

Menko Corner

1951 Sanenchu 5 Set – A Piece of Japanese History

by Ryan Laughton

Back at the end of 2007, I wrote an article on the 1953 Kagome Rikishi 7 Set; a huge set in terms of physical size, quantity and quality of rikishi. Seven modern day yokozuna as well as 4 of the modern day ozeki appear in that set. However, an even more important set was manufactured two years earlier and was the first set produced after the war that established a foothold back into the sumo menko industry. That set is the 1951 Sanenchu 5 Set.

Throughout the American occupation of Japan from 1945 to 1951/1952, food was scarce, the black market was rampant and citizens had little money to spend on “frivolous” items such as toys and menko, let alone tickets to go watch sumo. However, at the end of the occupation things were looking up in Japan and sumo’s popularity was back on the rise. In 1952 the “new” Kuramae Kokugikan was built and in 1953 sumo was being televised around the country. In parallel with all this, there was a rebirth of sumo menko and sets that depicted the most popular rikishi of the day.

The 1951 set contains at least 7 of the modern-day yokozuna as well as 2 of the modern day ozeki, but I’m predicting there is a yet to be discovered menko of sekiwake Tochinishiki lurking out there somewhere. I’m also predicting menko of future ozeki Saganohana, Kotogahama, Matsunobori and Ouchiyaama. If these are all confirmed, it would mean there are 8 yokozuna and 6 ozeki in this single set making it one of the most important sets in sumo menko history!

Until this time, sumo menko were primarily die-cut into shapes of wrestlers and dubbed the “Rikishi Series” of menko. The 1951 Sanenchu 5 Set did away with all that and were printed on thick paper stock and cut into rectangles measuring approximately 1.25” x 2.5”. Consequently, this set tended to withstand the rigors of war better than thinner menko. This set endured a fairly long print run as the unknown manufacturer updated several rank changes.

This long print run also led to different ink colors being used and consequently 3 different types of sets that you can collect: dark blue ink on back, light blue ink on back and purple ink on back. The backs are very simple with the rikishi’s shikona written in large, prominent characters in the middle of the menko. The rikishi’s height and weight is along one side or the other as well as the rank and a 5 digit fighting number. A large Gu-Choki-Pa mark dominates the bottom. A nice, simple and clean design.

What is also landmark about this set is it is the first set to use the lottery system where if you pulled a menko with a winner stamp on back, you’d win a free uncut sheet of menko. See the “Winner Menko” section of www.Sumomenko.com for more information on this. This was very important as it established a decade long tradition of winner stamps on the back of menko. The two known types of winner stamps on this set have a number printed inside a circle and actually drawn into the design of the menko and a red ink number inside a box that

was stamped on the back after the menko were printed. Menko with winner stamps in the set carry a premium as they are much rarer!

On the front side, the menko are extremely plain and each shows a portrait shot of the rikishi against a solid color background. At the bottom of the menko is the rikishi’s shikona written in large kanji against a solid color background. It is very plain, but easy on the eye and nice and simple.

Let’s break down this set and explore some of the uniqueness in certain menko:

36th Yokozuna Haguroyama (64210) – He held the yokozuna rank for an all time record of 12 years and three months. One of the his known menko.

38th Yokozuna Terukuni (71940) – He had a perfect yusho the year this menko was printed... that would be his last yusho.

40th Yokozuna Azumafuji (32690) – One of the last menko of him before his body started giving out and he would be injured more often than not.

Ozeki Chiyonoyama (41st Yokozuna) (26840) – This set has Chiyonoyama’s only known ozeki menko! Because of the long print run, his rank was updated to yokozuna on later menko.

Sekiwake Kagamisato (42nd Yokozuna) (94520) – Kagamisato’s only known sekiwake era menko! Because of through food the long print run,

his rank was updated to ozeki on later menko. Debut Menko (first ever menko printed of him!)

Sekiwake Yoshibayama (43rd Yokozuna) (56820) –

Yoshibayama's only known sekiwake era menko. Again, because of the long print run, his rank was updated to ozeki on later menko. Debut Menko (first ever menko printed of him!)

Sekiwake Tochinishiki (44th Yokozuna) –

I know this menko is out there somewhere, but I have never seen it.

Sekiwake Mitsuneyama (12047) –

Nice sanyaku menko of him before

he hit the ozeki ranks!

Komusubi Wakanohana (45th Yokozuna) (23540) –

Wakanohana's fi blues rst Komusubi menko! Debut Menko (first ever menko printed of the still living yokozuna)

Maegashira Nayoroiwa (82521) –

Nice menko of him in his later years on his way down from ozeki.

Maegashira Bishuyama (49770) –

A nice menko, again in his later years. Debut Menko (first ever menko printed of Bishuyama!)

Maegashira Otachi (74280) –

Debut Menko (first ever menko

printed of this rikishi!)

Maegashira Terunobori (63540) –

Debut Menko (first ever menko printed!)

Maegashira Sakuranishiki (23540)

– First and last known menko of Sakuranishiki. He retired in 1951. Debut Menko (another first!)

This is another fun set to try and build. Because of the smaller number of menko in the set and the rarity of the menko it will be a difficult set to build. However, this set is truly a piece of Japanese history and so any attempt at collecting it will be worthwhile. Until next time, cheers...



Picture 1: The 7 yokozuna in the set



Picture 2: Reverse side of menko