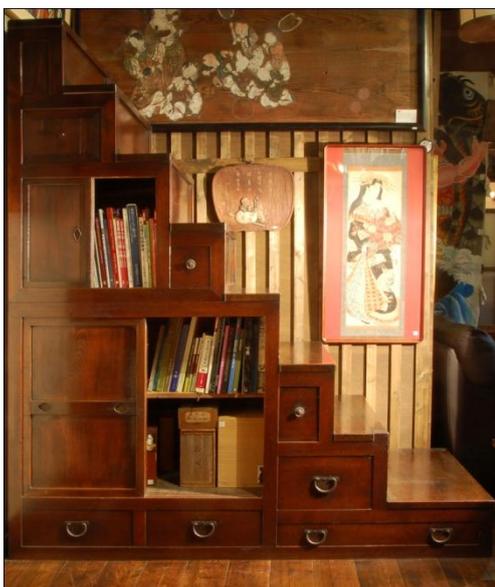




箆笥 (Tansu) : The Japanese chest. 3

This newsletter is the last part of our examination of Japanese storage devices. After discussing the art of boxes, the Japanese *kura* (蔵) institution, the *ishô-dansu* (衣装箆笥), then the *chôba-dansu* (帳場箆笥), we are finally presenting the *kaidan-dansu* (階段箆笥- step chest) and the *mizuya-dansu* (水屋箆笥- kitchen chest).

Kaidan-dansu and *Ômi mizuya-dansu*¹ share the same origin: the *machiya* or merchant shops of the Edo Era. It was the architectural disposition of the typical *machiya* that fostered the development of these two forms of furniture. *Machiya* were typically very long and narrow buildings, with a front size of about 6



metres and a depth of 20 metres. As we

have seen, the merchant class

(*chônin* - 町人) was at the bottom of the societal hierarchy and could not show any sign of wealth due to the recurrent sumptuary laws (*kenyakurei* - 儉約令). It could well have been for that reason that shops displayed a narrow front space, with the shop space in the front, family quarters and a kitchen space in the middle, and storage or a workshop in the back². The second storey was traditionally for storage or for employees and apprentices quarters.



Eight steps two sections *kaidan-dansu* from Gifu prefecture built in Japanese cypress. Late Meiji era.

¹ In this article we are referring to what is specifically called *Ômi mizuya* from *Ômi* area around Biwa lake in Shiga prefecture. Kitchen *tansu* from other area are usually less sophisticated.

² Although the narrow frontage has sometime been explained by the fact that taxes were determined by the width of the frontage, it seems that there is no evidence to back-up that assertion.

Kaidan-dansu - 階段箆笥

Kaidan-dansu, although technically built as operative staircases, are now frequently removed from old houses and sold in antiques shops as decorative furniture, like other Japanese *tansu*. As they were expensive pieces of both architecture and cabinetry to begin with, they are not as common as other types of furniture and therefore command a premium today. Furthermore, they have been imitated in other countries at different scales, especially in other parts of Asia, as purely decorative items. Reproductions are easy to spot, however, as they never use the original types of wood, which are mainly cedar and cypress for the steps and frame and *keyaki* (zelkova) for the drawers and door faces. Also, the construction method is different and not adapted for human weight. Nowadays, Japanese carpenters are still manufacturing modern *kaidan-dansu* to special order with the best carpentry tradition, at a price comparable to that of the best antique pieces.

Kaidan-dansu are sometime called *hako-dansu* (箱箆笥) or *hakodan* (箱段), or *hako-hashigo* (箱梯子), meaning “box-furniture”, or “box-ladder”. It seems that, historically, stairways progressed from stepladders to the most sophisticated stair cabinets.

A *kaidan-dansu* is a free-standing staircase that can be moved if needed (although it is often fixed to the building frame for stability), with drawers and compartments built under the steps. It actually offers a very large volume of storage as treads are usually about 60cm wide, which was probably the first purpose of their existence: storing as much possible in a crowded *machiya* house. Some *machiya* had 2 staircases, one in the back, which was very simple, more like a stepladder and used as a service stair, and one in the living area, seen by customers and therefore more elaborate.



Six steps one section *kaidan-dansu* with a half deep second step (detail below). Built in *sugi* and *keyaki* wood. Meiji era.

In the Meiji era, when merchants (*chônin*) were not inhibited anymore by the sumptuary laws, the upstairs living quarters developed, and some lavishly decorated *kaidan-dansu* appeared. Most of them are accessible from one side only, i.e. the other side is against a wall, but in some rare cases, the drawers and cupboards were accessible from both side of the staircase.

Handrails did not become common until the end of the Edo period. A common phenomenon is for the first step to be wider and/or the first and second step to be only half deep. The reason for such configurations is due to the installation of the *kaidan-dansu* between two walls, and the obligation to start one's ascent facing the side of the staircase. *Kaidan-dansu* are usually built with a foot space of



one *tatami* mat, and sometimes even less, so the gradient is always steeper than 45°.

Most *kaidan-dansu* are made in 2 units, to facilitate transportation, but some are only one unit and some are 3 units. Oftentimes, the *kaidan-dansu* does not reach all the way to the upper floor, and instead the last one or two steps are built above it and fixed to the building structure. That is why some low *tansu* with only 6 or 7 steps can be found. These low *kaidan-dansu* must not be confused with the upper half of a two-unit *tansu*, with the bottom unit missing.

It has been suggested that *kaidan-dansu* were made movable so that they could be hidden from tax collectors, because second floors were illegal, and, for the same reason, *kaidan-dansu* were sometimes hidden in closets behind the *fusuma* (襖).

Unfortunately, there is no evidence to back-up such assertions, even if it sounds plausible. Second floors were never forbidden. Also, although there is sometime a third middle floor discreetly built in some opulent houses in such a way that the building looks like a two-storey house from outside, the purpose was not to avoid taxes but rather cautious discretion, since merchants were encouraged by social customs, and sometimes sumptuary laws, to avoid showing too much wealth.

Thus, the relative compact size of portable stairs or their occasional location behind *fusuma* sliding doors was simply a way to save space and keep the stairs out of sight. In opulent merchant houses, once the sumptuary laws were aborted after Meiji restoration, *kaidan-dansu* became more and more sophisticated and decorative objects that did not need to be hidden in a closet any more. They even became a symbol of status. In the process, staircases that used to be built by carpenters (*daiku* -大工) as a part of the house frame, sophisticated *kaidan-dansu* were built by cabinet makers (*sashimonoshi* -指物師 or *tansu-shi* - 箆笥師) using different joinery techniques and a wider panel of a wood such as *keyaki* (zelkova) and *kuri* (chestnut) for framing instead of *sugi* (cryptomeria).

Ômi Mizuya - 近江水屋

Ômi *mizuya* is a type of furniture geographically linked to Kansai, and particularly the Kyoto-Biwa lake area in Shiga prefecture. Just as *kaidan-dansu* became an object of display in merchant houses, *mizuya* became an object of pride in kitchens open to public view. This has to do with the design of *machiya* houses. These long and narrow houses were often designed with a long corridor (*tori-niwa* -通り庭) at street level, stretching from the street entrance to the storage room or workshop at the back of the house. It is in the middle of that corridor that the kitchen was built. Since one had to go along that corridor to access the centre rooms of the house, the guest room or the family dining room, the kitchen was thus always visible and the *mizuya* became a central piece of furniture. *Mizuya* can be compared to dressers in Europe in which the best tableware of the house was on display. The *mizuya* did not have exactly the same purpose as the French *vaisselier* that was a kind of display case with glass doors; they were used for kitchen utensils as well as food. Nevertheless, owners were proud to show the longest and most sophisticated *mizuya*, and often two or three of them stood in line next to each other.

Most *mizuya* were made of *sugi* (cryptomeria) or *hinoki* (Japanese cypress) for the frame, with more precious woods for the door panels and drawer fronts, such as *keyaki* (zelkova) or *kakinoki* (persimmon wood). The long *mizuya* were almost always made in two stacked parts. The top part is the most sophisticated, combining different sizes of drawers and sliding doors. Quite often, the bottom part is damaged beyond repair (by humidity, insects and rodents), since the kitchen floor was often earthen and humid. It is common to find only the top part at antique stores, especially outside Japan. It can serve as a low chest. Common *mizuya* lengths are 3 *shaku* (90cm), 4 *shaku* (120cm) and 6 *shaku* (182cm). 5 *shaku mizuya* are rare, and huge *mizuya* up to 9 *shaku*³ also exist.

³ The *shaku* is an old unit of measure in East Asia, equivalent to the foot. In 1881 it was defined as 10/33 meter, approximately 30,3 centimeters. Japanese carpenters, cabinet makers and most craftsmen still use that unit of measure.



Six shaku (182 cm) *mizuya-dansu* from Kohoku, Shiga prefecture. Built in Zelkova and Cryptomeria with laquered door frames. Meiji era.