



Kogo? Oh, go and see

Tiny Japanese ceramic incense boxes, called kogo, are art in miniature.

And while they are considered an art form, kogo are as essential to the Japanese tea ceremony as tea bowls.

The incense boxes are diminutive folk art studies of animals, birds, fish, gods, flowers, vegetables and geometric forms. They are collectibles so small, (some two cm by three cm) they can be carried around in jacket pockets like worry beads.

The palm-sized incense boxes are so small, in fact, that one of the largest collections every assembled was "lost" or misplaced for almost 40 years.

The 566-piece kogo exhibit now at the Centennial Museum is part of the original collection of French statesman Georges Clemenceau. In 1890, the former premier

of France asked the consul-general in Yokohama to start collecting kogo for him. Clemenceau never did publicly disclose his avid interest in this esoteric oriental material, but when he died in 1929, he had acquired 3,500 ceramic incense boxes.

Canadian industrialist Joseph-Arthur Simard bought the collection from Clemenceau's son in 1939 and shipped it home to Montreal where it remained in storage for 20 years. In 1959, he gave the kogo to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts where it sat undisturbed in its wrappings for another 18 years. It was unearthed quite accidentally.

The kogo exhibit, at first glance, may seem busy to the Western eye. Rows of glass cases hold so many pieces of this ceramic art, made from more than 100 separate kilns. But one has to admire the work of 17th to 19th century Japanese arti-

sans when viewing a rock or boat-shaped box, the size of a golf ball, topped with five to 10 definable Lilliputian figures.

There is humor in the animal figures which are the containers for incense. Flopp-eared rabbits (they proliferate), seated camels, pregnant badgers and turtles (a sign of longevity) are given witty treatment. More down-to-earth representations are praying buddhas and thatched-roofed huts.

Birds are caricatured and doves, swans and herons are reminiscent of the blue and white porcelain of England. Some incense boxes are more solid with earth glaze and color; others a brilliant sapphire blue. Pottery fans, scrolls, flower blossoms, square and cylindrical kogo were used as cosmetic pots by actors as well as incense for the tea ceremony.

People probably own incense boxes bought at bargain prices and are not aware of their true value. A few years ago, a Japanese incense box sold for \$400 at Sotheby Parke Bernet in London, far more than the original \$80 to \$120 estimate placed on it by the firm.

The Clemenceau collection will be at the Centennial Museum until June 1.



CLOCKWISE: Chubby woman, emblem of happiness; duck; pregnant badger.