

The Hyakkō Hishō: A Lord's Collection of Decorative Craft Samples

The Hyakkō Hishō is a seventeenth-century collection of small articles, swatches, and illustrations representing decorative crafts from across Japan. It was conceived by Maeda Tsunanori (1643–1724), the fifth lord of Kaga domain (now Ishikawa and Toyama Prefectures). The collection comprises eleven boxes—over 2,000 items in total—that exemplify superior craft techniques of the 1600s.

The Collector

Maeda Tsunanori was a meticulous, scholarly man who valued collecting books, documents, and decorative arts and crafts. Like many of his contemporaries, he was strongly influenced by the ideas of Chinese Neo-Confucianist Zhu Xi (1130–1200), who encouraged “investigating things to extend knowledge.” In keeping with this philosophy, Tsunanori believed that closely observing decorative crafts (a form of “knowledge” stemming from human creativity) would give him insight into the fundamental patterns making up the physical world. Tsunanori was unusual in applying this philosophy to decorative arts and crafts, making the Hyakkō Hishō a unique and precious resource.

To form the collection, Tsunanori had artisans make samples for him. He also gathered items from the Maeda family's residences in Kaga and Edo (now Tokyo). He even purchased items from other domains, and when an owner refused to sell, had copies made or illustrations drawn. Approximately 85 to 90 percent of the collection was gathered by Tsunanori; after his death, his descendants continued to expand it. However, the lack of organization of Box Eleven—thought to have been a temporary “sorting box”—suggests that the collection was never completed or fully catalogued.

Contents

The collection contains samples of *maki-e* lacquer decoration, metalwork, woodwork, *washi* paper, leather, and cloth, as well as illustrations of garments, family crests (*kamon*), and more.

Box One contains, among other things, samples of *maki-e*. Especially notable are the squares of *nashiji nuri-iro*, one of the earliest *maki-e* styles. The style uses a fine gold powder called *nashiji* (literally, “pear-skin surface”) made of irregularly sized particles. When sprinkled over a lacquered base, the powder creates a texture that resembles the skin of an Asian pear. The *nashiji maki-e* squares are arranged to show a progression of

application techniques and colorings. In this way, the samples would have served as useful teaching tools for artisans as well as a reference for specific designs and styles of *maki-e*.

Box Two holds many colorful illustrations of martial items, including various campaign jackets (*jinbaori*) that were worn over armor to protect samurai from wind and rain. Tsunanori likely wanted to collect the jackets themselves, but as they were symbols of rank for their samurai owners, it was impossible for him to acquire them. Instead, Tsunanori had the campaign jackets carefully depicted on paper and stored the illustrations in the Hyakkō Hishō collection.

Many of the boxes contain actual items—not samples—that have seen practical use. Boxes Three and Four contain metal fittings, Boxes Five and Six contain ornamental nail covers, and Box Seven holds intricately designed drawer handles. The remaining boxes contain decorative finials, samples of wood and leather, drawings of drawer knobs and nail covers, blueprints, and items that were never properly organized and stored.

The gold and enameled nail covers in Box Six are particularly splendid. Some are designed to resemble cages containing birds or insects; others show flowers blooming from the cages. The nail covers were interior decorative fixtures in the Maeda family residence in Edo before being added to the Hyakkō Hishō.