ABOUT JAPANESE BOXES. BY OLIVE PERCIVAL, MEMBER OF THE LONDON JAPAN SOCIETY

ONE of our racial prerogatives seems to be the easy acceptance of all things beautiful, convenient and desirable, as if they were created solely for us. Rather too often we remain ignorant and quite careless of the intent of the designer.

When, for example, we are told that the Japanese boxes we have so long used as convenient receptacles for our gloves and handkerchiefs, were really designed as cov-
erings in which to send ceremonial gifts, or to hold the sacred books of a temple, we smile (but not at ourselves) at the absurdity of the Japanese idea. It has been one of our opinions,—inherited to be sure,—that art has little to do with aught except the pictorial, and that any real feeling and power is not to be expected in mere design or craftsmanship. Yet, ages ago, the far-away, quite isolated Japanese were sufficiently advanced to recognize art in the humblest object and material, and offered neither apology nor explanation to the masses. The greatest and most successful pictorial artists of that country did not disdain to become occasional craftsmen, and many of them have left their gold-lacquer signatures on little boxes.

One could, if one chose, learn much of the art, the history, the religion and the customs of beautiful Old Japan through the sole study of Japanese boxes.

Very little is known regarding them by the majority of their foreign admirers; although they have been very generally admired and collected since the days of Madame de Pompadour and Marie Antoinette.

Few of the best boxes of Old Japan have come to us, and the few are in the museums of our greater cities; yet among these there are some which fully convince us of the superiority of the Japanese artist in his ideas of construction and design, as adapted to innumerable purposes and materials. The commoner boxes, finding their way to our shops, are those designed to contain the sacred books in the temple; to carry the family picnic luncheon, or medicine, or perfume, or a man’s seal; to hold incense, or tobacco, or ink, or a mirror, or a fan, or poems (one of the everyday refinements of Japan is writing poetry!); and in which to send gifts or letters.

The material most commonly employed is wood and it is lacquered, or carved, or else entirely dependent for its artistic value upon the beautiful, satin-like surface of the natural wood. Tortoise-shell, ivory, bronze, brass, copper and porcelain are also frequently used.
JAPANESE BOXES

One of the most satisfactory work or photograph boxes imaginable is the *Bento-bako* of the Japanese, which is in reality a pile of boxes of a uniform size, fitting perfectly to one another, with a lid for the uppermost. When the Japanese family-man takes a holiday to see the blossoming cherry-trees (or, perhaps, the wisterias, or the iris-fields, or the lotus-ponds, or the maple-trees), he has a luncheon packed in a *bento-bako* (of porcelain or lacquered wood), and tied up in an immense square of print, or silk. He then thrusts a stout bamboo stick under the knot, and, followed by his little wife and children in their best frocks and sashes, he sallies forth with the *bento-bako* over his shoulder. Some of the choicest examples of gold lacquer are seen on this kind of boxes.

The incense-boxes (*Kogos*), if at all pretentious, have inner boxes for holding the incense appropriate for each season of the year. The workmanship, especially of the tiny inner boxes, is exquisite and unapproached. Some of the old *kogos* are of ivory, with an all-over, inlaid decoration in gold and silver; the crest of the family being the *motif*. The common, modern ones are most frequently of porcelain, and are found even in our department stores, where they are sold to hold pins, collar-buttons, or cold-cream!

Perhaps the most fascinating of all the many boxes offered by the Japanese is the *Inro*, or medicine-box, which is an original little contrivance on the principle of the *bento-bako*, but in the form of deep trays, pierced at the ends and strung together with a silken cord.

This box was worn by the gentleman of Old Japan suspended from his girdle, and in it he carried medicines, perfumes and his seal. An imposing array of *objets d'art* was the *châtelaine* of a conservative Japanese gentleman! First of all, he wore at his girdle an ornamental button, called a *Netsuke*, to which were attached by silken cords the many little articles indispensable to his comfort. Usually, the *netsuke* was of ivory or wood, exquisitely carved and sufficiently large to stay above the sash, and not be pulled through by the weight of the attach-

![Luncheon and incense boxes](image)

ments,—which included a medicine-box, a tobacco-box, a pipe, a pipe-case, a purse and a writing-case, with paper, ink and writing-brush. When one considers that each of these articles was the work of a skilled artisan and artist, and that the materials chosen were ivory, metal, brocade, leather and rare woods, it is possible to get an adequate idea of the splendid total. Many famous signatures were once seen on old *inros*—such names as Yosei, Zeshin, Korin and Hokusai, and some of the best lacquer work was done on these little boxes. We cannot all know much about good lacquer, as the export of
the best has always been forbidden. Certainly, the modern pieces are seldom worth buying, as the wood is too frequently half-seasoned and soon warps and splits; the lacquer cracking and peeling off at the corners.

When a letter was sent in the old days of Japan, it was placed in a box ("glove-box"), and tied with a heavy silk cord, in a certain correct way. The box was then sent by the hand of a servant, who it is said, sometimes wore a cloth over his mouth, lest he should accidentally breathe upon the

![Image of a box with items inside]

Two tobacco-boxes at left; two medicine-boxes in middle; luncheon box at right; other objects are incense-boxes

honorable missive. When the dispatch was sent by a nobleman, the box was generally retained as a valued gift by the recipient, who then sent his reply in a box of his own. The crest of the owner usually figured on a letter-box as the sole decoration. Japanese crests are extremely decorative and are common on all modern Japanese objects, although seldom recognized as such. They are, generally speaking, conventionalized flower-forms, and not lions, bears, wolves, cocks, eagles, and arms brandishing swords or scepters. The six-

teen-petaled chrysanthemum is, of course, well known as the official crest of the emperor; the motif for his private crest being three leaves and three flowers of the beautiful *Paulownia imperialis* tree. The crest of the mighty Tokugawa family (remarkable rulers and great patrons of art) is composed of mallow, or hollyhock leaves in a circle, in the center of which their points meet.

The letter-boxes shown in the accompanying photographs are of plain, persimmon-colored lacquer, studded with small brass nail-heads in the form of cherry-blossoms; of plain red lacquer, lined with mirror black; of tortoise-shell, with a rich gold lacquer decoration; and of plain wood, silver-lined, and inlaid with mother-of-pearl and lacquered in different effects of gold and silver.

When a ceremonial gift was sent, according to the etiquette of Old Japan (that is, a wedding gift, or one sent at New Year's, or, on an anniversary, or, at the birth of a child), it was never offered in common paper, tied about with common string. Even a humble laborer was not so inelegant as to do such a thing as that! The gift was placed in a beautiful box made for such occasions only, a silk cloth was thrown over it, and then a servant carried it carefully to its destination. Of course, the recipient was always polite, and before taking out his present, he paused to admire both the box and the gift-cloth (*Fukusa*), which were returned to the owner. The
choosing of the *fukusa* to be used on such occasions, gave a fine opportunity to show one’s perfection of breeding, as the occasion, the recipient, the gift, and the social position of the giver were all subjects of consideration. *Fukusas* were once an important part in the outfit of every Japanese bride of high family: some were plain squares of silk, or crêpe, but others showed the family crest, the regulation long-life symbols, the New Year’s ship of good fortune, or the seven household gods.

**CIVILIZED man, and especially one of Anglo-Saxon descent, is a home-loving creature. To him the dwelling-place stands for his most important institution.** The arts, sciences and traditions he pursues, mainly as they are to minister unto it, and its fruition is the goal of life. About his dwelling-place, then, there must be a very great deal to be said, indissolubly associated as it is with everything in life worth having—one’s childhood, parents, children, wife, sweetheart, and next to these one’s own personal comfort—one’s hours of leisure and recreation.

The home one builds must mean something beside artistic and engineering skill. It must presuppose, by subtle architectonic expression, both in itself and in its surroundings, that its owner possessed, once upon a time, two good parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, and so on; had, likely, brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, all eminently respectable and endeared to him; that *bienséance* and family order have flourished in his line from time immemorial—there were no black sheep to make him ashamed—and that he has inherited heirlooms, plate, portraits, miniatures, pictures, rare volumes, diaries, letters and state archives to link him up properly in historical succession and progression. We are covetous of our niche in history. We want to belong somewhere and to something, not to be entirely cut off by ourselves as stray atoms in boundless space either geographical or chronological. The human mind is a dependent thing and so is happiness. We may not, indeed, have inherited the house we live in; the chances are we have not. We may not remember that either of our parents or any of our grandparents before us, ever gloried in the quiet possession of an ideal homestead; but for the sake of goodness—for the sake of making the world appear a more decent place to live in—let us pretend that they did, and that it is now ours. Let us pretend that God has been so good to us, and that we have proved worthy of His trust.

—Joy Wheeler Dow in “American Renaissance.”