



## 硯箱 (Suzuri-bako) : Writing box

I remember when studying drawing during my school years, using common India ink, or *encre de Chine* as it was called in French. The English term most probably date from the 16th-17th century when The “Indies” designated the vast region of Asia from which many “curiosities” were imported. The French term, “Chinese ink” is more accurate... except that in the Far East ink traditionally comes as a solid stick that needs to be ground and mixed with water rather than a ready to use liquid.

Such ink is still sold in sticks (墨 sumi) today that are ground on a *suzuri* (硯), or “inkstone”. This is usually of black stone with a very fine grain, and is most commonly slate or of volcanic origin. The grain of the inkstone is considered of the utmost importance for producing a fine thick ink quickly; it must not be too hard or the ink produced will be too coarse, it must not be too soft or it will take too long to make ink, and it must not be too porous or the ink produced will dry too soon.

Also, even if always called ink stones, some are made of ceramic or other materials. In Japan, the most famous ink stones are the Amahata-ishi (雨畑石) and Akama-ishi (赤間石) stones; Akama is near Shimonoseki (下関) in Yamaguchi Prefecture, and Amahata near Mt Fuji in the Yamanashi Prefecture. Akama stones are excavated since the Kamakura period; those of red or purplish colour



Edo period writing box with everted sides and feet. Chrysanthemums and insects design on top on a *nashi-ji* background with tin and nacre incrustations. Private collection.

resembled the famous Chinese Duan (Jap. *tankei*) stones. Old Amahata stones remind one of another famous Chinese type called the She stone (Jap. *kyūjūken*).

Japanese inkstones are usually flat and oblong shaped, with a little pool on one end.

A few drops of water are poured onto the surface of the stone from a *suiteki* (水滴). *Suiteki* are most often tiny containers entirely closed except for two little holes, one for letting air come out, to facilitate the filling and to control the amount of water; they can be made of metal (bronze, brass, silver, often gilded) or ceramic (porcelain, sandstone) and often have a little inset tray made of a similar material. The inkstick is then lightly rubbed upright on the stone with a circular movement to gradually grind its edge and produce, ideally, a black ink with an oily shine. A sweet smell briefly rises from the stone, somehow smelling better than the memory of the liquid “encre de Chine” from my youth. The quality of the ink depends on the quality of the inkstick, a mixture of soot and animal glue. Many kinds exist, producing different ink thicknesses and fluidity. Many kinds exist, producing different ink thickness and fluidity according to the use. Some variations are appropriate for writing kana or Kanji, or for drawing, and some are more suitable than others for certain kinds of paper. Also, many colours are available.

A *suzuri-bako* will also contain one or more brushes of different shapes, a major difference from the feather quills used in European calligraphy, as oriental calligraphy is indistinguishable from the art of painting. Brush making is an art by itself, as different kinds of animal hair (dogs, wolf, goat, rabbit, squirrel, marten, deer and many others) can be combined to obtain different flexibility at different pressures, and allow different amounts and thicknesses of ink to be released on the paper.

Two long paper weights, and sometimes a piece of black felt (*shitajiki*) which is placed under the writing paper, complete the set of tools of the calligrapher. Aside from the *suiteki* water dropper and the inkstone, however, other calligraphy (*shodō*) tools are generally chosen separately. Thus, a lacquered *suzuri-bako* is usually delivered with only the long-lasting basics: the inkstone (*suzuri*) and the water dropper (*suiteki*).



Meiji era writing box with domed lid decorated with shell motives on a *nashi-ji* design background. The inside of the lid is decorated with dandelion flowers.

The earliest known Japanese writing boxes date from the Heian period (794 to 1185). Writing boxes as we know them appeared in Japan during the Kamakura period (1185–1333), but it was during the following Muromachi period (1337 to 1573) that they were made in great numbers, as tea ceremonies, poetry writing and calligraphy became common activities for members of the warrior class.

A *suzuri-bako* has a main decoration on its lid, sometimes spilling over to the sides of the box. Generally speaking, Muromachi and earlier Edo writing boxes are smaller, with subtle designs and a kind of austere atmosphere reflecting the Zen asceticism promulgated by the master of Japanese aesthetics of the time, Sen no Rikyu (1522-1591), while Meiji era boxes are larger, heavier and lavishly decorated, with bright raised lacquer (*taka-makie*). All combinations of lacquer techniques are freely used on *suzuri-bako*, as these precious boxes constitute one of the main forms of expression for lacquer artisans.



Muromachi period writing box decorated in raised lacquer (*taka-makie*) with a pavilion, chrysanthemums, fences, rocks and clouds. The inside of the lid is decorated with peonies and cranes. Private Collection.

The inside part of the lid is also often adorned with a motif, which is either a development of the top theme, or a more discreet decoration. The inside of the box is left black, treated in *nashi-ji* (gold tiny flakes sunk to various depth in black lacquer, giving a pear (*nashi*) skin feeling under the fingertips), or with a subtle patterning. Boxes from the late Meiji period and afterwards can be covered inside and out with lavish designs.

Such boxes never feature symmetrical designs like those found on the European equivalents with marquetry. Asymmetry is the rule, and, like most Japanese paintings, the lid of a writing box often feels like a part of a window opening onto a larger landscape.



Six writing boxes from 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, showing top and inside of their lids.