

“Zen” Tray Tables

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While it is not true that the Japanese did not know about furniture (They had imported the idea of tables, chairs, desks, and other items from the mainland during the eighth century Nara period.) it is true that they have always been primarily a floor-seated culture. Starting with the high-culture of the Heian period in the ninth century, Japan returned to its traditional roots and it basically stayed there until modern times. Now this does not mean that Japan did not have any furniture, just that much of the indoor furniture was designed for the benefit of one seated on the floor. One of the most varied types of floor furniture are the low tray-tables that are generally called “zen”.



A zen is a tray, often lacquered, that has some kind of base that raises it a bit closer to the diner, and enables the fingers of the serve to get below the tray when it is being placed on or lifted from the floor. The particular type of the tray-table is determined by the type of base or legs it has. The footed “takatsuki” tray, with its tapering round base, is probably most familiar to us today, as it was used by nobility as far back as the Heian period. The butterfly-legged “chouashi-zen”, and cat’s paw legged “nekoashi-zen” are used in scrolls to denote status, as the butterfly-leg zen was more suited for higher classes and cat’s-paw-leg for retainers and servants. In later period, the broad-pedestaled “tsuigasane” gains popularity, and it is very similar to pedestals used to present offerings in temples.

Some of these items are difficult to recreate, and I am not sure how they would have been made in period. The takatsuki for instance has a base that would be most easily turned on a lathe, but lathes were not common in Japan until almost modern times. Many of the shapes in various zen are quite clearly hand-carved, but this is labor-intensive and not conducive to making the large numbers of these we might need for our recreation activities. Most of the simpler designs are either more intended for commoners, or too modern for our use.

The main breakthrough for me came when I noticed a detail in a close-up photo of a commercially available tsuigasane tray. These trays are still used in traditional Shinto ceremonies, and a few retailers custom make them available for purchase. In the angled “sumikiri” clipped corner of an octagonal tray, I noticed dark gaps in the wood. A technique called “kerf bending” was obviously used to remove wood at the corners, so that only a thin surface of the wood was being bent. The gaps are created by sawing out wood to leave room for the edges of the cut to move together during the bend, I tried this method on my table saw with some birch-face plywood, and decided the method was workable.

It should be possible to cut enough pieces from a single 4’x8’ sheet of plywood (~\$25) to make six tsuigasane. A regular tables saw can be used to cut each piece to size, and a regular table saw blade can be used to cut the 1/8” kerfs that provide each 22.5 degree bend at the corners. the plywood must have high-quality wood on its outer face, or it will crack during bending. Steaming or other moistening of the wood may be necessary to facilitate bending, but once the pieces are shaped they can be glued together and the resulting object painted.

<http://www.eeOr.com/sca/mokkou/>

Scans from "the Koizumi furniture book":

Koizumi, Kazuko

Traditional Japanese Furniture; A Definitive Guide

Tokyo and New York

Kodansha International

1989 (1986)



105. Footed tray (*takatsuki*)
Approx. H. 8. W. 12, D. 12 in. (20, 30, 30 cm.)
Negoro lacquer

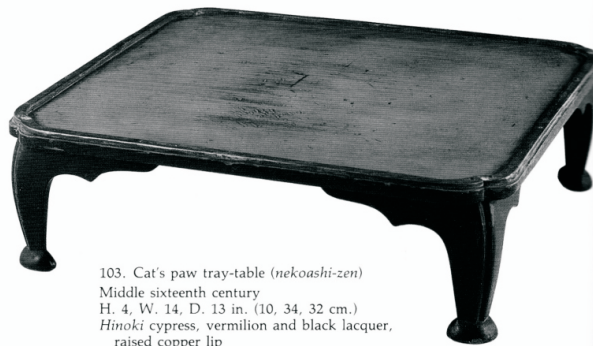


106. Broad-pedestaled tray (*tsuigasane*)
Middle sixteenth century
Approx. H. 7, W. 15, D. 15 in. (18, 40, 40 cm.)
Negoro lacquer

MEALTIME FURNISHINGS



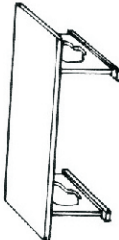


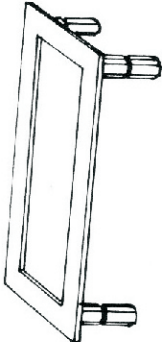
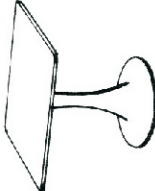
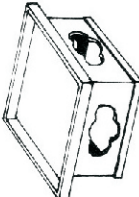
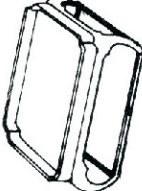


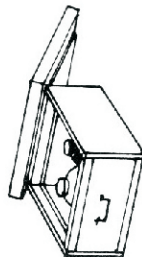

102. Butterfly-legged tray-table with bowls
(*chôashi-zen* with *wan*)
Early eighteenth century
H. 5, W. 15, D. 15 in. (12, 36, 36 cm.)
Mother-of-pearl inlay, *maki-e*



103. Cat's paw tray-table (*nekoashi-zen*)
Middle sixteenth century
H. 4, W. 14, D. 13 in. (10, 34, 32 cm.)
Hinoki cypress, vermillion and black lacquer,
raised copper lip

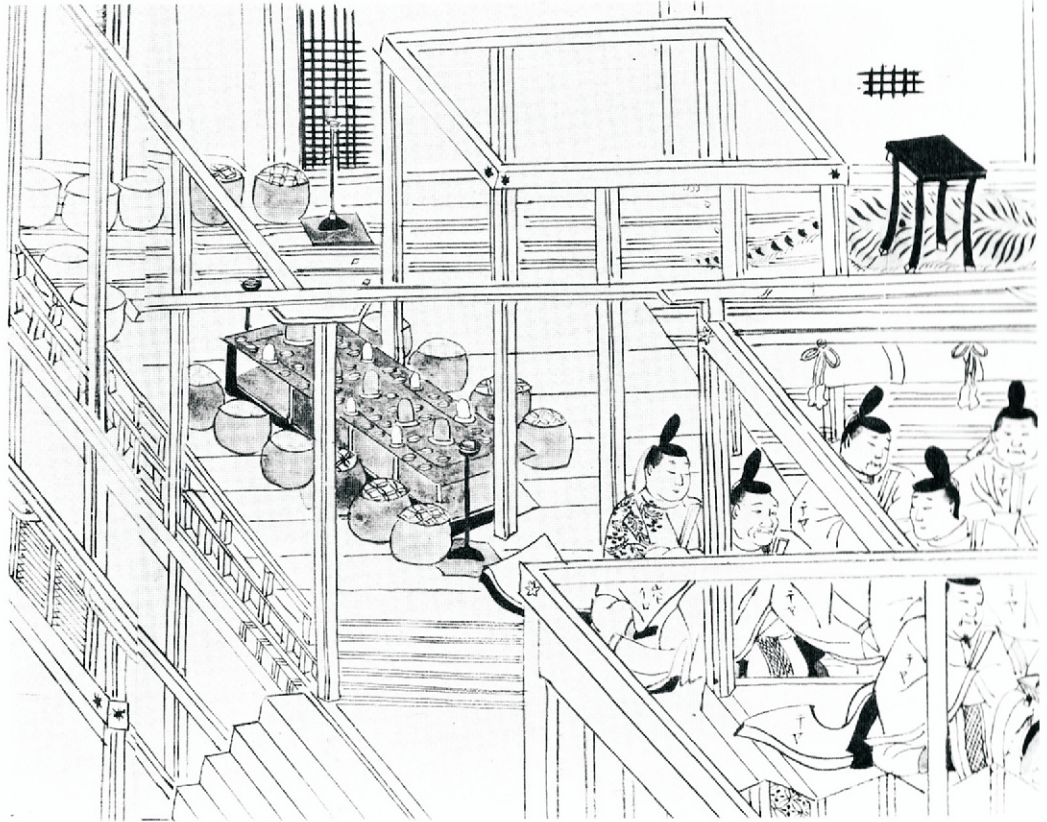


104. Box-legged tray (*kakeban*)
Late sixteenth century
H. 10, W. 17, D. 17 in. (25, 44, 44 cm.)
Maki-e, black lacquer

ANCIENT	MEDIEVAL	PREMODERN
 <p>table</p>  <p>footed tray</p>  <p>place-setting tray</p>  <p>banquet table</p>	 <p>footed tray</p>  <p>broad-pedestaled tray</p>  <p>box-legged tray-table</p>	 <p>butterfly leg tray-table</p>  <p>tray</p>  <p>boxed tray-table</p>  <p>plain wood tray-table</p>
MEALTIME FURNISHINGS		

Neijū-gyōji-emaki (detail of a copy of the original of c. 1160): Scroll 5, scene 4. Ink and light colours on paper. H. 45.8 cm. Private collection.

Following the New Year banquet a contest in the composition of Chinese poems is being held in the Jijū-den Hall behind the Shishinden. The emperor is participating in disguise. Behind the great men stands a laid table and stools for the diners.



Screen capture from the film:
Kagemusha (1980)
dir. Kurosawa, Akira



Screen capture from the film:
Sanjuro (1962)
dir. Kurosawa, Akira

How to get parts for six tsuigasane tray-tables from a single piece of 1/4 inch plywood.

