

SECTION 00: INTRODUCTION TO TRADITIONAL METHODS of CRAFTSMANSHIP (example: making of a Hikone *butsudan*)

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1. What is a *Butsudan*?
2. Making a Hikone *Butsudan*
3. The Research

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Because of its popularity throughout the world, the culture of Japan has been studied extensively over the years. Thus we can find books explaining the mystique of the tea ceremony and flower arrangement. Antique shops in large cities everywhere stock wood block prints and netsuke for those interested in becoming collectors. Touring exhibitions of magnificent temple arts or common everyday craft items such as simple pottery bowls whet our appetite for all things Japanese.

However, it is a sad fact that traditional Japanese craftsmanship is disappearing because the time necessary to reach the required standard of skill means the prices charged by the artisans are very high. Add to that the fact that cheap and easy-care copies are being imported to replace the expensive Japanese ones. For example, with the fast pace of life today, many housewives prefer dishwasher safe bowls to lacquer ones that have to be washed and dried carefully.

Therefore we wish to contribute something to the documentation of those traditional skills that are disappearing fast and will be completely gone in a generation or two. And we wish to focus on the Buddhist family altar (*butsudan*). It may not have the familiarity or instant appeal to the western eye that such things as Japanese gardens or kimonos have. However, it is still important, both culturally as the focus of domestic worship, and technically because it encompasses seven craft skills, including forms of woodwork, lacquering and metalwork.

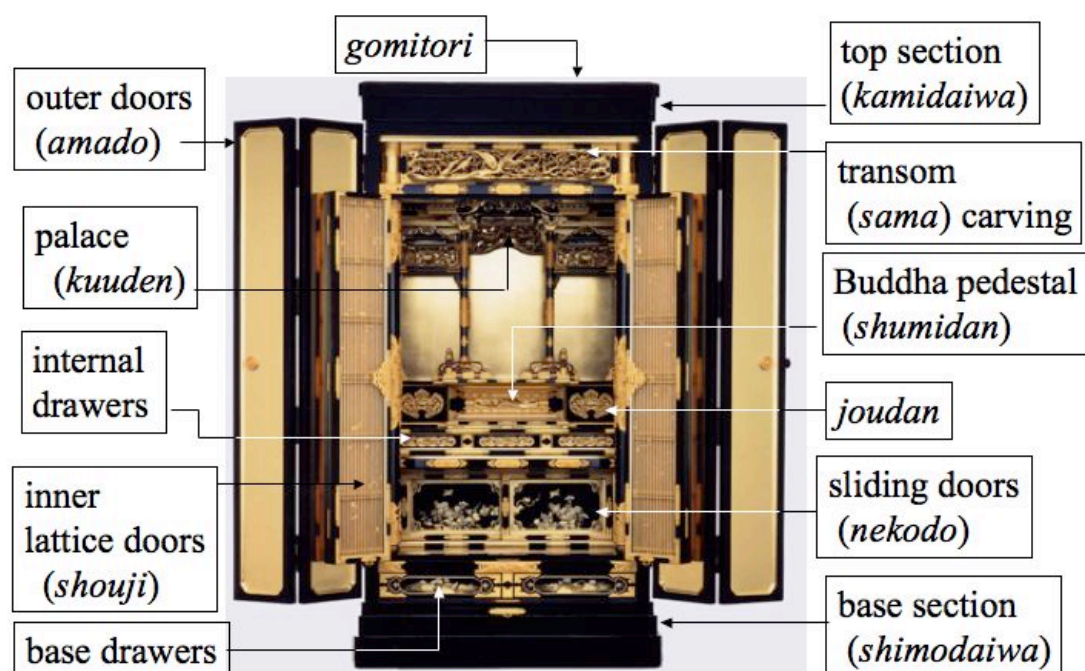
1. What is a *Butsudan*?

As outlined in previous publications (see home page), a *butsudan* is basically a dark coloured cabinet with a double set of doors, and various drawers and shelves inside. Traditionally it was placed in a special room (*butsuma*), decorated in Japanese style with *tatami* mats, a hanging scroll and flower arrangement, where guests would customarily be welcomed.

When the doors of the *butsudan* are open, as they usually are, the focal point is a stand or pedestal (*shumidan*) on which usually stands a small Buddhist statue, surmounted by a pillared canopy (*kuuden*). Other ornaments may be placed on smaller stands (*joudan*) to each side of the main *shumidan*. Buddhist scriptures are stored in the drawers and compartments and paraphernalia for worship (*butsugu*) are kept on the shelves. Therefore one obvious purpose of the *butsudan* is Buddhist worship. However, over the years in Japanese society, its role has come to include, to varying degrees, a way of remembering and communicating with the ancestors. Therefore, inside the *butsudan*, we can find stacks of plaques (*ihai*) written with the Buddhist names of the ancestors and memorabilia of interest to them, such as graduation or

marriage certificates and postcards. When visitors arrive, presents brought to the family are placed in front of the *butsudan* and often the guests will also say a short prayer there before joining the rest of the party.

Keeping to the religious theme, when people buy a *butsudan* they will most likely choose a style that matches their particular faith. Thus generally Buddhist altars fall into four categories depending on style. Simple, plain lacquered wood (*karaki*) *butsudan*, with very little gold or other decoration, suit the austere nature of Zen Buddhism. Large ornate *butsudan*, with an abundance of gold (*kin*), harmonize more with the Joudo and Joudoshin sects (*shuu*) of Buddhism. Further, the Joudou sect (Joudoshinshuu) was historically divided into two sub-sects and allied to particular temples in Kyoto, Nishi Honganji and Higashi Honganji. The differences in the *butsudan* of these sects and sub-sects can be seen from both the general overall appearance as well as the positions of drawers and shapes of individual internal parts, particularly the *kuuden* (see Section 2: *kuuden* section). Broadly speaking, a Joudoshuu *butsudan* has drawers in the base section (*shimodaiwa*), which are visible when the outer doors are closed. However, in both types of Joudoshinshuu *butsudan*, the drawers are all contained within the body (*kiji*) and not visible when the outer doors are closed. Although the division between the Nishi and Higashi Honganji styles is not absolute, it tends to be expressed in terms of the amount of gold on the internal surfaces and the shape of the *kuuden*. The Nishi style usually has gold pillars and gilding on the carvings, whereas in the Higashi style more of the surfaces are left in the simpler black lacquered state.



Intro photo 01: Joudoshinshuu *butsudan* [courtesy of Eirakuya Co. Ltd.]

As mentioned before, it is the purpose of this website to outline the traditional techniques used in making a *butsudan*. The research was carried out in Hikone, on the eastern shore of Lake Biwa in Shiga Prefecture.



children drawing the castle on a summer day

As a result of the Tokugawa success at the Battle of Sekigahara in 1601, the Ii family was awarded land on the eastern shore of Lake Biwa.

Hikone castle was built, starting in 1603 and taking 20 years. It became the seat of the Hikone fief.

It is one of four original castles which have been designated as National Treasures.

Intro photo 02.a: Hikone castle



Intro photo 02.b: Hikone castle & moat in winter



a culture plaza where music, drama and exhibitions can be experienced



lake Biwa is the largest lake in Japan and is especially beautiful in the evening

Intro photo 03: sites of Hikone

Hikone still has many quaint streets with old houses

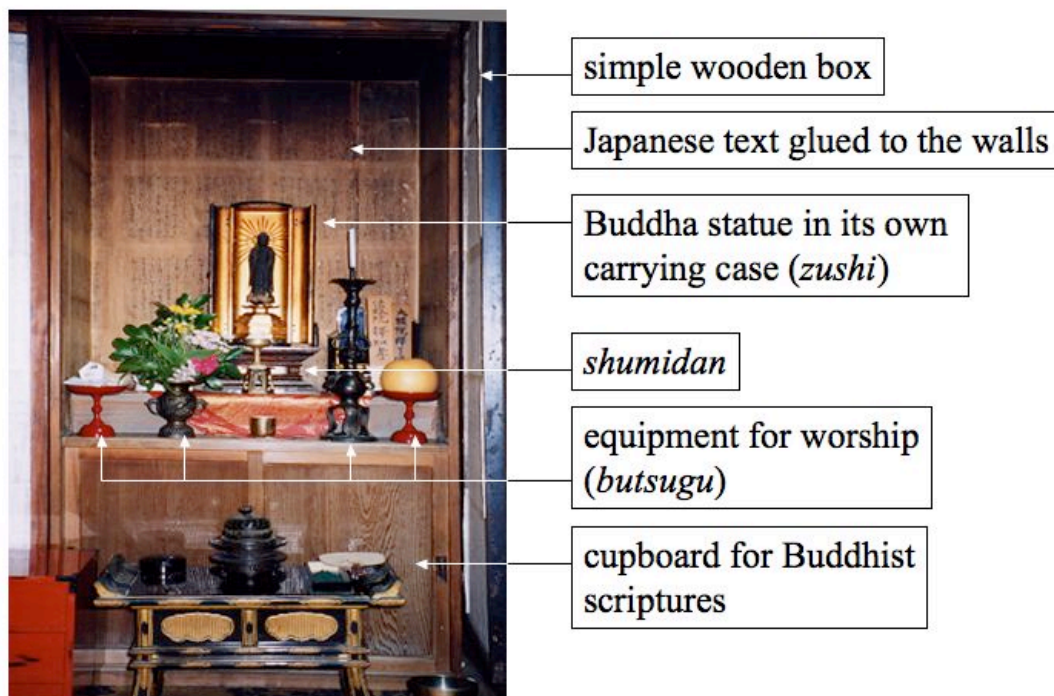


the *butsudan* companies use this image to market their products

Intro photo 04: streets of Hikone

Hikone is one of 15 regions especially designated by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), as a traditional *butsudan* production area. Although each Production Area has its own particular style, Hikone designs have the advantage of being acceptable to customers in other parts of Japan. However, in general, the following description is that of a large sized gold Joudoshinshuu *butsudan*, which many people would recognize as being typical of Hikone.

On the other hand, as one artisan comments, ‘it can be an orange crate and if you put a statue of the Buddha inside, isn’t it a *butsudan*?’ In fact, some people might say that the simpler the altar the more you can focus on the essentials and not be distracted by the trappings. The following photo is a simple wooden box with old Buddhist writings glued to the walls instead of gilding. It has all the necessary parts: a shelf for the statue of the Buddha, a cupboard for storage of scriptures and equipment and the usual candles, bells, flowers etc (*butsugu*). In this case the statue of the Buddha is far more special and important to the family than the *butsudan* itself.

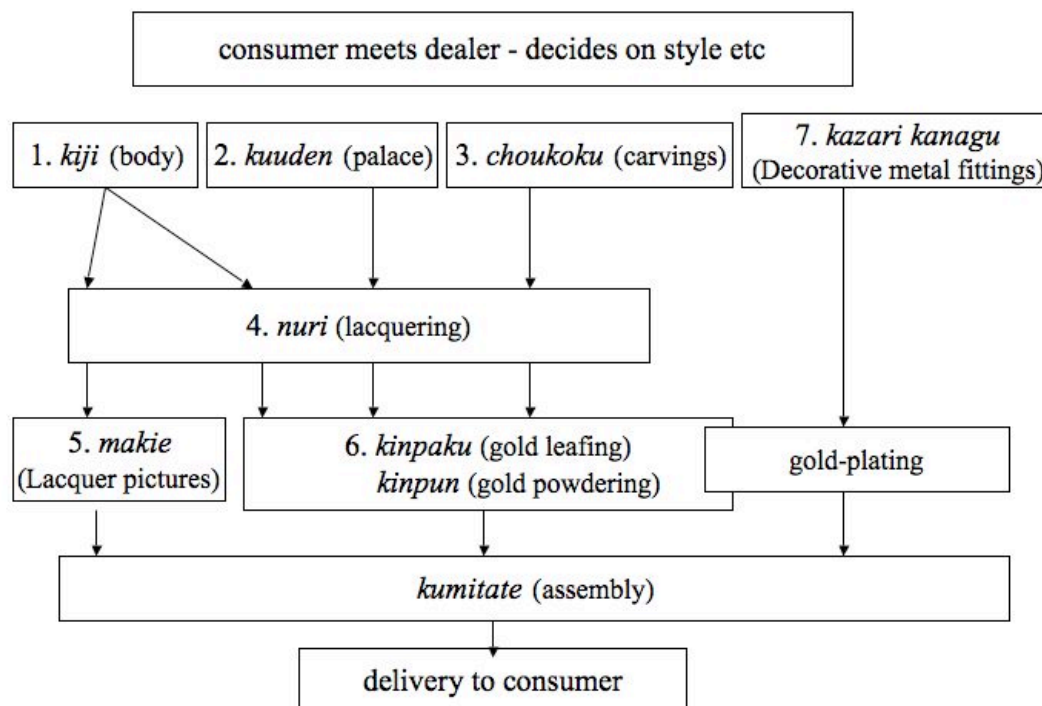


Intro photo 05: simple wooden *butsudan*

2. Making a Hikone *Butsudan*

Making a *butsudan* in the traditional way involves the collaboration of more than seven different kinds of artisans. Each of these artisans undergoes an apprenticeship of between five and ten years. If they then wish to obtain official certification as traditional artisans (*dentou kougei shi* or DKS), it is necessary to pass quite rigorous written and practical exams. In the following website, the work of each DKS will be described. The flow chart outlines the complete production process, as carried out by the seven artisans, from the original order to the final delivery.

Intro fig 01: Making a Hikone *butsudan*



Of these seven types of craftsmen, three are woodworkers, two are lacquer workers and two are metal workers.

The three wood artisans are the *kijishi* who makes the body or carcass of the *butsudan*, the *kuudenshi* who makes the palace or canopy that surmounts the statue of the Buddha and the *choukokushi* who does the carvings that decorate the *butsudan*. When these three artisans have finished their work, the *kiji*, *kuuden* and *choukoku* are passed on to the *nurishi* who applies several layers of lacquer (*urushi*), giving them a black or reddish appearance. After this the parts will be separated for further finishing by different artisans. A layer of gilding can be applied by the *kinpakuoshishi*, using gold leaf (*kinpaku*), or by the *fundameshi*, using gold powder (*kinpun*). Alternatively a picture (*makie*), using lacquer and gold powder, may be put on certain areas by the *makieshi*. Finally, the *kazari kanagu shi* makes the metal fittings to decorate the doors, drawers and shelf fronts. The same artisan also makes the more functional door fittings, such as knobs and hinges. When these are finished, they may also be gold plated and or lacquered. Lastly all the *butsudan* parts will be sent back to the shop for assembly (*kumitate*) by special artisans, so that it is ready for delivery.

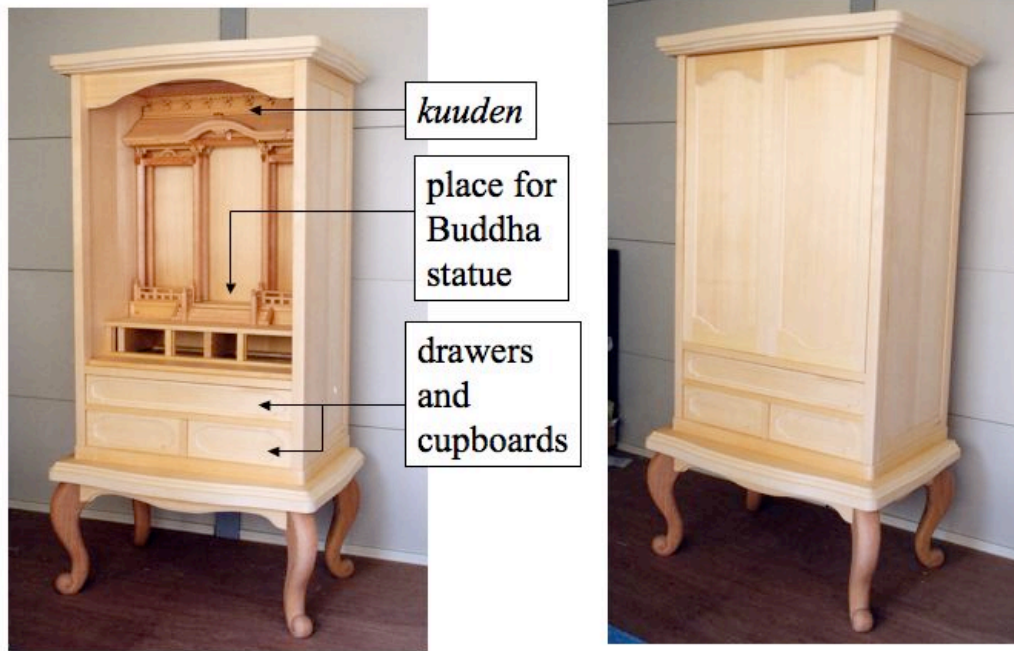
Customarily, companies (*toiya*) both large and small oversee the production of a *butsudan*. They have display areas where the customer can come and select a ready made item or make special requests considering budget or choices to emphasize certain skills. The *toiya* may have workshops themselves or they may delegate the work to their favoured artisans. Recently however a shift is occurring away from the pre-eminence of the *toiya* and, as in the following two cases, the artisans themselves are taking a more active role in the manufacturing process.

Photo 6 shows the result of collaboration between an artisan who took on the role of *toiya*, distributing the work to his fellow craftsmen, and the customer who had particular style requirements in mind and enjoyed using his computer to that end. In this case the *butsudan* was to be small so it could sit on a shelf. The customer wanted to highlight *makie* and de-emphasize metalwork, so he designed the *makie* himself for the outside of the door, to make the appearance of the closed *butsudan* less austere (cf *Nuri* photo 01 and *Kazari Kanagu*: section 7).



Intro photo 06: collaboration between the customer and the artisan maker

Some craftsmen are now designing *butsudan* to look like other pieces of furniture. So why not give it cabriole legs and green instead of black lacquer to disguise its true function? The following photo shows a *butsudan* prepared without the cooperation of the *toiya* as a somewhat renegade break from their authority.



Intro photo 07.a: a *butsudan* or not a *butsudan*:
the plain wooden *kiji* (it will be painted green)



Intro photo 07.b: the hidden butsudan: painted
green [courtesy of Butsudan Koubou Aun]

3. The Research

Our research started quite by chance in 1996. During that year, it was suggested that, since *butsudan* were one of the products for which Hikone was famous, a visit to a *butsudan* maker (Eirakuya Co.Ltd.) would be interesting. It was arranged and we three, Yuriko Nishiyama, Hiroko Yanase and Carla Eades set off. The shop owner was very welcoming. She could speak some English and was willing to show us around, explaining details of the overwhelming number and variety of *butsudan* on display. Tea was served and when we chanced to say we might be interested in studying the topic further it was enthusiastically encouraged.

Eirakuya Co. Ltd. deals almost exclusively in *butsudan* made using the traditional techniques. They carry out some of the processes in their own factory while others are allocated to individual artisans working in their own homes or workshops. Because of the long training period for artisans, as mentioned above, the prices of these goods are very high. A traditionally made *butsudan* can take a year to make and can cost up to 20 million yen. It is not surprising, therefore, that most people nowadays, have neither the money, the living space, nor the religious inclination to purchase such an article. It seems important, therefore, that the traditional production processes should be documented before they are lost altogether.

Very little is written in Japanese, on this topic, and almost nothing in English, so it didn't take long to do the preliminary research. When we were ready to begin interviews with the individual artisans, we were introduced to a charming and helpful *kijishi*, the late Tsuji Ryozo who, together with his son Toshimasa, patiently explained the intricacies of *kiji* making (see *kiji* section).



Intro photo 08: Yuriko (L) and Hiroko (R) listening to *kijishi* Tsuji Toshimasa describe the intricacies of jig-sawing

Because of his high ranking in the All Japan Association of Traditionally Skilled Artisans (*zenkoku dentou kougei shi kai*), and his long-standing service to the industry locally, he was able to cajole or otherwise convince the remaining six types of artisans to meet with us. As we talked with them, for many hours on some occasions, we were met with progressive astonishment (that three women, including a foreigner, would be so interested in their work), irritation (at our persistent questions) and finally respect (for the extent of our accumulating knowledge). The deeper we delved, the more we understood the problems these artisans were having in their attempts to cope with the Japanese recession of the 1990s. Through this we became interested in the marketing procedures and what their umbrella organization, the Hikone *Butsudan* Manufacturers' Cooperative Association, (Hikone *Butsudan Jigyou Kyoudou Kumiai* referred to throughout the website as the *kumiai*) is doing to help.

Each year the *kumiai* puts on an exhibition, where the 30 or so local companies display their latest products. At these events, the visitors can enjoy demonstrations by the artisans and the chance to try their hands at the techniques.

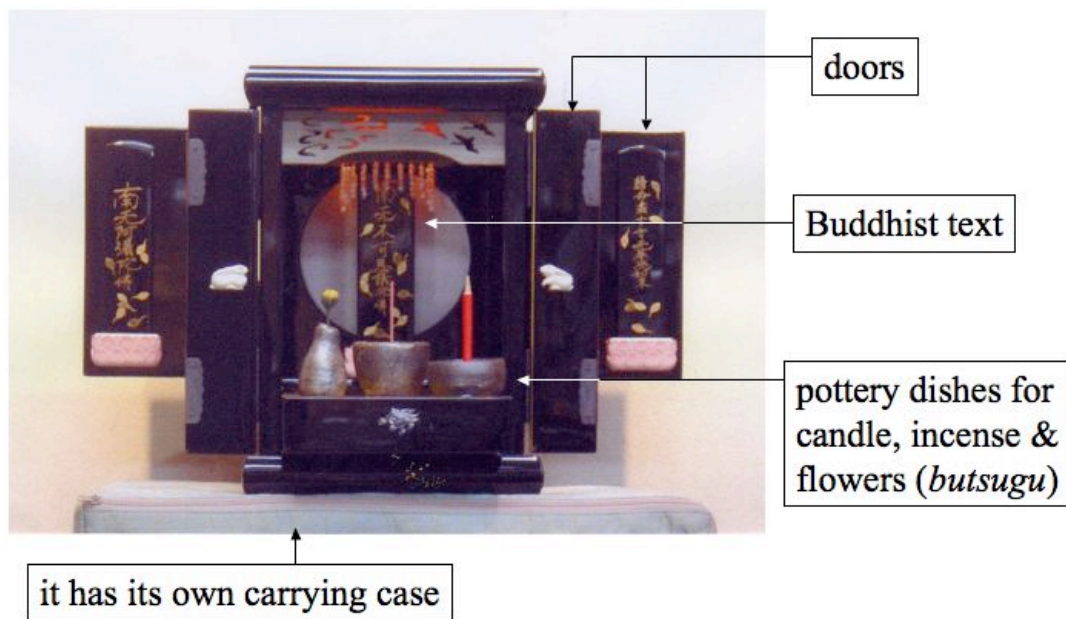


Intro photo 09: Yuriko and Carla learning how to make metal decorations [with the help of *kazari kanagushi* Sawatari Masaaki]

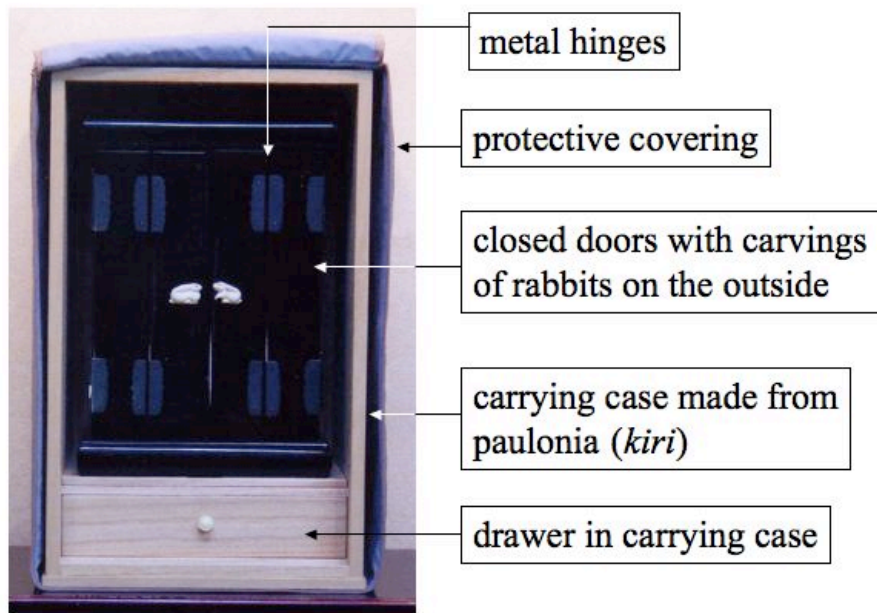
The most important of these exhibitions, *zenkoku dentouteiki kougeihin butsudan butsugu ten* (colloquially '*zenbutsuten*') or 'Nationwide Exhibition of Traditionally Produced Buddhist Altars and Accessories', takes place every two years. All 15 Production Areas gather to exhibit their latest *butsudan* creations. The venue rotates between the Production Areas and in October 2003 it was the turn of the Hikone *Kumiai* to stage the 17th event. It involved the usual display of *butsudan*, demonstrations and contests. It was also an opportunity for the artisans to demonstrate their skills in making products not related to the *butsudan* industry. These goods were

judged and awards were given for them, as well as to the *butsudan* makers. It was all very successful.

One of the *butsudan* to receive a prize in this exhibition was another small butsudān (cf Intro photo 06) that could be put on a shelf. It was significant in that the maker rather broke with the Hikone tradition of making large gilt butsudān to try to meet the needs of modern society. Perhaps that is the reason it was so well received, winning the second most important prize in the competition.



Intro photo 10.a: small butsudān to fit on a shelf (courtesy of Tanaka Butsudanten)



Intro photo 10.b: small *butsudan* in carrying case

Now that this website is complete, we hope it will provide a useful documentation of traditional skills which sadly, are either becoming obsolete or moving offshore. We also wish to thank the artisans, the shop owners and the *kumiai* members who gave their time so freely. They will be acknowledged individually throughout this work.