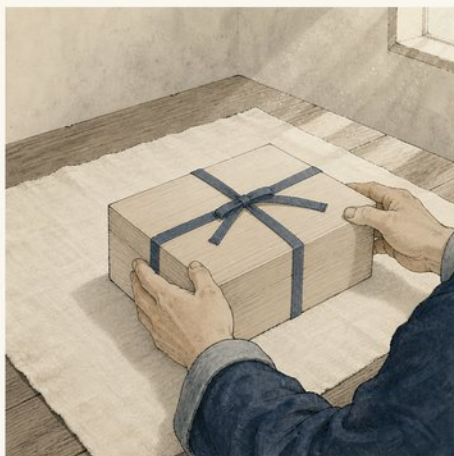




Inside the Kura

An Illustrated Introduction to Japanese Antiques, with a Collector's Field Guide

Kei Kurata · Curator, Kura Finds

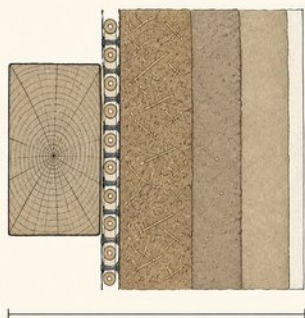


Most guides to Japanese antiques begin with prices. This one begins with the room they were kept in.

I'm Kei. I look at Japanese objects for a living — where they were made, how, and by whom.

No book will make you an expert. But there are a handful of things that change how you look, and they fit in the twenty pages that follow. What comes after those is for keeping, not for reading straight through.

After this, a shelf at a flea market will not look the same.



Across Japan, families who owned anything worth keeping built a second building to keep it in.

A kura. Timber frame, bamboo lath, and earth — layer after layer of it — finished in white lime plaster.

Walls half a metre thick. Slow to burn. Slow to change temperature. Slow to let damp in.

The house was where you lived. The kura was where things waited.

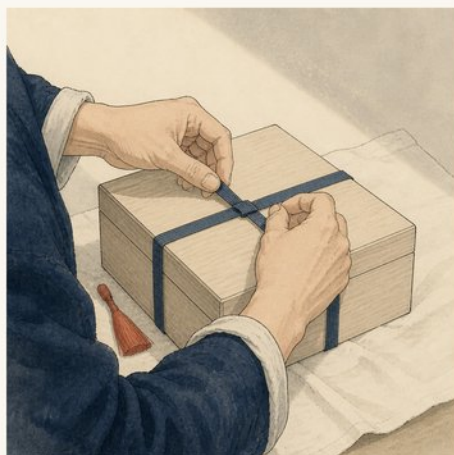
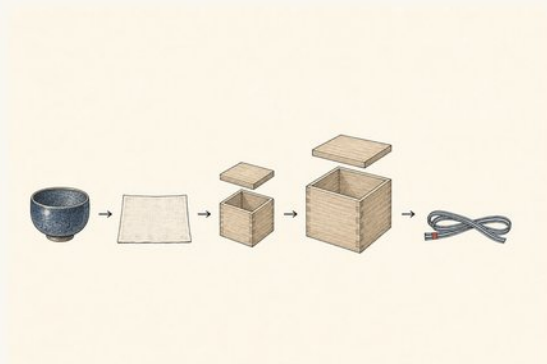


Japanese display was seasonal. One scroll. One flower. For a few weeks.

Then it went back into its cloth, into its box, into the kura — and something else came out.

An object used four weeks a year, and stored for forty-eight, ages differently from one left on a shelf for a century.

That habit — not luck — is why so much survives, and survives well.



The first thing a dealer looks at is often not the object. It's the box.

Kiri — paulownia. Light, slow to conduct heat, and it swells shut in humid air and opens again when the air is dry.

A box the maker built and inscribed for their own work is a tomobako. The writing on the lid is hakogaki.

It can carry the maker's name, the title of the piece, sometimes a date. Keep the box. Always keep the box.



There is an old word in Japanese for the feeling of waste: mottainai.

When something broke, the reflex was not to replace it. It was to mend it — and to let the mend be seen.

Kintsugi is a lacquer repair, dusted with gold. It isn't a disguise. It's a record.

So when you meet an old Japanese object, you are often meeting several generations of care at once.



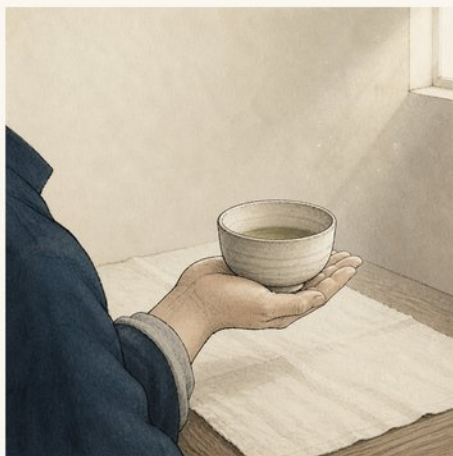
Japanese ceramics are regional before they are anything else.

The Six Ancient Kilns — Bizen, Shigaraki, Tokoname, Seto, Echizen, Tamba — have been firing since the medieval period.

Bizen wears no glaze at all. Its surface is made by wood ash and flame inside the kiln.

Porcelain came later — from Arita in Kyushu, in the seventeenth century. White body, cobalt blue under the glaze. Europe called it Imari, after the port it shipped from.

Whatever you're holding, turn it over. The foot ring is where the potter stops performing.

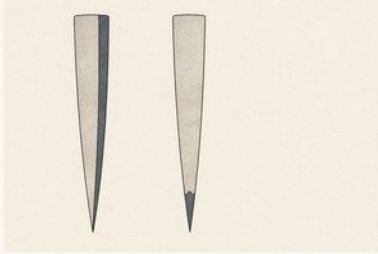


Three things, in this order: the clay, the foot, the weight.

The clay at the foot tells you the region — iron-red, sandy grey, pure white.

The foot tells you the hand. Was it cut, trimmed, or pressed?

And weight tells you intention. A tea bowl is meant to be held for the length of a conversation.



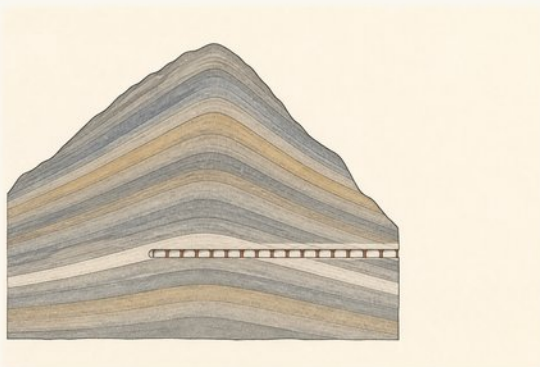
A Japanese blade is usually not one metal. It's two, forge-welded together.

A hard steel edge, wrapped in softer iron. The hard steel takes a finer edge; the soft iron keeps the blade from being brittle. That construction is called *kasumi*.

A blade forged from a single high-carbon steel and hardened only along the edge is *honyaki*. Harder to make, and much rarer.

Modern smiths mostly work in Yasuki steels — *shirogami*, "white paper", and *aogami*, "blue paper" — named for the colour of the paper they were wrapped in at the mill.

The maker's name is chiselled or stamped on one face. It's worth reading before you read the price.

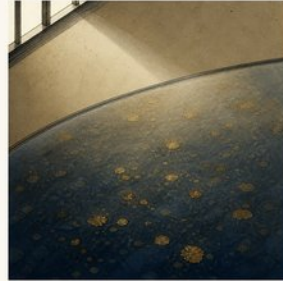
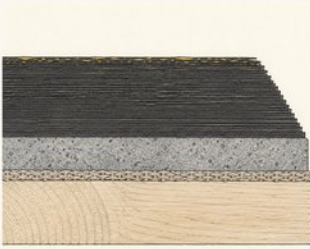


A blade is only half the story. The other half is the stone.

Japan's finishing stones come from a narrow band of ancient seabed sediment in the mountains north-west of Kyoto.

Ozuku, Nakayama, Narutaki. Those are the names of mines, not brands — and most of them are closed now.

A synthetic stone cuts faster. A natural stone leaves a softer, hazier polish — which is what people have preferred for centuries.



Urushi is not paint. It's tree sap — and it doesn't dry. It cures, and it needs humidity to do it.

A serious piece is dozens of thin layers, each one cured and polished before the next goes on.

Maki-e means "sprinkled picture". Gold or silver powder dropped onto wet lacquer, then sealed and polished.

Flat is hiramaki-e. Raised in relief is takamaki-e. Buried under lacquer and then polished back up out of it is togidashi.

Tilt it. Lacquer was made to be read in moving light, not flat light.



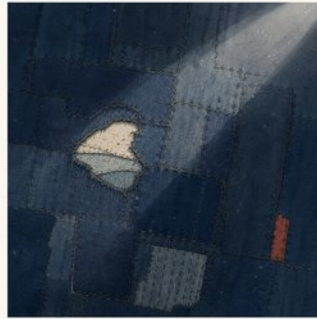
A Japanese woodblock print is not the work of one person. It's four trades.

The artist drew. The carver cut the blocks — one for the key lines, one for every colour. The printer inked and pressed by hand. The publisher paid for all of it, and carried the risk.

Those small notches at the edge of the block — kento — are how twelve colours land in the same place twelve times.

A sky that fades from deep blue into nothing is bokashi. It is wiped onto the block by hand, freshly, for every single sheet.

Which is why no two impressions are ever quite identical — and why later printings from the same design exist, and are worth knowing about.

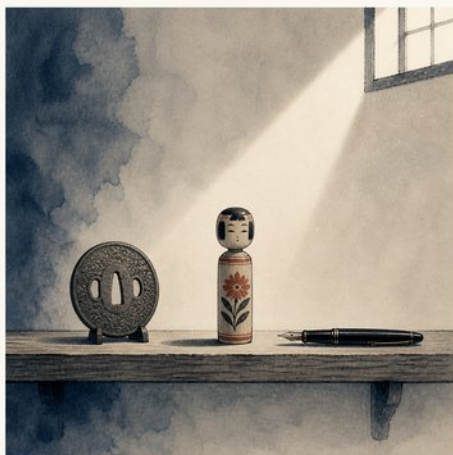


Cotton stayed expensive in rural Japan for a long time. So cloth was never thrown away.

Indigo — aizome — is fermented, not boiled. The cloth comes out of the vat green, and turns blue in the air.

Sashiko is running stitch used to reinforce. Boro is what a few generations of it produces: layer over layer, patch over patch.

A kimono is cut in straight lines from one narrow bolt of cloth, with almost nothing wasted. It can be unpicked back into flat cloth, washed, and built again.



Not everything old in Japan is medieval.

When the wearing of swords was abolished in 1876, the metalworkers who had made sword fittings had to find other work. Some of the finest small metalwork in Japan comes from that generation.

Kokeshi — turned wooden dolls from the hot-spring towns of the north — divide into eleven traditional regional forms, and a freer modern school.

And in the 1920s, maki-e artisans began decorating fountain pens for export. The same lacquer. The same gold. A new object.



Everyone wants to start with the signature. Start with it last.

A mark is the easiest thing on any object to add. The clay, the foot, the weight, the wear — those are hard to imitate convincingly, and they cost nothing to look at.

When a mark does matter, check that it agrees with everything else: the box, the period, the technique.

Agreement is the evidence. A signature on its own is only a claim.

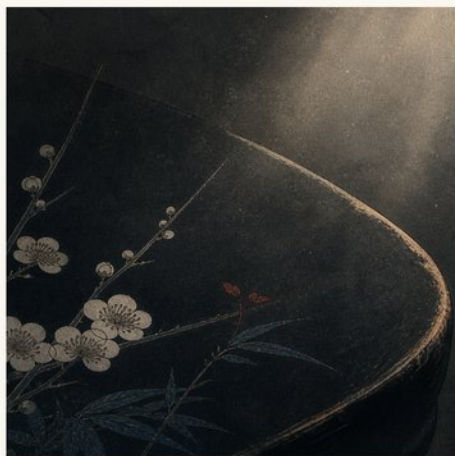


A tomobako is a document that happens to be a box.

Outside the lid: what the piece is called. Inside the lid: who made it, and their seal.

A box inscribed by someone else — a tea master, a later authority — is a different thing, and it says so on itself.

Object and box, separated, are two objects. Together, they are a record.



Old things arrive carrying their own history. Learning to read it is most of the pleasure.

Lacquer that has been used for a century develops a depth no new piece has. That isn't wear. That's the surface finally finishing.

Bronze builds its patina in layers. Cleaning it off removes the only part that took two hundred years.

A tea bowl darkened along its crackle has been drunk from. Collectors look for that.

The question is never "Is it perfect?" It is: does what I am seeing agree with the life this object claims to have had?



In the sixteenth century, the fashionable tea utensils in Japan were imported, symmetrical, and expensive.

The tea masters of that period turned deliberately the other way: local clay, uneven walls, plain rooms, ordinary things.

That preference is what people now call wabi-sabi. It isn't a style you can apply to something. It's a judgement about what deserves attention.

An object that shows the hand that made it. A surface that shows the time it has passed through.



You don't need money to begin. You need to handle things.

Pick it up. Feel where the weight sits. Turn it over. Look at the foot, the join, the underside — the places nobody bothered to decorate.

Then ask one question: does everything I can see agree with everything else?

That is the whole method. The rest is years.

Buy the thing you don't want to put down. That instinct is more reliable than most price guides.



Kura Finds is a small dealership in Japan, run by one person. It is not one collection. What I do is search — among makers still working, dealers, and old collections all over Japan — and put forward only what I would be glad to keep myself.

Much of it came out of a room like the one on the cover of this book. Some of it was made this year, by hands still at work.

What you have read so far is one method, applied to a handful of things. What follows is the other half: the genres themselves, one at a time.

Fourteen of them, and a fifteenth page for everything that does not fit. Where each comes from, three things to look at, the names worth knowing, and what it is like to live with. You are not meant to read it in one sitting. Keep it, and open it when you meet something.

Part Two — The Collector's Field Guide



Fourteen fields, and a page for everything else. The same seven questions asked of each. Not a catalogue — a way of arriving prepared.

These are the fields I work in most often. They are not the only ones — Japan kept more than any list can hold.

Ceramics



Japanese ceramics are regional before they are anything else. A pot tells you where it was made before it tells you who made it.

Where it comes from

- Six Ancient Kilns: Bizen · Shigaraki · Tokoname · Seto · Echizen · Tamba
- Porcelain: Arita/Imari · Nabeshima · Kutani · Hirado
- Stoneware: Hagi · Karatsu · Mino · Raku · Kyo-yaki
- Folk kilns: Onta · Koishiwara · Tsuboya

Three things to look at

1. The clay at the foot ring — The glaze stops here, so the clay itself is on show: iron-red at Bizen and Shigaraki, sandy grey at Karatsu, a clean white at Arita.
2. How the foot was cut — Cut with a tool, turned on the wheel, or pressed in a mould. The speed of the hand — and any hesitation in it — stays in the cut.
3. Weight against the size — A tea bowl is made to be held for the length of a conversation; a serving bowl to be carried in one hand. Ask whether the weight agrees with the intention.

Names worth knowing

Ogata Kenzan / Kitaoji Rosanjin / Kaneshige Toyo / Arakawa Toyozo / Hamada Shoji / Raku family

Living with it today

One vase, one flower, for a few weeks. A single guinomi holds sake, whisky, or nothing at all. Serving plates made three hundred years ago are still the right size for food.

What the market asks

Unsigned regional pieces are the entry point. Signed studio work rises well above them, and with its original box further again — the box moves the price more than most buyers expect.

Tea Ceremony Utensils



Tea utensils are the one field where the box, the inscription and the object are inseparable. Judged alone, a tea bowl is only half read.

Where it comes from

- Schools: Urasenke · Omotesenke · Mushakojisenke
- chawan / chaire · natsume / chashaku / mizusashi / kensui / kama / furo / hanaire
- Ashiya · Tenmyo · Kyoto

Three things to look at

1. Who inscribed the box — If the maker wrote it, the box is a tomobako. A box inscribed by a tea master, or by a later authority, is a different thing — and it says so on itself.
2. The inside of the bowl — A bowl that has been drunk from takes colour along its crackle. This is where its use can be read.
3. Agreement — Do the signature, the box, the period and the technique agree with one another? A signature on its own is only a claim.

Names worth knowing

Sen no Rikyu / Raku Chojiro / Kobori Enshu / Nakamura Sotetsu

Living with it today

You do not need the ceremony. Whisk matcha in the morning; the bowl is designed for exactly that grip. Out of use, a good bowl is the quietest object a shelf can hold.

What the market asks

Utensils made for daily practice are the entry point. Signed work with its tomobako stands well above them, and a box inscribed by a tea master above that again.

Lacquerware & Maki-e



Urushi is tree sap, not paint. It does not dry — it cures, and it needs humidity to do it. A serious piece is dozens of thin layers, each cured and polished before the next.

Where it comes from

- Wajima · Aizu · Yamanaka · Kyoto · Tsugaru · Kagawa · Odawara · Kamakura
- hiramaki-e / takamaki-e / togidashi / nashiji / raden / chinkin / negoro

Three things to look at

1. Tilt it into raking light — Lacquer was made to be read in moving light. Under flat light the design sinks back into the black.
2. The inside of the lid — The outside is the face; the inside is the making. The care taken over the ground shows here, and so, often, does the signature.
3. Lightness — The thinness of the wooden core is the skill itself. Of two pieces the same size, the lighter is the better turned.

Names worth knowing

Shibata Zeshin / Ogawa Shomin / Matsuda Gonroku / Zohiko / Namiki/Pilot

Living with it today

A suzuribako becomes a desk box for pens and keys. Jubako stack away and come out for one meal a year. Lacquer cups are warm in the hand in a way ceramic is not.

What the market asks

Utilitarian Meiji and Showa pieces are the entry point. Careful maki-e stands well above them, and named artists far above that. What the market pays for is the depth of the layering, not the quantity of gold.

Ukiyo-e & Prints



A Japanese woodblock print is not the work of one person but of four trades — artist, carver, printer, publisher. No two impressions are quite identical, because the colour is wiped onto the block by hand for every sheet.

Where it comes from

- Edo masters: Hokusai · Hiroshige · Utamaro · Kuniyoshi · Sharaku
- Meiji: Yoshitoshi · Kiyochika · Chikanobu
- Shin-hanga: Kawase Hasui · Yoshida Hiroshi · Ito Shinsui · Hasui Watanabe
- Sosaku-hanga: Munakata Shiko · Saito Kiyoshi

Three things to look at

1. The bokashi — The graded sky is wiped onto the block by hand for every single sheet. In a good impression the gradation is still alive rather than flat.
2. The paper — Look for the fibres of the kozo paper, the dent left by the pressure of the block, and the blind embossing that carries no ink at all.
3. Which printing — Later printings from the same design exist. Read the publisher's and censor's seals, and watch for lines that have thickened with wear.

Names worth knowing

publisher seals / Watanabe · Doi · Unsodo

Living with it today

Frame with UV glass, out of direct sun, and rotate them — which is precisely what the kura habit was for. A print resting in its folder is a print that keeps its colour.

What the market asks

Later strikes and Meiji impressions are the entry point. Shin-hanga first editions stand above them. Fine Edo impressions vary more widely than anything else in this guide, because the quality of the impression matters more than the name on it.

Paintings & Hanging Scrolls



A kakejiku is a painting built to be rolled away. The mounting is not a frame; it is part of the work, chosen to suit it, and often replaced once or twice over a few centuries.

Where it comes from

- Schools: Kano · Tosa · Rinpa · Nanga/Bunjinga · Maruyama-Shijo · Zenga · Nihonga
- Formats: kakejiku / makimono / byobu / gaku / shikishi

Three things to look at

1. Silk or paper — Silk sinks towards brown with age; paper dries and tightens. The material sets the terms for both the period and the technique.
2. Signature and seal together — A signature alone, or a seal alone, is half the information. Ask whether both agree with the manner of the painting.
3. The box — A box with a title slip is a document. As with a pot, the two together make a record.

Names worth knowing

Ike no Taiga / Yosa Buson / Maruyama Okyo / Hakuin / Yokoyama Taikan

Living with it today

One scroll on one plain wall, changed with the season. It rolls into a box the size of a bottle — the least demanding way to own a painting.

What the market asks

Unsigned and modern works are the entry point. A signed work with its box stands well above them. Remounting is normal and not a fault — but a mounting chosen well for the painting is itself part of what you are paying for.

Kitchen Knives & Cooking Tools



A Japanese blade is usually not one metal but two, forge-welded: a hard steel edge wrapped in softer iron. The hard steel takes a finer edge; the soft iron keeps it from being brittle.

Where it comes from

- Sakai · Seki · Echizen/Takefu · Tosa · Sanjo
- Steels: shirogami / aogami
- Types: deba / yanagiba / usuba / santoku / nakiri / gyuto

Three things to look at

1. The join line — The boundary between the soft iron and the hard steel. On a laminated blade it appears like the edge of fog, and it is the evidence of how the blade was made.
2. Single or double bevel — Most Japanese kitchen knives are ground on one face only, and are made for the right hand. Left-handed blades are made separately, not simply reversed.
3. The mei — Read it before you read the price. It is chiselled or stamped into one face of the blade.

Names worth knowing

Sakai Takayuki / Aritsugu / Masamoto / Shigefusa / Konosuke

Living with it today

It wants to be dried after use and brought back on a stone — that is the whole of it. A carbon steel blade darkens as it is used; the colour is a record of your cooking.

What the market asks

Older carbon-steel working knives are the entry point. A named smith's work stands well above them. A blade that has been sharpened for years costs less than a new one and is often the better made of the two.

Carpentry & Hand Tools



Japanese hand tools cut on the pull, not the push. Blades are laminated like knives — hard steel on soft iron — and the back of the blade is hollowed so that only a thin band needs to be flattened.

Where it comes from

- kanna / nomi / nokogiri / sumitsubo / kiridashi
- Natural stones: Ozuku · Nakayama · Narutaki · Shobudani · Aiiwatani

Three things to look at

1. How much blade is left — Planes and chisels are consumed by sharpening. What is left of the blade is what is left of the tool's life.
2. The ura — The hollow ground into the back should show an even band all the way round. The skill of whoever used it stays here.
3. The stone's strata — The banding on the side should run cleanly. What you do not want is a hard inclusion that will scratch everything you sharpen.

Names worth knowing

Chiyo-zuru Korehide / Funahiro / Tasai / Ouchi / Kunikei

Living with it today

These work on European timber without complaint, and a Kyoto finishing stone will sharpen a kitchen knife as happily as a chisel. Tools bought to look at tend to end up being used.

What the market asks

Natural finishing stones and used blades are the entry point. A named smith's plane or chisel stands well above them. The mines that produced the finest stones are closed, and that supply does not come back.

Armour & Sword Fittings



Sword fittings are the smallest and most concentrated metalwork Japan produced. When the wearing of swords was abolished in 1876, the metalworkers who made them turned to vases, okimono and jewellery — and some of the finest small metalwork in Japan comes from that generation.

Where it comes from

- Parts: tsuba / fuchi-kashira / menuki / kozuka / kogai
- Schools: Goto · Higo · Akasaka · Nara · Mito · Shoami · Hamano
- shakudo / shibuichi / sukashi / nunome-zogan / nanako

Three things to look at

1. The fit of the nakago-ana — Small soft-metal shims fitted into the central opening are the mark of a guard that was actually mounted on a blade.
2. Patina on soft metal — The colour of shakudo and shibuichi is raised in the pickling bath and cannot be put back once it has been polished away. Look for the layers still in place.
3. Granulation — A field of minute raised dots, each one struck separately. How evenly they run is the measure of the maker.

Names worth knowing

Goto Yujo / Nara Toshinaga / Shoami Katsuyoshi / Kano Natsuo

Living with it today

*A tsuba sits on a small stand like a coin or a medal; collectors abroad also mount them as pendants.
Nothing here is a weapon — these are the ornaments that were attached to one.*

What the market asks

Iron openwork guards are the entry point. Soft-metal school work stands well above them. Much of the value sits in the patina, which is why a cleaned piece is worth less than an untouched one.

Kimono & Antique Textiles



Cotton stayed expensive in rural Japan for a long time, so cloth was never thrown away. A kimono is cut in straight lines from one narrow bolt with almost nothing wasted; it can be unpicked back into flat cloth, washed, and built again.

Where it comes from

- Types: kimono / haori / obi / juban / noragi / hanten / furoshiki / fukusa
- Techniques: aizome / shibori / kasuri / tsutsugaki / yuzen / sashiko / boro
- asa · momen · tsumugi · chirimen · rinzu

Three things to look at

1. Bolt width and straight seams — Everything is cut in straight lines from a bolt about thirty-six centimetres wide. This is where hand work parts company with machine-made clothing.
2. Depth of the indigo — A fermented vat dyes in layers. Where the cloth has rubbed, the paler colour beneath shows through.
3. The layers — Boro is patch over patch. The number of layers is the number of years it was kept in use.

Names worth knowing

Serizawa Keisuke / Awa / Kurume / Oshima tsumugi / Nishijin

Living with it today

A haori is a jacket, and always was. An obi runs down the middle of a table. Boro stretched on a frame is textile art, and the museums that show it have caught up only recently.

What the market asks

Haori and everyday cloth are the entry point. Antique boro, fine yuzen and good obi stand well above them. Boro is priced by how many generations of mending it carries — the more worn, the more it is worth.

Bamboo & Woodcraft



Bamboo basketry is one of the few Japanese crafts where the maker signs the box as a matter of course, because the field was raised to fine art in the twentieth century.

Where it comes from

- hanakago / chakago / zaru / chashaku / mokuzai woodcraft
- madake · susudake · kurochiku
- Beppu · Kyoto · Suruga

Three things to look at

1. Susudake or new bamboo — Bamboo darkened by a century of hearth smoke cannot be reproduced. The uneven amber tone is the proof.
2. Tightness of the plaiting — The weave should be evenly drawn throughout. Slackness is where a difference in skill shows first.
3. The otoshi — A flower basket takes a separate cylinder inside it to hold the water. Ask whether it is still with the basket.

Names worth knowing

Iizuka Rokansai / Shono Shounsai / Tanabe Chikuunsai / Maeda Chikubosai

Living with it today

For flowers, for fruit, or on a wall as a form. A basket that has been used for fifty years is darker and better than one that has not.

What the market asks

Unsigned working baskets are the entry point. A signed basket with its box stands well above them. Smoke-darkened bamboo cannot be made to order; it can only be found.

Wooden Furniture



Tansu were built for specific trades and specific rooms, and their type is written into their shape. The ironwork was forged by hand, one plate at a time, and is often the best thing on the piece.

Where it comes from

- Types: isho-dansu / kaidan-dansu / mizuya-dansu / choba-dansu / kusuri-dansu / funa-dansu
- Woods: kiri · keyaki · sugi · kuri
- Sendai · Yonezawa · Sado · Mikuni · Matsumoto

Three things to look at

1. The joinery — Cut joints or nails. On a piece made by a cabinetmaker, the answer shows at the corners.
2. Original ironwork — Hand-forged plates are slightly uneven; later replacements are regular. Set side by side, the difference is obvious.
3. The keyaki grain — Good figure was saved for the front boards on purpose. Compare them with the back boards to see how much care went in.

Names worth knowing

sashimono-shi / kazari-kanagu-shi

Living with it today

A mizuya becomes a sideboard; a small kusiuri-dansu holds a desk's worth of small things. Weight and volume are the real constraint — see Part Three on shipping.

What the market asks

Small boxes and chests are the entry point. A full tansu stands well above them, and at that size the shipping is part of the price rather than an addition to it.

Fountain Pens & Writing Instruments



In the 1920s, maki-e artisans began decorating fountain pens for export. The same lacquer, the same gold, a new object — and the only field in this guide where a technique many centuries old is still applied to something you can carry in a pocket.

Where it comes from

- Namiki/Pilot · / Nakaya / Platinum · Sailor
- Writing set: suzuri / suiteki / fude / hanko / intro / bunchin / suzuribako

Three things to look at

1. The barrel in raking light — Maki-e on a pen behaves as it does on a box. Tilt it and see whether the design lifts out of the black.
2. The nib — Material, imprint and flex. This is where the value as something to use, rather than to look at, sits.
3. The artist's mark — A small mark near the end of the barrel. Whether the lacquer artist can be identified changes everything.

Names worth knowing

Kokkokai / Matsuda Gonroku / Shogo Yamada / Nakaya

Living with it today

Use it. A pen is the one antique in this guide that improves by being carried. Ink dries, nibs are serviceable, and lacquer likes the humidity of a hand.

What the market asks

Japanese vintage pens are the entry point. A maki-e barrel stands well above them, and a named lacquer artist far above that. A pen that still writes is worth more than one kept only to look at.

Photobooks



Postwar Japan produced photobooks as objects in their own right — sequenced, printed and bound as the work itself, not as a record of prints hung elsewhere. The field has its own bibliography and its own idea of condition.

Where it comes from

- Photographers: Moriyama Daido · Hosoe Eikoh · Tomatsu Shomei · Fukase Masahisa · Araki Nobuyoshi · Kawada Kikuji
- Provoke · VIVO
- Meiji hand-coloured albums · gravure

Three things to look at

1. The obi — The narrow paper band around the book. This is the value factor buyers outside Japan most often miss, and its presence changes the price.
2. Which printing — First printing or later. The colophon at the back of the book records the impression.
3. The printing method — Gravure or offset. In the early photobooks the depth of the gravure black is the work itself.

Names worth knowing

publishers: Yugensha · Chuokoron · Asahi Shimbun / Shashin Yo Sayonara ●● · Karasu ●●

Living with it today

A shelf, flat or upright, out of the sun. These are books meant to be opened, and the sequence only works at reading distance.

What the market asks

Common titles are the entry point. A first edition with its obi stands well above them, and landmark titles far above that. Of everything in this field, the presence of that narrow paper band moves the price most.

Folk Art & Small Crafts



Kokeshi are turned wooden dolls from the hot-spring towns of the north. Traditional kokeshi divide into eleven regional strains, each with its own head shape, and a maker signs the base by hand.

Where it comes from

- Eleven strains: Tsuchiyu · Togatta · Yajiro · Naruko · Sakunami · Zao · Hijiori · Kijiyama · Nanbu · Tsugaru · Nakanosawa
- Among others: daruma / hariko / clay dolls / netsuke / okimono / masks

Three things to look at

1. The signature on the base — The maker's name and the strain they belong to. Read it and the lineage can be followed.
2. The lathe rings — The rings left by the turning. The speed of the hand stays in them.
3. The line of the painting — Brows and hair drawn in a single stroke. What you want is a line with no hesitation in it.

Names worth knowing

Sato Bunkichi / Ogasawara Sakan / Yanagi Soetsu / Hamada Shoji · Kawai Kanjiro

Living with it today

Grouped, never alone — five of different strains on one shelf show you instantly what "regional" means. They are also the easiest way into this whole subject, and the cheapest.

What the market asks

Postwar pieces are the entry point. Prewar work and named makers stand well above them. The signature on the base is what separates the two, and it costs nothing to turn the doll over.

And Beyond

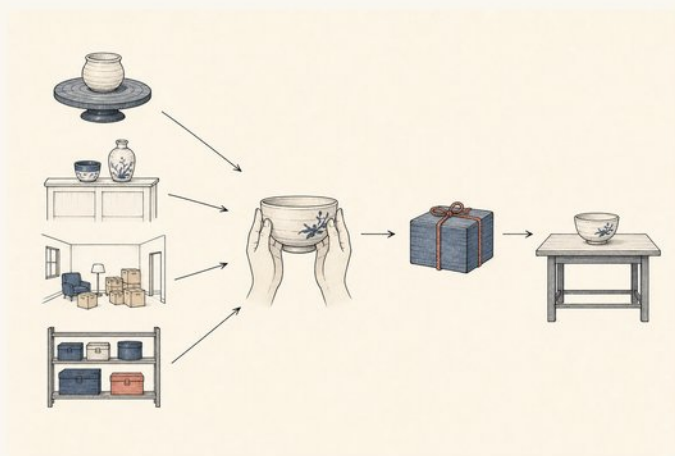


A kura did not sort itself by category. What came out of one could include a Showa desk lamp, a box of records, a folding map of a province, a fossil someone's grandfather picked up, a set of sake cups, and a camera — all in the same afternoon.

Words You Will Meet

<i>kura</i>	the thick-walled storehouse where things waited
<i>tomobako</i>	a box made and inscribed by the maker for their own work
<i>hakogaki</i>	the inscription on the lid
<i>kodai</i>	the foot ring — where the potter stops performing
<i>kannyu</i>	the fine crackle in a glaze
<i>kintsugi</i>	a lacquer repair dusted with gold — a record, not a disguise
<i>urushi</i>	tree sap that cures rather than dries
<i>maki-e</i>	sprinkled picture — metal powder on wet lacquer
<i>kento</i>	registration notches cut into a woodblock
<i>bokashi</i>	a gradation wiped by hand for every sheet
<i>sashiko</i>	running stitch used to reinforce
<i>boro</i>	cloth mended across generations, layer over patch
<i>kasumi</i>	hard steel wrapped in soft iron
<i>honyaki</i>	a blade of a single hardened steel
<i>susudake</i>	bamboo smoked for a century in a farmhouse roof
<i>tsuba</i>	the guard between blade and hand
<i>obi</i>	a sash — and the paper band around a Japanese book
<i>wabi</i>	a judgement about what deserves attention
<i>mottainai</i>	the feeling that something is being wasted

How These Pieces Reach You



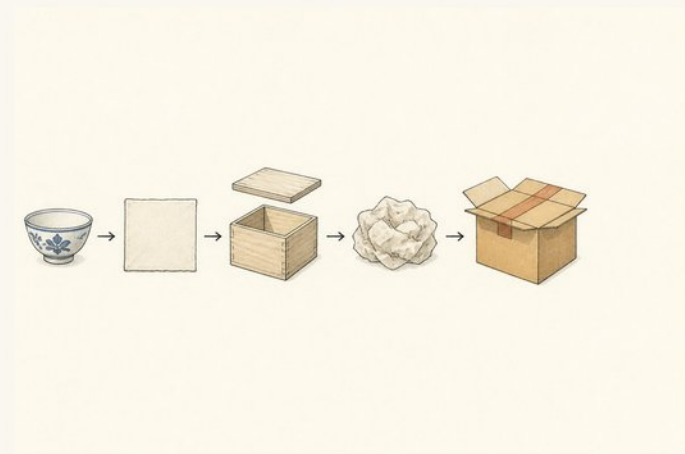
It is not one collection. What I do is search — among makers still working, dealers, estates being cleared, and old collections changing hands — all over Japan.

So the shop looks less uniform than a single collection would. The photographs come from many different hands. That is the honest shape of it: one person choosing, from a whole country.

What I put forward is only what I would be glad to keep myself. When something is described, you are reading notes made from what is known about it: where it is from, how it was made, what the surface has been through. If a thing is uncertain, it is written as uncertain.

Ask questions before you buy. A dealer who minds being asked is telling you something.

Packing, Shipping and Duty



The Japanese habit of boxing things turns out to be a shipping method. A piece that arrives in its tomobako, wrapped in cloth, has been travelling the way it always travelled.

Tell Me What You Are Looking For



Half of what I find, I find because someone told me what they were looking for.

If you are after a particular kiln, a particular smith, a size that fits a particular alcove — write to me. I go to auctions and old houses every month either way. Knowing what to watch for costs nothing and changes what I come back with.

And if you would rather just watch for a while: every other week I write a letter. One object — where it came from, how it was made, and what to look at. No countdowns, no sales calendar. Just the object.

Read the letters — kurafinds.com/newsletter

See what is in the kura — kurafinds.com

Or simply reply to this email and tell me what you are looking for.

Kei Kurata · Curator, Kura Finds

© Kura Finds. Text and illustrations by Kei Kurata.
kurafinds.com