

Kawagoe-Wealth, Status and Practicality

Story and photo by Bill Tingey

Despite the nation's long heritage of wooden architecture, many young people in Japan today regard traditional timber buildings as something of a refreshing novelty. This is hardly surprising given that so many of the archipelago's urban conurbations are consumed by an ever expanding army of concrete and steel monstrosities that reflect little or nothing of Japan's climate and culture.

Nevertheless, not everything about wood as a building material is good. Fire is and always has been its natural enemy. When Tokyo was known as Edo, fires were so numerous that they were referred to as the "flowers of Edo". One of the worst was the Meireki fire of 1657, when more than 100,000 people lost their lives and a vast tract of land was razed. Fires would sometimes be whipped up by the dry seasonal winds that blow in the winter months and fire would leap hungrily from one tasty wooden morsel to the next, callously leaving ash and tears in its wake. Clearly some kind of protection was needed.

In the Middle Ages the wooden-framed plastered store houses of the pawn broker were a rare sight among the forest of wooden buildings in towns up and down the country. They were a relatively simple affair with daub or plastered walls and roof that needed protection from wind and rain. This was provided by a simple additional deep-eaved roof which could be dragged off if a fire broke out nearby, meaning that no combustible materials would be in direct contact with the plastered surfaces.

Apart from providing some practical protection against fire these store houses became a symbol of the wealth of their owner and by the end of the 19th century they had been developed into a sophisticated style of shop-cum-storehouse known as *mise-kura*.

It was in Edo that this style was favored most and by the time the capital's name was changed to Tokyo at the end of the 19th century, many main shopping streets were lined with these imposing buildings with their thickly plastered

somewhat sombre-looking black walls and heavily tiled grey roofs.

Explanations of why they were black are various and hark back to the infancy of the style. Some say, for example, it was out of respect, because samurai storehouses were white. Others say it was because white would have been too dazzling. Still others say that after a fire, when all around them had literally gone up in smoke, the blackened and charred walls were visible testimony of the building's ability to resist fire. In whichever case, the black finish of these merchant thrones was an integral part of a design that incorporated a number of exaggerated features of vernacular architecture, such as high roof ridges and decorative ridge-end tiles, heavy eaves and gables. The inter-locking shutter doors - *kannonbiraki* - at the windows were an interesting design feature when open, but were quickly closed when a fire broke out and the remaining cracks were sealed with a specially prepared mud kept handy for the job. Sometimes *miso* - soya bean paste - was used.

Sadly, these shops were unable to resist the ravages of earthquake and war, or the relentless march of fashion and their demise in Tokyo was inevitable. A number of these distinctive buildings do, however, remain in Kawagoe. The most impressive is Kameya that sports all the main features of a style of architecture skillfully combining practicality and status, while still



Kameya - Practicality combined with symbols of wealth and status

relying on wood for its structure.

Wood, of course, is the staple material of many of Japan's crafts. In the case of Edo Art Dolls, fine paulownia sawdust was mixed with fresh funorin and pressed into molds. Individual elements of figures representing kabuki and non performers and other traditional characters were pieced together, painted and clothed, the edges of the garments being tucked into groves strategically left for the purpose. Formally such dolls were often displayed in the traditional *mise-kura*. They were a delicate display of the taste and refinement of their owners, while the shops themselves were a demonstrative representation of the merchant's wealth and status. And both have seen the millennium in.



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Located in Saitama Prefecture, Kawagoe is on the JR Kawagoe Line, the Seibu Shinjuku line and the Tobu Tojo line, and can be reached in about an hour from central Tokyo. Kameya is a few minutes walk north of the train station. Go to the Kura-zukuri Shiryō-kan (Tel: 0492-25-4287 / Closed Mondays, every fourth Friday and the New Year holiday) to learn more about the shop storehouse style. See and purchase Edo Art Dolls and other traditional crafts at the Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo Tel: 03-3403-2460.

