

An Introduction to Different Types of Firearms

The world of firearms and gun terminology is quite broad, and it can be difficult to know what makes one gun different from another. There are many ways to classify firearms across their centuries of history, but the simplest way to differentiate is by how they are loaded and fired.

Muskets (also known as arquebuses) were the most common handheld firearms of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. Muskets are **muzzle-loaders**, meaning that the propellant (gunpowder) and projectile (a musket ball) are inserted into the mouth of the barrel and packed down into the firing chamber using a long tool called a ramrod. The powder is ignited by a slow-burning match cord that is clipped to a spring-loaded arm. When the trigger is pulled, the arm snaps forward, bringing the lit match cord into contact with the powder and firing the gun. This firing mechanism is referred to as a **matchlock**.

In the West, matchlocks had fallen out of use by the end of the seventeenth century. They were replaced first by **wheellocks** and **flintlocks**, which use sparks rather than match cords to ignite the powder. A century later, self-igniting **percussion caps** made those designs obsolete. Muzzle-loaders were eventually replaced by faster, easier-to-use **breech-loaders**, which are loaded through an opening in the back of the barrel.

In Japan, matchlocks were never abandoned, and gunsmiths improved on the design during the 1600s and 1700s. Muzzle-loading matchlock muskets remained in use throughout the Tokugawa period (1603–1867), when Japan kept itself largely isolated from the world. Only when the country reopened in the nineteenth century did it begin importing and manufacturing more modern weapons.