

# Japanese Furniture That Went Overseas

Exquisite Beauty & Delicate Craftsmanship

8 JUNE - 21 AUGUST 2018

LIXIL  
GALLERY

## Foreword

In the late 19th century, Japanese furniture crafted for export to Europe received an ardent reception there amid the Japonisme craze then underway. Along with Japanese ceramics, cloisonné, metalwork, and other crafts, the furniture captivated Westerners with its rich and elaborate workmanship and profusion of traditional Japanese motifs and patterns. Today, the furniture's overwhelming decorative density startles us, while the craftsmen's seemingly unlimited expressiveness steals our hearts. Unfortunately, the furniture was produced mainly for exporting, so almost none remains in Japan.

This exhibition displays furniture of five types—Japanese Marquetry, Shibayama Inlay, Inlaid Mother-of-Pearl, Sendai Chests, and Yokohama Sculptural Furniture. The featured works are primarily furniture items that have since found their way home to Japan. By savoring each piece's "exquisite beauty" and "delicate craftsmanship," viewers will come to understand the manner of furniture actually produced, at the time, and the level of skill its craftsmen commanded. The venue space, as a whole, has been conceived as an "ocean" and the fixture for furniture in the center as a "ship"—a layout evoking an image of the pieces crossing the ocean on their return to Japan.

We wish to extend our warmest appreciation to Teruhiko Kaneko and everyone whose efforts have

LIXIL GALLERY

## Meiji-period Export Furniture—Why Now?

Kazuko Koizumi (Director, The Japan Society for the History of Interiors, Furniture and Tools)

This exhibition displays examples of furniture created for export to the West in the Meiji period (1868-1912). Five types are featured—Japanese Marquetry, Shibayama Inlay, Inlaid Mother-of-Pearl, Sendai Chests, and Yokohama Sculptural Furniture. Traditional craft objects were one of Japan's two major export products in the Meiji period along with silk. In every case, whether ceramics, cloisonné, metalwork, furniture, wall papers, or floor coverings, the craft objects were adapted to Western expectations. In order to satisfy the tastes of Westerners, they featured traditional Japanese motifs in dazzling, flamboyant designs, commanding virtuosic Edo-period techniques.

Such designs were not entirely meant for Westerners, however; they also enjoyed popularity in Japan. In the Meiji years, works of this character won all the awards at Japanese expositions and competitive exhibitions.

Nevertheless, rapid industrialization soon thereafter transformed the aesthetics of design around the world. Decoration was rejected in favor of functionality. Meiji-period crafts came to be seen as backward and old-fashioned with result that exports stopped, and in time, they were forgotten. Above all, in Japan, the ostentation and technical showiness of Meiji crafts were seen as the incarnation of bad taste—the direct opposite of the simple refinement of wabi, sabi, and iki. Amid the wave of modernization, the crafts were uniformly renounced.

Yet, was modern design—with its functionalism and emphasis on efficiency—really so perfect? Today, when industrial manufacturing and information technology (IT) dominate the world, and robots and AI (artificial intelligence) are a part of everyday life, our environment is growing as cold and inorganic as a spaceship. Such a lifestyle may be convenient and comfortable, yet it has nothing pleasing to our hearts.

Meiji-period export furniture surprises us with its warmth and human qualities. It can hardly be considered smart; it overwhelms us with its obsessive adhesion to narrative, eloquence, and decorativeness—not to mention its detailed fidelity to nature and awesome craftsmanship. It may, finally, all be useless decoration. But even then, is not fantastic and enthralling? Showiness is an intrinsic human quality and source of vitality.

This being so, then we likely have need to rediscover Meiji-period export furniture. Indeed, on this occasion, let us do so with eager interest. In the profound richness of Meiji-period crafts, we may find something that can resuscitate us.

## Japanese Marquetry (Yosegi-zaiku)

The roots of Japanese marquetry can be traced to Western Asia 4,000 years ago. Works of marquetry that arrived in Japan via the Silk Road are found among the treasures in the Shoso-in treasure house in Nara. Marquetry flourished in Japan in the Edo period (1603~1868). Master craftsmen gathering to remodel Asama Shrine in Sunpu (Shizuoka), at the orders of the third shogun Iemitsu, remained living in the castle town after the shrine's completion and produced furniture and furnishings to earn a livelihood. The craftsmen devised their own technique of gluing thin wood slices of different colors on boxes and furniture. Their innovation gave a foundation to Japanese marquetry, which subsequently flourished in Shizuoka. The technique was transmitted to Hakone and Odawara as well, and in the Meiji period (1868~1912), marquetry furniture became an important export for obtaining foreign currency. To create marquetry, wood sheets of different colors are cut into slender sticks having different geometric shapes in section. The sticks are assembled in a block ("tane-yosegi") to form a mosaic pattern in section. Using a plane, thin slices of the mosaic pattern are taken for applying as a veneer on furniture. Gradually, from the Edo to Meiji period, the slices were reduced in thickness from 5mm to 0.15mm, with the result that marquetry of high sophistication was achieved, and production volumes also grew. By viewing the mosaic patterns covering the furniture and savoring their kaleidoscopic variety and the beauty of their light and dark color tones, we can sense how sophisticated the craftsmen's skills were at the time.

Writing Bureau / Hakone, Meiji Period

This writing bureau, exuding weighty dignity, functions for both writing and storage. It was brought back to Japan from England. Showing signs of frequent use, the bureau is thought to have been valued and enjoyed by its owner.

Collection: Teruhiko Kaneko Collection

Display Cabinet / Hakone, Meiji Period

Marquetry patterns come in three types: large, intermediate, and small. Too many large patterns will offend the eye, but too many small ones will look busy. In arranging a good overall balance, the craftsman shows his skill. This display cabinet, finished in entirely in bright ochre with strategic accents of "kurogaki" (black persimmon wood with beautiful stripes), effectively employs color contrasts.

Collection: Teruhiko Kaneko Collection

Decorative Chest of Drawers / Shizuoka, Meiji Period

This oddly shaped chest of drawers stands on four legs, apparently for easy use by Westerners in their chair-oriented lifestyle. The hinged double doors of such cabinets typically had a mirror finish ornamented with maki-e (lacquer sprinkled with gold or silver powder) and mother-of-pearl.

Collection: Teruhiko Kaneko Collection

Chess Table / Hakone, Meiji Period

The chess board on the top surface combines wood pieces of different colors in a check pattern. The delicate cabriole legs were likely an order placed by a Westerner.

Collection: Teruhiko Kaneko Collection

## Shibayama Inlay (Shibayama-zaiku)

Shibayama inlay was innovated by Onoki Senzo of Shibayama village in Shimofusa province (Chiba), in the late Edo period. Onoki revived a lost technique and named it after Shibayama, his home village.

When Yokohama opened to foreign trade (1859) in the final years of the Edo period, works of Shibayama inlay became popular craft products for exporting. They ranged from small decorative items to furnishings and large furniture pieces. Works of Shibayama inlay were thereafter displayed to great acclaim at the Centennial International Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and at Japan's first National Industrial Exhibition, held the following year, 1877. Several factors lay behind the furniture's popular success—first, the ornate decorative work and its sense of volume; second, the

use of diverse materials including mother-of-pearl, ivory, and coral; and third, the blending of sophisticated craft techniques such as lacquer, maki-e, mother-of-pearl inlay, and sculpture. These factors gave the furniture an exquisite fineness and gorgeousness not found in other craft items. Because Shibayama inlay involves so many techniques, a division of labor system developed early on. Such is another a feature of Shibayama inlay. From the "kiji-shi" who created the wood ground to the "urushi-shi" who brushed on the lacquer, the "Shibayama-shi" who assembled the various components, and the "horikomi-shi" who carved the wood ground, the different craftsmen applied themselves assiduously, each in his own studio.

Screen—"Abundant Harvest" / Meiji Period

The screen depicts a pastoral autumn village scene of people harvesting rice and persimmons. The people are rendered mainly in ivory and the birds in white shell, while the rice fields and small streams are done in raised lacquer. The farming people's costumes, displaying gorgeous brocade and gold figures with inset jade and coral details, are stunning in effect. Westerners were doubtless astonished by the screen's lavish ornamentation.

Collection: Teruhiko Kaneko Collection

Plaque / Meiji Period

A plaque depicting a hanging flower basket. When viewed from an angle, the flowers appear to emerge from the plaque in three dimensions. This type of relief used in Shibayama inlay is called the "uki-age" technique.

Collection: Teruhiko Kaneko Collection

Plaque / Meiji Period

This small work, depicting a mother and daughter returning from a festival, shows Japanese customs and lifestyle, and was a popular souvenir item among Westerners.

Collection: Teruhiko Kaneko Collection

## Inlaid Mother-of-Pearl (Aogai-zaiku)

The "aogai-zaiku" inlaid mother-of-pearl technique involves polishing shell (primarily abalone) down to translucent thinness. Color is then applied to the shell back or directly on the wood ground. Because color is laid ("fuseru") below the shell, it is also called "fuse-zaishiki" inlay. Often produced in Nagasaki, it was sometimes called Nagasaki inlay as well. Usually, in the mother-of-pearl technique, a piece of lustrous shell is polished down and inlaid in a lacquer ground. Aogai-zaiku, however, requires polishing the shell down to translucent thinness, and hence demands fine skill and care. The technique's novelty and splendid beauty brought it

popularity, and it flourished as a craft in the Edo and Meiji periods.

The "Aogai-ya," a lacquerware shop in Kyoto, mainly sold aogai-zaiku inlaid mother-of-pearl items, research in recent years indicates. The Aogai-ya also had a branch store in Nagasaki which dealt directly with Dutch merchants to export large volumes of cabinets, tables, sewing tables, and assorted small boxes. One advantage of the aogai-zaiku method is that the colored portion, being covered with thin shell, is not exposed to the air and resists fading. Because of this, the furniture pieces still appear bright and beautiful today.

Chest of Drawers / Kyoto, Meiji Period

Depicted is a "winding stream" sake drinking party, held for a gathering of literati in 353 AD by Jin Dynasty calligrapher Wang Xizhi. The party took place at the Orchid Pavilion in Shaoxing, Zhejiang province, China. In composition, a stream is seen to flow from the Pavilion, depicted on the top board, to all corners of the chest. The piece is slightly warped, but the entire ceremony can be imagined by connecting the pictures on the front, sides, and back. A novel, unexpected design unfolds around the entire box.

Collection: Teruhiko Kaneko Collection

Writing Bureau (Caption) / Nagasaki, Meiji Period

A bureau decorated with a poem on the beauties of nature in gorgeous script. When the upper door is opened, it becomes a writing desk with an interior storage space divided into small drawers. The door panel depicts a peacock male with tail feathers spread, on its right. A peacock female perches in a pine tree, and below the tree are charming peony flowers. The bureau was brought back from England.

Collection: Teruhiko Kaneko Collection

## Sendai Chests (Sendai-dansu)

Sendai chests, a furniture item used in the Sendai Domain (Miyagi prefecture), were manufactured for the houses of samurai in the late Edo period. In the Meiji period (1868~1912), their use spread to the general public, and in the late 19th-century, they came to be exported overseas.

Sendai chests are renowned for their trinity of high-level techniques—wood craft, lacquer craft, and metal craft. The chests employ zelkova, a wood with a fine, beautiful grain, and are finished using the "kiji-ronuri" method of brushing on layers of transparent lacquer that reveal the natural grain's beauty. Their metal fittings are hammered out with designs of dragons and Chinese lions. In every case, workmanship of the finest quality has been invested in producing a strong and

beautiful Sendai chest.

A traditional craft product displaying strong regional character, the Sendai chest eventually attracted foreign buyers. The development in Sendai of a summer resort exclusively for Westerners, in 1889, prompted exports of the chests. Around 1919, during World War I, German POWs in Sendai bought them for shipping back home. After World War II, during the Occupation, they became popular among American soldiers stationed in Japan, with result that foreign demand for the chests revived. A fusion of practical function and beauty of design, the chests were useful in everyday life while presenting charm as interior decorative items. Hence, they fitted Westerners' perception of furniture nicely.

Sendai Chest with a Dressing Table Mirror / Around 1915

Created at the behest of a German who brought a sketch, asking for a chest with a dressing table mirror, this precious Sendai chest remained in Japan and was never exported, owing to a flaw. Its mirror, set in a high position, was perhaps intended not to reflect one's face but rather the room's lighting to brighten the room interior.

Collection: Toshi Yunome

## Yokohama Sculptural Furniture (Yokohama-chokoku-kagu)

Yokoyama is considered the birthplace of Western furniture production in Japan. In the final years of the Edo period, carpenters were needed to repair and reproduce Western furniture pieces used by residents of Yokohama's foreign settlement, and in time, skilled craftsmen gathered in the city. By the mid-Meiji period (late 19th-century), a distinctive Yokohama style of furniture was actively being manufactured for exportation. Featuring ornate sculptural carvings of dragons, phoenixes, peonies, and chrysanthemums on Western-style furniture pieces, it achieved popularity under the name, "Yokohama Furniture."

Antique merchant Nushima Jirobe was among the first to

begin producing Yokohama sculptural furniture. On his return from Australia around 1894 or '95, Nushima opened a furniture production studio and hired traditional temple and shrine carvers whose livelihoods were endangered, it is said. The profuse ornamentation of their sculptured furniture is identical to the carved wood ornamentation of temples and shrines. The vitality of the carving suggests that the craftsmen went all out in displaying their skills, inspired by their opportunity to work. The sculptural furniture, rich in exotic mood, became a specialty product of Yokoyama along with Shibayama inlay, and helped fuel the Japonisme craze in the West in the form of export and souvenir products.

Three-Piece Newlywed Furniture Set

Because it was produced for exporting, almost no examples of Yokoyama sculptural furniture are found in Japan. An exception is this three-piece newlywed set of dressing table, wardrobe, and chest of drawers. The set, formerly possessed by Takeo Sakata of Sakata Seed, a Yokohama seed and sapling store, was created in the late Taisho period (1912~26) for the marriage of Miyo Kido, fifth daughter of the wealthy Kido family of Nagano prefecture. Sakata founded his company at the youthful age of 24 after returning from his studies in the United States. Because of his active engagement in exporting and importing seedlings, he is believed to have been knowledgeable about Western furniture as well. Collection & photo cooperation: Yokohama City.

