



箆笥 (*Tansu*) : The Japanese chest.

In this newsletter, we continue our examination of Japanese storage devices. After discussing the art of boxing things, then the Japanese *kura* (蔵) institution, we are now presenting the Japanese chest: the famous *tansu*.

Here, we will talk about the clothing *tansu* or *ishô-dansu* (衣装箆笥)¹.

In further newsletters we will discuss other types, like the *chôba-dansu* (帳場箆笥) used by merchants or artisans, *kaidan-dansu* (階段箆笥 - used as a staircase) and those *tansu* used for storing food and tableware.



A high-class brothel in Yoshiwara, showing several courtesans entertaining a client with music. Several pieces of furniture can be seen, all lavishly decorated in the same *makie* lacquer with a motive of plum flowers.

BOX-SHAPE

First a few word about those things that characterize all *tansu*, small or large, whatever their shape may be. The word *tansu* came from China, where it meant a box to carry food or clothing. When the box was round it was called *tan* (箆) and when it was square it was called *shi* (笥), so in ancient China *tanshi* designated a container, round or square, which held clothing or food².

¹ When associated with a qualificative, the word "*tansu*" is read "*dansu*".

² 和箆笥百選, 家具の博物館 (One Hundred Tansu), published by The Furniture Museum, Tokyo, 1986.

In Japan, around the beginning of the 18th century the word *tatebitsu* (竪櫃) designated a chest with drawers. But a *tatebitsu* was also known as a *tansu*, possibly a contraction of the word *tatebitsu*, even though it was written with the Chinese word *tanshi* (箆笥).

In modern common usage, the word *tansu* usually designates a drawer-type of furniture, distinct from shelves furniture made for displaying objects (*kazari-dana* 飾り棚), or from box shaped furniture, such as trunk (*hitsu* 櫃) or various small and light boxes (*tsuzura* 葛籠).

Even so, it seems that all Japanese *tansu* have somehow kept the spirit of the original meaning of the word: simple, with square corners, they often appear geometric, with the lines on the front face of the drawers designing simple rectangular parallelograms. They are very different, for example, from Chinese furniture, which is often intricate and employs rounded shapes. The top and sides of *tansu* are usually left rougher than the front, as this type of furniture was often concealed in alcoves or closet (*oshiire*), so only the face was visible.

In Japanese furniture, as in other Japanese arts and crafts, we often find economy of means and a shying away from too much ostentation, combined with simplicity and functionality. The spirit of *bushi* is never far away, which elevates the virtues of plainness, sturdiness, and sees luxury as shameful. Also, repeated sumptuary laws have codified the use of furniture, for a long time considered as a luxury product³.



Saotôshi handles.

Another characteristic of Japanese *tansu*, is that they always have kept their original “movability”. Most *tansu* were designed with side handles called *saotôshi* (竿通し) or “pole hangers” so that two porters could pass a pole through these handles and carry it walking one behind the other. Furthermore, large *tansu* were often divided in two sections, each with its own *saotôshi*, the bottom ones fitting over studs in the above section.

The simplicity of design mentioned earlier is balanced against the iron decoration (*kanagu* - 金具) of the hinges, locks and pullers. The richer the *tansu*, the more gorgeous the iron plates, made with a repoussé technique, using thin metal plates shaped and ornamented by hammering to create a design in low relief. Most designs



Late Edo period two sections *Ishô-dansu* of the *Sadô* type, from *Yawata*. Characteristic design of large square iron plates with open work motive of cranes and other auspicious symbols. Constructed with thick *kiri*-wood (paulownia) and stained with a transparent *shunkei* lacquer (using ferric oxide (*bengara*) to obtain the red stain). This is a rare example of early *Sadô-dansu*, shorter in front length than the models produced during *Meiji* era. There is a secret compartment concealed behind the little door.

³ During the second half of the 17th century, several edicts in Edo banned merchants and craftsmen from owning items decorated with *makie* lacquer or decorative metal fittings. And in 1799, an edict in Morioka read as follows: *It is said that farmer's domiciles have become extravagant, that they employ paper and wooden doors and keep their possessions in tansu or trunks. This demonstrates a lack of recognition of their status. (...) They should return to the old form of housing, destroying that which is not suitable to the lifestyle of farmers.*

are stylized plants or animals, auspicious symbols, family crests or even divinities like Ebisu and Daikoku or Hotei.

Historically, *tansu* manufacturing started in Osaka during the middle of the 17th century and spread to Izumi, Kawaguchi, Wakabayashi and Tokushima on Shikoku Island. Products from those areas were sent to Osaka to be redistributed via water transport to the rest of the country including Edo. To facilitate this, *tansu* were sent out in parts that could be assembled at the final destination and secured with wood pegs.

To satisfy a growing demand, production started to appear in the early 18th century in Edo and neighbouring towns like Kawagoe and Kasukabe. About the same time, production also started in Kyoto and Nagoya.

By the mid-19th century, many castle and harbour towns had their own production centre for local consumers, and each region developed uniquely recognizable designs, sold mostly locally.

It was only during the Meiji era that famous *tansu* regions, like Sendai, began to market nationally, and production developed on a larger scale. Also, the end of sumptuary laws, combined with imports of cheaper iron sheets, made the development of lavish ironware and an explosion of creativity possible. Sadly, however, the great Kanto earthquake of 1923 saw the end of regional diversity: the Tokyo *tansu* factory destruction provoked a sudden demand for Tokyo-style *tansu* that were produced all over the country and the regional styles were soon abandoned. Tokyo-style *tansu* are mostly built of plain *kiri* wood with no lacquer and with little or no iron plate work. This style is still marketed today and considered as part of the trousseau of a new bride in very traditional families⁴.

ISHÔ-DANSU



Lacquered Meiji era *ishô-dansu* from Shônai area (Yamagata pref.). Constructed of cedar for the exterior and *kiri* wood (paulownia) for the drawer interiors. Lock-bar is decorated with lavish thick metalwork with open work motive of pine, plum, crane and tortoise.

The most simple clothing (*ishô*) *tansu* has 4 to 6 deep drawers, sometimes with a centre front lock-bar⁵, with a frame built from plain boards assembled by finger joinery and wood pegs. There is only a minimum of ironwork, around corners and locks, with thin pullers, and the wood is finished with a thin coat of brownish lacquer.

The next most common *ishô-dansu* is usually made of two stacked sections with two deep drawers each. More sophisticated models have the lower drawer shortened on its right side, on one or both sections, to make room for a stack of smaller drawers, or for a hinged square shaped door with concealed small drawers behind.

This seemingly simple design of drawers of different sizes is the basis of the charm of *ishô-dansu*. It also comes from the ironware around the locks and pullers, usually with a unique design repeated at different scales to match the size of the drawers. The little square door, when present, adds a touch of preciousness with its drawers behind and sometime a secret compartment (*kakushi* - 隠し).

⁴ Such highly priced furniture is sold at every large department store.

⁵ Lock-bars over drawers can be seen as a deterrent for eventual thieves, but most likely they originally served to lock drawers in place when *tansu* had to be moved quickly, as when escaping from a fire.

From that basic plan many combinations have arisen, especially in Sendai during the Meiji era, where the lavish design of repoussé iron plates was also enriched.

The Sendai region produced mostly one-section *ishô-dansu*, characterized by a longer front size that originally came from the length of a samurai's swords. The longer front of a **Sendai-dansu**, sometime called *samurai-dansu*, made possible the original distribution of drawers and door(s). The top drawer extends across the



Mid-Meiji era Sendai Yome-iri-dansu (wedding clothing chest) from the Ôguma area. Cedar frame, lacquered in black on front. Boldly grained and unusual thick *keyaki* wood (zelkova) used for the drawers and door, covered with *kijiro* lacquer coloured with ferric oxide. Ironware with the auspicious ideogram 福 (fuku - meaning "good luck").

width of the *tansu* to store swords, while the lower drawers, used for a samurai's clothes, are distributed like the two-section version described earlier. Sometimes, however, square doors will be installed on each side of the *tansu*, with a stack of drawers in between, eventually protected with a lock-bar. Sometimes the square door will be installed in the centre of the chest, with sets of drawers on each side. It seems that a Sendai cabinet maker's imagination was endless!⁶

Drawer Handles – 引手金具



Warabi-te - 蕨手

Kaku-te - 角手

Mokko-gata - 木瓜

Hiru-te - 蛭手

The next very common type of *ishô-dansu* is the **ryôbiraki-dansu** (両開き箆笥), also called the *kannonbiraki-dansu* (観音開き箆笥). This two-section *tansu* destined to store women's clothing was developed in Edo. The story says it was specially thought of for Edo's Yoshiwara pleasure quarters to decorate the courtesans' rooms.

It is usually made of plain soft *kiri* wood (paulownia), as was most furniture produced in the Edo area. That domination of *kiri* wood in the Edo area might be explained by the rapid growth of the biggest city of the country (with one million inhabitants in 1720) and the need of satisfying the demand rapidly, as paulownia could grow much faster than other woods available in Japan.

⁶ It should be noted that, contrary to other regions, Sendai-*dansu* production lasted much later and for an odd reason: in 1919, German prisoners of war returned home, bringing back Sendai-*dansu* so this type of *tansu* became fashionable again; and, after 1946, the American occupation also revived the market. Even today Sendai-*dansu* are produced but most of them use low-cost moulded metalwork instead of repoussé iron.



Ryôbiraki-dansu are stacked *tansu* with a bottom half section comparable to the *ishô-dansu* described earlier (two deep drawers with or without a square door) and a top section with hinged double-doors which reveal two identical, deep drawers inside, with also variation of a shorter lower drawer to make room for a stack of smaller drawers on the right side. The main attraction of *ryôbiraki-dansu* is their wide, round shaped double-door lock plates, some of which have lavish repoussé decorations. The doors are also protected with large iron bands forming a cross and also have five to seven large hinges. Like most *tansu* from the Tokyo area, *ryôbiraki-dansu* are not lacquered nor stained, even though some are finished with thin brown or reddish lacquer, and some even covered with *makie* lacquerwork. These were produced for the wealthiest families.

Late Edo two sections *ryôbiraki-dansu* from Kanto area. Built with thick *kiri*-wood (paulownia) and stained with a transparent *shunkei* lacquer (using ferric oxide (*bengara*) to obtain the red stain). This is a rare example of Edo era *ryôbiraki-dansu*, recognisable with heavier metalwork than the later model, in particular thick pulling handles.

Drawer Handles – 引手金具



Gumbai-gata - 軍配型

Kan-te - 環手

KURUMA-DANSU

Particularly noteworthy are *kuruma-dansu*, or wheeled *tansu*. Wooden wheels started to be installed under trunks in the 17th century, when they became too big and heavy to be moved conveniently by porters. Such *kuruma-nagamochi* were popular in the 1640s and 50s, but soon became outlawed in Edo, Osaka and Kyoto. The reason was that, when a huge fire broke out in Edo in 1657, people tried to flee with their possessions in these trunks and the street soon became so congested that fire-fighters could not access the flames, and many could not escape, resulting in a massive death toll. Consequently the use of *kuruma-dansu* was outlawed in the three cities. In other parts of Japan, they were built mostly for merchants (*chôba-dansu* 帳場箆笥), and, during the Meiji period, putting wheels under *ishô-dansu* became also fashionable, when it was no longer illegal to do so in major urban areas.



Mid-Meiji era *kuruma-ishô-dansu* (wheeled *tansu*). Built with boldly grained chestnut (*kuri*) wood face with cedar case and drawer interiors, and *keyaki* bottoms and wheels. This *tansu* is from Sendai, or Iwayado further north. The metalwork design is very opulent, with peonies, pines, bamboos and seashells. There is secret compartment under one of the small drawers with an unusual access.



In our next newsletter, we will address the *tansu* of merchants, tradesmen and artisans.

Detail of above *kuruma-dansu*. Metalwork, shaped and ornamented with a repoussé technique, then wiped with black lacquer, create a balanced motive mixing auspicious pine and bamboo trees around the *Maruni Makino Kashiwa* (丸に牧野柏) family crest. During Edo period, the 3 oak leaves (*kashiwa*) inside a circle (*maruni*) were the emblem of the Makino samurai clan, but were also used by the Hachisuka and Nakagawa clans.