

Menko Corner Square Menko

by Ryan Laughton

In the previous two editions of SFM I wrote about the most popular and sought-after sumo menko series: the R-series or 'Rikishi series' menko, and the hard-to-find C-series or Circle series menko. Both of these are included in the 13 different series that exist in the sumo menko world. This issue I am going to talk about M-series menko, or 'Square series,' which are the most traditional, most common and most affordable series of menko. In fact, almost half of the approximately 340 individual types of sumo menko are classified as M-series menko.

The first part of the paper sumo menko era, from the late 1800s to the 1930s, was dominated by R-series and C-series, meaning that relatively small amounts of M-series menko were printed. In fact, there were only about seven M-series sets produced during this time from a total of 50 sets manufactured. The very first menko set, the 1860 Kesho Mawashi Set (M1860), gives cause to debate over whether or not it is a true menko set.



Picture 1 (M1860 Set) – First known M-series Set, woodblock printed menko of generic rikishi

There were several games with woodblock printed sheets of rikishi that were meant to be cut out and played with, but the time at which they were allegedly made doesn't quite match up with paper sumo menko started getting printed. Regardless, this "first" set is a true piece of history.

The real boom of M-series menko started right before World War II and continued to 1959 when it was rapidly replaced by the more popular bromides of the era. One of the most historically significant menko sets ever produced was from November 1942. The 1942 Nagoya Gunbai Set (M421) made by Nagoya Gangu was the only set ever printed during World War II (See Picture 2). At this point in the war, Japan had been fighting with China for 10 years and had entered hostilities with America a year earlier in 1941.

Japan was short on many basic necessities including food, oil and paper so it was almost unheard of to print and sell "frivolous" items such as menko and games. What makes M421 an even more intriguing set is that it came in five variations. Completing any one of the variation sets is difficult, let alone completing the master set of all five.

After World War II, it took several years for Japan to recover economically and menko production followed suit. It wasn't until 1953, when a fourth sumo tournament was added to the annual schedule, a new stadium was on the verge of opening and bouts were being televised



Picture 2 (M421-4 Set) – Future Yokozuna Maedayama as an Ozeki

nationally, that sumo menko regained their popularity. The most significant set printed during this time was the 1951 Sanenchi 5 Set (M511). (Please see my SFM October 2008 sumo menko article here for more information on this set). The M511 set (See Picture 3) contains at least seven of the contemporary yokozuna as well as two of the contemporary 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 Ouchiyama. If these are all confirmed, it would mean there are eight yokozuna and six ozeki in this single set making it one of the most important in sumo menko history!

Sumo menko production peaked in 1956 as well as the number of M-series sets produced per year. The majority of M-series sets during this time started to look this same and the increasing

popularity of the BB-series and BC-series menko led to a phase-out of the M-series by the 1960 even though the end of the sumo menko era continued for another 4 years. One set that stands out from all these sets is the 1956 Tsuriyane 7-8-9 set (See Picture 4) which attempted to miniaturize menko.

This set is approximately 66% smaller than the typical M-series sets and contained Future Yokozuna Wakanohana's first ever menko as an ozeki. Evidently this new size didn't catch on as the

standard size continued to be 1.25" x 2.75" for the next four years.

The last M-series menko was printed in late 1959 or early 1960. Although the exact date is unknown, the 1960 Trump 7-8 Set (M601) is considered the last sumo M-series menko set ever printed (See Picture 5). It is a basic set with a playing card back and only the shikona is printed on the front to identify the rikishi. The colors are nice and vivid, but the more popular bromides of the day made the M-series "old" news. Because

of the number of M-series sets printed, they are some of the most affordable sumo menko sets out there. In addition, many M-series menko that survive today are in great shape because of their thicker cardboard which withstood more menko battles. Most of the 1950s M-series menko can be purchased for \$1.00 - \$1.50 per menko and they are almost always available for auction.

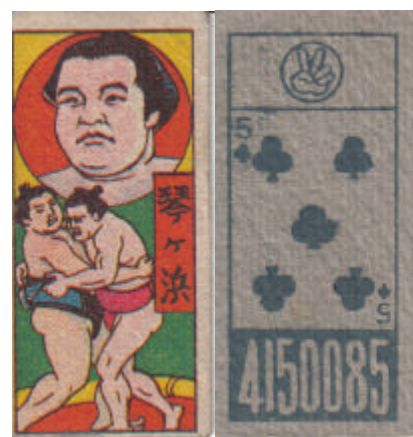
Thanks and we'll see you next time when we'll talk about Brick Menko or Kyokuku Menko designated as the H-series menko.



Picture 3 (M511-2 Set) – Future Yokozuna Chiyonoyama as an Ozeki



Picture 4 (M5616-1 Set) – Future Yokozuna Wakanohana as an Ozeki



Picture 5 (M601 Set) – Ozeki Kotogahama