

Matsuki Bunkio (1867–1940)

Dealer

Matsuki Bunkio was a well-known dealer and connoisseur of Japanese antiquities, especially prints and ceramic wares, who operated a shop that was first located on Boston's fashionable Boylston Street and later relocated to Newbury Street. Born in Shinano Province, Japan, as Takasaburo Matsuki, he grew up in a family that sold household wares and antiquities from impoverished samurai families. At age fourteen, he moved to Tokyo to become an attendant to a Buddhist priest who practiced Nichiren Buddhism, a branch of Mahayana Buddhism. Two years after his arrival, Matsuki became a disciple, receiving the name Bunkio. At the monastery, he studied English in preparation for a life of Buddhist missionary work, but by 1886, he abandoned the religious life and traveled to China, where he continued to pursue English-language studies. In 1888, Matsuki Bunkio—who soon restyled himself in the Western manner as Bunkio Matsuki, using his given name first—traveled to Boston, Massachusetts, where his hero, Benjamin Franklin, had also begun his career.

In Boston, Matsuki found the support of a group of wealthy university students who connected him with Edward S. Morse (1838–1925), a zoologist, archaeologist, and orientalist. Morse amassed a sizable collection of Japanese ceramics, which he kept in his home in Salem, and employed Matsuki to catalogue it. Recognizing his intelligence, Morse enrolled Matsuki at Salem High School; he graduated just two years later. Matsuki soon married a local woman, Martha Putnam Meacom (1872–1916), and found employment with the Syndicate Trading Company, which owned several dry-goods department stores across the country, including Almy, Bigelow and Washburn in Salem. Matsuki developed a temporary Japanese section within the store, selling Japanese artworks and household wares imported from Japan. The Syndicate Trading Company soon recognized Matsuki as an expert in identifying goods that would sell well to Westerners, and in 1891, the company sent him to Japan with the task of establishing new export agreements. Upon Matsuki's eventual return to Salem, Almy, Bigelow and Washburn invited him to make a permanent Japanese department within the store. The section became a massively profitable endeavor and began to conduct wholesale business. During this period of great success, Matsuki and his wife welcomed four children and built a home along Salem's Laurel Street in the "Japanese Style."

By 1893, Matsuki established a larger Japanese goods store in downtown Boston that carried inexpensive imports, including tea, parasols, lanterns, paper, fans, and toys alongside artistic rarities. The same year, the Japanese government appointed Matsuki to serve as the principal advisor in identifying commercial goods and fine arts for exhibition in the Japanese displays at the Columbian Exposition in

Chicago. This position helped him cultivate a reputation as an astute, refined connoisseur and allowed him to increasingly focus on supplying Western museums and collectors with Japanese works of art.

He expanded his business, marketing art supplies to amateur artists, opening a gallery space in Newport, Rhode Island, and holding auctions in New York City at the American Art Association. His new storefronts and public auctions allowed him to cater to wealthy clientele, including Charles Lang Freer (1854–1919), Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848–1933), Henry Walters (1848–1931), and Henry (1847–1907) and Louisine Havemeyer (1855–1929), among several others. Freer not only became one of Matsuki's most important customers but he also became a good friend. The duo worked together as peers, debating attributions, drawing comparisons, and exchanging study materials; Matsuki even accommodated Freer's studiousness, producing specialized publications and providing translations. Through Freer, Matsuki developed a deep interest in the art of James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), and when he developed *Lotus*, a journal that introduced Americans to Japanese art and culture, which he intended to publish quarterly, he dedicated the first (and only) volume in December 1903 to the late artist.

Matsuki made yearly trips to Japan, acquiring inventory and visiting family. Between 1903 and 1912 he made more frequent visits to Japan, as he reportedly fell in love with a geisha in Tokyo with whom he fathered a daughter. His wife, Martha, committed suicide in October 1916, and Matsuki quickly shuttered his American business ventures. By 1923, he relocated his household to New York City, where he enrolled as a student and taught courses on Buddhist history. In addition to teaching, Matsuki earned income as a writer and translator, preparing catalogues of the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens' Japanese Garden, and as a small-scale dealer of Japanese art, though he never opened another store. In May 1931, he returned to Japan and eventually resumed monastic life, spending his remaining years at the Entsu-ji Temple in Akasaka.

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