



## 整理整頓 (Seiri-seiton) : The Japanese way of keeping the house neat.

In this newsletter we are starting a series presenting Japanese ways of storing items. In our next issues, we will be continuing with the *kura* storage house, a Japanese institution, then we will pursue with Japanese chests (*tansu*).

**Chôdo.** There is almost no furniture or decoration in a traditional Japanese house in the western sense of the word. Instead, there is a large quantity of different types of movable furniture, in the original sense of the word, coming from the French *furniture*, meaning functional accessories used in a room, or what is called *chôdo* in Japanese. And when *chôdo* take the shape of a chest, like a *tansu*, they are still closer to the French word *meuble*, in an etymological sense (movable, in opposition to *immeuble*, non-movable, designating an edifice), in the sense that these *tansu* are all movable by one or 2 people, even when full<sup>1</sup>. The traditional Japanese mode of life requires numerous and sometimes bulky *chôdo*<sup>2</sup>. For example, Japanese cooking vessels and implements are many and voluminous, and serving a traditional Japanese meal requires endless sets of dishes and tray of all shapes and sizes. Regular festivals in Japan involve a wide array of accoutrements and cumbersome objects, such as lanterns, musical instruments and floats that need to be stored when not in use. The tea ceremony, spreading to urban centres after the 15<sup>th</sup> century, requires many sets of kettles, tea bowls, tea caddies, *kakejiku* to decorate the tea room, incense burners, ornaments and all the dishes for the *kaiseki* meal served before the ceremony proper. Furthermore, all are chosen according to the season or occasion.

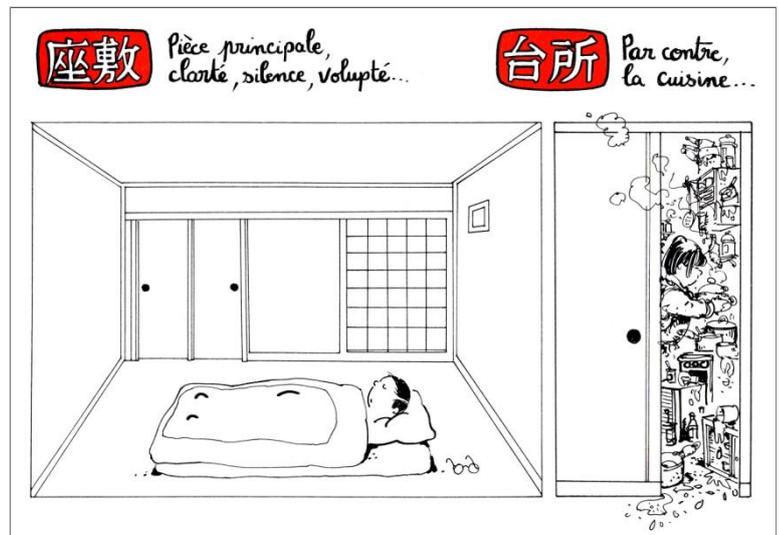


Illustration from Plantu of the dilemma of Japanese small apartments. The caption says: **Living room: clarity, silence, sensuous pleasure... not like the kitchen!** Published with the kind authorisation of Plantu, this illustration is extracted from "Impressions Japonaises", Denoël edition, 1993.

<sup>1</sup> Most *tansu* are designed with side handle called *saotoshi* or "pole hangers": 2 persons can carry them passing a pole through them. And large *tansu* are often divided in two sections for easier moving.

<sup>2</sup> Here is a non comprehensive list of what *chôdo* covers in an old traditional house: *tatami* mats, straw mats (to cover *tatami* in summer), paper covered sliding doors (*shôji* and *fusuma*), single-leaf screens, folding screens, curtain screens (*kichô*), bamboo blinds, straw cushions, stuffed cushions, chairs, stools, armrest, futons, pillows, mosquito nets, lamp stands (*andon*), candlesticks, braziers (*hibachi*), tobacco trays, lacquered clothes chest, oblong chests, covered baskets, cover-less baskets, cloth racks, desks, bookcases, letter boxes, boxes for writing equipment and paper (*suzuri-bako*), large tables, trays, raised trays, lacquered bowls, ceramic bowls, large bowls, rice containers, chopsticks, assorted small plates, sake cups, sake jars, trays, gourds, barrels, rice chests, bottles, lacquer boxes, baskets, musical instruments like lutes, mandolins, flutes, shamisen...



One of a pair of lacquered hokai food box, with its storage box.

For wealthy families in the past, the bulk of this equipment was stored most of the time in the *kura*. During festive occasions, such as a religious ceremony or a family celebration, not only were the best dishes taken out of the *kura*, but the entire house was redecorated, ordinary items and furniture were brought out of the house and the best utensils were taken out of the *kura*. Seasons, primarily winter and summer, also required two sets of many things. For example, separating sliding doors between rooms (*shoji*) could be removed during summer, or replaced with summer sets made of bamboo lace (*sudare*) that leave air circulating<sup>3</sup>.

If we consider that our mind is shaped by our environment, we can only speculate about the healthy influence of a seasonally remodelled home on its inhabitant, not just for the practical purpose of getting warmer or cooler according to the season, but to enrich their life, rediscovering the braziers design on the first days of winter or sound of the *furin* (wind chimes) during the first days of summer ...

The practical flexibility of a traditional Japanese room, that can serve as a living, sleeping or dining area is not only a question of space saving, frugality or lack of wealth, since this characteristic is kept even in the richest house, the owners of which traditionally can afford to have specialised function rooms. The real purpose might be to keep the freedom to decorate one's environment according to mood, season or occasion, and, for that reason, it is desirable to have a standard room type similar for all classes, and a wide choice of light *chôdo* to please one's taste. In seconds, a couple of smaller rooms can be transformed into a larger party area by removing partitions, then bringing out a few tables from storage, as well as cushions, armrests, braziers, lamps, wall decoration and tobacco trays. Perhaps even some musical instruments could be produced to entertain a few guests. And after the party, if needed, the same room can be transformed into sleeping quarters for guests living far away or those who have appreciated the host's rice *sake* too much to return safely home. In a blink of an eye, just like a change of set between stage acts, all the party items can disappear and the futons, cushions, cloth racks and cloth baskets be set for a comfortable night.

The *kura* storehouse, and a preference for light furniture, have made this versatile remodelling possible.

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<sup>3</sup> In our house in the district of Taito in Tokyo, built in 1957, we have two sets of *shoji* for the main room: glass and paper for winter season, bamboo lace for summer.

**Kiribako.** When it comes to the storage and preservation of its arts and crafts treasures, Japan has always faced multiple challenges. The country receives heavy rainfall (twice as much as the United Kingdom), has a hot and high-humidity season that makes any confined space an ideal breeding ground for both fungal decay and moths, and high seasonal temperatures and humidity fluctuations between day and night during the summer months, which puts wood objects under great strain. Japanese art objects made of paper or silk, like Japanese scroll paintings (*kakejiku*), are prone to damage from humidity, mildew and moths. Lacquer, although the most resilient material (see our Sep-Oct 2012 newsletter), dislikes sudden humidity changes because of its wood base being prone to shrinking or expansion<sup>4</sup>.



Pair of brass candle stands and their storage box.

Japanese artisans have responded to the challenge of keeping moisture and temperature fluctuations from ruining their production by providing wooden boxes for their products: boxes, built in Japanese timbers, these act as humidity and temperature buffers. They are not made of rough wood as, for example, are the wine cases assembled with nails, but are instead made of finely polished Japanese cypress (*sugi*) or better paulownia (*kiri*) wood<sup>5</sup> often assembled through dovetail joints, rice glue and wood pegs, with a tightly fitted lid maintained with a strong cotton cord carefully tied. Inside their box, items are often wrapped in Japanese paper or a cotton cloth<sup>6</sup>, offering an additional layer of protection from sudden changes in temperature or humidity. Also, the most cherished objects are double boxed (*nijû-bako*), with the outside

box often lacquered for additional protection. Kimonos, obis and most wearing accessories are likely sold in a custom made *kiribako* (box made of paulownia), but so are ceramics, bronze, sculptures, glasses, and any objects of value. Most boxes are meant to be used for several generations, with a calligraphy note indicating the contents, the origin, and sometime the name of the artist and his seal<sup>7</sup>, as well as the purchase date. Boxes can be almost as valued as their contents, and an original box (*tomobako*) gives an antique object even more value. This is so much so that, sometimes, the whole box - or just its lid - is carefully wrapped in Japanese paper to save it from dust, or, even better, protected in another custom ordered box... a never ending story of boxed



Pair of black lacquer chrysanthemum-base candle stands (*kikuza-shokudai*), with their original storage box.

<sup>4</sup> As long as the humidity fluctuation is gradual, and not too frequent, lacquer ware will do perfectly fine.

<sup>5</sup> The best boxes are *kiribako* because paulownia (*kiri*), beside being water and humidity resistant with a low density (0,26 to 0,35g/cm3), does not warp easily.

<sup>6</sup> This protective cloth was traditionally dyed with *ukon* (turmeric). Turmeric (one of the principal ingredients of curry) is a natural antioxidant and antibacterial spice that has also the property of keeping insects at large. Alas, yellow or orange cloth used for the same purpose nowadays is chemically died and has lost its protecting property.

<sup>7</sup> Most Japanese production is not signed, especially if they are pre-Meiji era.



A hanging scroll (kakejiku) with its double box. The inside box, made of *kiri* wood, is protected with a striped silk cover so finger mark will not stain the box when manipulating it, and the outside box which is lacquered is also enveloped with an orange paper for keeping the lacquer in perfect condition. With such a shelter, that scroll will stay in pristine condition for centuries.

valuables!

The purpose of a *kiribako* for non porous materials like bronze or glass is not necessarily humidity control, but protection during the period they are not in use or display. Modest houses store these boxes filled with precious objects in the attics or *oshiiré* closets behind *fusuma* sliding doors, and

wealthy houses have a *kura* storehouse. The majority of Japanese arts treasures of the past that

have been preserved for many generations, sometimes for many centuries, have been kept in storehouses that acted as private strongboxes, preserving the contents from weather, war, fire, theft, earthquake, moisture, rodents and pollution.

In our next Newsletter, we will present *Kura* storage house, a legacy of an ancient way of life, when objects of luxury were considered in terms of their beauty and value, as well as assets to be preserved for later generations. The oldest Japanese *kura* is the Shôsôin, adjacent to the Tôdai-ji in Nara, built in the 8<sup>th</sup> century



The Shosoin (正倉院) repository has kept imperial treasures in pristine condition for 12 000 years. The edifice is 33 metres long, 9.4 metres deep and 14 metres high.