

Introduction



In Japanese construction and architecture, the term *tategu* refers to internal and external doors and windows, and those who make and install *tategu* are called *tateguya*, or *tategushi*. Besides its purely functional role of closing off or partitioning the internal space, protecting against the elements, providing relief against the harsh sun, and security, *tategu* is the one element of construction that allows a personal decorative touch. Architectural design of the home — traditional or contemporary, Japanese or Western — allows the owner to make an overall statement, but it's the *tategu* that gives the owner the opportunity to express individual

flair, and his or her own personality. Quiet serenity, or a more lively ambience; formal, or family oriented; traditional, or modern — all moods can be communicated with minor variations in how the *tategu* are designed. And it's the skill of the *tateguya* that can give life to the owner's aspirations.

Above all else, *tategu* has to meet three criteria: it must be light — it should be able to open and close or slide freely without hindrance, and it must not appear heavy, so consideration for design, structure and material relative to its location and func-

tion is vital; it must be durable — selection of timber type is crucial so that the *tategu* remains serviceable for many years, but at the same meets the first criterion; and it must be attractive — beauty in structure, material and form within the first two criteria are essential elements for conveying the desired atmosphere or mood.

The shoji doors and windows we are familiar with in the West are just one part of the *tateguya's* craft, albeit a very important part, and the vast range of structures and designs that can be incorporated into shoji perhaps more than any other element of *tategu* allows tremendous scope for a distinctive feel and functionality within a room or other living space. The term shoji itself means something that “blocks off” (light) or “obstructs” (a view).

I first came into contact with Japanese culture when studying the language in 1974, and very quickly became captivated by the Japanese sense of aesthetics, shoji in particular. The paper backing in shoji fills the room with a gentle soft light, and introduces an element of ambiguity so valued by the Japanese. The play of light and shadows on the paper allows the outline to be discerned, but not clearly enough to be identified. The object can be seen, but not seen.

Shoji are so much more than just thin pieces of wood held in a frame with paper stuck on the back. To the Japanese they are a way of life, a constant that has been a part of their character for a thousand years, and even amid the present trend of a gradual shift away from traditional Japanese style houses, the sense of warmth and comfort projected by shoji ensures that they will remain within the Japanese spirit for centuries to come.

This is a book about shoji, specifically, how to make basic shoji. In formulating the structure of the book, I wanted to provide enough options that would enable woodworkers to make a set of shoji through which they could express their own individuality without making the process overly com-

plex. I've tried to keep the instructions clear and to the point, but I've also added snippets of information where I thought they would be helpful or of interest.

This is not a book of photographs of shoji. There are many glossy colored photo books presenting a range of beautiful shoji amid ideal settings whose photos are better than anything I could present. I do, however, provide a large number of photos and diagrams explaining how to make the shoji and kumiko patterns I've included, which is the aim of this book. Nor is this a book giving advice on how to tear down and reinstall a door or window frame to fit the shoji you make. Window and door frames are different from country to country, and from region to region, so if you are not confident that you have the necessary knowledge or experience, you should hire a qualified carpenter to do this framing work for you. The information provided in this book will enable you to give the carpenter clear instructions on the groove measurements.

Without the expensive and high-tech machinery available to the larger *tategu* businesses in Japan, and by the very nature of shoji and kumiko work, woodworkers in the West must rely heavily on hand tools and their hand skills when building shoji, as *shokunin* had to do in the past before the advent of modern technology and computer-controlled accuracy. Shoji and kumiko work requires extremely high levels of accuracy, and precise joinery, so to start I list a series of exercises that I strongly recommend you complete to give you practice in the hand skills necessary for cutting the joints in shoji frames and kumiko. These exercises will very quickly let you know about your cutting techniques and the areas you need to concentrate on so that the joinery in your shoji and the internal kumiko are straight, square and tight.

I'll then give detailed instructions on making a set of standard shoji doors (scaled down), covering all processes from calculating dimensions, preparing

the frame and cutting the kumiko, through to attaching shoji paper and fitting it into its grooves, including how to make the minor adjustments necessary so that it sits flush with the side pillars. I'll also discuss some of the variations you can apply to the shoji joinery to make them more distinctive, and I'll give a comprehensive list of jigs for you to make that will help you work more accurately and efficiently.

After the standard shoji, I'll give a detailed step-by-step guide on making a shoji with a hip-board, a slightly more complex kumiko pattern, and a variation on the rail/stile joinery. In the third set of shoji, I'll lay the groundwork for a very attractive design in the next book — *kōzu* — and introduce two kumiko patterns — *asa-no-ha* and *izutsu-tsunagi* — that form the basis for many other more intricate patterns. This is the fun part of shoji, and I'll give detailed instructions and dimensioned diagrams for each of these patterns. There are three different ways of making the *asa-no-ha* pattern, and I'll cover each in detail.

However, before we embark on our journey into the fascinating — and at times frustrating — world of shoji, I will devote some pages to the Japanese hand plane — the *kanna*. For the vast majority of my shoji and kumiko work, I use Japanese tools, and apart from the use of a Western block plane in some jigs, I only use Japanese planes. The *kanna* is an outstanding tool, but it can be very difficult to set up and maintain. Many woodworkers in the West have tried *kanna*, only to give up in understandable exasperation when they could not get it to work. Therefore in the first part of this book I cover all aspects of the *kanna* at length, specifically the four main types you will use for the shoji detailed in this book, so that if you do decide to take the plunge and try a *kanna*, you will at least know how to set it up and maintain it so that it can perform at its peak.