



## 矢立 (Yatate) : Portable Writing Implement

In the spring of the second year of the Genroku era (1689), at the age of 45, the poet Matsuo Bashô (松尾芭蕉 - 1644-94) prepared himself for the last of his major wandering trips, a 2400 kilometres trek over 5 months into Japan's deep North, a region called Oku<sup>1</sup>.

Although at the time the country was at peace under the Tokugawa administration for almost a century, to go wander on a reputedly difficult path to the end of the civilized world as understood by the Japanese at that time comported some risks.

Therefore the poet sold his hut on the bank of the Sumida river (with a banana tree, 芭蕉 - *bashô*, planted in front by his disciples) and wrote a will. He also travelled lightly, carrying himself his small luggage; a few changes of clothes and a portable writing implement - a *yatate* (矢立), offered by his



*Hiôgi-gata* (檜扇型矢立) *yatate*, a folding fan-shaped *yatate*, made in brass.

pupil Ozawa Bokushaku (小沢卜尺) as a farewell gift. The only instrument that the poet took with him, according to the diary of his disciple Kawai Sora (河合曾良), who accompanied him, was a *hiôgi-gata* (檜扇型矢立) *yatate*, a folding fan-shaped *yatate*, made in mulberry wood. The first leg of the journey began at Senju, famous at the time for its fish market, to cross the Senju bridge on the Sumida river that would set him on the *Nikkô kaidô*, the road to Nikkô<sup>2</sup>. Departing from his friends who accompanied him on the boat trip to the southern leg of the bridge, with tears in his eyes, the poet took his *yatate* out of his obi to write his first haiku on the road to deep Japan<sup>3</sup>:

行春や鳥啼魚の目は泪  
(Yukuharuya, torinaki, uono  
mewanamida)

*Loath to let spring go, Birds cry, and even fishes' Eyes are wet with tears*

Followed by this comment:

是を矢立の初めとして、行く道なをすすまず。人々は途中に立ちならびて、後かげのみゆる迄はと見送るなるべし。

*This was the first time I used my Yatate, and I was still reluctant to venture farther. Behind, my friends were standing in a row, as if to watch till I was lost to sight.*

<sup>1</sup> Oku designated the provinces of northern Honshû: Mutsu (in the area of nowadays Fukushima, Miyagi, Iwate and Aomori) and Dewa (in the area of Yamagata and Akita). But "*oku*" also means "interior", "inside", "deep" and "remote".

<sup>2</sup> This is where the Tôshôgû Shrine (東照宮) is located, a mausoleum to Togugawa Ieyasu, founder of the Tokugawa shogunate that ruled Japan for over 250 years until 1868.

<sup>3</sup> It was the second haiku in Oku no Hosomichi (奥の細道), *The Narrow Road to the Interior*, Bashô's masterpiece, a poetic diary in the form known as *haibun*, a combination of prose and haiku. It was to be published after his death, in 1702.

In 1820 a group of scholars, admirers of the poet, erected a memorial stone recording the first step of Bashô, in the garden of the Susanô shrine (素盞雄神社), south of the bridge of Senju. On the other side of the bridge, the North side, another stone reads: 矢立初めの碑 (*yatate hajime no hi*, the beginnings of the *yatate*).

Susanô shrine (素盞雄神) on the South side of Senju bridge on the Sumida river in Tokyo, where a memorial stone is erected, recording the first leg of Basho's journey to the North in 1689.



*Yatate* writing implements were widely used during the Edo period, but the *hiôji-gata yatate* offered to Basho was of an ancient type, already in use during the Kamakura period (1185-1333). The folding fan shaped box, usually made of wood, had a lid sliding on an axle at the lower tip that would close just like a fan folding. It contained an inkpad at the wider end, and the writing brush would rest inside the fan body. The inkpad was made of raw silk or cotton soaked with ink. This had been made previously from a *sumi* stick ground against a specially-shaped *suzuri* stone with water, as described in our previous newsletter<sup>4</sup>, and when the ink dried up, just a few drops of water would revive it. The *yatate* was a great invention for travellers who needed to take notes while carrying minimum luggage, as it became possible for the first time to leave behind the bulky stone necessary to produce ink. But the origin of the word *yatate* indicates that it had not been always the case.

*Yatate* literally means "arrow stand", and the most accepted origin of the word for the portable writing implement we know is a passage in the classic Tale of the Heike (平家物語)<sup>5</sup>: "*the warrior clerk of Kiso Yoshinaka, a Genji warlord, carried a small ink stone in his quiver and wrote skilful letters for his lord*". Thus, it is believed that before the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Japanese samurai archers used to carry a *suzuri* stone at the bottom of their quiver, perhaps in a small compartment right under the arrows section.

This small grinding stone became known as the "*yatate no suzuri*" (arrow stand grinding stone). Carrying a heavy stone in one's luggage was probably not convenient for everyone, however, and



A brass *hishaku-gata* (柄杓型矢立) *yatate* shaped as a persimmon fruit on a branch. The narrow compartment is divided to hold a paper knife (missing) on top of the brush.

carrying readymade ink at the time was not an option, as the lid of any containers would eventually pop, leading to disastrous spillages in one's luggage. The invention of a portable writing set was likely a great relief, and, since it was probably first adopted by samurai, it continued to be referred as a *yatate*.

<sup>4</sup> See our previous Vol XIV.II, Mar-Apr 2014 about *Suzuri-bako*, Japanese writing box and the art of brush writing.

<sup>5</sup> *Heike Monogatari*, an epic chronicle of the struggle between the Taira and Minamoto clans in the Genpei War (1180-1185).



A very compact *yatate* shaped as a luffa gourd (*hechima* ヘチマ) with leaves. The brush fold as a telescopic antenna. This *yatate* as it appears when not in use is shown page 7 of this document.

During the Edo period, as the number of people travelling the five routes (五街道 *gokaidō*) leading to the shogun capital increased, the use of *yatate* became more common among merchants, scholars and other travellers. A new type of *yatate* appeared, the *hishaku-gata* (柄杓型矢立), ladle (or inter locking) type, that would eventually replace the *hiōji-gata*, or folding fan shaped type that Bashō used to such effect. The word *hishaku* designates a ladle used to scoop water, like the bamboo ones seen on the *chōzubachi* (手水鉢) at the entrance of shrines. These are used by worshippers

for the washing of their hands and mouths in order to purify themselves before approaching the shrine. A *hishaku-gata yatate* is therefore a long hollow stem into which the writing brush is slid, ending with a *sumi tsubo*, a hinged ink pot where the ink-soaked cloth is kept. Usually the opening of the *sumi tsubo* ingeniously reveals both the inkpad and the opening of the tube containing the brush.

The *hishaku-gata yatate* became extremely common during the Edo period, and by the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century it seems that almost everyone carried one, from young students to clerks, which explains why it is the type found most commonly in the present-day antique market. Such commonness, on the other hand, might have fostered artisans to design



An *inrō-gata* (印籠型矢立) *yatate*, with its separate *sumi tsubo*.

originally-shaped *yatate* for those travellers searching for distinction, adding functions other than the basic ink and brush, whilst always mindful of the need of the travellers and thus keeping the implement light. The most common accessory added was a *kami-kiri* (紙切), a very small paper knife, which was usually held in a separate compartment just above the brush. *Yatate* with a *kami-kiri* compartment are quite easy to find, but it is rare to find them with the original knife. Other accessories include a compass, a sundial, a ruler, a knife or an abacus.

During the Kansei era (1789-1801), a new shape appeared that gained popularity for a short time. This was the *inrō-gata* (印籠型矢立) *yatate*, with a separate ink container connected to the writing brush tube by a cord or a chain.

Then, at the end of the Edo period, the pocket *yatate*, a thin box-type, appeared. Since it is very compact, often the writing brush handle is made in two pieces which can be joined end to end, or sometimes extended like a telescopic antenna. That type became more fashionable



during the Meiji era (1868-1912) because, with the appearance of Western clothing, it could easily be carried in a pocket. And consequently, the appearance of the fountain pen, called *mannenhitsu* (万年筆 - ten-thousand years brush) in Japanese, would precipitate the end of the *yatate*...

A miniature bronze *hishaku-gata yatate* decorated with an arabesque (*karakusa*) design, with a telescopic brush.

A variety of materials were used for *yatate*, the most popular of which were brass, copper, copper alloys, bronze and silver. Refined *yatate* often used *shaku-dô* (赤銅), an alloy unique to Japan made of copper with 3 to 5% of gold. It has the appearance of bronze after casting, but usually receives a special *niro-shiage* (煮色仕上げ) patina which gives it a purple black shininess resembling lacquer. Natural materials are also used such as ivory, horn and bone, tortoise-shell, gourds, porcelain, rattan, wood and bamboo. All those materials might also receive lacquer decoration as well as inlays of mother of pearl, gold, and other precious materials. There seemed to be no limit to the invention of Japanese artisans in conceiving *yatate*, and collecting them guarantees one many good surprises!



A *hishaku-gata* in ebony wood (*kokutan* - 黒壇) and silver with a small compass.

A rare *yatate* (above and right) built as a small purse in woven bamboo opening as a miniature *suzuri-bako* complete with ink stone, *suiteki* water dropper and compartments for brush and ink stick. It also includes a folding ruler, and a miniature sundial and compass or pantochronometer.





An elegant silvered bronze *yatate* with a design of *reishi* (靈芝) mushrooms (used as a medicinal plant) on its lid.



A *yatate* in *shaku-dô* and gold overlays, with a *sumi tsubo* made from a *fuchi*, the ornament fitted round the hilt of a sword behind the *tsuba*. Signed Yûkishû.



A brass *yatate-netsuke*, equipped with a compass and telescopic brush.





An elegant small grooved yatate in silver alloy.



A yatate in brass shaped as an Edo period pistol.



A yatate in brass with a ruler.



The very compact (75 mm) *yatate* shaped as an luffa gourd (*hechima* ヘチマ) with leaves showed open on page 3 of this document.



A amazing *yatate* shaped as a combination of two Japanese court musical instruments. The *sumi tsubo* is shaped as a *Shô* (笙) with 22 bamboo pipes. The brush compartment is shaped as a *Ryûteki* (竜笛), a bamboo flute. Both instruments are used in *Gagaku*, the Shinto traditional music associated with Japan's imperial court.