SECTION 3: THE WORK OF THE WOOD CARVER (*choukokushi*)

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INTRODUCTION

Continuing our documentation of traditional craftsmanship, using a *dentou kougen hin* (DKH) Hikone *butsudan* as an example, we are now moving on to wood carving. Of all the crafts, surely this is one with great instant appeal, where we can easily recognize the expertise involved. Whether rough and primitive or fine and delicate, we can readily feel the spirit of the artisan. Amongst carvers the world over, Japanese craftsmen are renowned for the high level of their skills. Unfortunately, as with the other skills we are documenting, today's carvers are struggling to survive. This is so even in the Hikone butsudan industry. However there is a small pocket of resistance in Shiga Prefecture.

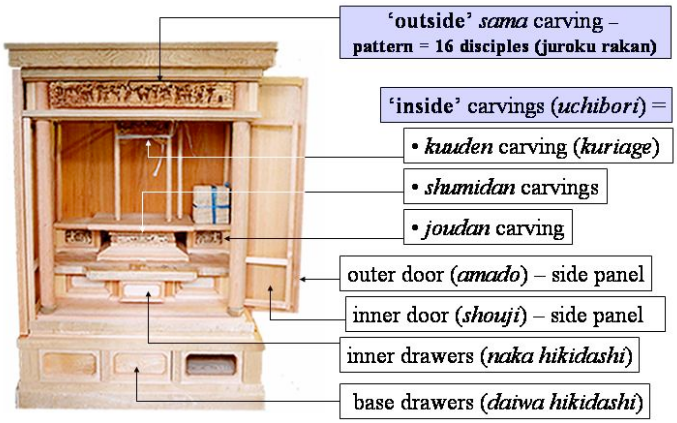
A short distance from Hikone city, the small village of Samegai is strung out along a beautiful river valley with mountains rising high on either side. Because of this location, away from any flat rice farming areas, Samegai residents long ago, turned instead to a more suitable industry, that of wood carving, specifically *butsudan* carving (FN.1). Even with the present day deterioration in religious feeling, this kind of work still predominates in the village and this is where *choukokushi*, Mori Tesso lives and works with his two sons, Yasuichiro and Tetsuo.

Tesso
and
his two sons,
Yasuichiro
and
Tetsuo
work here

Choukoku photo 01: Yasuichiro carving in their new workshop (Tesso's place is at the end sitting on a cushion)

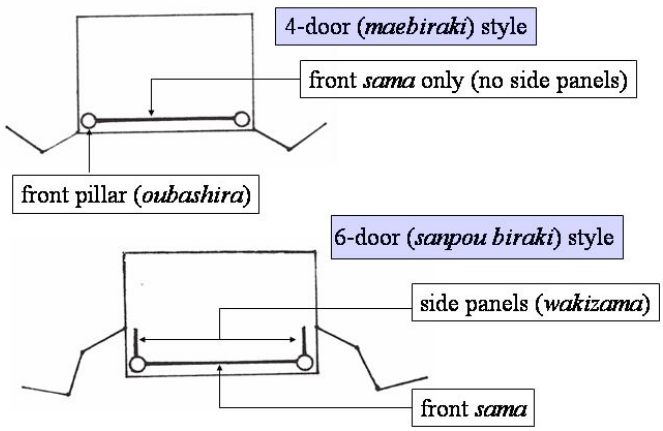
Although his sons are still apprentices, Tesso himself has the advanced DKS proficiency qualification necessary to make the carvings for a DKH *butsudan* (see general inroduction). Because of the technical skill required, it can take as long as two months to measure-up, design and make these carvings. However, since their size and shape are dependent on the dimensions of the *kiji* and *kuuden*, discussed in sections 1 and 2, naturally he cannot start until those items are finished and delivered to the manufacturer.

Each of the seven crafts that go into making a traditional *butsudan* requires long years of training and high levels of expertise and has its own special appeal. However, on first viewing a *butsudan*, it may well be the carvings that have the most immediate impact. While technically all carvings are 'inside' the *butsudan*, if the outer doors (*amado*) are open but the inner lattice doors (*shouji*) are closed, the front transom carving, or *sama*, is visible and maximally eye-catching. The *sama* is based on and looks similar to the *ranma* found in temples or the traditional rooms of a Japanese house. When the sliding doors partitioning a large room are removed, the highly decorative *ranma*, placed above the doorframe, still serves as a theoretical if not structural divider. Similarly, the *butsudan sama* marks a boundary between the outer secular world and the inner spiritual world. Thus conceptually the *choukokushi* divides his work into two parts: the 'outside' *sama* carving(s) and all the other 'inside' ones, collectively called *uchibori* or *uchi mawari*.

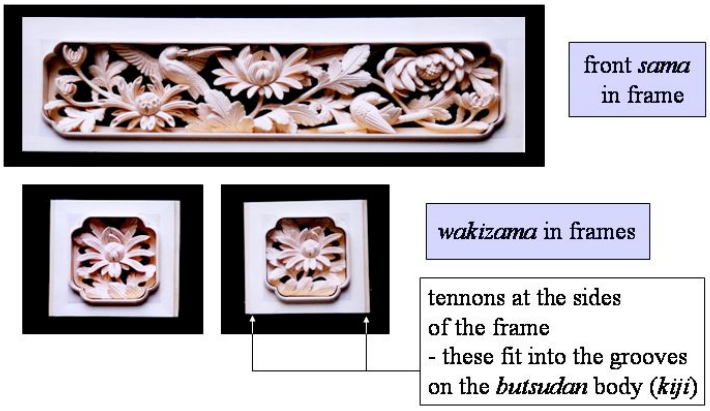


Choukoku photo 02: Joudoshuu *kiji* – ready for lacquering (*kuuden* pillars tied up for transport)

Firstly, considering the position of the *sama* carving, a four-door, *maebiraki*, *butsudan* has a single structure running across the front. In contrast, because the side door panels of a six-door, *sanpoubiraki*, *butsudan* start part way back, there is an additional smaller *wakizama* at each side.

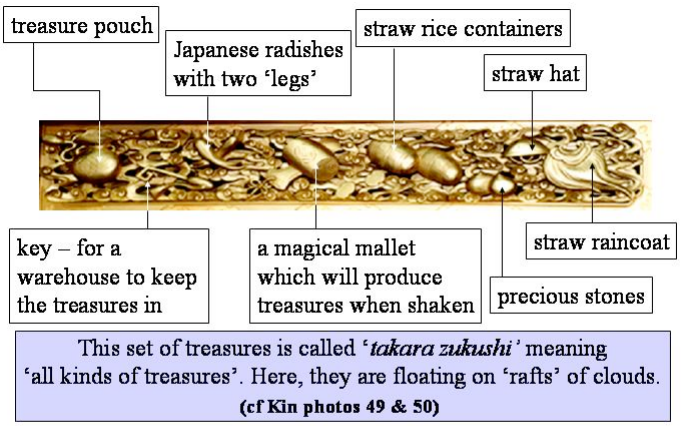


Choukoku figure 01: position of *sama* carvings on 4 and 6-door *butsudan* (viewed from above)



Choukoku photo 03: Birds and Chrysanthemums [photo courtesy of Mori Tesso]

Compared to some other styles, the *sama* on a Hikone *butsudan* is both subtle and refined (FN.2). It sits in a frame made by the *kijishi*, and depends for its effect on the beauty of the carving rather than the size. Before being installed in the *butsudan* it may be lacquered and then gilded with either gold leaf (*kinpaku*) or gold powder (*kinpun*).



Choukoku photo 04: gilded *sama* carving – complete within its frame (cf Kin photo 48)

the satin finish shows they have been covered with gold powder (*kinpun*)
(cf the shiny finish of kinpaku in Cho photo 11)

Choukoku photo 05: appearance after lacquer and gold coatings

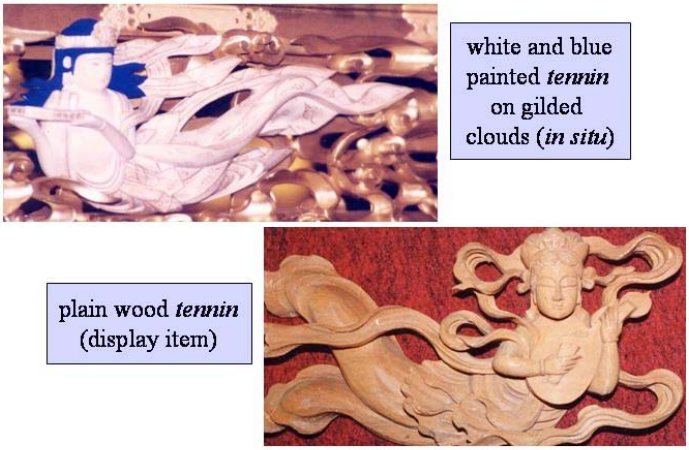
Therefore while the *choukokushi* is working, he must keep in mind how much of the detail will be lost when these coatings are applied. Getting this just right is part of his special skill and comes only with years of experience.

As an alternative to gilding, if it is the preference of the customer and within the ability of the carver, the whole *sama* may be left as bare wood.

Phoenix and Chrysanthemum pattern carved in zelkova wood (*keyaki*)

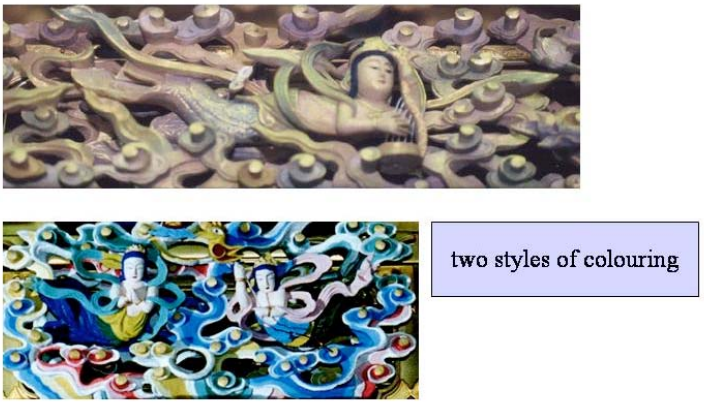
Choukoku photo 06: section of plain wood *sama* (also see Cho photos 02 & 12)

However, as these carvings are made in one, two or three layers, each of the layers may be handled in a different way. Sometimes the base layer or *jiita* is treated with gold, after which specially carved plain wood or coloured pieces can be attached. For example, heavenly beings (*tennin*) might be found floating on the surface of gilded clouds.



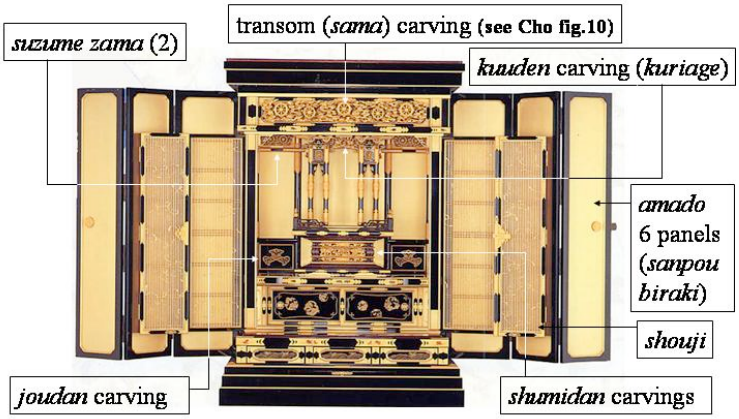
Choukoku photo 07: heavenly beings (*tennin*)

Especially with the plain wood pieces, the subtle carving of the *tennin* faces and delicate swirls of their flowing robes combine with the intricate grain pattern to show the carvers' artistry to the full. Yet another alternative, which perhaps should be mentioned here even though it is not particularly favoured by Hikone artisans, is for the *sama* to be completely coloured with almost no gold being used. This more vibrant finish is popular in other areas of Japan where the dignified and sophisticated influence of Kyoto is not felt.



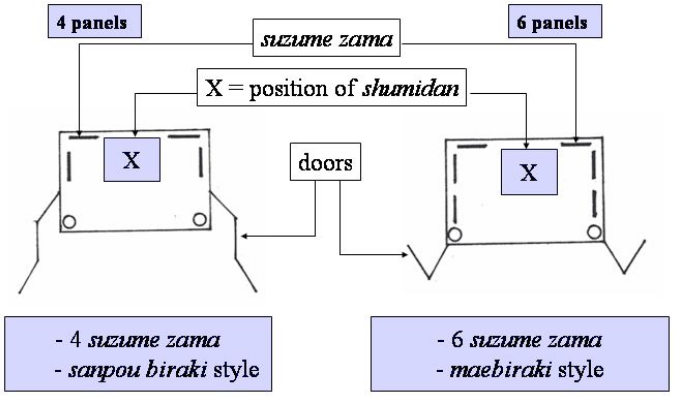
Choukoku photo 08: coloured *tennin* floating on clouds

Moving on, the 'inside' carvings (*uchibori*) are revealed when both sets of doors, the *amado* and the *shouji*, are open. *Uchiborii* consist of the plaque-like *suzume zama*, which can be found on the inner back and side walls of the *kiji* as well as the smaller carvings associated with the *shumidan*, *joudan*, and *kuuden*.



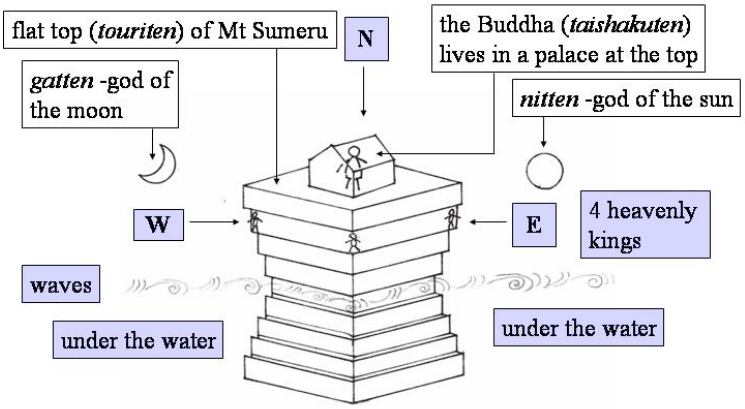
Choukoku photo 09: typical Hikone style *butsudan* [Joudoshinshuu Higashi honganji] (cf Cho photo 35) (cf *kiji* and *kuuden* sections) [photo by courtesy of Eirakuya (KK)]

First, to understand the *suzume zama*, it is necessary to think again about whether the *butsudan* has four or six doors. For the 4-door *maebiraki* type, there are six panels of *suzume zama*, two at the back facing outwards and two on each side facing towards the *kuuden*. For the 6-door *sanpou biraki* type, there are four panels of *suzume zama*, two at the back next to the *kuuden* and one at each side. These panels are set in frames, again made by the *kijishi*.



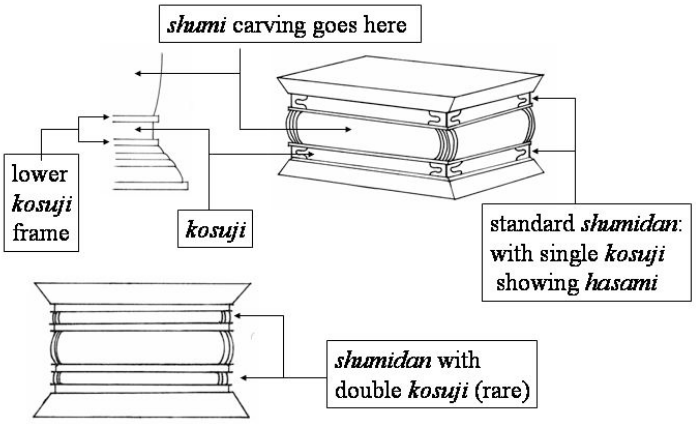
Choukoku figure 02: position of doors and *suzume zama* on 4 and 6-door *butsudan* (viewed from above)

Also the *choukokushi* is responsible for the carvings on the *shumidan*, or pedestal, where the Buddha statue will sit. The *shumidan* has a narrow mid-section to mimic the 'waist' of Mt Sumeru in Buddhist cosmology (FN.3) (Hatta, 1994; p 32 to 34).



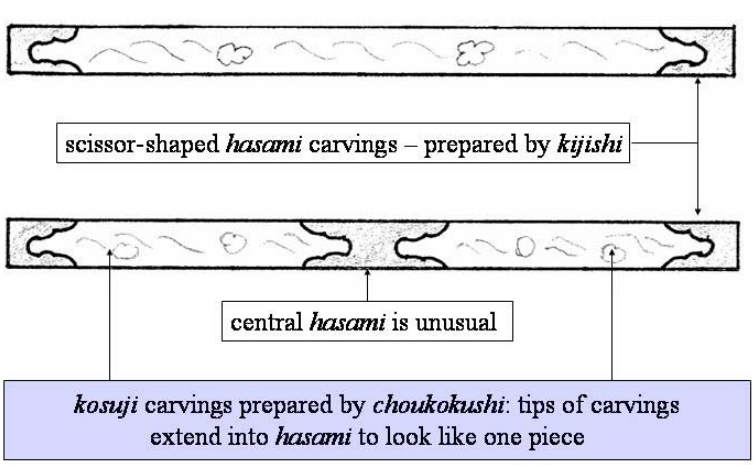
Choukoku figure 03: diagrammatic representation of Mt Sumeru (see FN.3) *Nitten* and *gatten* go around Mt Sumeru. The 4 heavenly kings (*shitennou*) guard N,E,S &W.

The carvings go across the front and along the sides of this 'waist' and they consist of the wide central *shumi* carving and the one, or rarely two, narrow strips above and below it, called *kosuji*.



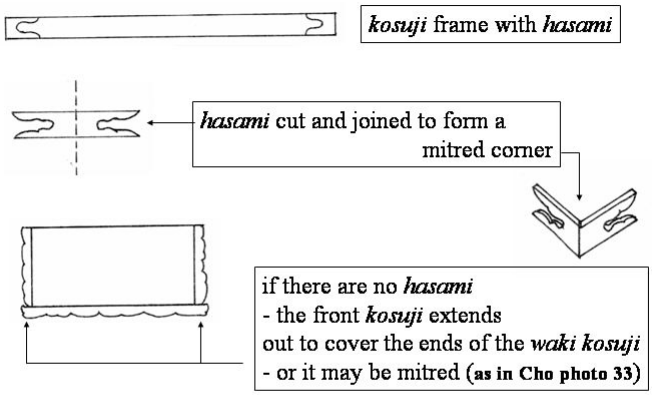
Choukoku figure 04: *shumidan*, showing position of carvings (*shumi* and *kosuji* carvings)

Firstly, the *kijishi* carves frames for the *kosuji* and also scissor-shaped pieces (*hasami*), which go at the ends and sometimes in the middle.



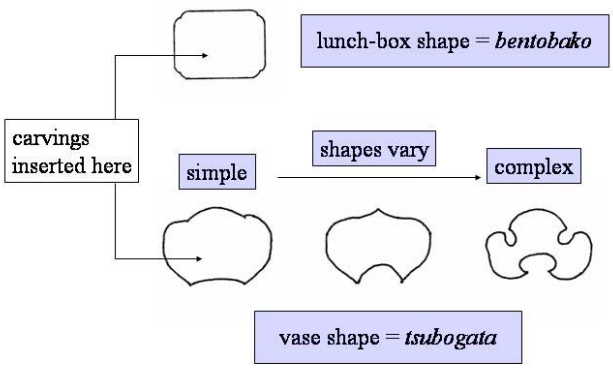
Choukoku figure 05: *hasami* carvings of *kosuji*

Those at the corners are mitred to make a good angle at the edge of the *shumidan*. Where there are no *hasami*, the front *kosuji* carvings may project out to the sides to hide the ends of the side or *waki kosuji*.



Choukoku figure 06: corners of *shumidan* carvings

Then the *choukokushi* makes the *kosuji* and *waki kosuji* carvings to go between the *hasami*. Carved parts such as a leaf tips extend into the *hasami*, forming an apparently unbroken carving. Because of the constricted shape of the *shumidan* all these carvings can be seen during prayer, and the side ones have to be worked as carefully as those at the front. Finally, the two box-like *joudan*, which sit next to the *shumidan*, have framed carvings on their front facing surfaces. These are sometimes in a lunch-box shape, called *bentobako*, and sometimes in a vase shape, called *tsubogata*. This latter style may be plain or convoluted to look like a butterfly.



Choukoku figure 07: *joudan* carving frames – can be different shapes

bentobako shape

plain wood carving on a shiny gold leaf (*kinpaku*) background

Choukoku photo 10: *joudan* carving- lunch box shape (see Cho photo 2) (cf Cho photo 9)

tsubogata shape

the shiny surface shows it has been covered with gold leaf (*kinpaku*) **(cf the satin finish of kinpun in Cho photo 5)**

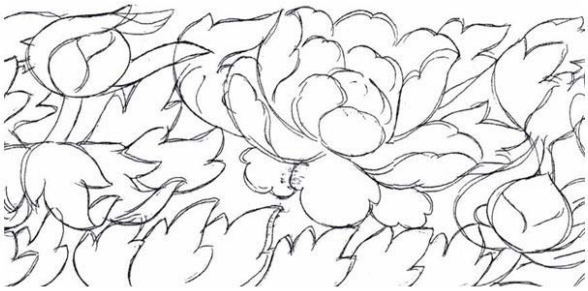
Choukoku photo 11: *joudan* carving- butterfly shape (also see Cho photo 09) (cf Cho photos 2 & 10)

Lastly, the *choukokushi* often makes some parts associated with the *kuuden* such as vertical pieces running lengthwise between the pillars or a small *kuuden* carving (*kuriage*), to be inserted across the front just under the *kuuden* roof (see cho photo 09). Also, as already mentioned in the *kuuden* section, he may prepare small roof parts and very occasionally, carvings to adorn the drawers, either the *naka hikidashi*, inside the *butsudan* or the *daiwa hikidashi* in the base.

Having looked at the position of each carving, let us next consider the designs and patterns the *choukokushi* uses. Choosing and drawing the designs is special because it gives him scope for creativity. Then, with his knowledgeable selection of materials and particular choice of tools, he can exercise more artistic control over the final product than either of the two artisans already discussed. Therefore, starting with designs and patterns, we will look at these factors before beginning the description of the actual carving processes.

3.1 DESIGNS and PATTERNS:

The *choukokushi*'s patterns are his special treasure, often having been in the family for several generations. As Tesso says, "all artisans have their favourite patterns. Each house (family) has a selection that is a little different from other families, and I associate some families with particular designs. Also the order of the training process is different. In my case I learned from my father and my uncle and I started with making chrysanthemum flowers and peony buds.



section taken from an original sketch for a *sama* carving-
(detail of Cho fig. 12)

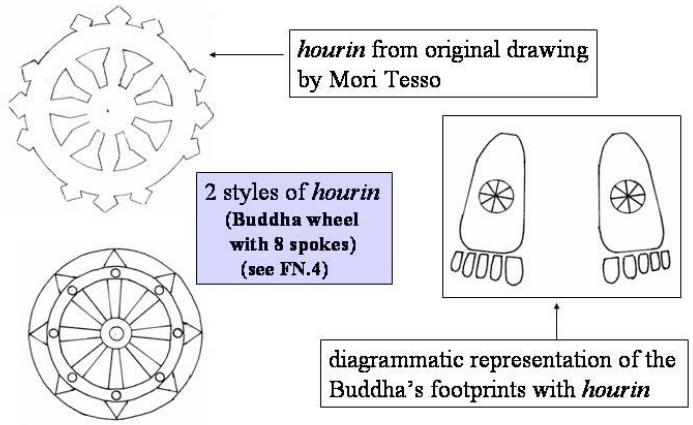
Choukoku figure 08: peony and buds [original drawing on paper: courtesy of Mori Tesso]

Some families start with birds, so just by looking at the birds, I can guess which lineage or family made them. Some masters have a particular style that will be passed down through the 'line'. This is more significant than the differences between schools of Buddhism and their pattern variations. Most notable are human faces. It is quite easy to guess who did them. Often they resemble the carvers or their wives," he adds with a smile.

"Each new carver chooses the patterns he likes from the family stock," continues Tesso. "First he'll learn the family style and then, as he becomes skilled, the patterns take on his personal characteristics. In other words they become adapted. So each person has something individual about his carving. This might be good or bad and that's decided by the artistic sense of the carver. Each artisan wants to have some individual appeal, something which catches the eye, something distinctive. But he doesn't always make a success of it."

Besides the inherited patterns with which he has a special bond, the carver will search many sources, from nature and from books, to augment his repertoire. "I have photos of designs by my father and other artisans and I have lots of my own," says Tesso. "From my long years of experience, all the traditional patterns are in my head. Also I have many volumes of patterns. I look and choose my favourite designs. So when I draw, I have the designs in my mind and I arrange these patterns in my own style so that I can carve them easily.

"In our culture, there are certain fixed combinations of patterns, say Chinese lion and peony," explains Tesso. "They have some connection, some meaning together, even if it's not particularly religious. However for *butsudan*, going back to its origins, it's not strange to have Buddhist wheels (*hourin*), stone footprints of the Buddha, and sages (arhats or *rakan*) as patterns (FN.4).



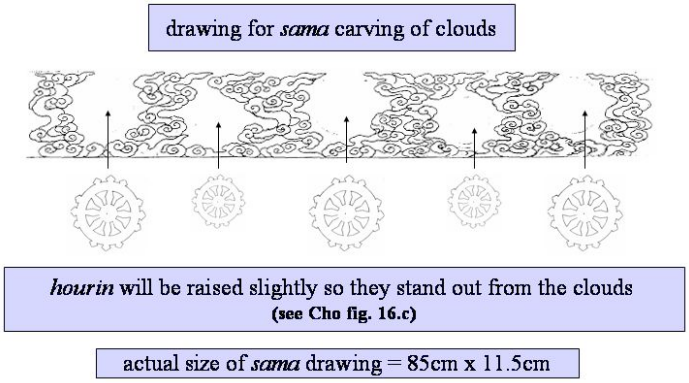
Choukoku figure 09: *hourin* and footprints of the Buddha

A special composite pattern called 'Twenty-four historical people selected in China for showing great filial piety' or *nijuushi kou* is very popular. This is a Chinese idea," says Tesso. "There are many Chinese patterns on a *butsudan*" (FN.5).

Choukoku photo 12: examples of Chinese designs without gilding (cf Cho photos 2 and 6)

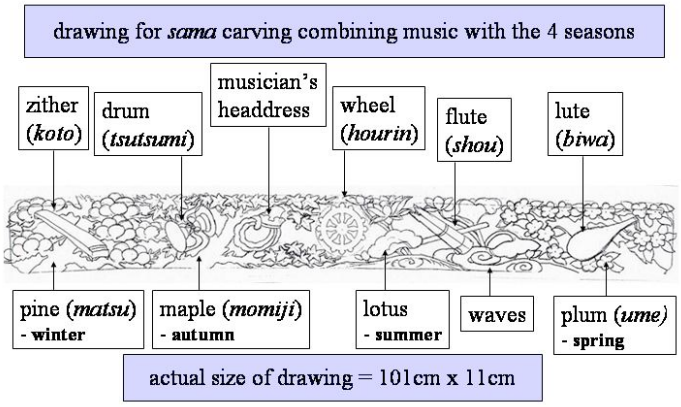
"Furthermore different sects have different patterns," he continues. "The Buddhist temple headquarters have their ideal forms, and the *butsudan* patterns take after these, especially the *ranma* of the sacred or inner hall (*naijin*). There are many halls in a temple. Each hall has different patterns and the *butsudan* uses those. So there are differences in carving patterns and styles of *ranma*. If you use patterns from the temple, the person buying the *butsudan* will feel convinced of its authenticity. At first the Buddha didn't want images of himself, so people used symbols instead, such as stone footprints or *hourin*. People who are in the know about the original Buddhism still feel the same way and they follow that idea."

Consequently, there are traditional religious pattern combinations that conjure up particular images in the Japanese mind. These include '8 disciples' (*hachi rakan*) or '16 disciples' (*juroku rakan*), 'heavenly beings in the clouds' *kumo ni tennin*, and 'Buddhist wheels in the clouds' (*kumo ni hourin*).



Choukoku figure 10: Buddhist wheel in the clouds
[original drawings on paper: courtesy of Mori Tesso]
(cf Eirakuya *butsudan* Cho photo 9)

In a slightly less religious but still mystical frame of mind, there is a pattern that brings together seasonal elements of nature with musical instruments thus implying celestial harmonies. It seems to bridge the gap between the spiritual and the secular very effectively.



Choukoku figure 11: Musical instruments with Nature
[original drawing on paper: courtesy of Mori Tesso]

"However for those who 'really don't care' about religious symbolism," he says, "deer and maple trees go together, consider *hanafuda* cards (FN.6). We can use anything we see around us. I sometimes see deer around my house. These are all familiar and everyday things to us Japanese. If it were easy, I'd carve bush clover and wild boar." In fact he would like to use anything around him if he could, but since it is for *butsudan*, Tesso feels that most people prefer Buddhist symbols so he has to contain his natural inclinations. On the other hand, he does do special orders if asked. An unusual one he has done on *joudan*, consisted of a pair of chickens.

Although generally the style of a *butsudan* and especially the carving designs will reflect the locality where they are made, Tesso thinks there are no special patterns for Hikone *butsudan*. "But…," he wonders, "maybe 'peony' is most popular in Hikone." Peony alone is called *subotan* and this is his favourite pattern. He carves it most often. Another favourite is 'peonies in the wind' (*kazefuki botan*).

one of Tesso's favourite patterns

actual size of drawing = 87cm x 12cm

Choukoku figure 12: Peonies in the Wind
[original drawing on paper: courtesy of Mori Tesso]

"Peonies are very appropriate for Hikone *butsudan*," he says, "because they can be seen at both Higashi and Nishi honganji in Kyoto. Also 'peonies with peacocks', and 'paulonia (*kiri*) with phoenix' and 'dragon with clouds and water' are also commonly used. I always wonder why such patterns are used for *butsudan*. You have played *hanafuda* haven't you?" he asks. "In *hanafuda* 'crane and pine', '*kiri* and phoenix' are typical patterns which go together."

Sometimes he and the other artisans go to the temples to study patterns and styles, but each craftsman sees only what is relevant to him. It is the manufacturer (*toiya*) who has an overview and so coordinates the whole production process, combining the seven crafts as shown in the flow chart: introduction figure 1. Tesso thinks that for one *butsudan* there should be a common theme. "When the order is placed," he says, "I tell the *toiya* that certain patterns would be better in certain places. However it doesn't work like that. I have an idea of a theme, but the customer or *toiya* may have other ideas." If the *toiya* doesn't coordinate clearly the different types of artisans, working separately, may 'go their own way', and the themes may not match. As will be mentioned again later, another factor is whether the carver is making all or only some of the carvings for one *butsudan*. If he is doing only the *sama*, for example, and the others are being imported from abroad, unless the manufacturer is diligent, there is no guarantee that the designs will harmonize.

In any case, the subject matter of the carvings should at least be in keeping with their position on the *butsudan*. The *sama* and *suzume zama*, being at the top of the *butsudan*, generally have themes related to air, birds, clouds or heavenly beings. These subjects would never be found around the base where water or ground topics would prevail. However the *shumidan*, because it is at the middle of the *butsudan*, can have themes associated with either air or land and water. It will be at eye-level to the knelling supplicant, therefore the related carvings must be elegant, but not so as to detract from concentration on the focal point, the Buddhist image. Generally *joudan* carvings have designs such as 'Chinese' lions (*karajishi*), peonies, waves or water lilies.

Besides the designs themselves, there are also economic considerations to bear in mind. "First of all," says Tesso, "the budget for the carvings decides what I will do for them so I can't help thinking of how much time I should spend for a certain amount of money, rather than being worried about how appropriate the designs are." For example, with the pattern 'peonies in the wind', getting just the right amount of realism takes much more time, than plain peonies, and is therefore more expensive (see cho fig. 12).

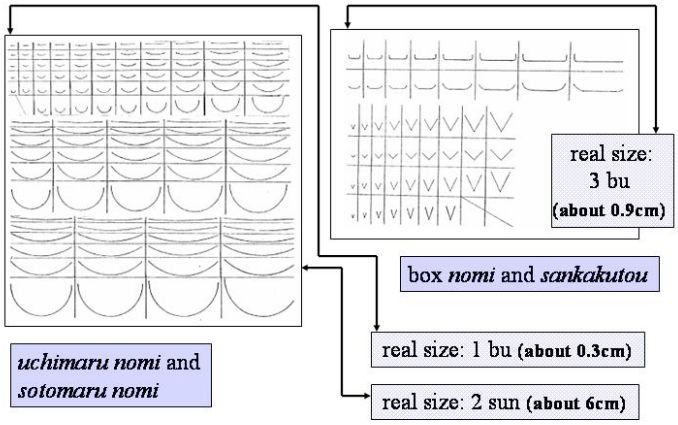
It is also worth noting that on occasion, Mori Tesso has been asked to carve from another artisan's drawings and vice versa. "When a carver cannot finish the work by the deadline, he asks me to do part of it. And there are also times when I need to ask another carver to help me," he says. "For instance I asked another one to do the clouds on a *suzume zama* just recently. He told me, after the work was finished, that he had made the cloud eddies go clockwise in some parts. I would probably have done them counter clockwise but I think the work is OK." He accepted this situation, although he himself would probably either have been more scrupulous in following the pattern, or have had it approved by the original artisan first. When he uses his own drawings he may change details as he goes, but when he uses another carver's sketch he will follow the pattern religiously. "As I work, I might have an innate feeling that something should be different," he explains, "and I think that if I don't change it, the carving will not be good. Perhaps it will lack something special. But anyway, in such a case, I stick to the drawings." However, with the changing emphasis on the work, as will be seen in the next paragraph, many carvers do not have the enthusiasm to confer or even to care much about such small details.

Recently, with more and more *butsudan* components being imported from abroad, it is natural that items initially produced in Japan are later reproduced offshore. This problem has been going on longest and is most serious for the *choukokushi*, where not only the carvings themselves, but also the pattern sketches may be sent abroad for copying. However carvers do not register their patterns, so there is not much they can do about it. Tesso says, "I sometimes wish we could register our patterns. We complain amongst ourselves about it. If we get an order from a wholesaler and then they have the work copied …", he grumbles, "…if they'd paid for it, like a copyright, it might be OK. But we suddenly find that our designs have been used. Though the finish is not up to par with our standards." (FN.7)

Naturally the finish is partly to do with the tools, so before detailing the carving processes we will take a brief look at the tools Tesso uses. For a more complete description please refer to Part 2: *kuuden* section.

3.2 TOOLS:

The chisel is a *choukokushi*'s basic implement and Tesso uses four types of blade depending on the depth and shape of groove he requires.



Choukoku figure 13: blade marking to show size and shape of chisel blades

He also makes use of a box *nomi* and a scooping *nomi* for gouging out deep holes. Hammer chisels are for 'rough' carving (*arabori*), in which case he buys the blades with the handles already attached. Finishing chisels are for the more delicate final carving (*shiage bori*). Here he buys only the blades and makes the handles himself.

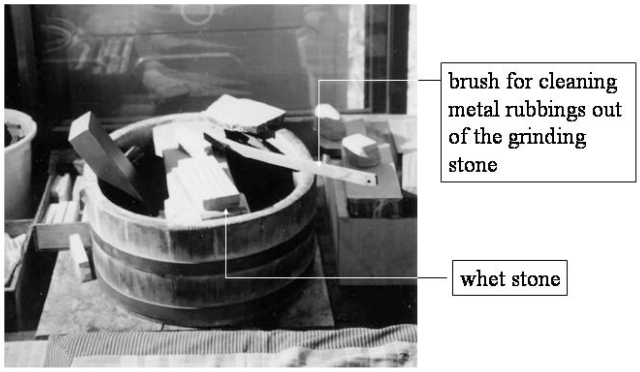
Choukoku photo 13: chisels as seen in a tool maker's catalogue

He generally purchases his tools from a firm named Konobu in Tokyo, which is used by several Hikone artisans. When he wants to buy a new tool, he borrows a similar one from a fellow artisan, makes the blade mark on cardboard, then writes the order on the card, puts it into an envelope and sends it. A favourite, much used tool might last Tesso 20 years. "My father gave this to me when I began to learn carving work," he says, gently touching a chisel that has been sharpened right down to the handle. "The blade has become so small that I can't use it any more, but I can't throw it away either."

Each artisan lays out his tools in a way that best suits his needs. “As I work, I reach out knowing exactly where each tool is, and then I put it back in the same place,” says Tesso.

Choukoku photo 14: Tesso at work – reaching out automatically for the tool he needs

When asked for the names of the tools, he shrugs and points at the muddle on his workbench. “Its name doesn’t matter. What it does is more important. To me all these tools on the table are just *choukokutou* or ‘carving tools’. I call them, ‘rough carving tool’ or ‘fine carving tool’.” However as he warms to the subject, some names do begin to emerge. He picks out several items from his table and generally explains that ‘*uchimaru nomi*’ has the steel part inside, (see ku fig. 08: *gantou*), and ‘*sotomaru nomi*’ has the steel outside, (see ku fig. 07: *marusuki nomi*). “The blade is made of steel and pure iron. It’s easy to sharpen,” he says.



Choukoku photo 15: equipment for sharpening tools

“I sharpen both sides or it doesn’t cut well. And it’s easy to use. A whetstone from Kyoto called ‘*honyama*’ is perfect for these tools. That’s the difference between Japanese tools and western ones. All blades of Japanese cutting tools except swords are double layered

steel and iron. American tools," he adds, "are all steel and are hard to sharpen and hard to work with. They slip because of the pure steel." For sharpening techniques please refer to *kuuden* fig. 5 to 8 and the related text.

Besides these chisels, Tesso has a limited need for other tools, including some electrical ones. For instance, he prefers the ease of machine saws, such as the jigsaw and the circular saw (*marunoko*), which he holds by hand although they are normally used with a table. Also, where necessary, he uses both double and single bladed handsaws and one with a back iron called *douzuki noko*. For planing he uses *shakkuriganna* (see ku fig.15) and *kiwaganna* (see ku fig. 16), and occasionally a tiny one called *mameganna*, which is not often used for *butsudan* work. *Denkiganna* is a small, motorized plane although it is controlled by hand. He also uses an electric drill, and an electric cutter, with blade width varying from 2 to 35mm, which can remove the surface of a board.

As mentioned before, more detail about tools is available in the *kiji* and *kuuden* sections. Therefore, let us move on to the actual processes involved in preparing and making the carvings.

3.3 MATERIALS:

For the three wood working skills (*kiji*, *kuuden*, *choukoku*), the selection of materials is very important and is covered within 'technical processes'. For the other four skills, the artisan doesn't have so many options and the choices can be made purely for aesthetic reasons. However, for the wood working skills a clear understanding of the requirements of the job and limitations of the materials are essential for success. Thus, for the wood working crafts choice of materials is considered a technical process.

3.4 TECHNCAL PROCESSES:

1. Getting the patterns (*torigata*)

The first process in actually making the carvings is called *torigata* or sometimes *katadori*. This means measuring the dimensions and then, using lightweight cardboard, making the patterns for the general shapes of the carvings.

"First the *kijishi* makes the *butsudan* body, and after that the *kuudenshi* makes the *kuuden* and then the *butsudan* is delivered to the *toiya's* shop," explains Tesso. "At the shop, the *kuuden* is set into the wooden *kiji*. Then the owner calls me to 'come to take *kata*,' which means come and make the cardboard patterns (*katagami*). I go there and make all the patterns for the shapes of the areas to be filled with carved parts". Each *butsudan* has different shapes and sizes of spaces to be filled. To measure these, he inserts stiff paper into the space and then draws the shape. "I copy the shape of the area to be filled on paper the thickness of the back of a calendar. I cut the paper roughly to shape and put it into the space and draw around the shape with a pencil. If the paper is too hard I cannot push it into place and if it is too soft the line will not be accurate, so calendar paper is just right for this job."

An even better way of getting the patterns, especially for *sama* and *suzume zama* which can be quite large, is for the shop owner to send him the wooden frames already made by the *kijishi*. "That way I am happiest because the carvings are more likely to fit perfectly," says Tesso. As he works, he has to allow room for the lacquering and gilding layers, as described in a previous section, so having the frame available ensures complete success. Otherwise, minor adjustments might have to be made during the assembly process, where because of the delicate finish, it is preferable to keep handling to a minimum at that stage.

However the situation is not always what the *choukokushi* would wish. The very worst is for someone else to make the patterns, and then fax the outline to him. "Then I am not so happy because often it is not accurate and the carving does not fit perfectly," says Tesso. "Even worse, for some *butsudan* I receive orders for only some of the parts." Sadly, this reflects the decline in demand for *butsudan* and the high cost of Japanese workmanship in the post bubble recession. Unfortunately, some or even all of the carvings may be ordered from abroad. Thus, the DKS *choukokushi*, who can charge high wages, could be asked to make only the prominent *sama* carving while other parts might be brought in from, amongst other places, China or Vietnam. In such cases, the dealer will probably not be overly worried about the integrity of the images. The customer may not even notice any differences in styles and themes at first and may have a growing sense of unease with the designs only as time goes on. However, knowing this, the *choukokushi* will find it hard to put his all into his part of the work. Nevertheless, along with many of the carvers working in the Hikone *butsudan* industry, Tesso tries to keep a positive attitude. To that end, besides preparing the patterns carefully, he is also meticulous about selecting just the right wood.

2. Selecting materials

Each artisan has his particular ideas about which wood is best. It should be remembered that the artisan's own thoughts are being relayed here and any disagreement between sections is because of the individual focus of the craftsman in question. Needless to say the subject of materials is an important issue for each artisan.

Thus, when the *butsudan* is first ordered, most often the customer or the dealer has specific requirements about the type of wood for the carvings. According to Tesso, "There are times when the dealer (*toiya*) says 'our customer wants, for example zelkova at any cost', even when I say a different type of wood would be better for that particular part both artistically and technically. When the design and the content of the order do not match, I say so. I used to choose the materials myself but sometimes that caused trouble, and is unusual nowadays."

However, after the type of wood has been chosen the selection of the timber itself is very important, and is usually up to the carver. Attention must be paid to cracks, gnarls and the amount of resin in the wood (Nomura, 1977; p 51). As Tesso explains: "Knotted wood cannot be used for *butsudan* work. For the *kijishi* the knots may be put in invisible places. However, for me when the board includes knots, I do not try to repair it with putty. I cut

the knots out and throw them away. Then I use the rest for non-*butsudan* carving, such as ornaments for the *tokonoma*."

Therefore, for Tesso, choosing the right tree is crucial. He says that most artisans buy the wood as planks either before or after seasoning. They rarely buy a complete trunk. "I am one of the few artisans who often buys wood as a trunk. It is like a game," he says, "that I cannot see inside the trunk. I cannot see any knots, cracks or insects, which might be there. This is a special problem with conifers, such as cypress (*hinoki*). Regarding insects," continues Tesso, "the cutting season rather than the kind of wood is important as to whether it is prone to attack. A good time to cut a tree is in autumn when it's not sucking up water and is in hibernation. In spring the liquid goes up and the tree is sweet. Spring-cut trees get insects. After cutting the tree in autumn, it's left lying on the ground and the liquid evaporates through the leaves. When the tree dries it won't get insects. This is the problem with wood from SE Asia that sucks up water all the time. Even the sawmill owner does not actually see the trees being cut, but he has to trust, as I do, that the trees were cut in autumn. Honest people cut trees in autumn. So this is the way to get wood that is in the best condition."

Although occasionally he gets wood from a local sawmill, most often he uses a favourite mill in Gifu, where, if he needs it urgently he has to use wood that has already been through the seasoning process. In preference to that, however, he phones to place the order or goes in person. When he buys a trunk, he either gets it cut into different thicknesses at the sawmill and then delivered to dry at his home or else it is kept at the mill for at least three years. He buys wood by volume, not by weight. Compared to the price of a whole trunk, freshly cut boards are twice and dried boards are 3 times as expensive.

For Hikone *butsudan* carvings, Mori Tesso often uses a Japanese white pine called *himekomatsu*, but some carvers use a Russian red pine called *benimatsu*. *Himekomatsu* is the more expensive of the two. One problem concerning both these woods is that as they get older, for example after seasoning for 12-13 years, they become too dry and difficult to carve, even though they have the benefit of being very stable after the work is finished. Very sharp tools are needed, even when the wood has been dried for shorter periods. Thus constant sharpening throughout the carving process increases the time required and thus the expense. Additionally, in comparison to other more expensive woods, such as zelkova (*keyaki*) and cypress (*hinoki*), neither has much durability. With a typical life span of 100 years, in the long run they might not be considered economical on a *butsudan* that has a life of 200 years or more.

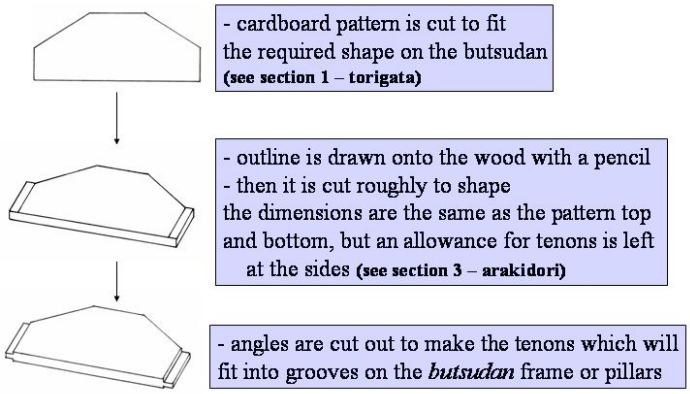
For more expensive Hikone *butsudan*, many of the carvings, in particular the *sama*, are made partially or completely with *keyaki*, especially where they will be left as bare wood, as described in the introduction. *Keyaki* is the most expensive of all woods. For instance, according to Tesso, at 1998 prices, one square meter, with no knots and regardless of thickness could cost up to 1 million yen. Also it is the most difficult and time-consuming wood to carve because it is so hard. The blade must be sharp but not very pointed. A lot of pressure has to be applied, causing the tip to break easily and making frequent sharpening necessary. On the other hand the durability of *keyaki* is a bonus. It can dry for

any length of time, and remain stable and workable. In fact the longer the better, because even though Tesso might have thought the wood was dry enough, for example after three years of seasoning, it sometimes begins warping as he sets to work. In his usual philosophical way he says, "When my work doesn't turn out fine I start again from the beginning. Sometimes carved wood warps and I realize it as I am working. Even *keyaki* has differences in quality. The same applies to humans. Like humans, each tree has its born nature. *Keyaki* can warp even after it has been dried well." Thus he feels that three years is a minimum drying time, although he understands that some artisans try to get away with less.

Compared to *keyaki*, which can be seasoned for almost any length of time, if *hinoki* is seasoned for more than 15 years, it is not good. When he is asked especially, Tesso will use *hinoki* for the carvings. However it takes more work because it is most difficult to carve. The grain is fine and dense and it cannot be carved without a well-sharpened, pointed blade, which becomes dull and breaks very easily, and so has to be sharpened even more often than with other woods. Thus the carving takes a lot of time and trouble and it must command a high price. But as the grain is dense it lasts a long time, and even after 50 to 100 years it does not warp or bend. As Tesso says, "Houryuuji is made of *hinoki* and it has lasted more than 1000 years. *Hinoki* has strength like a person who is born strong. It is natural in the wood and cannot be created. Nothing can make weak wood strong. *Hinoki* has endurance so temples last a long time. If the customer can afford it, it is worth using *hinoki*." Highest quality *hinoki*, without any knots costs, at 1998 prices, about 500,000 yen for a cubic metre. Then the relatively higher cost of his workmanship is added onto this. It is an indication of this situation, that although Tesso usually does the initial 'rough' carving and his sons do the delicate finishing details, with *hinoki* he does both, partly because of the greater skill required but also because of the higher cost of the material.

3. Rough cutting (*arakidori*)

When the cut boards have been seasoned long enough, the next stage, for Mori Tesso, is to match the size and thickness of each with its future position on the *butsudan*. He smooths and trims the wood, then lays the prepared cardboard patterns on top and copies the outlines in pencil. Next, using handsaws, he cuts the wood a little wider than the pattern, leaving it the same at the top and bottom. Finally he shaves and trims the pieces, with hand planes, cutting an angle or tenon, which will slot into a groove on the *butsudan* body or prepared frame (see cho photo 28).



Choukoku figure 14: rough cutting of *kuuden* carving including making the tenons

In the case of the vertical carvings on the *kuuden* pillars, when making the tenons on the carvings to fit into the grooves on the pillars, he is not so worried about exact right angles because the pillars are not fixed solidly so the carved pieces must be able to move with the poles. This means that it is also important to allow for the lacquer and gilding layers. When finished the pieces are ready to have the patterns transferred onto them.

4. Design drawing

As soon as the dealer (*toiya*) gets the order for the *butsudan* he will quickly decide which artisan will do the carvings. Since certain carvers are especially skilled at certain designs, that fact will be instrumental in his choice. Even though the *choukokushi* has to wait for the *kiji* to be finished before he can measure exactly and make the shapes, he can begin to plan and sketch the designs according to the wishes of the customer and the *toiya*. However, the rough drawings made by the carvers at this time are not shown to the dealer. As Tesso says, "Between *toiya* and carvers it is not necessary to do so. Because we know each other so well, it is enough to discuss the names of the designs. For example 'peony' or an arrangement such as 'peonies in the wind' is sufficient for the *toiya* to understand exactly what it will look like. Only when a customer wants to see the rough sketches do I draw details, such as bird feathers, into the design at this stage. This happens only once in a while." In that case sometimes he sends the drawings, perhaps by fax, to the *toiya* to pass it on to the customer for approval. Also, just as materials are partly determined by the customer's budget, naturally the intricacy of the pattern and the number of layers will be similarly affected. However once the general nature of the design has been agreed on and the *kiji* is finished, Tesso can make the pattern shapes as described in section 1 (*torigata*) and then draw the designs.

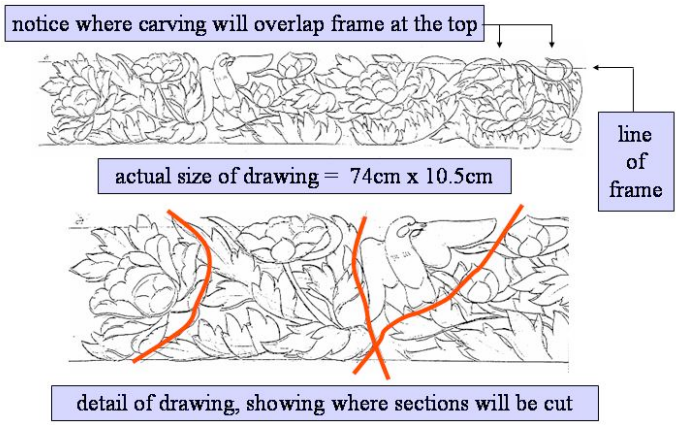
After years of experience, *choukokushi* have many designs in their heads and by now Tesso will have an overview of what he wants to do. Even when he uses a motif prepared for a previous order, the size of the base layer (*jiita*) will differ according to the size of

the *butsudan*. He will have to adapt the whole arrangement, making a new set of sketches. "I copy the outline of the space to be filled onto soft paper, adjusting the pattern to fit into the frame. Inside the outline I draw rough sketches, free hand, using a pencil. First I decide where to put the central motifs of the design such as Buddhist wheels (*hourin*), heavenly beings (*tennin*), disciples (arhats or *rakan*), animals or flowers, keeping in mind the overall balance. Then the position of the clouds, branches and buds will follow naturally. I fill the whole area with roughly drawn shapes and then gradually fill in the spaces. When planning the design, it is different from nature. In nature there is space; but in this case the spaces must be filled in. "Even so," explains Tesso with the help of a whiteboard, "although it is a rough sketch, the proportions and relationships must be true to life. If you do not draw a good drawing the whole design of the carving will be wrong as it proceeds. Draw the flower petals out from the center point, which may not really be in the center. And draw a branch as it comes out from behind the flower even though that part will not be visible."

As mentioned before, at this stage, unless required by the *toiya*, he is not concerned with drawing small inner details, such as leaf veins. "These rough pictures are the guides I use for preliminary carving," he says, "for mapping out the general shapes even before the initial or 'rough' carving stage (*arabori*) begins. Therefore I do not draw in the details. Rough pictures are like a blueprint, so any one can imagine the details and can carve from it if they have the skill. When I am drawing the rough picture I imagine the final carving. If the picture is by a master and the apprentice knows his style then he will do the master's style. But if the picture is by a stranger the carver will interpret the fine details in his own way. As I carve I may change the details. For example in the clouds I may increase or decrease the number of eddies. I may make them go clockwise or counter clockwise. I may change the cut in the tips of the cherry petals and the veins in the leaves as I go. In this way I keep considering the total balance." To see the relationship of the original drawing with the final carving please compare cho fig.15 and cho photo 22.

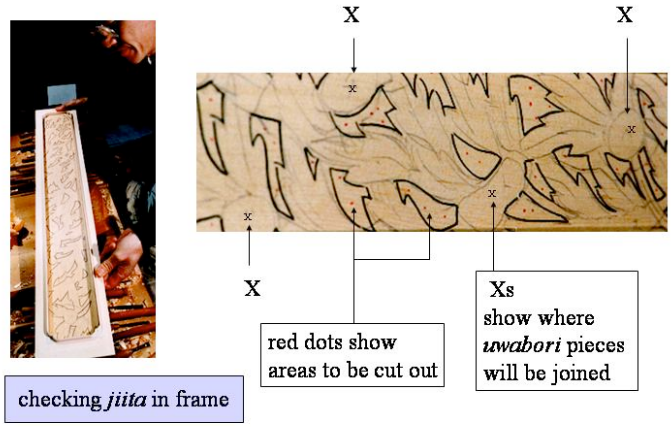
Previously Mori Tesso would have been asked to do all the carvings or *choukoku* for a single *butsudan*. However, increasingly he gets orders for only some of them, usually the prominent *sama* carvings. The other, not so obvious ones will be done either by less qualified or less skilled artisans, or they will be imported. Recently, though, he had the satisfaction of being commissioned to do all the carvings for a large Joudoshuu style *butsudan*. We will use this model to follow the processes through carving to assembly. This *butsudan*, (see photo 23) has a *touriyane* or non-removable *kuuden*, which is rather unusual for such a high quality product (see kuuden introduction). Later, in the assembly section, we will look at the other carvings, but first, for details of the carving processes we will study the double-layered front *sama*.

For the upper *uwabori* drawing of the *sama*, the flowers, buds, leaves and birds are sketched and then the places where it is to be divided are worked out, bearing in mind the entire pattern balance and the overlapping areas.



Choukoku figure 15: *sama* drawing [original drawing on paper: courtesy of Mori Tesso]

Then Tesso puts carbon paper on the roughly cut out wood and puts the picture on top of that. He copies the patterns with ballpoint pen. "At this moment," he explains, "I decide the exact line and relationships of the sections." The single *jiita* consists of leaves, amongst which round flat places are marked with 'X's to show where the *uwabori* sections will be attached by pegs. The *jiita* is checked to make sure it fits into the frame. However this is not so important with the *uwabori* because some parts of it will overlap the frame anyway. After these are drawn, the areas to be cut out are decided and dotted with red pen before being sent for jig sawing.



Choukoku photo 16: rough drawing on *jiita*

5. Jig sawing (*mishin biki*)

Jig sawing requires a special skill, and although most carvers do this process themselves, it is not uncommon, as with Mori Tesso, for the *choukokushi* to send this work out to be

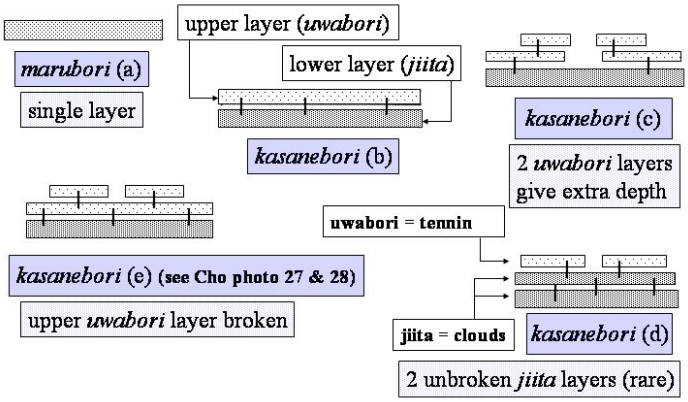
done by an expert. As mentioned before he makes a pen outline and marks it with red dots to indicate the parts to be cut out. The jig sawing process is done mostly by electric jigsaw, rarely by handsaws.

"In my case," explains Tesso, "I order this particular work from a person who specializes in jig sawing. He is a male *kijishi* who does jig sawing at night as his side job (FN.8). He is paid by the hour and is so good at it that three or four carvers order their work from him. It would take a lot of time for me to do it myself. However, I think I would have to, if this man ever stops."

6. '**Rough' carving (*arabori*)**

As already mentioned, for a Hikone *butsudan*, it takes between one and two months to complete the *choukoku*, from making the initial patterns to the finished carving (*shiagebori*), depending on the number, size and intricacy of the work. Tesso thinks that there are some artisans who sketch only rough pictures on paper and then, without drawing them onto the wood, do *arabori*. However he explains that *arabori* is very difficult because the carver has to have a clear idea of the end result in terms of both surface pattern and depth, taking into account such things as overlapping and protruding parts. It is necessary to have a concept of all three dimensions and is therefore harder than putting in the finishing details. This is the reason why he does most of the *arabori*, while his two sons, during their apprenticeship, practise with *shiagebori*. Also why he says, "A good initial drawing is essential. Once I have decided where to put the birds or flowers and have transferred the pattern to the wood, I can work very quickly."

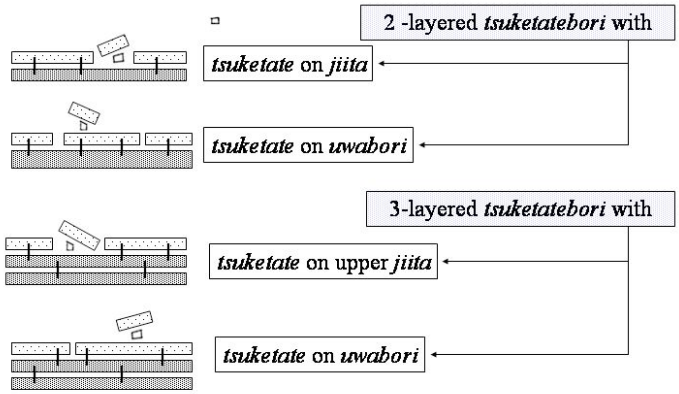
As already noted, carvings can be made in one, two, or three layers.



Choukoku figure 16.i: ways of combining the layers together (note peg positions do not coincide)

The simple and elegant single-layered style is called *marubori* and reaches a thickness of between 2.5 to 4.0cm (16.i.a). Small carvings such as those for *shumidan*, *joudan* and

pillars are generally done this way. Alternatively, on a Hikone *butsudan*, the *sama*, *suzume zama* and *kuuden* carvings will usually be two or more layers as detailed below. *Kasanebori* has two undivided layers, the base *jiita* and upper *uwabori* (16.i.b). In this case the two tiers are joined with bamboo pegs making a total thickness of 2.5 to 8.0 cm. The aim of this technique is to show depth, so it is especially good for cloud scenes. Tesso says, "The cloud patterns are on both the base (*jiita*) and upper (*uwabori*) layers and are usually flat. If I want to get extra depth, I attach more separate clouds, spaced around on top of the *jiita*, calling it *uwabori* instead of a second *jiita* (16.i.c & e). Thus it is not truly a two-layered *jiita*. Wheels or *tennin* then stand out from the clouds" (see cho photo 09). This extra set of *uwabori* carvings, added on top, gives a thickness of 3.5 to 9.0cm. Another way of increasing depth is to have three undivided layers instead of two. True two-layered *jiita*, are rare and are generally in cases where there are 2 *jiita* of clouds with *uwabori* having heavenly beings (16.i.d). A third, and perhaps most interesting style, is where some parts of the carvings are lifted on wooden cubes. This style can have two or three layers and the lifted piece may be associated with any of them. The ultimate depth can be 2.5 to 6.0cm. As is often the case with artisans, names are not particularly important and sometimes they do not even agree on them, however, we shall call this technique *tsuketatebori* after Nomura (1977; p51).

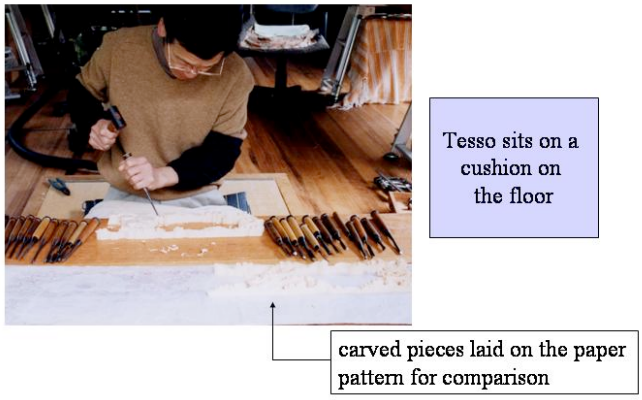


Choukoku figure 16.ii: versions of *tsuketatebori*

This way of layering is especially good for designs based on nature since it allows a sense of movement and realism to be carved into the work. Designs such as birds in flight, and flowers blowing in the wind are best depicted using this method. The small wooden cubes or wedges (*tsukedai*) are put between the *jiita* and parts of the *uwabori* to lift and angle the *uwabori* pieces, thus increasing the sense of motion. Tesso explains, "Sometimes it looks as if they are all one piece but in fact they are carved into sections and the places where they come together are undercut so it looks like one piece. For example flower stems go under the leaves and are attached to the *jiita*. During the early stages of 'rough' carving the *uwabori* sections may be kept together for stability. Later,

they are separated either by jigsaw or by cutting diagonally into the work, with a knife." The skill is in making the division where the overlapping areas create a more 'alive' look. For example undercutting and slanting a bird, thus raising its wing, can create a sense of its imminent flight. All this, of course, must be planned and executed during the *arabori* phase.

Now let us continue with a consideration of how the carvings are actually done. On the *jiita*, which will be flush with the frame, leaves and cloud shapes are carved roughly. Matching patterns such as flowers and birds or *tennin*, are done on the *uwabori*. Although this stage of carving is called 'rough' and at first, in order to draft out the main design, it involves the removal of largish pieces of wood, it is by no means 'rough' when it is finished. Initially Tesso uses a banded *nomi* where a hammer is needed to apply the force required to cut deeply into the wood (see ku fig.10).



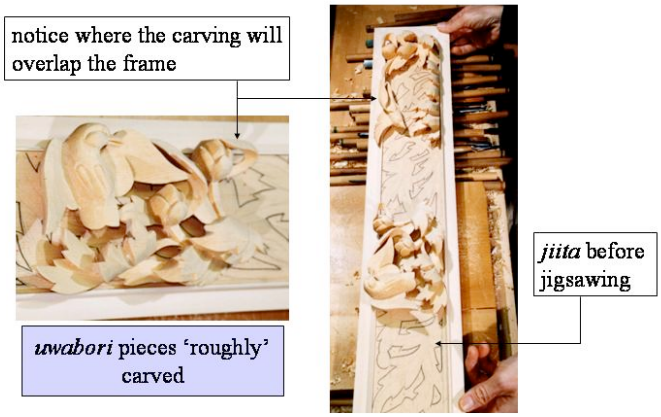
Choukoku photo 17: using hammer *nomi* for 'rough' carving

At this stage only the position, depth and general shape of the design, such as a wing here or there, a flower facing this way or that, are mapped out.

The *uwabori* is done first so that, as the carvings progress, the pieces can be placed onto the *jiita*, fitted into the frame and compared to the original paper pattern. The layout and balance can be checked and minor adjustments made.

Choukoku photo 18: final checking before starting the finishing details

Finally the finished pieces are laid onto the *jiita* again and the connecting points are confirmed.



Choukoku photo 19: confirming connecting points

This stage, which comes between *arabori* and the 'finish' carving or *shiagebori*, Tesso calls *kozukuri*.

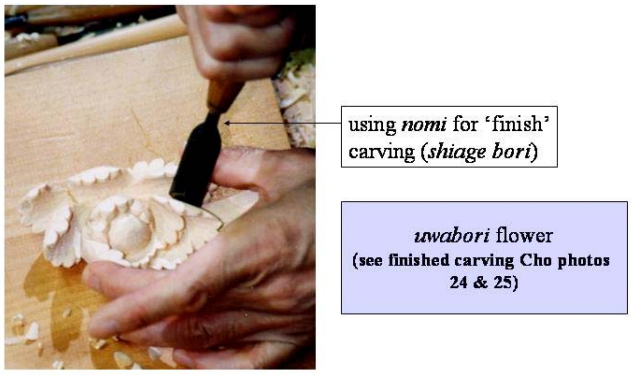
About *arabori*, Tesso says, "It's most interesting. But it's tiring. Sometimes I'm successful and sometimes I'm not. It is like an adventure. A *kuudenshi* knows the result of his work from the beginning, but a *choukokushi* has some scope for creativity. Some older *choukokushi* do the rough picture drawing and *shiagebori* because it doesn't require so much strength. When I get old maybe I will do the same," he adds stoically. In the meantime he has an immense enthusiasm for his job and enjoys the communal feeling of

working with his sons, the chipping sounds blending with music from the stereo, the rushing of the nearby river and the wind in the trees on the mountainside. In his newly built studio, with its huge picture windows on three sides, Tesso smoothes and finishes the 'rough' work. Then he and his sons work together to put in the final details.

7. '**Finish' carving (*shiagebori*)**

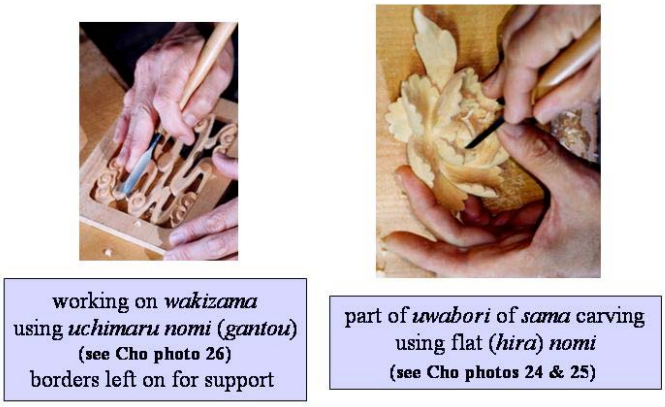
As with Tesso's sons, Yasuichiro and Tetsuo, it is most common for apprentices to begin with *shiagebori*. "Apprentices usually start with buds of chrysanthemum and peony, so carving the flowers themselves is for more advanced artisans," explains Tesso, who often puts the finishing touches on his sons' work. "Even after 1 or 2 years," he says, "it's too soon for them to do such things as *tennin*. They haven't had enough experience of either life or carving. It requires a special feeling because they are special objects of prayer." Even Tesso, cannot do *tennin* faces unless he is fresh. He can carve the other parts any time, but for the faces he must wait until he is in a good mood. "Sometimes when I carve faces," he adds, "I must not be tired. I must be on good terms with my wife, when I'm calm-minded. I always leave those parts and finish them at the end. Sometimes I can't feel contented with my carvings of human faces. In that case I can't help abandoning the work even though I spent many days on it. Our profession is not an artistic one, but I want to feel happy with my work. I think everyone wants to do a good job." He can often tell which artisans have carved which faces. He can also tell if the carvings have been imported from Vietnam. The faces look Vietnamese and he is dissatisfied. It is typical of him, to study such things critically. "While I'm working," he continues, "I aim for 100% perfection. But after finishing I'm never 100% satisfied with it myself."

In any case, once the 'rough' carving is completed the inner details can be added quickly. There is naturally a stage between 'rough' and 'finish' carving where the distinction is not clear. Because the carver goes by instinct as much as by deliberate choice, it is difficult to pinpoint what tool he might use at any one time. However Tesso describes 'finish' or *shiagebori* work as anything where he does not use a hammer or banded chisel. When accuracy is more important than power, chisels without bands are used. Applying pressure by hand allows the features to be shaped more carefully than can be done with a hammer.



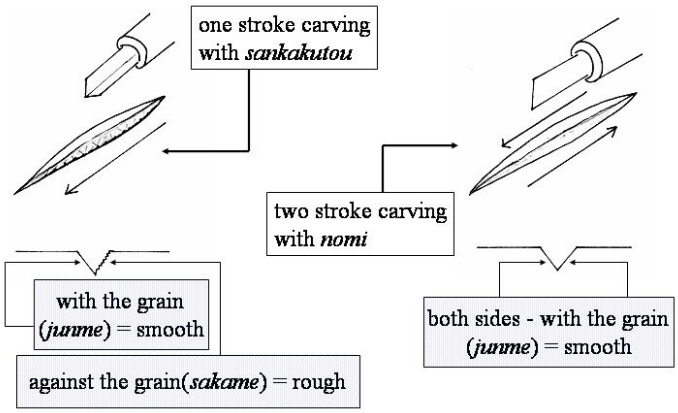
Choukoku photo 20: fine carving using *nomi* which Tesso also simply calls carving tool ('*choukokutou*')

Finally, to make the exact form of a leaf or petal or the swirl of a cloud, other chisels and carving knives will be used. The tools, as described for *kuudenshi* are used in the much the same way, to get the same effects (see ku photos 06 – 10). The *uchimaru nomi* (*gantou*) can be used to make holes and notches, such as birds' eyes or petal edges and flower centres (see ku fig. 08). Rounded and v-shaped grooves, as found on birds' beaks and feathers and leaf veins, require *sotomaru nomi* (*marusuki nomi*) and occasionally, *sankakutou* (see ku figs. 07 & 09.a). Using *uchimaru nomi* the soft flowing swirls of a cloud can be made.



Choukoku photo 21: early stages of *shiage bori* before beginning the fine inner details

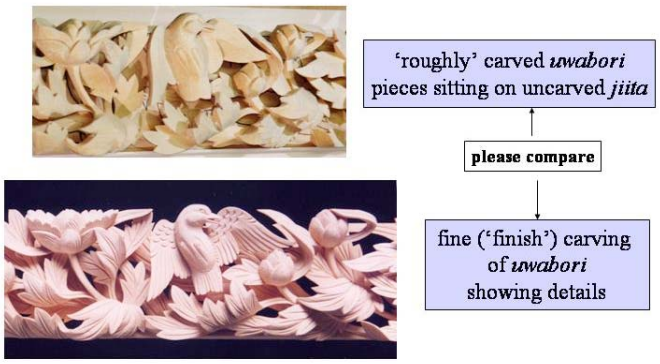
Then *kurikogatana* are used, as with all open carvings, to smooth the inner surfaces (see *kiji* photos 13 & 14). Thus the *choukokushi*'s panoply of implements is virtually the same as that of the *kijishi* or *kuudenshi*. However, according to *choukokushi*, Yoshida Kuniaki, *sankakutou* are almost never used except for very delicate lines in the 'finish' carving. He says, "If you carve with *sankakutou* one side of the groove will be against the grain and it will be rough. So, using a *nomi*, a groove is carved with two strokes.



Choukoku figure 17: results of using *sankakutou* or *nomi* to make a groove (also see Ku fig. 24)

When I was an apprentice, if I carved a thin line with *sankakutou* my master scolded me for doing it the easy way." *Jiita* details include the swirling patterns of clouds and waves, and even though these designs will be covered, to a large extent, by the *uwabori*, the patterns are prepared and worked carefully, using the tools as mentioned above.

This completes the carving process and it is interesting, at this stage, to compare the 'rough' *sama* with the finished one.

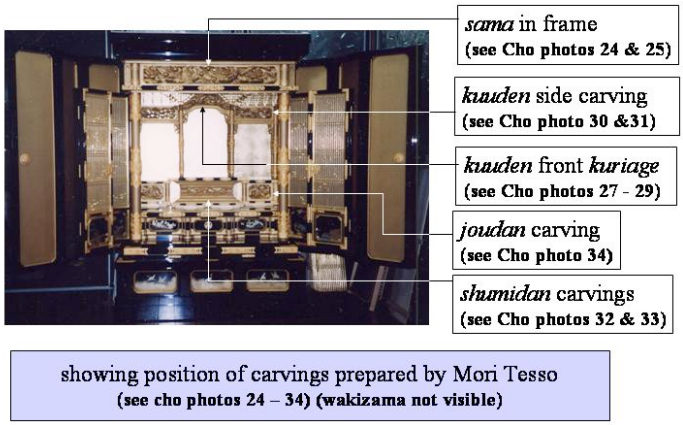


Choukoku photo 22: section of *sama* carving
(compare with original drawing cho fig. 15)

Also by looking at cho fig. 15, the modifications made by Tesso between the original drawing and the final product can be seen.

Finally, when all the carvings are finished, the layers are combined and fitted into their respective frames. This is when the *choukokushi* begins to get a sense of his success. Later the parts will be disassembled and the dealer will distribute them for further treatment, such a lacquering. Therefore, it is the *toiya* who does the final assembly, and it often happens that the carver never sees his work again. He never sees it *in situ* and thus,

disappointingly, never knows exactly what the final product looks like. However in the case of the previously mentioned large Joudohsuu *butsudan*, Tesso was able to see the end result since he did all the carvings and was on good terms with the dealer. Therefore to get a better understanding of the carver's part in the assembly processes, we will look at all the carvings on this *butsudan*.

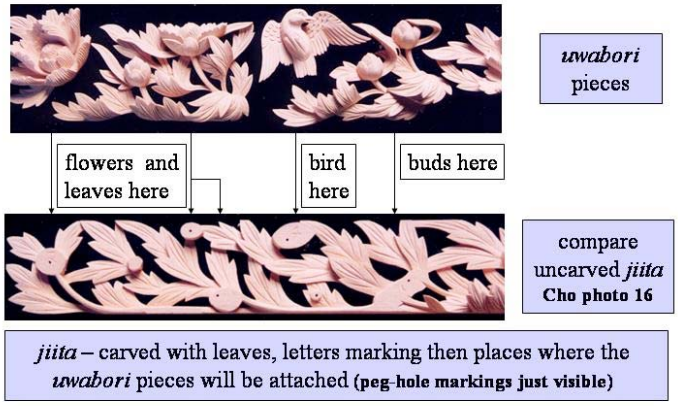


Choukoku photo 23: *butsudan* ordered from Tanaka Co Ltd (in the workshop awaiting delivery)

Assembly

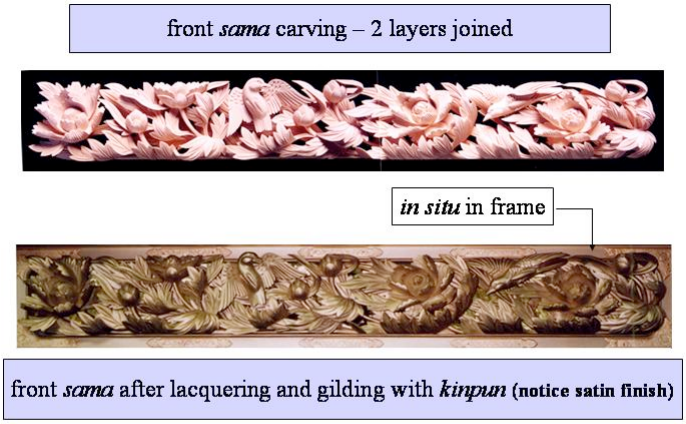
From the shape of this *butsudan* we can see that it is Joudoshuu style and there are no *suzume zama* because of the wide *touriyane* style *kuuden*. Tesso was responsible for the 'outside' carvings, that is the front *sama* and the two side or *wakizama* and also the 'inside' carvings including those for the *kuuden*, the *shumidan* and the *joudan*.

Preparation of the *sama* has already been dealt with, but the photos of the final carved pieces before assembly will show Tesso's skill to its full extent. Both the front and side sections have two layers. As mentioned before, the front pattern is peonies in the wind with birds (see cho fig. 15). Leaves and attachment points show clearly on the *jiita*.



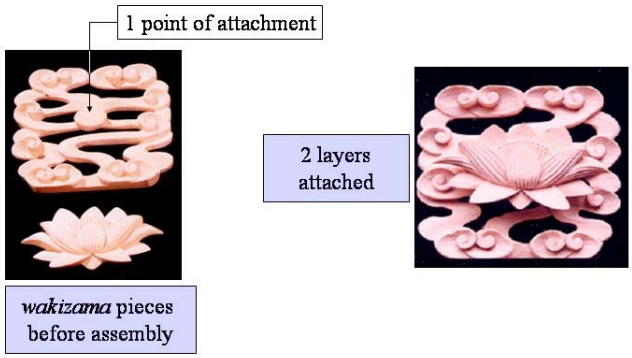
Choukoku photo 24: front *sama* carvings before joining

Each peg hole is marked with a *katakana* letter, such as 'i', 'ro' or 'ha', which matches the same marking on the underneath of the *uwabori* piece, so that the sections will be attached in the correct positions. These katakana letters are carved because they must be clear even after lacquering and gold leafing. The two layers are joined and it is interesting to compare the plain wood *sama* with that of the gilded one *in situ*. Notice that because of Tesso's careful carving very little detail is lost after the finishing processes.



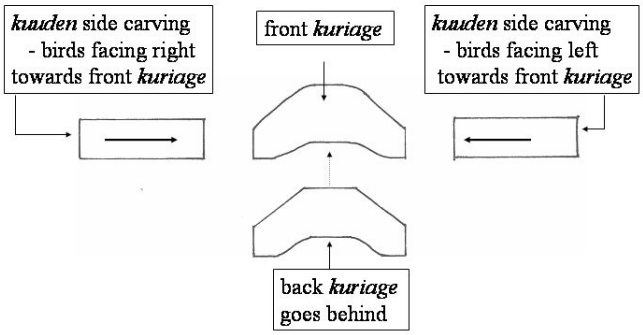
Choukoku photo 25: front *sama* carving - complete

The wakizama design is clouds and lotus flowers. The *jiita* has clouds and the edging, which had been left on for stability during carving has now been removed (see cho photo19). There is a round area for attachment of the lotus flower in the middle



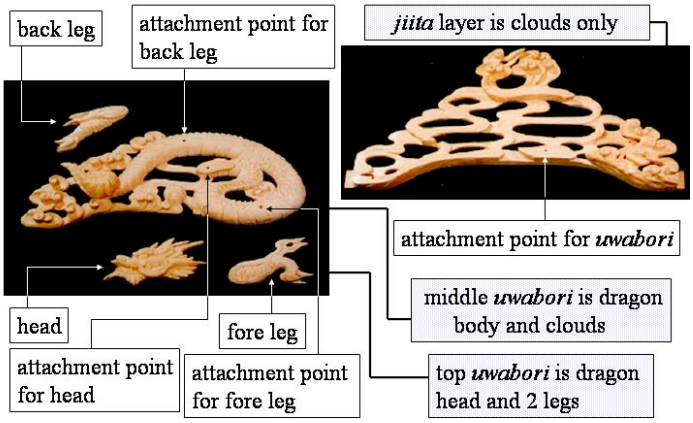
Choukoku photo 26: *wakizama* carvings - pattern is clouds and lotus flowers

Next, as mentioned before, this *butsudan* has no *suzume zama*, however the *kuuden* carvings, consisting of the central front and back *kuriage* and the side carvings, are exquisite.



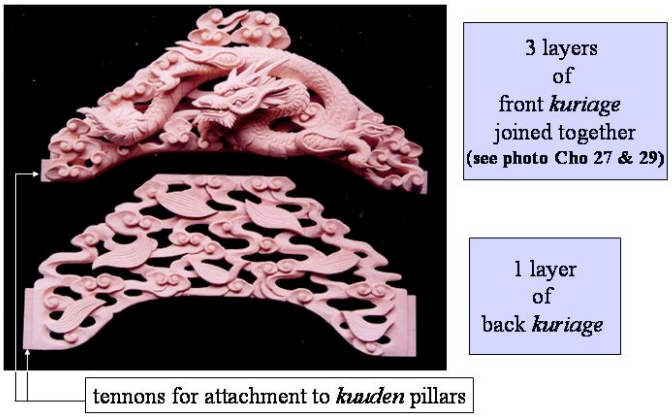
Choukoku figure 18: position of *kuuden* carvings in the case of a *butsudan* with a *touriyane* style *kuuden* (see *kuuden* section – introduction)

The front *kuriage*, inserted into the forward pillars, has three layers with a motif of clouds and a dragon (see cho fig.16.i.e). The *jiita* layer is composed of clouds only. The middle *uwabori* layer, consists of the dragon body carved onto clouds, while the upper *uwabori* layer, has the dragon's head and legs, prepared as separate pieces. When there are three layers, as in this case, the layers are put together one by one starting from the underneath and the pegs never go through all of them at the same position.



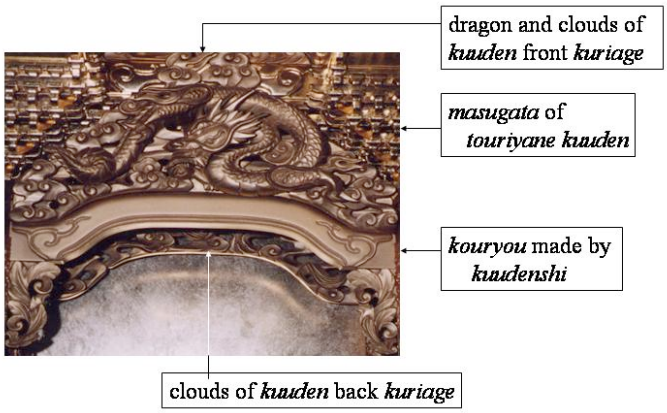
Choukoku photo 27: *kuuden* front carving (*kuriage*) – theme is dragon and clouds (see Cho fig 16.i.d)

Then with the back *kuriage* of more clouds, inserted slightly lower down and behind the front one, a great sense of depth can be achieved.



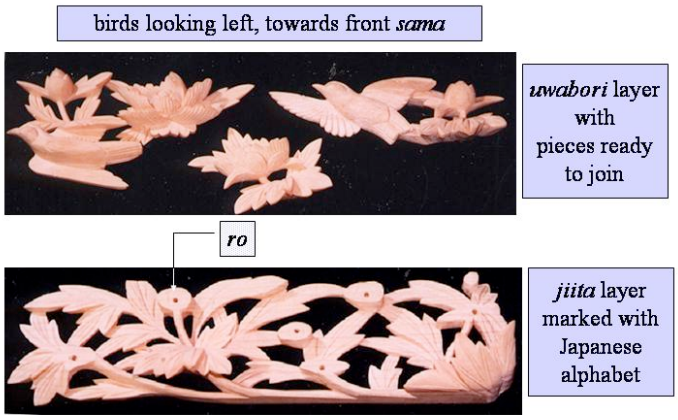
Choukoku photo 28: *kuuden* centre front and back carvings (*kuriage*)

We can see this in the gilded product *in situ* on the *butsudan*.

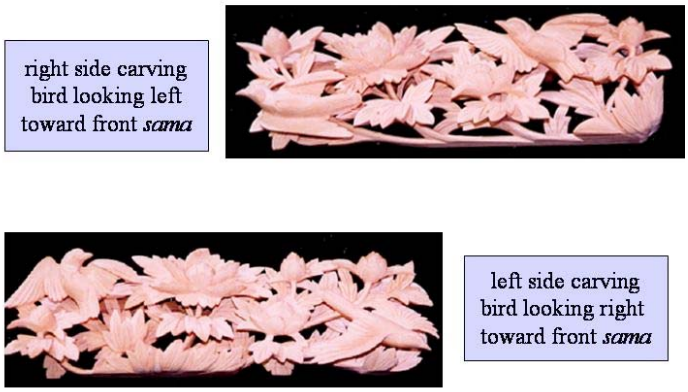


Choukoku photo 29: *kuuden kuriage* – front and back carvings finished and installed

The *uwabori* layer of the *kuuden* side carvings has peonies with birds looking inwards towards the front *kuriage*. The *jiita* layer has leaves and stems with peg attachment points clearly labeled.

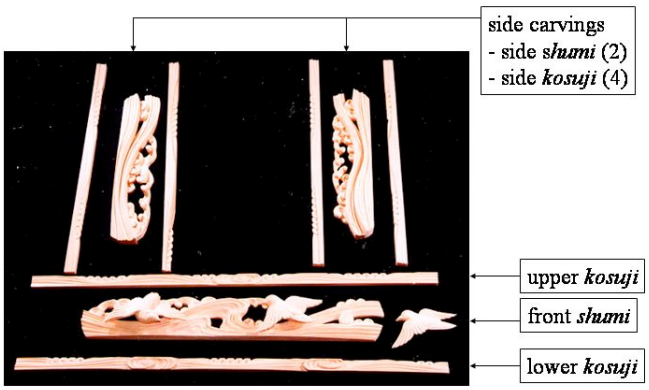


Choukoku photo 30: *kuuden* side carving (right side) not joined

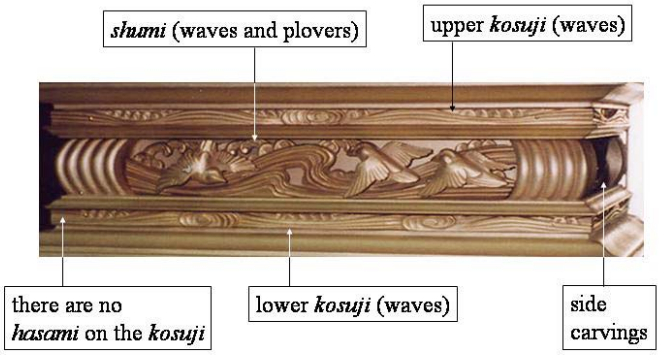


Choukoku photo 31: *kuuden* side carvings joined

Next, regarding the *shumidan*, the designs of the front and side *shumi* carvings are waves and plovers. There are waves on the *kosuji*.

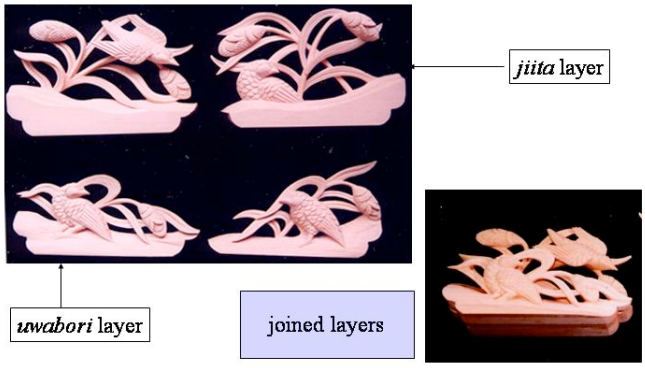


Choukoku photo 32: *shumidan* carvings – theme is waves and plovers



Choukoku photo 33 : finished *shumidan* carvings gilded with gold powder and installed

The *joudan* carving is lunchbox shape (*bentobako*) and the pattern is millet with quail.



Choukoku photo 34: *joudan* carvings – theme is millet and quail

It is not the carver's job to assemble any more than what has already been described. It is a specialist's job to fix the assembled parts into their frames. The *jiita* will be flush with the frame held in place by copper nails set diagonally through all layers of wood. Leaf tips and clouds of *uwabori* extend out over the beading.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Besides *butsudan* carvings, other religious or related work, such as repair on temples and festival floats, is helping to keep Samegai people busy during recession periods.

2. Another form of *butsudan*, called Hamadan, comes from nearby Nagahama and is also manufactured by Hikone dealers. One of its main distinguishing features is the wide, thick *sama* carving which is usually not set in a frame and is always left as plain wood.

Choukoku **photo 35 – Nagahama Butsudan (Hamadan)** (cf Cho photo 9) [photo courtesy of Eirakuya (KK)]

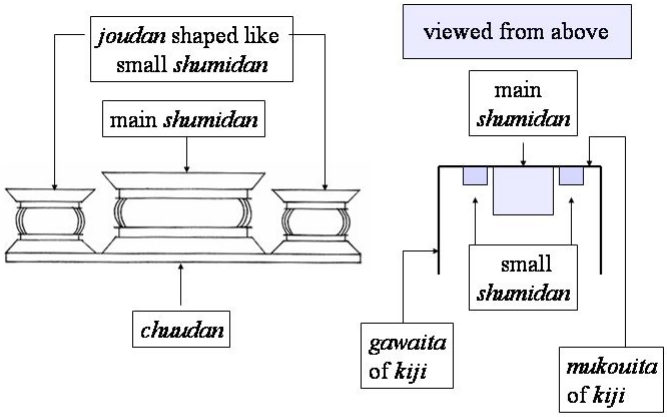
3. According to Buddhist cosmology, Mt Sumeru is like the Himalayas that are too steep for people to approach so it is where the gods live. Like the *shumidan*, the top of Mt Sumeru is wide and flat. It meets the heavens, with the palace of Taishakuten (the Buddha) on top. There are four heavenly kings (*shitennou*) guarding north, east, south and west. The *shumidan* is narrowest around the middle, at the surface of the water. The bottom part is wide and has a deep foundation in the sea, keeping it as firm as a rock. (Hatta, 1994; p32-34)

4. The *hourin* or Buddhist wheel is a symbol of Buddhist law. Its shape indicates that Buddhist teaching will spread outwards, steadily and strongly, to more and more people.

5. For many years carvings have been copied offshore, starting in Taiwan and Korea then, as they became too expensive, moving to China and now to Vietnam and even Indonesia. However, since *butsudan* are of interest only to the Japanese, even though craftsmen in those countries do have the necessary skill, the carvings, according to Japanese artisans, lack that quintessential quality which really is discernable if you know what to look for. Therefore typical Chinese patterns, as described in the text, tend to be copied most successfully.

6. *Hanafuda* is a game played with 48 cards. Twelve kinds of plants or flowers (pine tree, plume tree, cherry tree, wisteria, iris, peony, bush clover, pampas grass, chrysanthemum, maple, willow and paulonia) are painted onto the cards in 4 different styles of each. The aim is to collect certain combinations of cards with different values depending on the themes and styles.

7. An example of copying reported to us, concerns a style of *joudan* conceived by *kijishi* Tsuji Ryozo, called '*mitsujumi*'.



Choukoku figure 19: *mitsujumi*

Here, the traditional box-shaped *joudan* are replaced by smaller *shumidan* with the typical 'waisted' shape. It seems that *toiya* took the idea and had it made cheaper, either here in Japan or abroad.

8. It is interesting that Tesso stresses that his jig sawyer is 'a male *kijishi*'. This comes from '*mishin biki'* where the word '*mishin*' refers to a sewing machine or a saw with an up and down action, like a sewing machine, and is usually associated with women working at home.

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Hatta Yukio. 1994. "Haka to *butsudan* no Igi" [The Meaning of Tombs and *Butsudan*]. Tohoshuppan (kabu): Osaka, p 32-34.

Butsudan photos: 09 and 35 are by courtesy of Eirakuya (KK), Hikone, Shiga Prefecture. [URL: http://www.eirakuya.com] [email: eirakuya@mx.biwa.ne.jp]

The following photographs are by courtesy of Mori Tesso: numbers 03, 22 – 34. All other photos are by Carla Eades. Diagrams are by Yuriko Nishiyama.

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