

Inami — Ornaments of the Vernacular

Story and photo by Bill Tingey

The traditional Japanese house has changed little in the last four-hundred years and is still being developed. It is universally recognized as a masterpiece of structural and spatial order and, although many foreign architects and designers try to emulate its simplicity and functional excellence, a recreation of its true qualities is usually beyond their reach. They cannot, after all, draw on the generations of accumulated knowledge and common sense that have gone into its development. It is the epitome of vernacular architecture — climate conscious, regionally modified and stylistically varied.

Wood, paper, clay, bamboo, metal, reed, cloth, and earth occasionally augmented by plaster are the materials used. Each has its place and the inherent qualities of all are skillfully expressed and readily appreciated. Glass is the only new material that has been added to this ensemble which is a stage for life, customs, habits and experiences. Decoration, if any, is generally restrained. A great variety of motifs — birds, flowers, insects, the paraphernalia of life — can be found gracing the recessed pulls of the space dividing screens; and the orderly arrangement of elements of the translucent paper window screens are sometimes worked into intriguing designs or abstracted scenes to provide a decorative effect.

In some houses, however, considerable ornamentation can be found above the wall lintel between two rooms in the form of an open-work transom. It is thought that their origin goes back to when oil lamps were kept burning in a special room in front of an image of the Buddha and commemorative tablets of the deceased. In ancient times, buildings of many types had no ceilings and any sooty smoke from these lamps would have drifted up into the roof members

unhindered. When ceilings came into use during medieval times, however, some way had to be found to allow the smoke to escape from these rooms. Transom grills of vertical bars were the first answer to this problem but gradually they were seen not only as something functional but as a 'canvas' for decorative expression. The fact that these carved screens were not in direct view is perhaps consistent with the Japanese liking for indirectness, although it does not mean that the designs were not sometimes the most extravagant celebrations of the carver art.

One place which became especially famous for the carving of these transoms was Inami. A small town on the edge of the Tonami plane and inland from the Sea of Japan, Inami prospered with Buddhist sponsorship during the peaceful times of the Edo period and a great deal of carving for temples was carried out. The wood carver here enjoyed relative freedom and soon began carving domestic items such as transom screen. Although contemporary demand is steady though limited, the carving of figures and other ornaments helps the craftsmen to survive.

In Inami, a wealth of carving-in-progress can be viewed through the windows of the workshops lining the main street up to Zuisenji temple, itself a showpiece of the



Apprentices and Master at work on transom screens in Inami

wood-carver art.

Zelkova and camphor are usually used and as well as carving in the round, there is much relief carving. For the transom, the wood is cut through and designs are finished on both sides.

The work of the Inami wood-carver is bound to reside in some of the fine farm houses of the Tonami plane. They dot the area with attendant screens of trees to break seasonal winds; and their isolation is said to have arisen as a way of preventing the spread of fire.

Not far from here high up in the mountains and close by Route 156 which runs from Takaoka to Gifu are the World Heritage Sites of Taira and Shirakawa. The houses in these villages are a response to quite a different set of circumstances but, with or without decoration, they are also just one small part of the vernacular building heritage of Japan.



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Fly or take a train to Toyama and then rent a car to see all the delights of the area. Examples of many kinds of wood-carving from Inami can be seen and purchased at the Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo (03-3403-2460) or at the Inami Woodcarving Center (0763-82-5158).

