Japanese Puzzle Boxes

By Jerry Slocum

Japan has exported secret opening boxes to the West since before 1870. They are often complex, requiring many "moves" to open them. The puzzle is to find the secret compartment inside.

To solve a puzzle box, one or more sliding parts in one end are moved, allowing the other end to be moved slightly. This partially unlocks a side panel, which allows other pieces to be moved. These, in turn, partially unlock the top or bottom. This method is continued, moving around the box, until the top panel can slide, opening the box.

Most of the very early puzzle boxes from the late 1800s/early 1900s only had a few moves to open, usually 2 to 4. They can sell for several hundred dollars if they are in good condition and work properly.

Puzzle boxes were often beautifully lacquered or veneered. The elaborate wood mosaic is called yoseki, a craft practiced for centuries in Japan. It uses the natural grain and texture of a wide variety of woods. Woods of many colors are selected—spindletong for white, Katsura for black, sumac or mulberry for yellow, camphor for brown, American walnut for purple, Japanese cucumber for blue, Chinese cedar for red, and so on.

Oblong rods of the desired cross sections are selected and glued together to form the geometric pattern desired. Subsequently, the sectional surface is sliced into very thin sheets of veneer that can be glued onto the surface of the box. The box is then glazed and polished.

By choosing wood of differ
rent cross sections—squares, regular and irregular hexagons, etc.—
and of different colors, it is possible to design patterns of great
beauty and complexity. These serve not only to decorate the boxes. They also play an
important role in concealing the sliding pieces, which
must be moved to open them.

It is likely that Japan was making puzzle boxes
before 1800, but it was a closed society until
Admiral Perry opened Japan to trade in 1854.
Within about a decade after Japan began to
trade with other countries, the Japanese
jewel-box was being sold in the 1867
“Adams & Co. of Boston Catalogue.” It
states in the catalogue, “Genuine Japanese
manufacture.”

In 1896, the
Marinka & Co.
Catalogue showed a
Japanese inlaid puzzle
box. This box had a
drawer that slid out from
different directions.

**Dating old Japanese puzzle boxes.** The McKinley Tariff
Act of 1891 required the country
of origin to be marked on
items imported to the USA.
From March 1891 until
September 1921,
Japanese goods were
supposed to be
marked with the
country of origin.
The Japanese choose to use the word
*Nippon* for their marking.

The Act was
strengthened in 1921
so products were to be marked
“Japan” or “Made in Japan.” From 1945
to 1952, the required marking was “Made in
Occupied Japan.” After 1952, “Made in Japan” was
supposed to be marked on goods exported to the U.S.

Much more accurate dating of
puzzles can be done by the use of
novelty, puzzle and magic
catalogs.

Pre-World War II puzzle
boxes were smaller, made of dark
colored woods and frequently
exhibit fine workmanship. Post
World War II puzzle boxes were
made with lighter colored woods
and are larger in size.

Solutions for puzzle boxes
frequently require sliding sections
of the ends of the boxes as well as
the top and bottom. The level of
difficulty in solving the problem varies
widely—some boxes only require two
moves to

open them, while
others require
as many

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**Japanese puzzle boxes from the 1920s to 1930s.** The two smaller
boxes are also banks with slots for
coins and only two or three moves
are needed to retrieve the money.

**Sizing up a puzzle box.**
The traditional Japanese unit of measure
is called a “sun.” A sun is about
1.22 inches, and curiously, it
is a unit of measure for length only, not
width or height.
Small puzzle boxes are 1, 2 or 3
sun in size.
Medium boxes are 4 sun, and a standard
size is 5 sun.
Large puzzle boxes are 6 and 7 sun.

**Our thanks to Jerry Slocum.** His latest book, the
*The Tangram Book*, contains the first comprehensive history of
one of the world’s most popular
puzzles, as well as 2,000 Tangram
puzzles to solve. It is available at Barnes &
Noble, Amazon.com and most
bookstores. Unless otherwise noted, photos are
courtesy Jerry Slocum.

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**A 1937 puzzle box with a
hidden coin slot and drawer.**
Four moves open the box.

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**The upper puzzle box contains a
noise maker that produces a “moo” sound when
the box is tilted.** The middle box requires nine
moves to open a secret compartment and drawer,
and ten moves are needed to open the secret
compartment in the lower box.
More Puzzle Box History

The Himitsu-Bako (personal secret box) is a traditional Japanese puzzle box that was designed over 100 years ago in the Hakone region of Japan. The Hakone Mountains are noted for their great variety of trees. The creators of the personal secret box took advantage of this wide variety of natural wood colors and textures to produce their elaborate geometric patterns.

The appeal of the personal secret box is not merely in its entertainment qualities. It is valued as a mosaic woodwork of the type usually applied to small handicrafts such as trays, boxes and chests. This marquetry technique originated in the late Edo Period, and for many years, the town of Hakone was a relay station on the main road to Edo (present day Tokyo). The mosaic woodwork was developed as souvenirs for travelers.

The personal secret box was first referred to in a journal issued during 1830-1843. In this time period, the secret box was in its early stages. It was referred to as a Sikake-Bako and as a Tie-Bako. Sikake means device or trick, and Tie means idea, wisdom or intelligence. These were small boxes used to contain strings, nails, sewing kits, etc.

These string boxes were developed into small chests for use by workers to carry their tools in and to keep them safe from theft. Because of the device or trick, no one could get into the box without first knowing the secret. Workers used these chests on coaches and ships to keep them secure.

The small string box was made with a very simple device or trick in the beginning. As this box became more popular, the device/trick became more complicated. Up to this point in history, these secret boxes were very simple with little or no decoration. They did not resemble the secret puzzle boxes of today.

It was after 1870 that puzzle boxes were used to keep important documents or secrets safe. Originally, the boxes were more flat in shape, but soon they were developed into 5 sun and 6 sun sizes with up to 66 intricate moves to open.

Most Japanese personal secret boxes have a variety of difficulties, ranging from 4 to 66 moves. A few large puzzle boxes have exceptional numbers of moves, such as 78, 122, 119, or 125.

The art of making personal secret boxes has never been written down. Instead, it has been passed on from master craftsmen to apprentice for generations.

Our thanks to www.cleverwood.com for this article. Cleverwood sells many types of wonderful puzzle boxes on their website. They can also be contacted by calling 888-593-8653.