

NBTHK SWORD JOURNAL

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Meito Kansho: Examination of important swords

Kokuho: National treasure

Type: Tachi

Mei: Nobufusa saku

Owner: Chido Museum

Length: 2 shaku 5 sun 2 bu 5 rin (76.5 cm)

Sori: 8 bu 1 rin (2.45 cm)

Motohaba: 8 bu 9 rin (2.7cm)

Sakihaba: 5 bu (1.5 cm)

Motokasane: 1 bu 7 rin (0.5 cm)

Sakikasane: 1 bu (0.3 cm)

Kissaki length: 7 bu 6 rin (2.3 cm)

Nakago length: 5 sun 6 bu 1 rin (17.0 cm)

Nakago sori: 1 bu (0.3 cm)

Commentary

This is a shinogi-zukuri tachi with an ihorimune. It is slightly narrow, the widths at the moto and saki are different, and it is somewhat thin. There is funbari, a large koshizori, the tip has a shallow sori, and there is a small kissaki. The jigane has ko-itame hada mixed with mokume hada, and the entire ji is well forged but the hada is barely visible. There are abundant ji-nie, fine chikei, mizukage-like utsuri under the machi, and continuous pale jifu style utsuri. The hamon is ko-midare and based on ko-choji mixed with ko-gunome, and there are wide and shallow variations in the width. There are frequent ashi, yo, abundant dense nie, and the upper part above the center has rough nie and nie-suji. the bottom half of the hamon has tobiyaki, and the upper half of the blade has some light muneyaki. The boshi is wide and almost ichimai, and is straight, with a komaru style point. The ura has a long return, and both sides have strong hakikake. The nakago is ubu (with a kijimomo shape,), the tip has a shallow kuri-jiri (it is almost kiri). The yasurime are a shallow kate-sagari and there are two mekugi-ana. On the omote, above the mekugi-ana, along the mune side there is a slightly large three kanji signature.

The two Bizen Koku Nobufusa smiths are famous around the end of Heian period into the early Kamakura period. One is a Ko-Bizen smith working around the Genryaku period (1184-5), and the other smith is a Ko-Ichimonji smith working around the Shogen period (1207-11). One is “Nobufusa” written with two kanji, and the other is “Nobufusa saku” written with three kanji. Some sword books classify the two kanji signature as Ko-Bizen work, and the three kanji signature as Ko-Ichimonji work, and sometimes these two smiths are classified as just the opposite. Clearly there is no currently accepted conclusion about this.

Concerning work with the two kanji signature, there is a just one blade classified as the 5th Tokubetsu Juyo Token. The workmanship is classically simple, and has a dignified feeling. From this observation, the two kanji signature work definitely appears to be early period work, and the three kanji signature work has a slightly more refined appearance. But the difference in the periods is only about twenty years, and it is certainly possible that the same smith made both swords in different periods. Whether the two smith theory is correct or not, we should carefully consider previous studies.

The smith’s style reflects the period, and the shape is elegant. In the case of the ubu-nakago blades, several with kijimomo shapes are seen. The jigane tends to be only slightly visible. The hamon has strong ha-nie compared to other smiths.

This tachi has a three kanji signature, and has the elegant shape seen from the end of the Heian period to the early Kamakura period. The widths at the moto and saki are different, the upper half’s sori is slightly shallow (showing a “falling down” style curvature), and there is a small kissaki. But around the monouchi area, the hamon width is even, the boshi is very wide, and is ichimai. From these details, the original shape appears to be present. The jigane is based on a tight ko-itame hada, mixed with itame hada, and the hada is barely visible, which shows the smith’s characteristic points. Also, from the center to the bottom half of the blade, there are pale and large dark jifu utsuri areas, and from this we can recognize the period’s characteristic points with the tachi shape. The hamon is based on a ko-choji style hamon, which has a natural appearing composition along with an elegant feeling. There are abundant hataraki such as ashi and yo, and the entire hamon has a feeling of depth which we can’t perceive from a single glance. Also, compared with the two kanji signature work, the hamon is not as classical, but notably, there are strong nie, from the center to the upper part of the blade, and we can see ara-nie (rough nie) which is a characteristic Ko-Bizen trait. From this, we can consider the possibility that this could be a transitional work evolving into the usual three kanji signature work.

This is considered one of the most beautiful Japanese sword shapes and has a strong feeling of elegance, and is a masterpiece.

This tachi is a family heirloom of the Shonai Sakai family’s founder Sakai Tadatsugu who was given this sword by Tokugawa Ieyasu. Tadatsugu was one of “Tokigawa’s four generals,” along with Ii, Sakakibara, and Honda, and among the fudai daimyo he was oldest and ranked first. During Ieyasu’s frequent military endeavors such as the battles of Anegawa, Mikatagahara, Nagashino and Komaki-Nagakute, he developed the appropriate strategies. He was a military commander who possessed excellent political skills and an ability to command his forces.

At a battle in Tensho 12 (1584), Tokugawa Ieyasu and Oda Nobukatsu fought Toyotomi Hideyoshi (this is called the Komaki-Nagakute battle), and Sakai Tadatsugu was the victorious general. As a result, Ieyasu is supposed to have presented him with this sword as a reward. Without listing the tachi mei, there is an Edo period daimyo and hatamoto family genealogy and record book, the "Kansei choshu shokafu" number 65". On the Sakai family's Tadatsugu pages, the battle is listed, and the last page says "The Toshogu (Ieyasu) appreciated Tadatsugu's efforts and presented him with the tachi". Since then, for more than four hundred years, this has been one of the Shonai Sakai family's important treasures which has been handed down in the family. This sword is not only rare as an ubu example of Nobufusa's work, but is also important as a historical item.

This sword is currently being exhibited at "An introduction to Japanese swords, part 3: Hamon" until April 19th.

Explanation by Ishii Akira and photo by Imoto Yuki.

No.758 Tosogu Kanshou

Juyo Tosogu

**Warabite ni ohka sukashi tsuba (fern bracken and cherry blossom design)
Mumei: Matashichi**

Hayashi Matashichi, needless to say, is Higo's representative tsuba smith. He was born in Keicho 18 (1613) in Kumamoto. His ancestor was a gunsmith in Owari and his father's generation worked for Kato Kiyomasa and moved to Kumamoto in Higo. After the Kato family lost their fief, he started working for the Hosokawa family and passed away at the age of 88 years.

Matashichi's tsuba can have a perfectly round shape, and this is an example. The bracken or fern buds and cherry flowers are present equally on four sides. Inevitably, this results in a feeling of stability on this tsuba. Matashichi has produced many bracken bud and cherry flower combinations, arranged in geometric patterns and made sukashi tsuba, just like this example. Today there are several extant tsuba with the same design, and later generations such as Shigemitsu and Tohachi worked in this style and design.

The pattern's shape is precise, and appears just like a pattern cut out of paper. Each chisel cut is sharp and strong. There is gentle and calm fooling produced by the iron, an interesting patina, and the edge's sculpted inlay is clear. The gold sculpted inlay appears like a flashing light, and is called Matashichi kareki-zogan (dry wood inlay), and they are seen all over this work.

Nishigaki produce irregularities in the composition, and Shimizu almost disturbs the balance. Matashichi created very unique art. Each Higo smith's tsuba shows their individual taste.

In the Meiji period, this tsuba was owned by the famous collector Amiya Soemon and passed on to a German collector Alexander Mozlay, and after passing through a series of owners, it is again owned by a German collector today. Everybody recognizes this as a Matashichi work, and it shows his typical style, it is full of charm, and is a masterpiece.

Explanation Kubo Yasuko

Shijo Kantei To No. 758

The deadline to submit answers for the issue No. 758 Shijo Kantei To is April 5, 2020. Each person may submit one vote. Submissions should contain your name and address and be sent to the NBTHK Shijo Kantei. You can use the Shijo Kantei card which is attached in this magazine. Votes postmarked on or before April 5, 2020 will be accepted. If there are sword smiths with the same name in different schools, please write the school or prefecture, and if the sword smith was active for more than one generation, please indicate a specific generation.

Information:

Type: Tanto

Length: 8 sun 5 rin (24.4 cm)

Sori: Uchi-zori

Motohaba: 6 bu 9 rin (2.1 cm)

Motokasane: 2 bu 5 rin (0.75 cm)

Nakago length: 3 sun 5 bu (10.6 cm)

Nakago sori: none

This is a hira-zukiri tanto with a mitsumune. It has an almost standard width, a relatively long length, a strong uchizori, and the fukura is poor looking. The jigane is a tight itamehada and there are some places with nagare or masame hada. There are abundant dense ji-nie, fine chikei, and the ji has a pale whitish appearance and a bright jigane. The hamon and boshi are as seen in the picture. Some parts of the hamon border have nie hotsure, there are ko-ashi, frequent bright and clear nie, and fine sunagashi. The nakago is ubu, the tip is kuri-jiri and the nakago mune is round. The yasurime are the school's unique yasurime. There are two mekugi-ana, and on the omote on the center, the smith's last name is included in the mei, and the ura mei shows the location or residence.

This school has relatively few works which include a location in the mei.

Teirei Kanshou Kai for February, 2020

Date: February 8, 2020 (2nd Saturday of February)
Place: Token Hakubutsukan auditorium
Lecturer: Imoto Yuki

Kantei To No. 1: tachi

Mei: Kunitsuna (Ko-Bizen)

Length: 2 shaku 6 sun

Sori: 1 sun 1 bu

Style: shinogi zukuri

Mune: ihorimune

Jigane: itame mixed with large itame hada and nagare hada; the entire ji has a clearly visible hada. There are ji-nie, pale jifu utsuri, and the steel color is dark.

Hamon: based on a wide ko-midare hamon with some ko-choji. There are abundant nie and frequent kinsuji and sunagashi; there is a bright nioiguchi.

Boshi: straight, and the tip is yakizume.

This is a Ko-Bizen Kunitsuna tachi. There is funbari at the koshimoto, and a large koshizori. Going towards the tip, the sori decreases or “falls down going forward”, and there is a small kissaki. This tachi shape was made no later than the early Kamakura period. The Ko-Bizen style includes a refined jigane with abundant ji-nie, and the hamon is based on a ko-midare hamon. The jiba (jigane and hamon) is bright.

A strong itame hada is visible, and there is a ko-midare hamon with strong nie, kinsuji, sunagashi, and abundant hataraki, and this shows a strong rustic style. The jigane is itame hada mixed with large itame hada, the entire ji is visible, the edge of the hamon has hotsure, and is mixed with kinsuji and sunagashi, and there are other hataraki or details. Also, at the koshimoto, the hamon becomes narrower going toward the machi. There is a mizukage style utsuri, and we can recognize a yakiotoshi style. From this, many people voted for Ko-Hoki smiths such as Yasutsuna.

This tachi has many characteristic points similar to the Ko-Hoki style, and at the first vote, it is understandable. But compared with Ko-Hoki work, you can notice differences such as the dark steel color is not as pronounced, and the ha-nie are bright. Ko-Hoki worked in the same period, and many of their swords have a rich hiraniku, and the sori “falls down going towards the tip” style is not prominent. This does not have all of the important elements to belong to the Ko-Hoki school, but that is a key element.

However, this is similar to Ko-Hoki work, and if you voted for Ko-Bizen at the second or the third vote, it would be a good judgement. People voted for Ko-Hoki work at the first vote, and at the next vote they corrected themselves which is fine.

Kantei To No. 2: wakizashi

Mei: Hasebe Kuninobu

Length: 1 shaku 1 bu

Sori: slightly over 1 bu

Style: hira-zukuri

Mune: mitsumune

Jigane: itame had mixed with mokume hada; the hada is visible, and in some places, the nagare hada becomes masame hada. There are ji-nie and frequent chikei.

Hamon: on the omote, the hamon is a low ko-notare mixed with gunome and square shaped gunome; on the ura the hamon is a gunome style mixed with ko-notare, and is wide; the entire hamon shows a double line and this resembles two parallel nioi lines (ni-dan). There are ashi, abundant nie, frequent tobiyaki and muneyaki, and the hamon becomes a hitatsura hamon with abundant long sunagashi and kinsuji, and a bright nioiguchi.

Boshi: midarekomi; the omote has hakikake and a komaru style tip; the ura has frequent hakikake, the tip is a round shape, and there is a long return which continues to become muneyaki.

This is work by the Nanbokucho period's Hasebe school's Kuninobu. The school is supposed to have been started by Yamato smiths, and established itself in Sagami, and later moved to Yamashiro. This is a wide, long, and thin blade with a shallow sori, and has a Nanbokucho period shape. It is a hitatsura style with frequent tobiyaki and muneyaki.

Soshu-den hitatsura examples are seen in Tokuzenin Sadamune, but the style is supposed to have been established by Sagami no Kuni Hiromitsu. In the same period, Soshu Den smiths with good hitatsura work were Sagami no Kuni Akihiro and the Hasebe school's Kuninobu and Kunishige. This wakizashi's jigane in some places towards the ha side and mune side have strong nagare and masame style hada. The hamon is based on notare mixed with gunome, and at the moto, the hamon maintains the same width and becomes a midare hamon, and there are abundant nie. The boshi's ura side has a round style and long return which continues to become muneyaki, and these details show Hasebe's characteristic points very well. Also, among works in the same period, a thin blade is the school's characteristic point.

On the other hand, if we examine the work of smiths good at making hitatsura, such as Hiromitsu and Akihiro, many of their blade have a standard thickness, and the hamon are mainly choji and gunome. Along the upper part of the blade, the hamon becomes wider, and the many boshi have a sharp point and return. Also, if this were Hiromitsu's work, the hamon, in some place would have round choji (called dango choji).

Furthermore, on this wakizashi's ura side, above the hamon, it appears like there is a boundary between two different kinds of steel running along the length of the blade, and the hamon looks divided across this boundary, and this is a characteristic seen in some Hasebe works.

Kantei To No. 3: katana

Mei: Oku Yamato no kami Taira-ason Motohira

Kansei 5 (1793) Mizunoto-ushi aki (autumn)

Kono katana Sumi Motooki no tame kitae motte tanren no jutsu tsutaeru

Length: 2 shaku 3 sun 5.5 bu

Sori: slightly over 6 bu

Style: shinogi-zukuri

Mune: ihorimune

Jigane: tight ko-itame; there are thick abundant ji-nie, frequent chikei, and on the lower half of the blade there are kawari-tetsu shaped chikei.

Hamon: tight yakidashi at the koshimoto, and ko-notare mixed with gunome and togariba; the hamon is wide. There are frequent long ashi, a dense nioiguchi, strong abundant nie mixed with uneven ara-nie; in some places there are fine sunagashi, kinsuji, nie-suji and a bright nioiguchi.

Boshi: wide midarekomi yakiba; the tip is a komaru style and yakizume.

This is an Oku Motohira katana. It is wide, there is a long chu-kissaki, strong ha-niku, and it feels heavy in the hand. The hamon has abundant nie, and in some places there are sharp shapes formed by nie. There are some prominent rough nie and nie-suji, and from these details, Satsuma Shinto or Shinshinto work comes to mind. Satsuma swords were influenced by the province's popular Zigen-ryu swordsmanship school, and many Shinto and Shinshinto swords have a robust shape. In voting, many people voted for Satsuma Shinto's Masakiyo. But if this were Masakiyo's work, the hamon would be ko-notare mixed with large and small gunome, there would be variations in the hamon width, the nioiguchi's width would show wide and narrow variations, and the top of the hamon would have prominent hataraki such as yubashiri and tobiyaki.

This sword is different from Masakiyo's swords: there is a denser nioiguchi and large gunome grouped close together to form a midare hamon, and from this we wish to think about work by either Motohira or Hoki no kami Masayuki. Their styles are similar and some of their examples are difficult to distinguish between. If it were Masayuki's work, many are wide with a large kissaki and a dynamic shape, and the jigane would show long white forging seams or welds, and this is supposed to be his characteristic point. On the other hand, many of Motohira's shapes have a long chu-kissaki, and closely follow standard shapes. In addition, around the yakidashi area, the nioiguchi's width is narrow when compared with the upper half of the hamon, just like this katana, and this is pointed out as a characteristic point.

This katana was made for Motohira's student Sumi Motooki, and given to him to serve as an example for forging. Before WWII, this was handed down in the Sumi family and is considered to be an important resource for studies.

Kantei To No. 4: wakizashi

Mei: Chikushu Fukuoka ju Koretsugu

Kanbun 3 (1663) 8 gatsu pi

Length: 1 shaku 5 sun 2 bu

Sori: slightly over 4 bu

Style: shinogi zukuri

Mune: ihorimune

Jigane: tight ko-itame hada; on the bottom half, there is a strong nagare hada which becomes masame hada. There are abundant ji-nie, frequent chikei, and clear midare utsuri.

Hamon: choji mixed with ko-gunome, and sharp gunome; there are square shaped gunome and the hamon is somewhat narrow. There are ashi, some yo, ko-nie, and some small tobiyaki.

Boshi: midarekomi; on the omote the tip has a round shape; the ura point has a togari sharp) shape and both sides have a small return.

Horimono: on the omote and the ura there are bo-hi carved through the nakago.

This is a Fukuoka Ishido Koretsugu wakizashi. The hamon is choji midare, and there are clear midare utsuri. At its current length, we can recognize clear funbari at the habaki moto. There is a tight nioiguchi and hataraki inside of the hamon are not prominent. From these details, you can recognize this as work from the Shinto period, and from the Ishido school which tried to follow models from the Ichimonji school. Koretsugu was a student of Edo Ishido Korekazu, and three years later he returned to Fukuoka and is supposed to have been active as the clan's smith.

In voting, many people voted for the Fukuoka Ishido smiths Koretsugu, and Moritsugu, and the Edo Ishido smiths Tsunemitsu and Korekazu. Among the Ishido school smiths, a prominent masame hada jigane are characteristic points for Korekazu and Fukuoka Ishido. The midare hamon is slightly small or narrow and the vertical variations are not prominent, but in some places, the high midare hamon almost reaches the shinogi-ji, and the top of the gunome have a rhombus-like shape and are called "squid's head" gunome and this is a unique shape. The boshi is midarekomi, the tip is sharp and the return shows the school's characteristic points very well. Also, it should be pointed out that many Fukuoka Ishido shapes have a large sori, and this could be a clue in narrowing down the school's name.

The Edo Ishido school's Mitsuhiro's hamon are choji mixed with large choji, and has high and low widths, and forms a gorgeous midare hamon. Tsunemitsu's hamon form a small choji midare hamon. But in both of these smiths' work, masame hada is not prominent.

Kantei To No. 5: katana

Mumei: Tegai

Length: slightly over 2 shaku 2 sun 6 bu

Sori: slightly less than 5 bu

Style: shinogi-zukuri

Mune: ihorimune

Jigane: tight itame hada; this is mixed with some strong nagare hada which can become masame hada. There are abundant ji-nie, frequent chikei, and pale nie utsuri.

Hamon: based on chu-suguha, and there are gunome and a ko-notare style. There are ashi, a dense nioiguchi, abundant nie, some bright rough nie, and the edge of the hamon has fine hotsure and kuichigai-ba; There are some sunagashi, nie suji, and a clear nioiguchi.

Boshi: straight with strong hakikake. The tip has a round shape and there is a small return.

This is a large suriage mumei katana, which is judged as Tegai. The funbari at the habaki-moto is gone. The original shape had a standard width, had koshizori, the tip also has sori, and there is a chu-kissaki. From these details it is possible judge this as work from the latter half of the Kamakura period. There is a wide shinogi-ji, and a high shinogi. The jigane shows strong nagare hada and masame hada. There are abundant ji-nie, and strong forging. The hamon is a suguha style with gunome and hataraki such as hotsure and kinsuji. The boshi has hakikake, and these are strong Yamato characteristic points.

The five Yamato schools were supposed to belong to specific temple territories, such as Todaiji, Kofukuji, and Taimaji. They tended to maintain their traditions, and each school has its individual character. In the case of the Senjuin school, the shape and the jiba (ji and ha) have a strong classic appearance. The Hosho school has a characteristic entirely masame hada. The Shikkake school hamon are a midare hamon just like the Doei school (which was listed in the historical book “Kaifun-ki”), and their characteristic hamon are a continuous gunome hamon just like the Bizen Kuni Yoshii school’s hamon. The Taima school has few signed works, but these few signed works show a gentle style. On the other hand, in their mumei work, we see strong nie, prominent chikei and kinsuji, and some Soshu Den characteristics. In the Tegai school, many of Kanenaga’s works have strong bright nie, and are clear. Thus, we can see that each school has its characteristic style.

This sword has a tight itame hada, no prominent masame, and refined forging. The hamon is a suguha style mixed with hotsure and kuichigaiba. There are bright ha-nie, and some places have nie which are described as being “bright beautiful nie which remind us of stars”. There are also bright rough nie, and these show Tegai’s extreme characteristic points very well. Among the other four schools, many people voted for Taima. If a mumei blade is judged as being that school’s work, there should be more strong nie, prominent chikei and sunagashi, and some Shoshu characteristics are supposed to be present.

Shijo Kantei To Number 756 in the 2020 New Year’s issue

The answer for the Shijo Kantei To is a wakizashi by Osafune Morimitsu dated Oei 19 (1412).

This wakizashi has an almost standard width and is long for the width. There is a shallow sori, and from the shape, you can judge this as early Muromachi work from around the Oei period.

The jigane is itame hada mixed with mokume hada, and the entire hada is visible. There are abundant dense ji-nie and chikei, and these are obvious Oei Bizen characteristics.

Oei Bizen hirazukuri tanto and wakizashi with midare hamon can have two types of utsuri: one is bo-utsuri towards the hamon side, and the other type is midare utsuri. This wakizashi's utsuri is between these styles of utsuri.

The hamon looks like slightly earlier work at first glance, but looking at the details carefully, there is an open bottom midare hamon mixed with round top choji, and there are nioiguchi type ko-nie. The boshi is midare-komi, the tip is a sharp, so-called candle wick shape, and from these details, we can judge this as Oei Bizen work.

In voting, the majority of people voted for Morimitsu, and besides him, there were votes for other Oei Bizen smiths such as Yasumitsu and Sanemitsu.

These smiths' styles are similar to each other, and sometimes it is hard to judge the name of an individual smith, and so, in this case, a vote for these other Oei Bizen smiths were treated as a correct answer at this time.

At this time, I would like to talk a bit about the lighting used to examine Japanese swords.

Recently LED lights have become a popular tool to use in the examination of Japanese swords. Conventionally when you attend a Japanese sword appreciation meeting, you look at the jigane using fluorescent light from the ceiling, and then examine the hamon using an incandescent light source in front of you, and this used to be the general approach.

But how did people examine swords in the past? People did not have these kinds of light sources during the Edo period for example. So, what kind of light did people use to examine swords?

One of the experts in the Token world has already written about this: set up a candle, and adjust a screen to let some light become visible between the panels, and then look at a sword with this light. However, we have no confirmation that people actually looked at swords this way.

In my school days, I tried to look at swords by moonlight. In the evening, I opened glass doors or windows, but unfortunately, the moonlight was diffuse and I could not see details like I could with an incandescent lamp.

Next, I tried to keep the glass window or door open, shut off all of the light in the room to darken the room, and closed the curtains to try to make a gap between two curtain panels, and looked at the sword in this light. The sword looked different from my usual examinations and I remember having some mysterious impressions.

Of course, not all swords can be viewed with this method, and so I do not quite understand how people appreciated swords in the past.

I have looked at Muromachi period Token secret books, and many of them do not write about the details we discuss today, such as the type of hada, chikei, ji-nie, etc. Primarily, they emphasized the color of the jigane and the color of the hamon.

Some historical teachers said “the color of a jo-saku’s (high ranking sword) jigane is blue, and the hamon is white and this kind of impression is just like we see in a Sumi drawing (a black and white ink picture). However, under these conditions, the black ink actually has five different colors or shades”. This means that in the Muromachi period, experts put a lot of weight on a delicate sense of color, and a sense of aesthetic consciousness such as wabi sabi.

This could be an insightful way to look at swords, and this view is different from today’s viewpoints. However, we have benefitted from improved polishing techniques as well as modern lighting, and these factors have influenced our way of viewing and appreciating swords.

Explanation by Hinohara Dai