

Menko Corner

Round/Circle Menko

by Ryan Laughton

There are 13 different series or categories of sumo menko and cards ranging from your typical square shape to elaborate die-cut and flower-cut varieties. In the previous edition of SFM I wrote about the most popular and sought after-category, the R-series or Rikishi series menko. These were die-cut menko with the edges shaped in an outline of a rikishi and with exquisite artwork. This issue I am going to talk about the C-series or Circle series menko. Believe it or not, these menko are extremely hard to find and only approximately a dozen sets are known to exist from the late 1800s to the end of the sumo menko era in the mid-1960s. This seems very unusual since the circle, one would presume, would be the easiest and simplest shape to produce. Manufacturing Circle series menko also wastes a lot of paper and in the thrifty world of Japan, this could have been the reason so few C-series menko were produced.

The earliest known C-series sumo menko were elaborate woodblock menko from the late 1800s (See Picture 1). However, the more popular themes for the 1800s C-series menko were soldiers, samurai and Japanese folklore characters. Little is known about who actually printed paper menko this early, but historians believe they were first printed by local street vendors in Nagoya in the 1870s/1880s, along with the standardized rules for the game. However, there is evidence through books that they had made their way to Osaka and Tokyo by

the turn of the century.

C-series sumo menko are very simple in their design and all known sets in existence have blank backs. The front usually bears the shikona, rank and a fighting number. In some instances, it also bears a Gu-Choki-Pa mark. Almost all are printed on a thick cardboard paper and, on average, measure about two inches in diameter.



Picture 1 (C1899 Set): Woodblock menko of Yokozuna Konishiki, 1899

There were only a few C-series sumo menko sets produced up through the mid 1940s. Probably the easiest of all C-series sets to find are the 1935 Mini Disks that show different kimarite being performed by two generic rikishi, or merely a bust shot of a generic rikishi (See Picture 2). I theorize there are upward of two dozen different menko in this set, but I have only seen nine in total so far. This set is small in comparisons to other C-series menko and measures approximately one inch in diameter.

In the 1940s, especially the late 40s, there was a "flurry" of C-series menko, with about seven



Picture 2 (C351 Set): 2 menko from the 1935 Mini Disk Set

sets being printed during this decade. Nearly all sets have only one or two known examples in existence, except for the 1948 Large Disk set which had three rikishi printed with nine other menko of baseball players, American military men and samurai (See Picture 3). This set is the easiest of the C-series menko to find, but still very difficult to unearth in the general menko environment.



Picture 3 (C481 Set): Yokozuna Terukuni from the 1948 Large Disk Set

Then, after a few sets were produced in the early 1950s, there were no known C-series menko made there onwards. Should some menko from this time subsequently be unearthed, they would be very rare and expensive indeed.

In summary, do not pass on any chance to pick up C-series menko as you may never see them again!