

GIN-BARI ENAMELS

by Elaine Cossman

I am absolutely mad about gin-bari buttons. I started collecting these precious works of art in the early 1990s. "Gin" is pronounced with a hard "g" just like the "g" in "give." In Japanese, "gin" is the word for "silver."

Created in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, gin-bari buttons have incredible depth. This depth comes from unique, definitive characteristics which make a gin-bari button a gin-bari. Unfortunately scans flatten the buttons. You can't truly appreciate their depth until you see them.

The "canvas" upon which the gin-bari button is created is a thin sheet of silver or silver foil. This silver is stamped, punched, chiseled, crumpled or treated with a combination of these techniques. The technique is used as both decorative background and/or the button's subject matter.

This silver is a very important and integral part of the gin-bari technique. It is not merely a foundation for the button. It is meant to be noticed, and provides a ground for the design to float upon.



This is an exceptional gin-bari. As we admire the back of the cloisonné narcissus, we see its front "reflected" in a pond. The flower front and the glistening water were created with tooled silver foil. While many gin-bari enamels employ foil tooling, the tooling here is combined with a chiseled flower. It's an example of the background being an integral part of the design, and in this case, it completes the image. Measuring 15/16", and dating to the late 19th century, this three-piece enamel button has a sterling silver back, a sterling silver rim and a heavy silver loop shank. It also has the distinction of being signed on the back.



One of the buttons on Plate 1 is not a gin-bari. The top button in the first column is a Japanese cloisonné enamel. The sky is executed with a rare enamel invented by the Japanese called "tea goldstone." I've forgotten the precise Japanese word for it. (You'll notice that the tea goldstone cloisonné button has no depth, nor can you see a textured silver base through a transparent enamel.)

The top button in the center column (birds fly over waves) is a particularly fine gin-bari and is an exceptional example of silver as an important design element. The chiseling is as fine as the cloisonné birds.

Two enameling techniques are used in gin-bari buttons—cloisonné and "wireless." At the moment, I personally think of "wireless" gin-



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4-1.6 Gin-bari. A style of Japanese cloisonné which uses lightly tinted clear enamel over a very thin sheet of detailed silver. The wires separating the design elements may be present, or they may have been dissolved or hidden to create "wireless" gin-bari.

GIN-BARI ENAMELS (continued)

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baris as "painted." The subject matter is built in layers of transparent colored enamel, making it stand above the silver. The entire design is then protected with layer upon layer of colorless enamel, resulting in increased depth. Some buttons even look like they're protected under glass. Except for an opaque white, the enamels are transparent.

You may find natural flaws in gin-bari buttons. Slight stress fractures in the enamel may be present. These are not scratches. The presence of many fractures tells me the button is not of high quality. The only time I purchase one with more than one or two stress fractures is if the subject matter is scarce.

Silver foil missing around the edge of the button may be noticed (see button below). This is something that can naturally occur during manufacture. If it doesn't detract from the button's beauty, I still enjoy the button. Another natural flaw can occur in the cloisonné gin-bari buttons. Just like regular cloisonné buttons, the gin-bari enamel may show "pitting" which occurs during firing of the enamel.

Literally and figuratively, the subject matter is very Japanese. Simple, asymmetrical designs depict things of nature—flowers, bamboo, birds, fish, butterflies, Mount Fuji—plant life being the most plentiful.

Gin-bari buttons are found in small, medium, large and diminutive size. Dimi's are rare (two flowers, top of Plate 2). Mediums are most plentiful. Gin-bari shapes and realistics are also rare. I have an apple (Plate 2), there is a crab, and Bruce Beck has a drop-dead gorgeous butterfly.

Gin-baris can be one- or two-piece mounted in silver or brass. Some two-piece mountings have a silver rim and a brass back, with applied round or elongated loop shanks. Some gin-bari buttons began life as belt plaques. You can tell by examining the button for evidence of links being soldered or cut off, and by noting if the shank looks added at a later time.

I hope you enjoy these gin-bari buttons. Their beauty speaks for itself. If you have questions about the buttons in the scans or about the information above, let me know. You can contact me by email at eloulou@earthlink.net



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