

“Kyouzoku” Arm Rests

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



A kyouzoku is a free-standing arm rest, as if one arm of a chair has been removed and placed on the floor. I had seen them in museums and books, but it was by watching Japanese historical movies that I gained an understanding of how they were used, and how handy one could be. Normally, the kyouzoku is kept off to one side of where a person is sitting, whether on a tatami mat, zabuton cushion, or raised dais. If you have ever sat on the floor like this, you know that eventually it gets very tiring to keep yourself upright without the benefit of a chair back or arm to lean on. When the floor-seated person wants to sit more comfortably, the person leans to the side onto the kyouzoku, or the kyouzoku is brought around to the front and the person leans forward placing their forearms or elbows on top of the kyouzoku.

I have seen several different styles of kyouzoku. Some are highly decorated with carved support spindles and detailed painting. Some are functional and quite sturdy, of heavy wood that is finished simply. Some are topped with cushions, and some are not. Later-period kyouzoku were even quite boxy, with storage space beneath their padded lids.

I chose to make a kyouzoku from commercially available lumber, and entirely by hand to exercise some useful woodworking skills. You only need a few tools to make the style that I chose. This style can be glued together for permanence and sturdiness, or left unglued for portability. I will eventually be gluing mine together and finishing it to practice decorative techniques.

My design follows typical joinery for a low writing table called a fuzukue. The top is a flat straight plank with curved ends. It is cut from 1x6 poplar lumber. Two cross-grain battens are fastened to the underside with a sliding dovetail. These battens keep the top from warping, and provide through-mortises for attaching the legs. They are cut from 1x2 poplar lumber. The legs are carved planks with tenons at both ends. They were cut from 1x10 lumber, though they could have been 1x8 if it had been available. The feet are more 1x2 poplar, with blind mortises so that the delicate tatami would be protected from harm.

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

Scans from "the Koizumi furniture book":

Koizumi, Kazuko

Traditional Japanese Furniture; A Definitive Guide

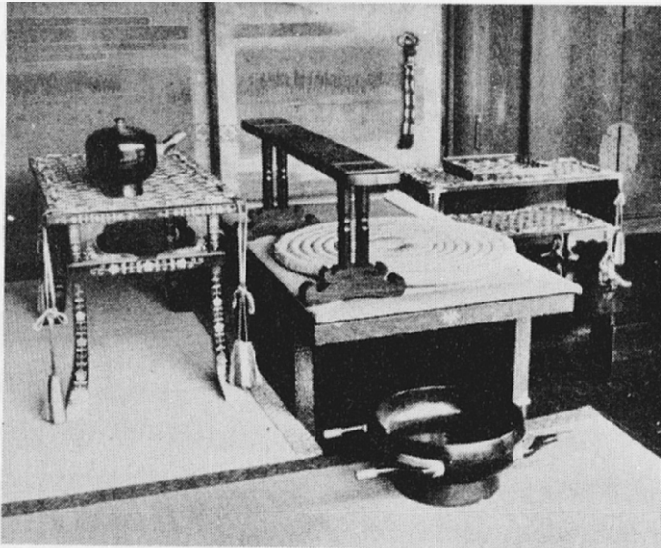
Tokyo and New York

Kodansha International

1989 (1986)

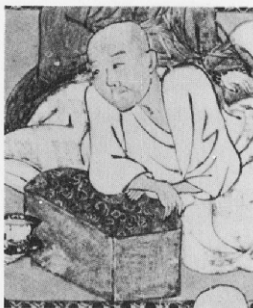
ARMRESTS *Kyōsoku*

Independent armrests (plates 163, 164) on which to lean while seated on the floor were called *kyōsoku* (though earlier they were known as *hyōki*, the Japanese reading of the Chinese name). A support board (*hyōban*) measuring approximately 18 by 6 inches (45 by 15 centimeters) was elevated on legs at either end, and covered with a cotton-padded cushion. Armrests might be made of imported *karaki* woods, zelkova, or paulownia, or lacquered and decorated in mother-of-pearl inlay or *maki-e*.

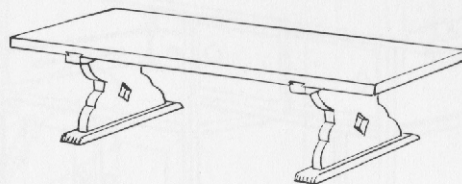


Enza cushion and armrest on dais (*shōji*), and for daily ablutions a horned basin and pitcher

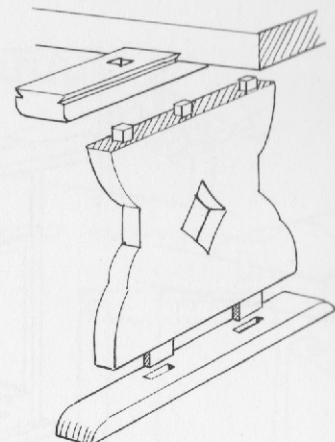
A sturdier, box-shaped armrest featuring feather-stuffed pads on top and usually storage space in the base emerged, and as these were used mainly for recuperation and childbirth, they were eventually included in bridal trousseaux.



Box-shaped armrest



Typical joinery work for writing table

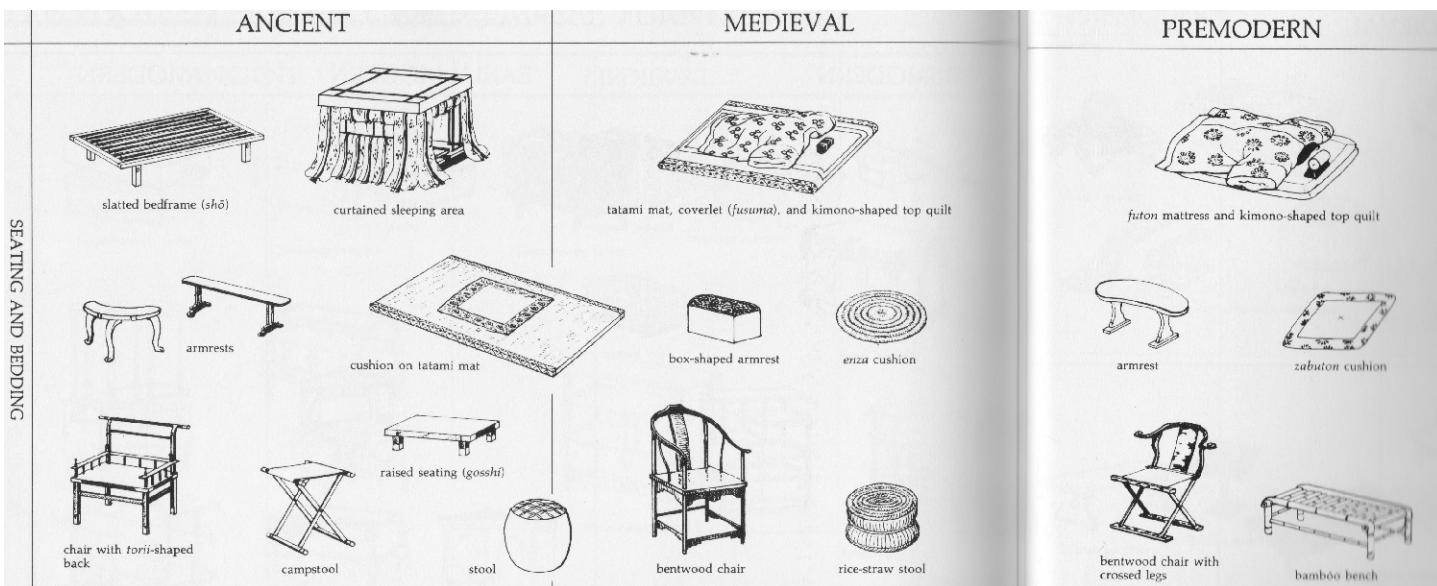




163. Armrest
Approx. H. 12, W. 24, D. 8 in. (30, 60, 20 cm.); silk,
black lacquer, *maki-e*.



164. Armrest
Middle eighteenth century. By Suzuki Harunobu (detail).



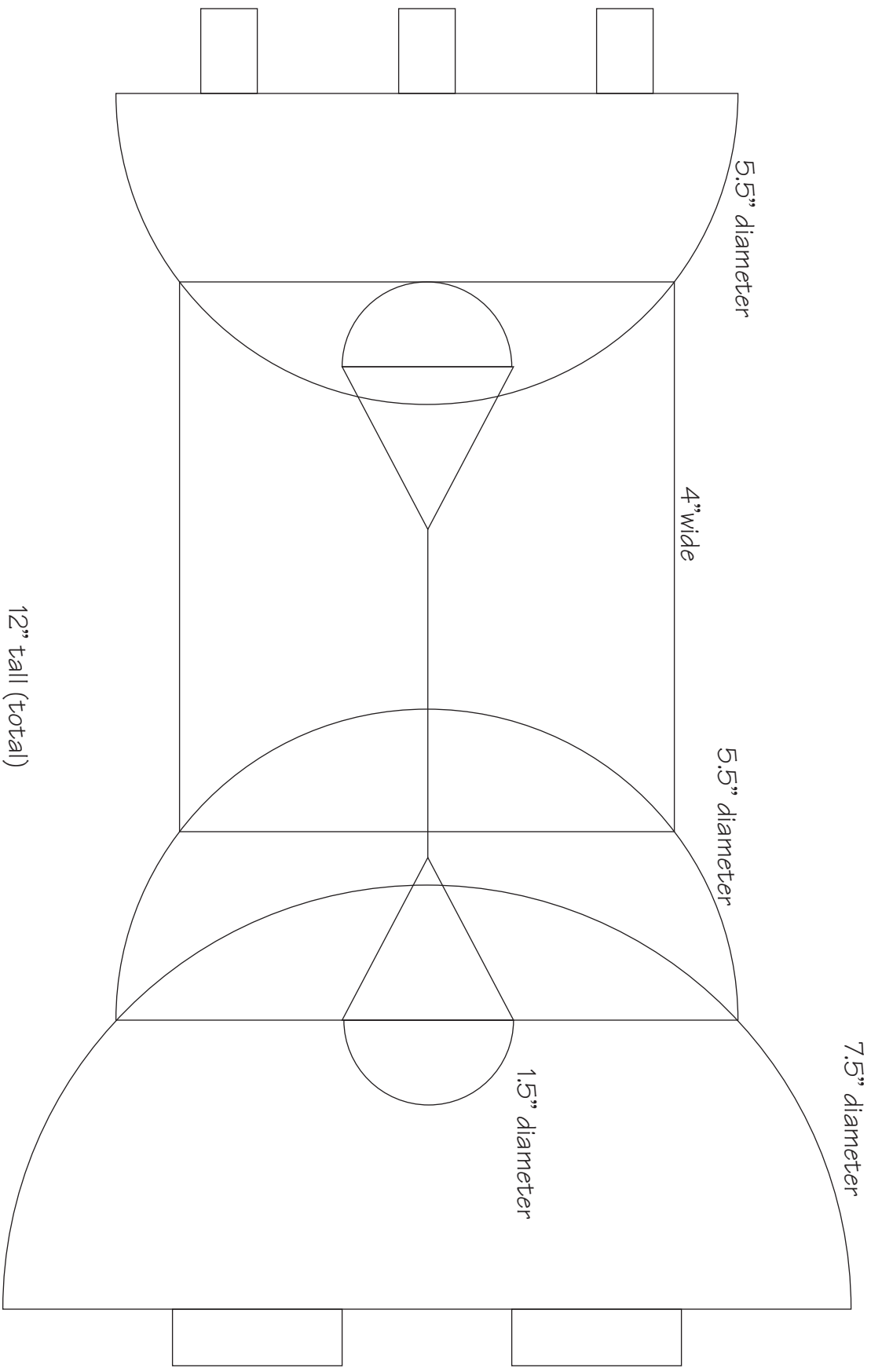


Excerpt from the sutra:
Heike-Nokyo, ca. 1164
 Ink and colors on paper
 Itsukushima-jinja, Hiroshima

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

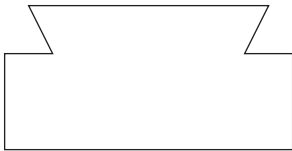


Screen capture from the film:
Ran (1985)
 dir. Kurosawa, Akira



Underside of one end of surface
showing sliding dovetail mortise
Full surface is 30 inches long.

One end of the dovetail key



The other end.



Foot piece

