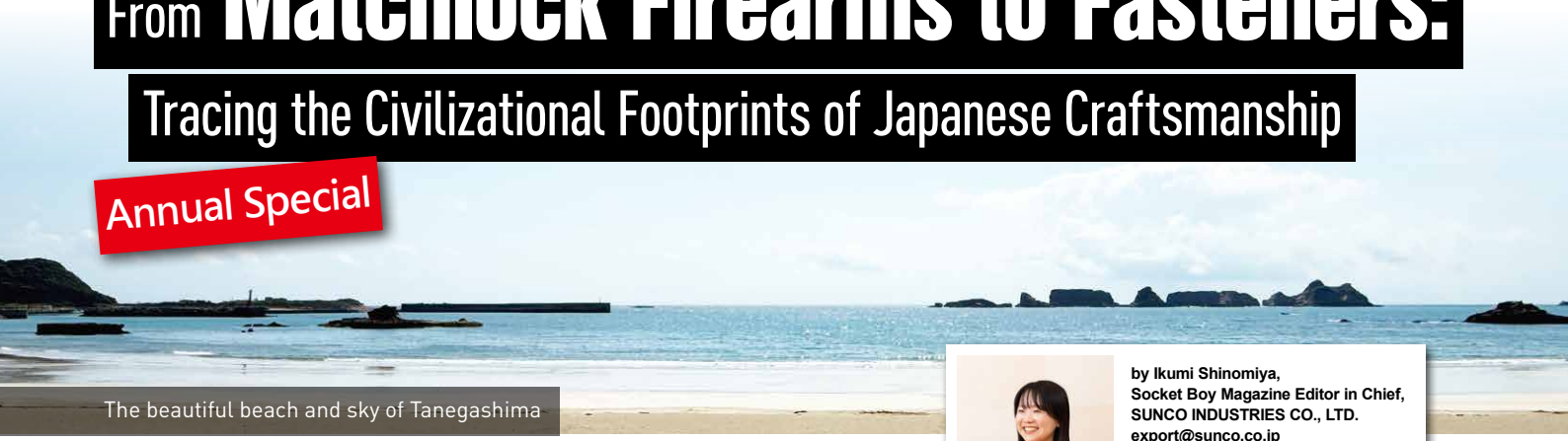
From Matchlock Firearms to Fasteners:

Tracing the Civilizational Footprints of Japanese Craftsmanship

Annual Special



The beautiful beach and sky of Tanegashima



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Editor's Note

How did a tiny fastener cross the ocean and become part of Japan's industrial history over the past several centuries? From the threaded breech plugs that arrived in Japan with matchlock firearms to the craftsmanship and cultural heritage carefully preserved by Japanese fastener giants today, fasteners bear witness not only to the introduction and evolution of technology, but also to the accumulation of craftsmanship and the passing down of knowledge from one generation to the next.

Japan is one of the world's most successful countries in preserving its cultural heritage and traditional craftsmanship. Japanese artisans not only possess exceptional technical skills but also carry the responsibility of sustaining traditions and safeguarding industrial culture. Through this three-part Journey to the Roots series submitted from Japan, we invite readers to follow the perspective of a Japanese fastener magazine's press crew as they trace the footsteps of history to Tanegashima Island, south of Kyushu, and rediscover the little-known origins and stories of Japan's fastener industry, revealing the rich craftsmanship and industrial heritage behind these seemingly small components.

Tracking the Origin of Fasteners

Tanegashima: The Island Where Firearms Were First Introduced to Japan

Tanegashima, an island located in the Pacific Ocean south of Kagoshima Prefecture, is widely known as the place where firearms were first introduced to Japan, nearly 500 years ago. The arrival of firearms had a profound impact on Japanese history, making Tanegashima famous nationwide as the birthplace of Japanese firearms technology. However, few people are aware that fasteners were also introduced to Japan along with these firearms.



▼ A breech plug fastener fitted to the rear of a matchlock gun barrel

1



Fasteners Arrived in Japan Together with Firearms

According to historical records, a Chinese ship carrying Portuguese traders was blown off course and came ashore at Maenohama on Tanagashima in 1543. The Portuguese brought matchlock firearms; this was the first arrival of guns in Japan. The local leader at the time, Tokitaka Tanegashima, purchased two matchlock guns and ordered local blacksmiths to reproduce them. Although the craftsmen eventually succeeded, after extensive trial and error, in manufacturing the gun barrels, they had great difficulty in reproducing the threaded fastener used for the breech plug, which seals the rear end of the barrel 1. The following year, the Portuguese returned to the island and taught the blacksmiths the techniques required to manufacture the breech plug. With the successful development of this fastening technology, Japan-made firearms were finally created.



2 ▲Matchlock firearms

The breech plug serves as a lid that withstands the enormous pressure generated when a firearm is discharged. As such, it is a critical component for ensuring its safe operation. In December 2025, a monument replicating a breech plug was installed on the beach where the Portuguese are believed to have landed in 1544. The monument commemorates the history of fasteners introduced to Japan alongside matchlock firearms 2, and it helps preserve this important story for future generations.

Tanegashima Where History and the Future Meet

While Tanegashima is known as the birthplace of firearms and fastener technology in Japan, it is also home to the cutting-edge technology that supports the nation's space development efforts. The Tanegashima Space Center, located in Minamitane Town, serves as one of Japan's most important facilities for launching and assembling rockets 3. While the center plays a vital role in the country's space exploration programs, it is also a popular tourist destination. At the JAXA Space Science and Technology Museum, located within the space center grounds, visitors can learn about rockets, satellites and space exploration. Tanegashima is a unique place where the past and the future coexist. The island continues to play a remarkable role in the advancement of technology.



3 A rocket monument welcomes visitors to the JAXA Space Science and Technology Museum.
4 Rocket launch site
5 A full-scale model of the H-II rocket on display

About Tanegashima

★ **Location:** South of Kagoshima Prefecture: part of the Osumi Islands archipelago

★ **Size:** Approximately 445 square kilometers

★ **Access:** About 40 minutes by air from Kagoshima Airport. About 1 hour and 40 minutes by high-speed ferry or about 3.5 hours by regular ferry from Kagoshima Port

★ **Climate and features:** Tanegashima enjoys a mild maritime climate with relatively warm temperatures throughout the year. The island is well known for its sugarcane and Anno sweet potato production. Its beautiful coastlines, crystal-clear waters and abundant natural scenery make it a popular tourist destination.



◀ Teppou Yuri (gun lily), aka the Easter lily, is the official flower of Nishiomote City on Tanegashima. Its Japanese name originates from the flower's resemblance to the muzzle of a firearm.

'Learning Through Play' Philosophy

Passing Down the History of the Matchlock and Fastener

"I want people to learn about the history and technology of matchlock guns through fun." These are the words of Kazuyuki Fukada, Chairman of the Nakatane Matchlock Preservation Society.

Born on Tanegashima Island in Kagoshima Prefecture in 1959, Fukada spent his childhood living on the island, but on graduation from high school, he moved to Osaka to work for the security company SECOM. Later he moved to Tokyo, joining the Metropolitan Police Department as a police officer. After a 30-year career in law enforcement, he returned to his hometown of Tanegashima and established the Nakatane Matchlock Preservation Society with the aim to preserve and pass on the history of how matchlock firearms were first introduced to Japan.



Demonstrating how to stand to fire a matchlock gun

The Creation of a Local Artillery Group



Founded primarily through Fukada's efforts in 2014, the Nakatane Matchlock Preservation Society is dedicated to preserving local culture and history. The organization currently has 15 members, including volunteers who perform matchlock firing demonstrations as part of the Tanegashima Artillery Group. The society participates in events organized by local government and visits elementary and junior high schools to teach students about the history of firearms and fasteners in Japan. Through these activities, the group plays an important role in preserving and promoting Tanegashima's firearm heritage.

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The Mononofu Festival held in June 2026

Tanegashima Island, known as the place where firearms were first introduced to Japan, is divided into three municipalities: Nishiomote City, Nakatane Town, Minamitane Town. Before Fukada founded the Nakatane Artillery Group, the other two local municipalities already had their own preservation organizations, but Nakatane Town did not. After returning to his hometown, Fukada was disappointed to learn that there was no local organization dedicated to preserving the history and technology of matchlock firearms. Determined to change this, he set out to establish one himself. A key figure in making this vision a reality was Taira Sawada, a matchlock researcher and the leader of the Sakai Matchlock Society in Sakai City, Osaka. Through an introduction from the head of the Minamitane Town Matchlock Society, Fukada met Sawada, who encouraged him saying, "If you are serious about establishing a preservation society, come to learn." Inspired by those words, Fukada spent his summer vacation learning about matchlock firing demonstrations under Sawada's guidance. Sawada also advised him to attend the National Matchlock Gun Summit held in Ashikita Town, Kumamoto Prefecture, at the end of September. Taking this advice to heart, Fukada worked with the local town council to create recruitment materials and gather supporters. His efforts paid off and the Nakatane Matchlock Preservation Society, along with its artillery group, was officially established in September 2014 and today has a dedicated membership, with both male and female members. Every June, the society organizes the Mononofu Festival* in Nakatane Town. At the festival, visitors can learn about the history of how matchlock guns were introduced to Japan and gain an understanding of their construction and mechanisms. Interactive activities include trying on traditional armor and firing a mock matchlock gun equipped with a percussion-cap mechanism. Visitors can also enjoy dramatic live matchlock firing demonstrations. The festival's greatest attraction is its ability to combine education and entertainment, allowing people of all ages to learn about history while having fun. (* Mononofu is a warrior skilled in martial arts who served and fought for his lord.)

The Place Where Firearms Arrived is Also the Place Where Fasteners Arrived

In December 2025, a fastener monument was installed at the Nature Recreation Village beach in Nakatane Town. According to Fukada, while Tanegashima is widely known as the place where firearms first entered Japan, few people realize that it is also considered the place where fasteners were first introduced to the country. **As well as establishing the artillery group, Fukada also hoped to raise awareness of this lesser-known part of Tanegashima's history and his long-term goal was to create a monument commemorating the introduction of fasteners to Japan.**



▲The fastener monument installed in the Nature Recreation Village

However, financial challenges delayed the project for many years. Fukada presented the idea to representatives of industry organizations during a visit to Tanegashima approximately ten years ago, but the monument did not become a reality until 2018 when **Fukada successfully utilized a Nakatane Town's grand program to install a sign explaining the history of fasteners on the island.** Continued efforts by Fukada and other society members eventually led to the realization of their dream and the fastener monument was finally installed last year. Smiling as he reflected on the achievement, Fukada said: "I was delighted to see a dream that I had pursued for more than a decade finally come true."

▼ An enthusiastic Fukada explains about the matchlock firearm



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Keeping the Flame of Tradition Alive

Looking to the future, Fukada believes the Preservation Society's most important challenge is securing the next generation of leaders and members. As current members grow older, his goal is to increase total membership from 15 to 20 while maintaining at least 15 active participants. He notes that some people have joined out of curiosity but eventually left before fully committing to the organization's mission. For this reason, he hopes to attract individuals who truly understand the importance of cultural preservation. "I want to find people who share our vision, understand the purpose of our activities and are committed to continuing them long term." Guide by the philosophy "Learning through Play," the Nakatane Matchlock Preservation Society continues to share the history of firearms and fasteners with new generations. Through educational programs, demonstrations and community events, the group remains dedicated to preserving and passing down the unique history and culture of Tanegashima.



How Many Can You Get Right?

A Matchlock Gun Quiz with Socket Boy!

What is a matchlock gun? A matchlock gun is a type of firearm that fires a lead ball, like a bullet, by using a match cord to ignite gunpowder. Below are pictures of tools used with matchlock guns. Can you guess what they are used for? See how many you can guess correctly!

This might be easy to guess!

1



2



The one on the right looks like a bird beak!

3



4



Hint: This is strapped to a gunman's waist so it could be accessed quickly whenever needed.

5



6



The tips look sharp! I wonder if it's for turning something?

Answer

1. **Match cord >** A specially treated cord used to fire a matchlock gun. It is designed to burn slowly and evenly.
2. **Gunpowder container >** A container for carrying the ignition powder (muzzle charge) placed in the firing pan of a matchlock gun.
3. **'Bullet' pouch >** A pouch used to store and carry the lead balls or bullets for firing and reloading a matchlock gun. The item shown on the right is the container that is fitted with a long tapered spout, called a karasukuchi, that allows bullets to be removed one at a time.
4. **Dohran (Cartridge box) >** A container used to store and carry hayagari – a set comprising the gunpowder and bullet required to fire a matchlock gun.
5. **Bullet mold >** A tool used to manufacture bullets for matchlock guns. Molten lead was poured into the mold to produce lead balls of a uniform size.
6. **Breach plug wrench >** A tool used to tighten or loosen the breech plug that seals the rear end of a matchlock gun barrel.