation for 6 years after that and the next 55 years!

Additionally, there has been over 60 years since then for parents and kids to throw out their old toys and menko like many American parents did with baseball cards. So, if you are lucky enough to come across this era of menko, don't hesitate to pay extra

as many other collectors will be doing the same.

Myth #4: Die-cut menko are more popular than square menko

True! The shape and uniqueness of die-cut menko often commands a higher price on the market than do square or rectangular menko. Even in the United States, collectors will pay a higher price for the die-cut menko versus standard "trading card size" menko. I personally like the die-cut menko because of their unique shape and often unique sizes. The one problem with die-cut menko is that Japanese menko production wasn't as sophisticated as other countries so many menko were cut off-center. In some cases parts of two different rikishi make it onto the same menko.



Many collectors like the die-cut menko, such as maegashira Kitanonada's menko from the scarce 1961 Hoshi Rikishi 7-8 set, because of their unique shapes.

Menko, like maegashira Fusanishiki's menko from the common 1962 Marukami Gohei 6 set, aren't as popular in auction sites.