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# STUDIO Potter



*The lacquered outer box, the tea caddy box, the shifuku outer box, and the paper covers for tea caddy and shifuku boxes.*

**PHOTO  
GALLERY**

## Looking at White Dew

[LOUISE ALLISON CORT \(/LOUISE-ALLISON-CORT\)](#)

There are few American museums that do not have at least one, and some have dozens: the little, two- or three inch high, brown-glazed Japanese tea jars with ivory lids, huddled together on the shelf of a seldom opened storage case. Once, each jar in this pitiful group was a cherished object, supplied not only with a lid but with one or more display bags of costly silk, a turned-wood storage case, and one if not several storage boxes attractively inscribed with the jar's name and the names of its several owners. For centuries, tea caddies (chaire) were considered the single most important utensil in the complex array of utensils required for chanoyu, the tea ceremony. When the ownership of many of these jars passed into the hands of Americans or Europeans in the late nineteenth century (at a time when traditional Japan was reeling from the sudden impact of the totality of Western culture) and,

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their protection and pedigree, and jumbled together like foreign orphans adopted and given a new identity - the registration numbers of the museum.

It is only through the opportunity of handling a kindred jar still preserved in the setting provided by its Japanese owners that one can begin to understand what each of the museum jars once must have been. Of course, some jars were never given more than the minimum outfit - a single silk bag and a simple wooden box - if their ordinary glaze or undistinguished shape suited them only to everyday use, or if their owner's means were modest.

In the practice of chanoyu today, usefulness alone is considered deserving of respect and care in handling. One further purpose of Tea, however, is to cultivate the eye that can glance over a hundred similar brown-glazed jars and pick out the one that is distinguished by a richer coloration and a more satisfying proportion. That individuality is acknowledged by giving the jar a name. Some jars became known to tea practitioners, or chajin, by their owner's name, being called simply "Rikyu's apple-shaped jar" or "Matsuya's square-shouldered jar." Other jars were named, especially from the seventeenth century onward, in reference to an image from classical poetry. If the outstanding qualities of the jar were confirmed by general opinion, it became named in the wider sense of being considered to set a standard: it acquired the status of meibutsu or "named object," where name is equivalent to fame.

Successive owners of such a named jar often provided an additional box for the box in which they received the jar. (This pattern holds for other tea utensils as well, although tea jars have been given special importance because of their high visibility and prominent place in the process of preparing tea, holding the small portion of freshly ground tea leaves that is whipped with the hot water in the tea bowl.) The extra box indicated respect both for the jar and for the previous owner, who had discovered it. Providing an additional box was a way of protecting the box that bore the earlier owner's inscription of the name of the jar, and sometimes the details of its history and it was also a means of authentication, since the owner customarily did not sign his own name to the box. Each successive box identified the hand of the earlier inscriber. Only when boxes were inscribed (at the owner's request, for a fee) by heads of the official tea schools did they bear that tea master's signature. Official inscriptions preserved the market value of the jar in a literal way and, at the same time, further enhanced the jar's reputation. There is no question that meibutsu tea caddies - in their layers of boxes, bags, and other containers - grew like pearls, with the luster radiating from the entire construction, not simply from the jar within - although as we shall see, the process of removing layer after layer before reaching the jar itself cannot fail to affect one's perception of the jar. A skeptic would say that it is a case of the "emperor's new clothes," but the skeptics who tossed away the

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Practical necessity, arising from the Japanese climate and geography, also motivated the accretion of bags and boxes around a highly valued jar. Created as a chain of volcanic islands, Japan is still a country of frequent earthquakes. A violent tremor would send rows of unprotected objects crashing against one another or onto the floor, with disastrous results. Bags and boxes around each object (not only tea utensils, but all tablewares and other fragile household possessions) formed soft cushions against the natural violence. In the past - when Japanese domestic architecture was built of wood, paper, and straw - earthquakes often led to fires. The storehouse, therefore, was a separate building made of thick, plastered and whitewashed walls, with a ceramic tile roof. Yet in Japan's humid climate, where mildew grows overnight, such a building could not be made airtight. A small window, protected by mesh or bars, was cut high up, under the eaves on each end wall. In fair weather, during the day, the heavy metal-plated doors were pushed open to air the interior, and at least once a year the entire contents were emptied out for a thorough cleaning. Even so, termites often devoured boxes, and dust blew in. A strong outer box protected a precious but insect-weakened inner one, and a wrapper made from a large square of cotton cloth usually enveloped the whole unit as protection from dust.

## WHITE DEW

We have come to see a certain collector's favorite tea caddy. We have been told that its name is White Dew. The jar we anticipate will be only a few inches high, yet a large bundle - almost a cubic foot in size - is brought into the room and placed on the tatami mat before us. In the process of unwrapping the bundle, we are going to relive in reverse the history of the little jar and its relationship to its various owners.



The bundle is wrapped in a sky-blue wrapper (furoshira) made of three panels of handspun cotton woven in the old-fashioned narrow loom width and stitched by hand, with concealed seams, into a square about one yard on each side.

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the front, then from the back; the corners to the left and right would be tied with a half-hitch knot, so that a tug at one tail of the knot would undo the cloth. The rough texture of the fabric would hold the knot and prevent the bundle from slipping from one's hands. Over one knotted corner a loop of blue silk cord secures a tiny rectangular paulownia-wood tag bearing the name of the jar, written with brush and ink, for identification of the bundle on the storeroom shelf.

The wrapper was provided by the antique dealer who sold the jar to its present owner; it was the dealer's personal addition to all the tea utensil packages that passed through his hands. The dealer never signs boxes himself, but anyone recognizing the juroshiki - in the trademark colors of sky-blue or pale yellow - would take it as the dealer's certification of authenticity. Furthermore, it will become clear that the blue wrapper was not chosen at random over the yellow for this particular object. This sky-blue tone of indigo is but one of the varied shades of the dyestuff that will appear on box cords and bags and papers within.

Inside the wrapper is a large, nearly square box. The wood is again paulownia - the lightweight wood with a silvery sheen that is favored for all storage uses since it swells to resist humidity and is not harmed by fire.

(In many parts of Japan it was once customary- upon the birth of a daughter - to plant the paulownia tree that would supply the wood for the daughter's trousseau chests.) For this box, the bare wood has been made impervious to soiling by a coat of a reddish, translucent lacquer. The dark grain patterns of the wood are visible through the warm, lustrous surface, as are the neatly joined, interlocking edges of the box sides, fastened only by wooden pegs. Instead of the more usual flat lid secured on the top of the box by interior strips of wood, the lid of this box has edges that fit over a flange, meeting perfectly with the walls. Lest the form of the perfect glossy cube be too austere, all edges and comers are planed to a soft roundness. The box is closed by a dark indigo-blue silk, flat-woven cord with a central gold silk stripe. The cord is attached to the box through slots formed between the box base and an added foot rim, so that the thick cord does not rest directly on the ground.

Subtle clues are offered structurally for the proper position in which to hold the box when opening it. The uppermost folded corner of the furoshiki points to the front of the box, and when the cloth is unwrapped the box is shown to be correctly oriented by two small, rectangular squares of handmade paper pasted to the box in the upper righthand corner of the lid and the corresponding corner of the front wall of the box. The labels are legible at once only from this direction. With their identical information inscribed in ink, the labels also identify the object within: "Tea caddy. White Dew." The off-white, roughened surface of the mulberry paper and the flowing cursive style of the label

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in close juxtaposition is a principle of design that recurs not only in utensils and architecture for chanoyu but within Japanese art as a whole.

The box lid lifts off smoothly but slowly, releasing an almost perfect seal. The interior of the box, also completely lacquered with the same translucent reddish lacquer, has been compartmentalized to contain two smaller boxes of dissimilar shape. A panel divides the outer box down the center. To the left, filling the entire compartment, is one long, narrow rectangular box. To the right, two false walls hold a small, square box snugly in the center of the compartment. The owner who supplied the outer box gave considerable thought to the choices of color, texture, and composition. The larger box on the left is covered by a piece of heavy handmade paper tinted a soft reddish-brown with fermented persimmon pulp— an old-fashioned dye used for peasant garments (until indigo-dyed cotton became widespread) and also used for waterproofing fishnets and wooden tools, and other practical chores. In this context, it adds a purposefully rustic note. The silk cord binding the box is a shade of blue intermediate between the furoshiki and the dark blue cords of the outer box, with a white stripe down the center. The small, square box on the right is covered with the same sort of handmade paper, dyed pale indigo blue, and it is bound by narrow, flat cords of old-gold cotton, with a center warp-stripe of alternating blue and white. It is a subtle point, but the blue of this center stripe is the same shade as the cords of the larger box.

Within the Mondrianlike composition of asymmetrical grids and blocks of color, the same calligraphy appears on each of the paper covers, softening the regularity. It identifies the square box on the right as that of the tea caddy, not by naming the caddy outright but by quoting a

section of the classical poem from which the jar's name comes, beginning with "White dew ..." and adding, by way of explanation, "the poem about green willows." The reddish paper covering the rectangular box reads more explicitly:

"White Dew Tea Caddy Three Bags."

The lacquered outer box and the paper covers for the inner boxes are the contribution of one owner, as the identical calligraphy shows. His small, square red seal will appear on a piece of paper pasted to the inside of the lid of the larger box, identifying him as an important industrialist and chajin active throughout the first half of our century. For several decades, his tea utensil collection was housed in a



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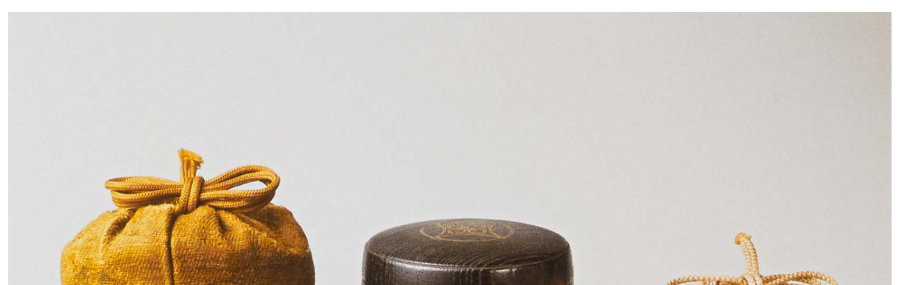
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When the square box covered with indigo-dyed paper is lifted by the cords from its compartment, it proves to be made of plain paulownia wood, slightly darkened with a patina of age and handling. The joinery indicates masterful attention to detail. When the cords are untied, the cover of blue paper is removed to show an inscription in ink - in a different hand - written directly on the wood of the upper righthand corner of the lid, simply stating the name of the jar: "White Dew." The two Chinese characters are written in the squared, formal, archaic style known to have been favored by one dominant figure in the development of chanoyu the warrior Kobori Enshu (1579-1642). Well-educated and conversant with classical Japanese literature, Enshu modeled his own calligraphy after that of the great thirteenth-century poet, Fujiwara Teika, and all subsequent heads of the Enshu school of tea followed suit. This calligraphy is a clue to the history of "White Dew."

The lid lifts off to reveal the top of a cloth bag gathered closed by a round, braided, silk cord. The bag is heavy as it is lifted out of the box, and it is too big to contain the caddy alone. It comes as no surprise to and see the grain of a turned wooden lid. This is the lathe-turned wooden case (hikiya) and its own cloth bag (shifuku) that provide special protection for cherished jars.

The practical purpose of the shifuku - to pad the hikiya and its contents - is reflected in the somber appearance of the heavy, twill-weave, silk brocade, faded almost to a monochrome ochre. Yet close examination of the large, complex geometrical figures - their full repeat lost in this small bag - shows that the cloth is a sixteenth- or early seventeenth-century version of the ancient brocade called shokko nishiki, which originated in the western Chinese province of Sichuan and was made there in official workshops until the end of the Ming dynasty in the mid-seventeenth century. The bag is tailored in two panels; tapered with darts and stitched to a stiffened circular base; closed only halfway up the sides and secured with fine cords of gold silk; and gathered through silk cord loops at the top with a thicker round cord of the same ochre color. A foil to the understated richness of the outer fabric of the bag is its gorgeous lining- satin striped in vivid red, green, white, and yellow, and shot through with gold threads tracing the outlines of lions and grapes, deer and flowers, dragons and phoenixes, and other auspicious pairs that formed part of the Chinese weaver's age-old repertory. This fabric is somewhat worn from long use for other purposes, and tiny stitches carefully repair the rents.

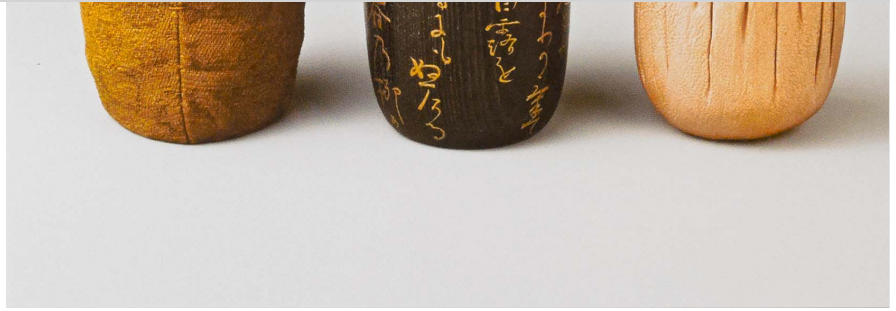
The hikiya is not a simple cylinder, for its base is tapered and its lid is domed and finished with a narrow groove around the edge. The hard, blackish wood - ironwood, from an



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precise that it seems etched. The intrinsically elegant surface is further enriched, on the lid, by wire-thin double lines of dull gold lacquer outlining a Chinese-style medallion circling a formalized, four-petal flower. Covering one



side of the container, refined calligraphy - also rendered in gold lacquer - inscribes a poem: the "poem about green willows," from which the jar takes its name. Some searching through indices to poetic anthologies shows that the poem is taken from the very first imperial anthology, the *Kokinshu*, compiled in A.D. 905. This classic among classics set the pattern for later anthologies by dividing the poems according to seasons or themes. The "poem about green willows" is Number 27 in the Spring section; moreover, it is by Bishop Henjo, who was numbered among the outstanding poets in the anthology - the so-called Six Poetic Geniuses. The headnote indicates that Bishop Henjo was writing about willows in the vicinity of a temple in the old capital of Kyoto:

Spinning out

Tender green threads

And slipping off

Beads of white dew -

The willow in spring.

The seasonal context of the poem prescribes the use of its namesake jar for tea-drinking occasions in the spring.

The lid of the *hikiya* fits so snugly that it squeaks as it is pulled off. Inside appears a startling reversal of texture: the interior of the case is lacquered entirely in mirrorblack lacquer, and through its layers the wood grain still shows faintly. This is the innermost chamber: nestled within is a bag of padded lavender silk crepe, gathered on a narrow silk cord of the same shade. Through the gathered opening shows the tiny turned knob of the ivory lid.

At last, approached through layers of wood and lacquer and silk, through shades of blue and russet

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gripped with his two fingers the fine-grained gray clay body, in order to dip the pot into the glaze. A second layer of fatter, golden brown glaze covers the level shoulder and runs over the edge in one long and one short drip. These glaze drips must be the causes for recollecting beads of white dew on willow branches. Echoing the straight line of the shoulder and of the neatly everted rim, a delicate horizontal line encircles the midriff of the jar, defining its proportions. This line and the straight-shouldered profile are often seen on the earliest and most esteemed tea caddies - Chinese jars that were handed down through the collections of Japan's military rulers in a strange yet not unfamiliar alliance of art and power; but surely this jar is Japanese in origin. There is something about the studied informality of its form that is confirmed by a look at the direction of the string-cut whorl on its base, showing that it was cut from a clockwise-turning Japanese wheel. The foot was not even trimmed - just smoothed a bit so that it fits comfortably in the palm. The exaggerated horizontal shape of the shoulders above the roundness of the slightly swollen base is another of those pleasing juxtapositions of hard-edged and organic forms. Only two inches high, this jar is eloquent as a sculpture in its abstract elements, yet bound to nature through the imagery of a poem about green willows.

The lid is aged ivory, with streaks of darker yellow and one brown imperfection that chajin enjoyed. One fine line is incised around the lid's perimeter; three lines define the dome supporting the knob; and two minute circles top the knob. The lid is a complex structure, for the ivory superstructure is fitted onto a cedar wood plug that will make a sound more pleasant than that of ivory when placed on the jar (in the tea room, even the smallest sound is carefully considered); and the plug, in turn, is covered by gold foil-coated paper that prevents the odor of the wood from affecting the taste of the tea.

There is the jar, but unanswered questions still remain, and the other box may answer them. Under the russet paper cover, the paulownia wood lid is inscribed with new information: "Shimbei," the potter's name. That name prompts a look into one of the massive volumes of a masterpiece of tea scholarship. Taisho Meikikan, by Takahashi San - a record of the famous utensils, meibutsu, still extant at the beginning of this century. The volume on tea caddies illustrates eight jars said to have been made by Shimbei. Taisho Meikikan follows the established tea custom of listing types of caddies in order of prestige, starting with the Chinese jars and progressing through the eras of production at the Seto kilns in Japan, where faithful copies were made of the Chinese prototypes. Shimbei's jars fall into the last category of Seto jars, nochigama ("latter-day kilns"), supposedly made in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries by known potters.

Opinions about Shimbei's identity have changed in recent years. Takahashi quoted earlier tea



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Potters of Seto by Oda Nobunaga, the warrior who was then master of the province within which Seto lay and who would shortly control most of Japan; as one of two generations of potters named Shimbei - the latter active in the era of Kobori Enshu - with whom a number of Shimbei's tea caddies are closely associated.

More recent scholarship indicates, however, that Shimbei was not a potter but a leading Kyoto merchant in the early seventeenth century, licensed to take part in the lucrative trade of undyed Chinese silk. Through his trading activity he acquired imported tea utensils which he sold, along with native pottery, in a subsidiary business. He probably dealt with kilns both in Seto and in Kyoto, and he figured importantly in the popularization of Shino and Oribe wares from the Mino kilns. Three of the extant Shimbei tea caddies even bear cryptic inscriptions incised on their bases that have been interpreted to show that the jars were ordered by Enshu from Shimbei and were approved as soon as they were thrown. Taisho Meikikan illustrates not only the Shimbei jars, but also their boxes and hi-hiya. A jar named Distant Mountains is accompanied by a paulownia wood box whose lid inscription seems to be in the same hand as the writing of the poem on the hikiya for White Dew. It is identified as the writing of Enshu's third son, Kobori Gonjuro (1625-1694). Gonjuro made a business of authenticating and inscribing objects associated with his father's taste. It is possible that the formal letters inscribing the name White Dew on the box for the caddy were also written by Gonjuro.

So far we have been looking at containers that figure in the private, behind-the-scenes storage of White Dew that an ordinary guest for Tea would not see. The lavender silk crepe bag, for instance, is made only for storage - never for display. If that bag can be likened to a dressing gown worn only in privacy, the three shifuku stored in the separate rectangular box are like jackets for public occasions of varying formality. The lid of the box assists by listing the fabrics from which the three bags are stitched: an antique gold brocade with "flower-colored" blue ground, a "Kiyomizu fragment," and a "Satsuma Canton." These strange terms lead into the realm of connoisseurship of antique fabrics that chajin and others called meibutsu-gire- literally, "famous scraps." The elaborate Chinese silks that entered Japan from the sixth century onward were destined originally for use in the garments worn by Buddhist monks and priests, but no remnant of a cut bolt or tattered garment was too small to be useful, and pieces of brocade were also employed as part of the mounting for hanging scrolls - especially of Chinese painting or of calligraphy by important Chinese monks - and as bags for storing valued ceramics.

Over generations, tea procedures gradually became more formalized, and different levels of formality were established. Borrowing the vocabulary for styles of calligraphy, chajin designated three basic styles of tea: shin (formal), gyo (intermediate), and so (informal). The shin style was most closely tied

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setting in the intimate and rustic grass hut tearoom setting. By Enshu's time, it was customary to equip a favorite tea caddy with a silk bag appropriate for display and use within each of the three types of settings, and that was done for *White Dew*.

The paulownia wood box is just a cover for another box of a hard, fine-grained wood beautifully constructed with sharp bevels on all edges, including those of the flat lid. A new gold silk cord with a blue-and-white center stripe secures the lid; but the old, frayed purple cord has been kept in the box. The only writing on the lid is the name *Shimbei* in gold lacquer.

Three compartments within the box hold the three bags, or *shifuku*. The *shin* bag is given the place of honor in the center, and the corners of that compartment are fitted with three-sided columns covered by beige-figured blue silk damask, while the bottom is lined in the same fabric. The fabric selected for the *shin* bag is a type of silk damask called *Kiyomizu* fragment because it was used to cover the 1691 record of parishioners compiled by the *Kiyomizu* Temple in Kyoto. The



use of the term, plus the inscriptions by *Kobori Gonjuro*, suggest a rather precise time-between 1691 and 1694 - when the bags were prepared and the inner boxes and *hikiya* were inscribed by *Gonjuro*. Chinese textiles of the "*Kiyomizu* fragment" type seem to have been woven in the first half of the seventeenth century. On *White Dew's* *shin* bag, the satin-weave ground is dark blue, while pattern wefts of sky blue, two shades of green gold and white are used to work a large-scale, realistic, gardenlike motif of flowering shrubs and rocks. The bag is lined with golden-brown figured silk twill, and secured with a thick, round braided cord of the same shade. All the cords of the display bags are tied with a distinctive trefoil knot that shows they are empty.

The fabric for the *gyo* bag is described on the lid as "antique gold brocade," and its design -worked in goldwrapped pattern-weft threads against a blue-green silk twill ground - is identical to the fabric that appears on the mountings of certain paintings belonging to important fifteenth-century

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"seven jewels." The lining silk is the same blue green, while the cord is beige.

The third shifuku, for informal Tea, makes use of a type of Indian woven silk that was shipped to Japan in great quantities along seventeenth-century trade routes that passed through the Chinese port of Guangdong (Canton), and so became known to the Japanese as kanto. One Japanese port that received such fabrics was Kagoshima, in the Kyushu province of Satsuma: hence the name, "Satsuma Canton." The deep rose of what was probably a South Indian sari is ornamented with green, yellow, and white figured stripes worked with pattern-warp threads on a drawn-loom device. The bag is lined with the same figured silk twill as the shin bag, and is secured with a deep blue cord.

In the process of returning White Dew to its storage bag, hikiya, and box, reconstructing the bundle and tying it up in the sky-blue cloth, one is struck by how many people's labor has contributed to that bundle: the potter, of course; several owners and tea-school masters; all the craftspeople whose work went into the sewn cloth and bags, the joined boxes and turned hikiya; the lacquerers; the man who turned the ivory lid; the cord-makers. Further removed yet no less important, are the dyers and weavers in China who produced the fabrics sewn into the bags. One might even include Bishop Henjo, who wrote his "poem about green willows." In the creation of a jar like White Dew, out of an anonymous little pot selected from among hundreds of similar pots, there was a conscious effort to integrate it on many dimensions into the flow of Japanese cultural traditions. It was, ultimately, a communal effort of imagination, spurred by a shared reverence for self-effacing craftsmanship. Without that, White Dew is just another pot; all pots, indeed, are just another pot.

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