

Fun Wooden Boxes

By Iseki Masaaki

A warm, very wet country whose long and narrow form stretches from north to south, Japan has a wondrous variety of native trees and shrubs.

Handicrafts that employ materials derived from nature—sculpture and applied arts that made use of wood, along with ceramics, have long utilized

the highly abundant soil of Japan—have flourished from ancient times.

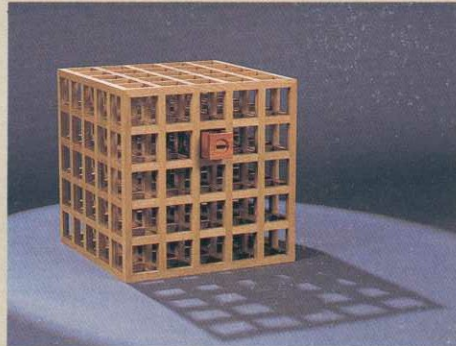
From the standpoint of woodcraft techniques, of course, joining boards and other kinds of wood-working was difficult, so furniture and other types of woodcrafts in the field of applied arts are relatively new. However, because materials were plentiful a broad range of woodcrafts have continued to be produced in the traditional manner while keeping pace with changing times and changes in society.

Compared with other countries, wood has been much more widely used in daily life in Japan. Not just chests, tables, shelves, and other types of furniture, but stairs, eating utensils, and even decorative items made of wood complement the interior spaces of houses made from wood—extremely widespread in Japan. Of the preceding, I would like to discuss wooden boxes in this issue.

In Japan, “box” has traditionally been the designation for a smaller type of chest. Simply defined, both “chests” and “boxes” are containers with lids on top that open and close. Current woodworking technology is typified by cabinet work, carved wood, lathe work, parquetry and wood inlays. Further, the practical functions of boxes can be broadly divided into three categories—human-oriented, environment-oriented, and object-oriented (boxes used for organizing or sorting things).



Sprout Boxes by Tanno Norio. A seed lodged in a rotting log sprouts in due course and dreams unfold.



Jungle Gym Box by Watanabe Hisashi. Play with the box by moving it around. It just will not come out. A box that will drive you nuts.



Travel by Shimizu Ikutaro. Made of five objects—a flute, wood bell, tambourine, taiko drum, and an alms box. The dreams of an artist who wants to become a busker and take a journey.



Wood Box Taken Out from a Tree by Misawa Kenji. Three structures carved from one log. The artist's concept of one space being born from another is an excellent expression of dialogue with nature.

An example of the human-oriented function would be placing an item in a box to keep it out of sight and to serve to prevent thievery. Environment-oriented functions might include protection against dust, pests, humidity, and other negative external elements.

It is probably worthwhile to rethink the ideas that we have long held regarding these commonplace, traditional functions and the corresponding techniques that were developed, devising ideas for functions concurrent with today's lifestyles and values to create different items.

Put differently, we might try to come up with more functionality than has been previously available or imagine boxes that have completely different uses. Especially in the current day and age when a wide variety of formative arts exist apart from functions and purposes, might it not be good if the concept were neither crafts, nor art, nor toys? Or, boxes that were a synthesis of all three of the above?

If this were the case, the box would have to exist solely as the concept of the creator.

Based on this concept, a number of exhibits featuring boxes with the image of boxes, but not boxes, have been held over the past few years at art museums and galleries in Japan. I would like to introduce one of these that was quite interesting, "Thinking Through Boxes—Fun Wooden Boxes," held at the Hokkaido Asahikawa Museum of

Art in 1992.

This museum, located in a region blessed with forest resources, has a strong interest in wood formative art and these types of pieces form the core of the collection. As such, the wooden box exhibit was a project perfectly suited to the museum.

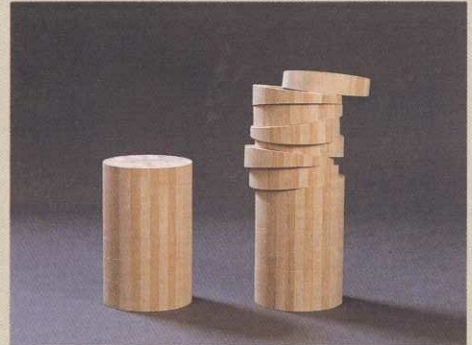
Approximately 100 pieces by designers, sculptors, craftspersons, architects, and other selected exhibitors from all over Japan were exhibited and photos of

several accompany this article. Some possess weird functions while others have unexpected shapes and still others have the image of a wooden box but are also imbued with a wonderfully playful spirit, providing endless entertainment for the viewer.

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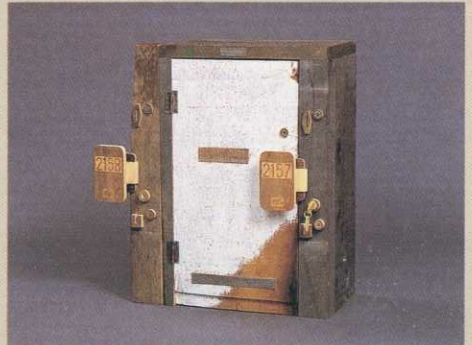
My Umbrella by Kitada Yoshiyuki. The section underneath where the boards join is a secret hiding place. A built-in box. Very chic sensibilities.



Tower of Bubble by Sato Taku. The beautiful cylinder has the function of a box. However, once balance is lost it cannot be stopped before it collapses and the functions of the box are lost. Similar to humans.



Box with Water by Koshimizu Susumu. A bucket is a container and so is a box. A finite box contains the artist's concept of the limitless void.



No. 2157 at Northern Passageway on the Third Floor by Hayashi Norichika. A metal coin locker reproduced with scraps of wood. What might be contained inside? This shows the eeriness of common, everyday things.