

# May 2011 Object of the Month Club

## Farmer Sowing Grain

(No picture; loaned object)

Object Title:	Farmer Sowing Grain
Creation Place:	Japan
Artist:	Unknown, Meiji period (pronounced MEH-YEE-GEE)
Date:	Late 19th century
Medium:	Bronze
Classification:	Sculpture
Accession #:	L93.125.5
Gallery:	G252

### Historical and Social Context:

- "The traveler who enters suddenly into a period of social change--especially change from a feudal past to a democratic present--is likely to regret the decay of things beautiful and the ugliness of things new. What of both I may yet discover in Japan I know not; but today, in these exotic streets, the old and the new mingle so well that one seems to set off the other ..." -- Lafcadio Hearn, Glimpses of an Unfamiliar Japan, 1894
- This sculpture was created during the Meiji period in the late 19th century. However, to understand the historical and social environment in Japan at that time, we need to start with the preceding period, the Edo or Tokugawa period, which ran from 1603 to 1868.
- Edo Period
  - During the Edo period, the administration of the country was shared by over 200 territorial feudal lords who ruled most of the country from their vast hereditary land holdings in a federation governed by the Tokugawa shogunate. The Tokugawa shogunate carried out a number of significant policies. They placed the samurai class above the commoners: the agriculturists, artisans, and merchants. They enacted sumptuary laws limiting hair style, dress, and accessories. They organized commoners into groups of five and held all responsible for the acts of each individual. To prevent territorial lords from rebelling, the shōguns required them to maintain lavish residences in Edo and live at these residences on a rotating schedule with their castles. Cultural achievement was high during this period, and many artistic developments took place, including the ukiyo-e form of wood-block print, kabuki and bunraku theaters, and musical compositions.
  - During the early part of the 17th century, the shogunate suspected that foreign traders and missionaries were actually forerunners of a military conquest by European powers. Christianity had spread in Japan, especially among peasants, and the shogunate suspected the loyalty of Christian peasants towards their territorial lords, severely persecuting them. This led to a revolt by persecuted peasants and Christians in 1637 known as the Shimabara Rebellion. After the eradication of the rebels, the shogunate placed Western foreigners under progressively tighter restrictions. It expelled traders, missionaries, and foreigners with the exception of the Dutch and Chinese merchants who were restricted to the island of Dejima in Nagasaki Bay and several small trading outposts outside the country. The Dutch enclave of Dejima allowed Japan to keep abreast of Western technology and medicine in the period when the country was closed to foreigners, 1641–1853.
  - The policy of isolation lasted for more than 200 years. In 1844, William II of the Netherlands sent a message urging Japan to open its doors which was rejected by the Japanese. On July 8, 1853,

United States Commodore Matthew Perry requested that Japan open to trade with the West. The following year Perry returned and demanded that the shōgun sign the Treaty of Peace and Amity, establishing formal diplomatic relations between Japan and the United States. Within five years, Japan had signed similar treaties with other Western countries. These treaties were unequal, having been forced on Japan through gunboat diplomacy, and were interpreted by the Japanese as a sign of Western imperialism taking hold of the rest of the Asian continent. Among other measures, they gave the Western nations unequivocal control of tariffs on imports.

- Meiji Period - Empire of Japan (1868-1945)

- In 1868, Japan undertook political, economic, and cultural reforms, emerging as a unified and centralized state known as the Empire of Japan. The young Emperor Mutsuhito was restored to power and took the name Meiji, meaning enlightened ruler. In the charter oath of 1868 he promised democratic style freedom; participation through administrative channels, reform, fairness and a search for wisdom throughout the world. In 1869 domain administration was made uniform and samurai ranks were reduced and simplified.
- The main changes which had a huge effect on society and the arts were:
  - the introduction of universal education,
  - the separation of Buddhism and Shintoism,
  - industrialization, and
  - an opening of the country to westerners and western culture.
- It wasn't long before the Meiji government recognized the power of the arts for its society and for Japan in its new role as an international unified power. The Meiji government had a political and practical rather than aesthetic motive in promoting the arts; this was to gain foreign currency through exports to pay for the huge cost of modernization and to present herself to the world as a cultured and 'civilized' nation.
- Renewed contact with the West precipitated a profound alteration of Japanese society. Importantly, within the context of Japan's subsequent aggressive militarism, the signing of the treaties was viewed as profoundly humiliating and a source of national shame. The shōgun was forced to resign, and the emperor was restored to power, beginning a period of fierce nationalism and intense socio-economic restructuring. The military was modernized, and numerous Western institutions were adopted, including a Western legal system and quasi-parliamentary constitutional government. While many aspects of the Meiji Restoration were adopted directly from Western institutions, others, such as the dissolution of the feudal system and removal of the shogunate, were processes that had begun long before the arrival of Perry. Nonetheless, Perry's intervention is widely viewed as a pivotal moment in Japanese history.
- In 1898, the last of the unequal treaties with Western powers was removed, signaling Japan's new status among the nations of the world. In a few decades by reforming and modernizing social, educational, economic, military, political and industrial systems, the Emperor Meiji's "controlled revolution" had transformed a feudal and isolated state into a world power. Significantly, the impetus for this change was the belief that Japan had to compete with the West both industrially and militarily to achieve equality.

#### Art History Context:

- During the Edo period, sculptors worked in workshops were kept busy producing products for two purposes:
  - making swords and daggers for samurai clients. The Restoration government prevented samurai from wearing swords.

- carving or casting the great Buddhist icons. The Meiji Restoration brought a sudden change in the religious climate of Japan. Shinto became the official state religion of Japan, and many shrines were supported by state funding.
- The metalworkers were regarded as master craftsmen rather than artists, and with these changes many accomplished craftsmen were reduced to carving umbrella handles, or toys and dolls for the foreigners. Some turned to netsuke carving and so made that craft for the first time a respectable profession.
- The policy of 'Enlightenment and Civilization' which lasted from 1868-1887 became associated with the indiscriminate borrowing from the west. Initially, the government was happy to promote western studies and the adoption of western customs even to the extent of discarding traditional values. The first visible effect of westernization was on fashion and architecture. Fashion was inexpensive to change; in 1887 the Empress switched to western dress and made an official proclamation calling on all women to do the same. Traditional buildings were not suitable to house the machinery imported from England.
- In 1876 the government opened the Technological Art School in Tokyo and contracted Western artists to teach, including the Italian sculptor Vincenzo Ragusa. (See more info below.) Students were at first leery of signing up: modeling and carving seemed to smack too much of the workshop to have anything to do with fine art. But before long Ragusa had 20 pupils, some of whom became well known as sculptors and teachers. There was already a huge demand for Western-style portraits and monuments to early Meiji leaders, which they executed skillfully enough. Ragusa's best pupil, Okuma Ujihiro (1896-1934), became his assistant and later spent a year in Rome. Much of the sculpture at this time was completely European in all but its subject. Many Western-style artists went abroad to train in Italy, France, and throughout Europe.
- The 1880s saw a resurgence in nationalism. When masterpieces of ancient Buddhist carving and bronze casting hidden in temples were made public, sculptors turned back to the Nara period for inspiration. Oddly enough, this resurgence was greatly influenced by an American named Ernest Fenollosa who was teaching philosophy and political economy at Tokyo Imperial University during this time.
- With the founding of the Meiji Art Society in 1889, the pendulum began to swing back again, but not all the way. Now there was room for both kinds of sculpture. Naganuma Shukei (1857-1942), who had been in Italy from 1881 to 1887, came back to fill the gap left by Ragusa's departure in 1882 and gathered the latter's old pupils around him. When the empress herself paid an official visit to the Meiji Society's first exhibition in 1891, sculpture in the European style could be seen to be fully rehabilitated. Most of it, of course, was a mere imitation of the salon style of the day.
- International expositions
  - The elegant workmanship in exquisite materials of Japanese sculpture made them highly desirable and they were much sought after by the imperial family as well as wealthy Japanese collectors.
  - Western connoisseurs first encountered Japanese objects similar to Farmer Sowing Grain at the world fairs that were held in Europe and America from the mid-19th century. Japan began attending every major show in the world where their artists' works made an immediate and profound impression on foreign observers and attracted much favorable comment. Japan participated in at least twenty-five foreign exhibitions between 1873 and 1910
  - At the 1873 Vienna World Exhibition, the unique arts and crafts of Japan were favorably received, and, in an effort to promote Japanese exports, the Japanese government encouraged the production of traditional art and craft objects including ivory and wooden sculpture.

- In the 1890s sculpture began to attain renewed social recognition and works were produced in large quantities, ranging from small-scale images that had hitherto been priced as objets d'art to large bronze sculptures. For the Chicago World Exposition in 1893, the Japanese government subsidized artists' production costs in an effort to promote traditional Japanese arts.
- The Meiji government had a political and practical rather than aesthetic motive in promoting the arts; this was to gain foreign currency through exports to pay for the huge cost of modernization and to present herself to the world as a cultured and 'civilized' nation.
- Vincenzo Ragusa
  - Vincenzo Ragusa (8 July 1841-13 March 1927) was an Italian sculptor who lived in Meiji period Japan from 1876-1882. He introduced European techniques in bronze casting, and new methods of modeling in wood, clay, plaster and wire armatures which exerted a significant role in the development of the modern Japanese sculptural arts.
  - In 1876, the Technical Fine Arts School of painting and sculpture was founded in Tokyo; this was the first governmental art school founded in Japan. With the waning popularity of Buddhism in the early Meiji period, traditional sculptural art had fallen into disfavor, and was surviving in minor arts such as architectural ornament, masks, dolls, netsuke, and ivory-work.
  - Upon recommendation of the Italian Minister to Tokyo, the Meiji government contracted three Italian artists to teach at the school: Vincenzo Ragusa for sculpture, Antonio Fontanesi for drawing, and Giovanni Cappelletti for the preparatory course. These individuals greatly influenced the development of modern Japanese art and architecture through the next several decades.
  - Ragusa moved to Japan in November 1876, and lectured in French which was interpreted by an official provided by the Foreign Ministry. The curricula at the Technical Fine Arts School consisted of perspective drawing, copying of paintings and making plaster models, still-life and life. His students included Takeuchi Kyuichi. He also received a teaching appointment at the School of Industrial Art in Yokohama.
  - Ragusa also had his own studio in his residence in Mita, Tokyo, and produced many portrait sculptures of notable people, actors and common people during his seven years in Japan. In recognition of his services, Ragusa was received in audience by Emperor Meiji in February 1879.
  - Ragusa renewed his contract in 1879 for a second six-year term, but the Technical Fine Art School closed in January 1883 due to financial difficulties and a strengthening of public opinion towards preservation of Japanese traditional culture. Ragusa left Japan in August 1882. He was honored with the Order of the Rising Sun (Fifth Class) in June 1884.

The object: Farmer Sowing Grain

- An unknown sculptor has depicted a farmer in the process of sowing seeds.
- Sculptures of great samurai, beautiful women, and ordinary farmers and fishermen were highly desired by American and European collectors.
- The bronze sculptures created during the late 19th century tended to conform with the notions of realism and naturalistic illustration and with the "imitation of form" of Western-style sculpture as promulgated by Ragusa and developed by Japanese artists.

Questions/activities:

- Let's take a moment to look carefully at this sculpture. What's going on with this sculpture? What do you see that makes you say that?

- Think back to the sculptures we've explored today. How does this one compare? What do you see that makes you say that?
- This sculpture was made by a now unknown Japanese sculptor in the late 19th century. What about this sculpture looks Japanese? What do you see that makes you say that? What, if anything, about this sculpture doesn't look Japanese to you?
- Now, let's take a moment and consider the "inner meaning" of this sculpture. Please write down your thought and then we'll spend a minute or so sharing.

Two best sources:

- An article from Oxford Art Online entitled "Japan: Sculpture". I read this on-line in the MIA library.
- <http://members.chello.nl/artnv/meiji.html> Good explanation of art and social changes going on during this period. Covers painting more than sculpture.