



## 蔵 (Kura) : The Japanese store house.

*Kura* are 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. This is the opposite of our way of living today, when the objects we cherish the most will be discarded during our own life, sometimes after only a few seasons, leaving nothing to pass on to the next generation.

**Azekura.** The oldest surviving *kura* in Japan is the Shôsôin, adjacent to the Tôdai-ji in Nara, built in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Raised on pillars 2.4 metres above the ground, it is 33 metres long, 9.4 metres deep and 14 metres high, with walls built of triangular beams of Japanese cypress (*hinoki*), laid horizontally like a log cabin (called the *azekura* style) in such a way that the peaks of the triangles face outside and



The Shôsôin (正倉院) sheltering imperial treasures for 1 200 years

the interior wall is smooth. That exterior aspect also led to *azekura* receiving the appellation of *yoroi-gura*, or 'armor' storehouse, because of its resemblance to the woven breastplates of Japanese armour<sup>1</sup>.

The Shôsôin was built as a memorial to Emperor Shômu in 756, for the conservation of his

personal belongings after his death, among them many manuscripts, furniture, musical instruments, weapons, bronzes, jewellery, *gigaku* masks, herbal medicines, fragrant materials, textiles and innumerable other items, mostly from Japan but also from China and elsewhere. About 9000 items altogether are stocked and have been preserved for over 1200 years, most of them in pristine condition<sup>2</sup>. That exceptional state of preservation is due partly to the fact that the repository was almost never opened, but is mostly because of the storage inside the environment itself, with only mild seasonal changes in temperature and a stable relative humidity (RH) level all year long.

<sup>1</sup> It has been said that the advantage of the log-cabin construction was that the gap between logs would close during rainy season with expansion of the wood, and inversely wood shrinking at the dry season would open these gaps, letting the air inside... but this is apparently an old urban legend with no scientific proof...

<sup>2</sup> All items have been transferred to a new air-conditioned storage in 1963, because of potential fire hazard.

**Dozô Kura.** Shôsôin is the oldest surviving wooden building of this type, but *kura* have been part of Japanese culture since at least the Yayoi era (300 B.C. – 250A.D.), used to keep rice or other crops from destruction by weather or vermin, and elements of the *azekura* style of intersected logs come from that prehistoric period. Many *azekura*-style warehouses have been preserved, like the Shôsôin, but the construction using bare wood walls was progressively abandoned during the Heian era, or reserved for Buddhist temples and Shintô shrine compounds, giving way to the *dozô* style. With thick clay and plaster walls and no wooden parts exposed on the outside, these became very popular during the Edo period, when urban congestion and the constant threat of fire made that type of structure the ideal type for the storage of valuable possessions and became a relatively discreet expression of wealth and status for the rising *chônin* merchant bourgeoisie, who had to comply with the sumptuary edicts frequently issued under the Tokugawa shogunate<sup>3</sup>. The wealth of a village or town could be judged by the number of *dozô kura*.

*Dozô kura* were built on a stone foundation, featuring a rigid frame carefully assembled with elaborate joinery. This structural frame is filled with a bamboo lath, including the roof part, on which was applied a mud and straw plaster mixed with fibrous material. The outer walls were then covered with a bamboo lathing to hold the mud-plastered walls that would cover the wooden construction. Then, white plaster was applied on top of



Kura standing after the 1909 great Osaka fire - Dojima area in Kita-ku district

everything. On top of the plastered roof, another frame was fixed, to which ceramic tiles were attached so that second roof could burn without harming the interior. The unique door and the few small windows were protected with iron grills and covered with heavy, plastered, hinged shutters, shaped with stepped and recessed edges (*jabara*), like the doors of a safe. If a fire broke out, these shutters could be closed and their edges sealed over with clay so the *kura* would be airtight<sup>4</sup>. The fragile white plaster was often protected from knocks or rain by flat tiles or wood boards covering the lower half or the whole wall. Tiles were fixed to the wall with nails or hooks on each side, and to cover the nails, a thick, rounded plaster joint was applied, spreading 2 or 3 centimetres<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Called *ken'yakurei*, those edicts proscribed the consumption of some goods and lavish entertainment, identifying what was appropriate for members of each class of peasants, *chônin* and samurai. The Tokugawa shogunate was always fearful that the neo-Confucian discipline and moral conduct adopted by the samurai class could be destabilized by ostentatious displays of wealth among the merchant class.

<sup>4</sup> There is some difference between Kansai and Kantô *kura*. Kansai *dozô* traditionally do not have outside shutters at windows, but vertical bars covered with white plaster. Walls in Kanto have thicker plastered walls, and a thick plaster walling under the roof eaves to protect that particularly vulnerable part from flames. And Kanto *dozô* walls adorn large iron hooks to secure ladders or scaffolding needed for repair work. Also, Edo merchants seem to have a preference for blackened walls instead of white for their *dozô*, a costly extravagance that required another polished coating on top of the white plaster.

<sup>5</sup> Those walls are called *namako* walls because the rounded joint reminded the shape of sea cucumber (*namako* in Japanese, *bêche-de-mer* in French).

In Tokyo, one can still spot some *kura* here and there, but most have been destroyed. In 1691, the Shogunate issued a blanket permit for the construction of *dozô* along river banks and canals, as the lines they formed tended to stop the spread of small fires. The Kuramae district (in front of the *kura*) in the eastern part of Tokyo is a reminder of the lines of warehouses that once stretched along the Sumida river, but, as elsewhere, *kura* have disappeared in the area as a result of real estate developments. To see a large concentration of *dozô kura* today, one can go to Kurashiki, a river port commercial centre administrated by the Shogun on the inland sea (Okayama pref.) that became very prosperous during the Edo period. Hundreds of *kura* used to line the Kurashiki river banks in the centre of the town, each displaying the *mon* (family crest), of a wealthy merchants on its gable, and many of these have been preserved, sometimes converted to a house, shop or museum. But *dozô kura* are also a common sight everywhere in rural Japan, easily spotted with their white plaster walls emerging from the fences of wealthy properties, mostly dating from the Edo period. Also during this time, residences and shops built to look like *kura* became popular among urban merchants (*misegura*)<sup>6</sup>. Some *kura* storehouse were used as part of a factory, like the *sakagura* which doubled as a *sake* brewery, probably because the stable temperature and humidity inside was perfect for fermenting rice. The same is true for other fermented products such as soybean paste factories (*misogura*), soy sauce factories (*shôyugura*), yeast factories (*kôjigura*) or indigo factories (*aigura*).



Misegura in Kurashiki, Okayama prefecture

**Mushiboshi.** The *kura*, with their thick plastered walls and roofs, were designed to act as heat shields in case of fire, but they also served as humidity controllers all year, reinforced by the inside wood panelled walls that would also absorb moisture. This offered a safe haven preserved from extreme fluctuations in temperature and RH during all seasons, while the heavy wooden frame made it resistant to earthquake. *Kura* storehouses were kept neat and clean. The best *kura* had their inside walls panelled with Japanese cypress (*sugi*) wood, all of the items were kept in boxes or sometimes a few in furniture drawers, and everything within was periodically taken out to be aired, which was another Japanese tradition.

<sup>6</sup> A concentration of *misegura* is visible in Kawagoe city, not far from Tokyo (Saitama pref.).

Airings at the Shôsoin imperial repository mentioned earlier are documented from the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century in the “Reports of the Airing Official” (*Bakuryôsho no ge*). Shrines, Temples, Imperial and Shogunate palaces, aristocratic or Daimyô houses or even simple scholars with a book collection used to conduct annual airings, known as *mushibarai* (driving insects out), *mushiboshi* (drying out insects), *doyôboshi* (late summer drying) or *bakuryô* (sunning and drying), during which all items were taken out of their boxes for inspection and exposed to the sun. Imperial yearly airings were synchronised with the Tanabata festival, on the seventh day of the seventh month<sup>7</sup>, when the *Kengyû* star (Altair on the Eagle constellation) and the *Shokujo* star (Vega on the Harp constellation) are the brightest stars for the longest time in the August night sky. These annual airings were a time of inventory for arts or book collections, and a time of exhibition, like an open museum, for temples and shrines: people would travel from far away to have a chance to glimpse relics, icons and other treasures otherwise kept in the darkness of a sacred *kura*. In Kyoto, this airing tradition was long coupled with the Gion festival, when *byôbu* (Japanese screens) and luxurious tapestries or carpets imported from central Asia and elsewhere were exposed in townhouses (*machiya*) along the festival route. Nowadays, the practice of airing is often conducted in October, as at the Imperial Household Agency, when temperatures are warm, the sun is plentiful, the air humidity is low and the temperature and relative humidity inside and outside the *kura* are close.



Street in Kurashiki, Okayama prefecture

**Collectors.** With its tradition of *kura*, Japan, the country of countless typhoons and earthquakes, has become a real paradise for historians, museum curators and collectors, because so many treasures have been preserved intact for many centuries. At the same time, the possibly unique *kura* system, along with the habit of boxing every valuable *chôdo*, has helped to shape a way of life and perhaps a way of thinking. On one hand, the inhabitants of Japan seem always to have had an affection for carefully manufactured objects, however modest, making them transmissible to the next generation in their original shape or in good repair, in the opposite way to most mass-produced objects that are discarded today, often after a just few seasons. On the other hand, Japanese inhabitants are not fond of idleness, and are not attracted to the Western “cosy interior” style of accumulation, in which each object gradually finds a place in the house and new objects are chosen carefully so as not to disturb the harmony of those already accumulated, and the search must inevitably conclude when all rooms and walls are filled<sup>8</sup>. Instead of static decoration, the Japanese “*chineur*” has no limits, constantly

<sup>7</sup> The Gregorian date of the seventh day of the seventh lunar month of the Japanese lunisolar calendar usually falls in August.

<sup>8</sup> This western tradition could come from the French classic age when furniture was assigned a definitive position inside the room of the “Hotel particuliers” of the XVII<sup>th</sup> century, as a static decoration.

looking for new items without the restriction of space, ordering new sets of lacquer or ceramics, buying new *kakejiku* or woven baskets. Why ? Because the house is like an empty stage where a new play can be set at any time.

The typical Japanese antique collector does not have the required space to display his full collection. Instead, a few objects are taken out at a time, to show to friends or to enjoy for one season, and the rest of the collection is wrapped in paper or silk, protected in a wooden box, and if they have a *kura*, this collection can last forever, and even be forgotten... then, here and there a *kura* unopened for several generations might be explored by a curious descendant, and wonderful antiques in pristine condition may surface again... Japan, indeed is an absolute paradise for collectors!

In our next Newsletter, we will present another storage device: the Japanese *tansu*.



Hyakume dansu (百目箆笥) or "100 eyes" pharmacy-chest (kusuridansu)