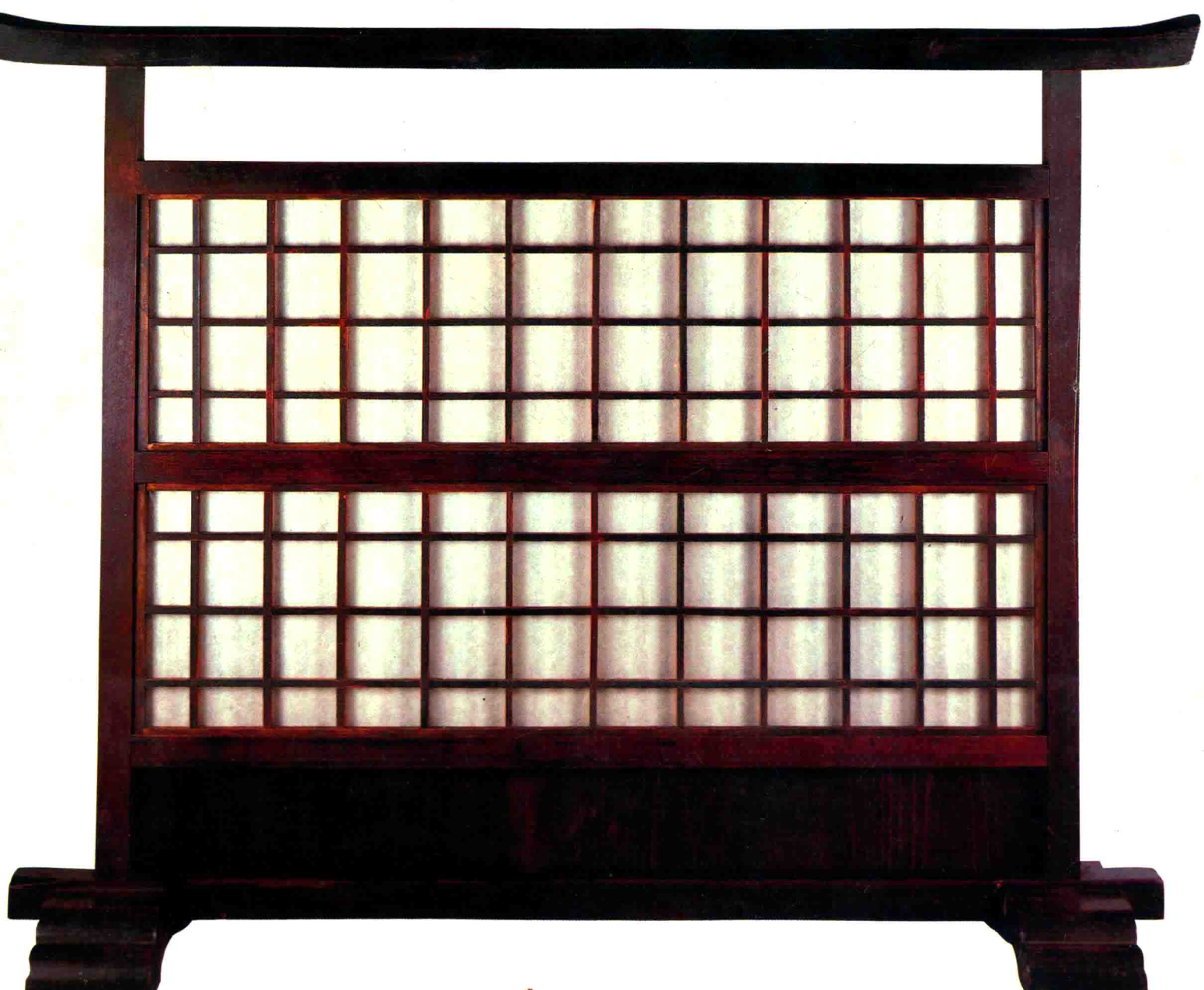
TRADITIONAL JAPANESE FURNITURE



Kazuko Koizumi

TRADITIONAL JAPANESE FURNITURE

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Translated by Alfred Birnbaum

KODANSHA INTERNATIONAL LTD.
Tokyo, New York, and San Francisco

Title page: Stairway chest.

Pieces on pages 6 and 7: From the left along the perimeter, a six-panel folding screen, various chests, and an apothecary chest (above). In the foreground, a *zataku* dining table, *zabuton* cushions, an armrest, and a metal hibachi.

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Additional photography by Eiji Kōri and Masashi Ogura. Line drawings for the Illustrated History of Japanese Furniture by Ritta Nakanishi.

The Japanese surname precedes the given name in the text, following the customary Japanese order. The author's name and those listed in the Acknowledgments follow the Western convention.

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INTRODUCTION

Japanese traditional furniture reached its highest level of perfection and craftsmanship in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, and products of this period are among the most cherished in and outside of Japan. Most pieces in Western collections belong to this era. Since up to now a great many Japanese furnishings have found their way abroad unaccompanied by any identifying background information whatsoever, there is a very real priority for providing accurate information in this direction. This book has been conceived in part as a guide for collecting and appreciating these "mysterious" items.

The broad overview of the types of Japanese furniture presented in Part 1 forms the heart of the book. Coverage has been limited to those common household effects developed and used from around the beginning of the Edo period (1600–1868) on into the Meiji era (1868–1912). This selection suggests itself for a number of reasons.

First, the time frame chosen corresponds to that historical period when the Japanese people had brought their traditions in furniture to the highest level of development, traditions that still form the basis for Japanese furniture today. For even amidst markedly increasing Western influence over lifestyles and the living environment, when most traditional Japanese furnishings have fallen into disuse, pieces of this period are valuable for understanding the furniture of contemporary Japan.

Second, there is the difficulty of covering every single type of furniture in Japan's lengthy history. People of different social classes and occupational backgrounds varied in the furnishings they used; the sheer diversity is overwhelming. Covered here, then, are the major types of furniture and furnishings along with their most important and interesting variations.

Third, the fact that furniture of the recent past survives in relatively greater numbers makes it possible to study the actual pieces, old and recent photographs, and precise reference drawings. Needless to say, such materials are invaluable for illuminating the text.

The history section is intended to supplement the information in the first section, offering a perspective on the intricate and changing relationship between architecture and furnishings from ancient times to the present.

The final section on techniques rounds out the study, paralleling the historical and cultural dimensions to Japanese furniture with an examination of such equally important technical aspects as joinery, finishing, and metalwork, along with a step-by-step examination of procedures for lacquer and metal fitting techniques.

Articles introduced to represent Japanese furniture in this book have been selected with an eye to their aesthetic role in the living environment (except where exclusion might lead to an imbalance in the category as a whole). Hence such pieces of kitchen equipment as pots and kettles have been excluded from consideration. On the other hand, lanterns and certain other items not usually regarded as "furniture" in the Western sense are included because many of these pieces have considerable artistic value, and because of the broad meaning that the word *kagu* (see below) at one time carried.

THE CONCEPT OF *KAGU*

As a point of departure, it should be noted that the term *kagu*—literally "house-makings," though rendered variously as "furniture," "furnishings," or "household effects"—has continually fluctuated in meaning over the course of history. Even today, definitions have sizable "gray areas." Such ambiguities are not limited to Japan, however, for even in the West, different countries and peoples have their own view of what is and what is not "furniture." Where some would proceed from the idea of *meubles*—"movables"—others might insist that even such built-ins as fireplaces ought to be included.

In the case of Japan, one especially problematic borderline area is that of kitchen equipment: should cookstoves (*kamado*), well-housings (*ido*), pots (*nabe*), and kettles (*kama*) be regarded as *kagu*? Or perhaps even more difficult, there is the question of how to deal with pieces whose status has changed dramatically according to the times; for example, trays (*bon*), which up until the Meiji era were in common use as individual place-settings for meals, have since ceased to be regarded as *kagu* with the widespread adoption of the Western concept of dining at a table. Then, there are tatami floormats, now built-in flooring, though in ancient and medieval Japan they were hauled about and positioned for sitting and sleeping. Doorway curtains (*noren*) likewise no longer seem to meet the popular notion of *kagu*, yet they too had once been important as a type of partition. Architectural innovations have effectively absorbed their role as furniture.

A related problem is that the very word *kagu* has a limited history of use. In fact, terms for furniture have changed with nearly every period. In written records of the Nara period (710–94), furnishings apparently came under such blanket headings as "holdings" (*shizai*), "odds-and-ends" (*zatsu-butsu*), "installed items" (*hosetsu-butsu*), or "trappings" (*shōzoku*). In the Heian period (794–1185), the most common usages were "equipage" (*chōdo*), and again "trappings," while in the Kamakura period (1185–1333), the terminology shifted to "fittings" (*gusoku*), "honorable items" (*gyomotsu*), and "properties" (*kizai*). The Edo period brought out still different expressions, among them "implements" (*dōgu*), "indoor properties" (*okuzai*), and "household properties" (*kazai*).

What is striking here is that historical investigation fails to come up with any single comprehensive word for articles in the home. At the very least, the things these words describe did not necessarily always conform to the modern idea of furniture. Take *chōdo*, for instance, which carried such diverse meanings as small personal accessories, metal architectural trim, and bows and arrows. Or *dōgu*, originally a Buddhist term for articles used in religious training, whence usage gradually broadened to include any implement for whatever end, far beyond the bounds of mere furnishings.

Even the word *kagu* itself seems to have meant something different than it does today. First coined in the Kamakura period, the "house-makings" in question at the time were things like roof beams and rafters—actual structural elements. Paradoxically, period writings also contain such combined phrasings as *wan kagu*, the "complementary article to the *wan* (bowl)"—in this case a tray-table (*zen*).

It is no coincidence that the word *kagu* attained its current meaning only as recently as the Meiji era, after the importation of Western furniture. For once the Japanese came in contact with these new chairs, tables, and beds, they were hard put to apply such existing vocabularies as *kazai* and *dōgu*, and so coined the neologism *seiyō kagu* ("Western house-makings"). And, of course, as new concepts lend themselves to new distinctions, it seemed natural to contrast these with the more familiar accouterments of the Japanese home. So that sometime between the end of the Meiji era and the beginning of the Taishō (1912–26), Japanese-style chests (*tansu*), shelving (*todana*), and the like came to be called simply *kagu*. Needless to say, this left the definition somewhat hazy, the bounds varying according to the purposes of discussion.

One more important consideration toward establishing general characteristics in Japanese furniture is that the Japanese have traditionally lived at floor level, as op-

posed to using chairs and beds. While every culture certainly began with floor-level lifestyles in primitive times, most evolved to living at chair height with the advance of civilization. Yet for some reason, Japanese civilization has retained the custom of floor-seating. Even more curious is the fact that the custom of chair-seating has found its way to Japan from abroad repeatedly over the course of history, and had at times even been adopted in part, but never made a lasting mark. The present chair-seated lifestyle really only caught on in the post–World War II era. Reasons why chair-seating did not "take" are suggested in the introduction to the historical chapters; meanwhile, suffice it to say that the choice not to have such raised furnishings as beds, tables, desks, and chairs in the living environment has to a great extent shaped the face of traditional Japanese furniture.

THE CONCEPT OF *SHITSURAI*

The essentially floor-level lifestyle of the Japanese meant that there was no need to develop raised furniture for seating and reclining. Hence one does not find legs or stands on Japanese furniture, not even on chests and cabinets. Everything stays low, within reach from a sitting position on the floor.

Next, it should be pointed out that floor-seating has tended to dictate a strong frontality in furnishings. Living at chair height frees people to move about the room, and such mobility brings the sides and even the backs of chests and cabinets into view, encouraging more volumetric designs. People seated on the floor, however, see things from a fixed perspective, which places proportionately greater emphasis on the frontal aspects. Hence singularly frontal designs are the rule; little or no consideration is given to the backs or sides of pieces.

Another significant feature is that Japanese furniture works to wholly systematize interiors within a standard architectural frame. This "from the floor up" approach to furnishing was traditionally called *shitsurai*, and dates from the beginnings of modular residential architecture in the mid–Heian period *shinden* style (see pages 158–59). This style was characterized by an extreme sparseness, interiors virtually bare stagelike settings of wooden floors and columns and little else. In order to render such space livable, doorway curtains (*noren*) and folding screens (*byōbu*) had to first partition off an area, in which tatami matting would be laid down, and then a low table or free-standing shelf set in place; only then could it function as a room. *Shitsurai* thus meant the act of providing and arranging articles so as to create a room for some given purpose or activity, and in fact it was *shitsurai* that made for the extreme versatility of *shinden*-style villas, where otherwise existed no special-purpose rooms such as sleeping chambers or dining halls. While this architectural style gradually changed over the course of Japan's middle ages (1185–1573), and eventually developed into the *shoin* style (see page 165) with fully partitioned rooms, which in turn continued up to modern times, the practice of *shitsurai* was passed on intact directly from the *shinden* to the *shoin* styles. Yet even here, the partitions had nothing of the solidity of Western or Chinese walls. Instead, there now were removable sliding-door panels (*fusuma*) and translucent paper panels (*shōji*). Furthermore, there continued to develop a whole battery of independent partition devices along the lines of the folding screens, doorway curtains, and *sudare* blinds. This trend was an entirely characteristic product of the tradition of *shitsurai* and the idea of "set in place" living arrangements.

Conversely, another characteristic offshoot of the *shitsurai* tradition was the tendency for once-independent furniture items to become functionally absorbed into the architecture. Free-standing shelves soon came to be built in place, while cabinets for bedding were tucked away in the walls as *oshiire* (literally "push-in" bedding closets). As a result, certain furnishings utterly lost their "occasional" status and appearance.

The idea of standard dimensions and interchangeable modular units also seems to have developed from much the same basic thinking. Even today, tatami, *fusuma*, and *shōji* all have the exact same 3- by 6-foot (90- by 180-centimeter) measurements (there are regional variations, but the concept remains the same), making it possible

to outfit (*shitsuraeru*) rooms of various sizes using multiples of these units. *Sudare* blinds come in standard 3- and 6-foot (90- and 180-centimeter) widths; broader window areas need only be hung with the appropriate number of units. *Tansu* may likewise be stacked chest-on-chest, and broken down for carrying by attached handles. Even tray-tables are made to allow stacking to impressive heights, as can still frequently be seen in traditional inns and restaurants. Such systematization of the furnishings had no parallel in the West until the advent of modern industrial society, yet it characterized Japanese furniture from early history.

LINEARITY, ASYMMETRY, AND FINISH

The most immediately apparent formal characteristic of Japanese furniture is its linearity. The *tansu*, for instance, is almost a box compared to Western chests of drawers, with their elliptical designs or intricately curved façades, replete with ornamental carving and fluting. Tables also are blocklike and simple, with legs that, excluding some ceremonial tables with legs that exhibit more fluidity, also tend toward boxlike forms.

There is probably no simple answer as to why the straight-line format should predominate, but one reason that does suggest itself is the wood-frame construction of Japanese buildings. For whereas other traditions in furniture are matched to more "sculptural" stone or earthen buildings, Japanese furniture might well echo the rectilinear, exposed post-and-beam structural joinery of Japanese architecture.

One more salient formal characteristic to be cited is that of simplicity. Unlike European furniture in which wood, leather, metal, even stone and other materials might be laboriously tooled into highly involved combinations, there is little striving after complicated effects in Japanese furniture. There apparently had been leanings in this direction in the Nara period, but from the Heian period on construction rarely went beyond wood with metal fittings or ornamentation, eschewing more diverse materials.

On the level of design, there was a decided preference for asymmetry. Needless to say, this taste was not limited to furniture, but extended to gardens and architecture itself, and to a broad range of plastic and decorative arts. Though a key feature in the aesthetic sensibilities of the Japanese, this preference for the asymmetric was not apparent from the very outset. There had always existed, on the one hand, the symmetric ideal, from which asymmetry was sought through the "relaxation" of form. That is to say, there were formal levels of stringency or propriety in design, as in the breakdown of calligraphy into formal, semiformal and cursive scripts (*shin, gyō, sō*). When applied to furniture, the most formal designs display an exacting symmetry, while semiformal and informal styles are progressively freer in conception. As was the case with so many cultural imports from China, where the Chinese had, and still do, prefer the quintessential formality of *shin* furnishings, the Japanese repeatedly chose to "play" upon the severe original forms, effecting *gyō* or *sō* alterations: throwing that shifted poise slightly off center, the stolid weight lightened, the aloof fixity injected with varying degrees of dynamism, even humor. There is, of course, a definite risk of overextending this breakdown process; the trick is to catch things right at that "just so" point of balance. A sensitivity to just such subtleties lies at the heart of the Japanese genius for design.

Numerous cultural and psychological factors would seem to contribute to this Japanese preference for the asymmetric, and no simple explanation suffices. However, it should be noted that many otherwise rigid or monotonous rectilinear designs in both architecture and furniture are in fact "saved" by the element of asymmetry,

Finally, there is an attention to the beauty of finish and detailing. Since the interest of Japanese furniture generally has little to do with the complexity of shapes themselves, aesthetic qualities are expressed mainly in surface treatment. In the case of wood furniture, this takes two forms: one is the cosmetic application of lacquer or decorative *maki-e* lacquer designs, typically in delicate, lyrical pictorial representations or symbols from nature; another is the rendering of the wood itself into the object of aesthetic appreciation. This latter approach aims either to emphasize the

beauty of unfinished wood (*shiraki*) or to bring out a pleasing wood-grain effect (*moku-me*).

As a rule, light-colored woods such as cypress, cryptomeria, pine, paulownia, and magnolia are left unfinished, and convey a sense of purity. Hence, the newer the materials, the better. With richly grained woods like zelkova, mulberry, boxwood, cherry, maple, black persimmon, walnut, and imported *karaki* woods, common practice is to heighten the sheen with thin layers of *fuki-urushi* lacquer, or with a coat of transparent *kijiro* or *shunkei* lacquers.

Of the two, the eye attuned to plain, unfinished *shiraki* seems a uniquely Japanese sensibility. Elsewhere in the world, the taste for wood grain runs strong: in the West, from Gothic to English country furniture, and particularly in Baroque and Roccoco furniture parquetry; in the Orient, Chinese and Korean Yi dynasty chests are exemplary. Yet probably no other culture exhibits such fondness for fresh, clean, planed wood surfaces. Very recently, some furniture coming out of Scandinavia in particular has begun to feature plain pine for its aesthetic value, but this is largely due to a Japanese influence on the vocabulary of Modernism.

Just how and when the Japanese came to this appreciation of unfinished wood is difficult to pinpoint. The most that can be said is that it relates to certain indigenous religious beliefs existing on the Japanese archipelago from before the transmission of Buddhism in 538, and specifically to the cult of purity and abstinence from defilements. The Grand Shrine of Ise (see page 151) and other shrine architecture is of plain wood, as are almost all ritual implements of Shinto. For fundamental to their design was the understanding that all utensil objects, architecture included, were to be discarded after use. This clearly ties in with the nature of woods such as Japanese cypress and cryptomeria—fragrant and beautifully bright when new, but all too quickly soiled.

While any conscious valuation of unfinished wood that existed prior to the influx of Chinese culture was no doubt limited to a priest-aristocracy, such awareness still remains strongly rooted in the cultural life of the Japanese people even today.