

Nozoki Karakuri (Peepshow Device)
and *Karakuri* (Mechanical Dolls or Mechanisms)

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Nozoki karakuri is an entertainment device that was popular before movies were introduced in Japan. This paper will discuss the origin and background of the word *karakuri*.

Previous studies include two major theories on the origin of the name. One is that *karakuri* in *nozoki karakuri* came from *Takeda karakuri*, or displays of mechanical dolls created by the first automata maker, Omi Takeda. The other is that when the original peepshow device was first brought to Japan, it was already equipped with mechanical dolls. The significance and role of *nozoki karakuri* will be clarified by examining the origin of the name, the definition of the word *karakuri* and changes in the meaning.

Investigating how the name *nozoki karakuri* was given to the device for entertaining people by having them look into a box through an attached lens and showing them tricks suggests that the device was introduced to Japanese culture in the late 1600s and acquired the name around 1700. The device was originally a box with some sort of mechanism or *karakuri*, and when it started to be used for entertainment, the word *karakuri* was attached to its name. At that time, *karakuri* meant “artfully built mechanisms.”

As recorded in historic sources from 1709, peepshows were referred to as *Takeda karakuri*. Automata expert Kosei Yamazaki pointed out that what were called *Takeda karakuri* was not necessarily true Takeda mechanical displays. The term connoted all types of self-operating mechanisms.

The original peepshow device brought to Japan was a box without an automaton. However, since mechanical dolls were popular then, they started to be placed in peepshow units. Later, *karakuri* mechanical devices became more complex and intricate, but peepshows were still called *Takeda karakuri*. Some of them were faithful copies of Takeda mechanical displays, but others were not. In 1770 a new peepshow device that showed illustrations of day and night scenes as in reality was introduced, and was well-received. Even though the content of the entertainment device changed, it was still called *nozoki karakuri*. Furthermore, people called street performances using the new device *Takeda karakuri*. There were two types of *Nozoki karakuri* devices: One showed mechanical dolls; the other, drawings of day and night scenes.

The latter apparatus was easy to operate; thus, scenes from *yoruri* puppet plays and kabuki performances were reproduced easily and effectively. At some point, the device became larger. Eventually, it evolved into a unique peepshow device.

The word *karakuri* in *nozoki karakuri* did not come from *Takeda karakuri* or “Takeda mechanical displays.” Even though what was inside peepshow devices was changed to adapt to the times, *nozoki karakuri* street performances continued to be called *Takeda karakuri*.