

An Overview of *Yatate*

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The major writing instruments used in Japan are brushes and ink introduced from China, where they have been in use since the Shang dynasty (c.1600–c.1046BC). In China, brushes and inkpots were placed on a desk; whereas in Japan, these writing implements were placed in a wooden box called *suzuribako* (also known as a writing box). The box stored the inkstone; brushes; water dropper; and other tools such as drills and knives. *Suzuribako* was first used in Japan in the 11th century and was often decorated with flowers, birds or landscapes in *maki-e* lacquer. The size and structure of the writing box made it inconvenient to be carried around so it was generally used inside the house. In order to compensate for the immobility of the writing box, a writing instrument called *yatate* was developed.



Suzuribako

19th century

Maki-e lacquer over bamboo

Collection of Liang Yi Museum (LYMA76A)

The name *yatate* derived from a weapon called *ebira* (a type of quiver used in Japanese archery). It gradually developed into a portable writing instrument used by the samurai class. One of the earliest illustrations of *yatate* is in a pictorial scroll of the Mongol invasion created during the Kamakura period (1185–1333). *Yatate* is depicted in the scroll as being used to record events happening on the battlefield. An inkstone and water dropper are stored in the interior.

Copper is often used to produce *yatate*. The generalised form of *yatate* includes a long handle to store a brush and an ink bottle for the ink. Techniques such as engraving and metalwork are often featured on *yatate*.

Different Parts of a *Yatate*

The body of a *yatate* can be further classified into:



Yatate

Meiji period (1868–1912)

Copper

Length 15.7cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum (LYMY110)

1. *Sumitsubo* (inkpot) – Where *sumi* (ink) is contained
2. *Sumitsubo's* lid – To prevent ink from spilling or drying up
3. *Hikkan's* lid – To prevent writing brush in *hikkan* from falling
4. *Hikkan* (brush tube) – Where writing brush is encased

Forms of *Yatate*

The generalised form of *yatate* includes a long handle and an inkpot. With more than 700 years of development, there are five major types of *yatate* identifiable by their respective shapes.

1. *Hiogi-gata* (folding fan-shaped)

When closed, the *yatate* looks like a *uchiwa* (closed fan). The sliding cover reveals a compartment for brush and a smaller compartment for ink.



Yatate

Shoumin

Meiji period (1868-1912)

Wood, lacquer and silver

Length 21.5cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum (LYMY029)

2. *Hishaku-gata* (inter-locking tyle)

The brush is kept in the hollow tube; the inkpad is contained in the inkpot connected to one end of the stem. Generally, the lid that opens the inkpot also reveals the brush.



Yatate

Meiji period (1868-1912)

Lacquer and silver

Length 19cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum (LYMY208)

3. *Inro-gata*

Constructed in a similar manner to *hishaku-gata*, the separate inkpot is connected to the brush tube by a cord or a chain made of various materials.



Yatate

Hirano

Taishō period (1912-1926)

Bamboo, lacquer

Length 19.4cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum (LYMY145)

4. Box-type pocket *yatate*

By the end of the Edo period in the 19th century, this type of *yatate* was created to be put into the pockets of Western clothing, the proper attire required for certain social classes.



Yatate

Kano Tetuya

Meiji period (1868-1912)

Ivory and silver

Length 6cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum (LYMY150)

5. Special-shaped *yatate*

Yatate made in various shapes such as musical instruments, umbrellas, guns and animals.



Yatate

Meiji period (1868-1912)

Copper, silver and gold

Length 17.3cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum (LYMY165)