

徳川文房博

Thematic Exhibition

Treasures from the Scholar's Study:

Writing Implements
from the Tokugawa Collection

Foreword

In China, the brush, ink stick, ink stone, and paper used for writing were known as the "Four Treasures of the Study" and, as such, exceptional examples of writing implements were used and enjoyed in the practice of writing and painting by the literati, who were high-ranking bureaucrats who maintained their own personal studies for reading and writing.

Writing implements were also an essential element in the daimyo household. Mainly Chinese writing implements were placed in the official chambers and decorated the space with atmosphere.

This exhibition introduces the writing implements that were passed down in the Owari Tokugawa family, and explores their charms which made the daimyo culture so colorful.

January 4 (Wed.) - January 29 (Sun.), 2023
Exhibition Rooms of Hōsa Library, City of Nagoya

Organized by
Hōsa Library, City of Nagoya
and
The Tokugawa Art Museum



Chapter I: *Chinese Writing Implements Brought to Japan*

The word *bunbō* (Ch., *wenfang*), literally “writing room,” was originally a Chinese word that referred to the court bureaus that handled documents and paperwork, as well as to the official posts held by the men who worked at them. Later, it came to refer to the private studies of high-ranking Chinese bureaucrats, or *literati*, who represented the epitome of culture and learning. Further, the writing implements and other prized tools used in these studies came to be called *bunbō-gu*, which is usually translated as “stationery” in English, but literally means “tools or implements of the writing room.”

In the Muromachi period (ca. 1333–1573) these Chinese writing implements were adopted by the Japanese warrior elite and became indispensable to their households. In medieval Zen temples, monks sat at desks built into bay window–like protruding alcoves to study sutras and read and write. The representative style of warrior-class residential architecture known as *shoin-zukuri* was distinguished by the presence of the *tsuke-shoin*, a type of built-in writing desk that was modeled after the monk’s bay window, but which was used primarily for displaying writing implements, not using them. The conventions for the display of writing implements followed by the Muromachi shogunal household, in particular, became the model for display in warrior-class households and showcasing rare Chinese writing implements became a symbol of power and authority for samurai families.

Tokugawa Yoshinao (徳川義直) and His Love of China

The Owari Tokugawa family’s vast collection of Chinese writing implements originated with the legacy of Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616). As part of his inheritance, Yoshinao, the first Lord of Owari, received a bequest of 163 sticks of ink as well as numerous other writing implements, including inkstones, brushes, and water droppers.

Yoshinao is known to have been particularly devoted to Confucianism, and enthusiastically collected Chinese texts and writing implements amidst the flourishing of Confucian studies and interest in Ming-dynasty Chinese learning and literary pursuits in the early modern period. Much of Yoshinao’s collection has been preserved to the present day. It is believed that Chen Yuanyun (J., Chin Genpin) and other naturalized Ming Chinese who served Yoshinao greatly facilitated his collecting efforts.



Chapter II: *Elegant Refinements of the Scholar's Study*

The scholar's study was a place for practicing the literati pursuits of calligraphy, poetry, painting, and seal-engraving, as well as for drinking tea, burning incense, playing music, and admiring bronze vessels and uniquely shaped stones together with one's guests. In these sanctuaries for purifying the mind and body removed from the complications of the political and mundane worlds, writing implements that were carefully selected by the literati were prized and cherished. In the broad sense, the term *bunbō-gu* refers not only to the tools used directly in the act of writing; it also encompasses the full range of prized items displayed in the scholar's study, including utensils for tea preparation, drinking vessels, incense tools, flower vases, musical instruments, jade carvings, cast bronzes, and curiously shaped stones. These finely crafted accoutrements made from the highest-quality materials reflected the aesthetic tastes of the literati and were also a means of demonstrating their cultural refinement, dignity of character, and spiritual sophistication.

The Four Treasures of the Study (文房四宝)

The inkstone, brush, ink stick, and paper were known as the "Four Treasures of the Study" and were especially prized among the scholar's possessions.

During China's Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, the ruler of the Southern Tang state (937–75), Li Yu (r. 961–75), promoted learning and the arts, and built a name for the Southern Tang on a national project to promote the production of the Four Treasures of the Study. Li established an Inkstone Bureau in Shezhou that oversaw the production of Shezhou inkstones, which rivaled Duanxi inkstones as the best in all of China. For the ink, so-called Li ink sticks were produced under the direction of Ink Minister Li Tinggui, and their quality remains unequalled throughout Chinese history. In terms of paper, this period saw the development of Chengshintang paper, which was renowned for its exceptionally high quality. And as for writing brushes, it is said that Li Yu ordered the Zhuge family brush makers to engrave the inscription "Jianye Wenfang" ("Study of the Jianye Ruler," denoting, essentially, Li's own "brand") on the jade writing brushes they produced.

Although the Southern Tang Dynasty was overthrown by the Northern Song Dynasty only thirty-nine years after its founding, the fashion for writing implements and cultivated refinement that

had been fostered in the Southern Tang Dynasty carried over into the Northern Song. In 986, the Northern Song official Su Yijian wrote a treatise entitled "Four Treasures of the Study," which discussed each of the four implements in detail. Many other books on the subject were also published during this period.

Inkstones (硯)

Because inkstones were not consumable items, the literati were particularly attached to them.

Inkstones were made from various types of materials, including stone, tile, and ceramic, but from the Song dynasty (960–1279) onward, stone inkstones were the most common type. In addition to their basic functionality as a rubbing surface and inkwell, stone inkstones were also appreciated for their color, mottled patterns, shape, and engraved designs and poetic inscriptions.

The very best stone for inkstones is said to be Duanxi stone, which is produced near Zhaoqing City in Guangdong Province. Other noted types, such as Shezhou inkstones (from around Longwei Mountain in Anhui Province) and green Taohe inkstones (from the Tao River in Gansu Province) were also highly prized. Additionally, Chengni ceramic inkstones were acclaimed as being favored by the literati. The Owari Tokugawa family inherited sixteen of the esteemed Duanxi inkstones and three Chengni ceramic inkstones.

Brushes (筆)

Most of the Chinese brushes that came to the Owari Tokugawa family were decorative brushes with handles and caps decorated with lacquer or mother-of-pearl inlay, or pictures rendered in gold or silver foil. Decorative brushes were hung on brush racks or placed in brush stands for display and were also favored as gifts. They were used only on special occasions, such as when asking a guest to write something.

It is believed that decorations were applied to brush handles from the Tang dynasty (618–907) onward, but most surviving decorative brushes date back to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), which was the golden age of this type of decoration. The materials used to decorate these brushes were extremely diverse, and included not only gold, silver, and ivory, but also rhinoceros horn, lapis lazuli, lacquer, cloisonné enamel, and bamboo. For the brush tip, rabbit hair, especially from the autumn season, was considered the best, and rat whiskers as well as deer and goat hair were also used.

Originally, Chinese ink was made by using a stone to crush and grind pigment into a powder, but by the Later Han dynasty (25-220), it was being rubbed against a stone by hand in stick form, as is still done today. The main raw material of this ink (known as *sumi* ink in Japanese) is soot (fine particles of carbon), a by-product of incomplete combustion. There are two ways to collect this soot: one is by burning resinous pine wood to get “pine soot,” and the other is by burning vegetable oil to get “oil soot.” The soot is then mixed with spices and a binder of animal glue and molded to form ink sticks. Pine soot ink was used until the Tang dynasty, but from the Song dynasty onward, oil soot ink came into more widespread use.

While high-quality ink sticks fulfilled the function of producing beautiful rich black ink, at the same time the ink sticks themselves were decorated in various ways to reflect the tastes of the literati. They were popular as gifts and became objects of aesthetic appreciation in themselves.

Longxiang Yumo Ink Sticks (龍香御墨)

Numbering over five hundred pieces, the ink collection of the Owari Tokugawa family is renowned as one of the world's greatest collections. The majority are from the Ming dynasty, including twenty-nine items known as Longxiang yumo, or “Dragon Fragrance Imperial Ink,” made for use at the imperial palace and dating from various periods from the Xuande (1426–35) to the Wanli era (1573–1620). The collection also includes twenty-six pieces of brightly colored pigment sticks in white, green, red, and brown ink that were made by mixing pigment powders with animal glue.

Ming Dynasty Ink Masters

The Ming dynasty was the height of the cultured refinement of literati writing implements, and many great master ink makers emerged at this time. In particular, Anhui Province had long been famous as an ink-producing region, and during the Ming dynasty, high-quality ink was produced in Shexian and Xiuning counties. The principal production region of Shexian was known for the work of master ink makers such as Luo Xiaohua, Cheng Junfang, and Fang Yulu. Xiuning produced talented ink makers such as Wang Zhongshan and Shao Gezhi. The Owari Tokugawa family ink collection includes many ink sticks by makers of the Shexian School, such as Cheng Junfang and Fang Yulu.



Chapter III: *Japanese Writing Implements*

China's abundance of high-quality inkstones and seal stones as well as its exceptional lacquer carving and related craftsmanship made its writing implements highly prized in Japan. At the same time, distinctively Japanese writing implements of various types were also being produced. In contrast to the Chinese lifestyle from the Song dynasty onward that centered on being seated on chairs at desks, the Japanese culture of sitting on tatami-mat floors produced its own unique forms of furniture and writing equipment, such as the *bundai*, a low writing table, and *kendai*, a book stand. Portable writing boxes, which stored the inkstone, ink stick, and writing brushes together in one place, were also useful in Japanese-style homes, where desks were not permanent fixtures, and many magnificently designed masterpieces have survived since the Kamakura period.

In the households of feudal lords, Chinese writing implements were generally displayed in drawing rooms with built-in shelf displays, while Japanese writing implements were used in daily life, or also sometimes used as decorative furnishings at weddings or other formal occasions, where they were decorated luxuriously without concern for any practical function.



© The Tokugawa Art Museum

1017 Tokugawa-cho, Higashi-ku,
Nagoya, 461-0023

TEL: 052-935-6262 / FAX: 052-935-6261