

## **The Architecture of Seki Juku**

Seki Juku has roughly 400 historic buildings, mostly dating from the late Edo period (1603–1867) and the Meiji era (1868–1912). Generally two stories high, with wooden lattices on the ground floor and plastered mud-daub walls on the second, they tend to be much longer than they are wide, in what is known as an “eel-nest” (*unagi no nedoko*) layout. The second-floor space was traditionally used as an attic for storage or the cultivation of silkworms rather than for daily life.

The following architectural details may be noted in the course of a stroll through the town.

### **Symmetrical vs. asymmetrical windows**

The second-floor façade of the house will have windows that are arranged either symmetrically or asymmetrically. If they are symmetrical, then chances are that the house dates from the Meiji era. But if they are asymmetrical, then the house dates from the Edo period. The reason for this difference is that during the Edo period, the arrangement of the windows was dictated by feng shui geomancy. When Western culture arrived in Japan during the Meiji era, however, feng shui was discredited as “irrational” and “Oriental,” and the arrangement of windows became rigorously logical and balanced.

### **Insect-cage windows**

The second-floor windows themselves have another distinctive characteristic. Lattices made of closely spaced vertical timbers wrapped in straw rope and then covered in plaster, they are known as *mushiko-mado* (“insect-cage windows”) because of their resemblance to close-barred cages for keeping insects. Such windows are found exclusively on upper floors and lofts.

### **Banging benches**

Some of the shop fronts feature fold-down benches or shelves known as *battari*. These could be let down for people to place goods on or to sit on. The onomatopoeic name derives from the thumping or thudding sound made when the bench drops.

### **Curtains against the rain**

Some of the houses in Seki Juku have vertical slats of wood fitted beneath the eaves to protect the storefronts from the wind and rain. Known as *makuita* (“curtain boards”), they are a relatively recent innovation that only came into use in the middle of the Meiji era, and are unique to Mie Prefecture.

### **Bulging with prosperity**

A small number of roofs in Seki Juku are so-called *mukuri-yane*, roofs with a very subtle convex bulge. Since such roofs were expensive to build, they served as a discreet way of signaling wealth while also facilitating the runoff of heavy rain. Appropriately enough, the best example of such a roof is found on the house once owned by Hashizume the moneychanger, about halfway along the main street on the north side.

### **Painted sculptures**

Among the more curious details to watch out for are the plaster sculptures nestling in the

corners atop the first-floor eaves of Seki Juku houses. Examples include fans, dragons, a carp climbing a waterfall – there is even a tiger emerging from some shocking pink undergrowth.

### **Tiles that tell a tale**

Also worth a close look are the carved circular pendants on the eave-end tiles facing the street. The tiles at the cooperage on the north side of the street feature the kanji for “vessel” or “container” (*utsuwa*) to reflect the cooper’s job as a maker of wooden barrels, buckets, and pails.

### **A sign of dubious character**

Just opposite the post office is an old confectionery shop called Fukagawaya. Both the building and its roofed sign date from 1784. While the sign has the name of the store’s famous signature confection, *seki no to*, written on both sides, the character *no* is written in hiragana on the eastern side (the side facing travelers going west toward Kyoto), but in kanji on the western side (facing those heading east toward Edo). There are conflicting theories as to the reason for this. Was hiragana used because Kyoto was a culture of kana rather than kanji? Were people from Edo presumed to be too poorly educated to read kanji? Or was the distinction made just to create a talking point and bring attention to the store?

### **Buildings, chronologically arranged**

There is a block on the north side of the street opposite Seki Jizoin Temple in which a row of four buildings progresses from west to east in chronological order: from the Edo-period Aizuya restaurant to the Meiji-era Yokanya, with its brick second-floor façade and Western-style windows, to an elegant Taisho-era building (now a dog café), and finally, a Showa-era liquor store. This series of buildings is typical of Seki Juku, not just in their chronological diversity but because all the buildings are still in use, despite their age.