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Meito Kansho: Examination of Important Swords

Juyo Bijutsuhin, Important Cultural Property

Type: Tachi

Mei: Unji

Length: 2 shaku 4 sun 4 bu 7 rin (74.15 cm)

Sori: 9 bu 6 rin (2.9 cm)

Motohaba: 9 bu 2 rin (2.8 cm)

Sakihaba: 5 bu 9 rin (1.8 cm)

Motokasane: 2 bu (0.6 cm)

Sakikasane: 1 bu 2 rin (0.35 cm)

Kissaki length: 8 bu 9 rin (2.7 cm)

Nakago length: 6 sun 7 bu 3 rin (20.4 cm)

Nakago sori: 7 rin (0.2 cm)

Commentary

This is a shinogi-zukuri tachi with an ihorimune. The width is standard, and the widths at the moto and saki are slightly different. There is a standard thickness, a large sori, and a chu-kissaki. The jigane has itame hada mixed with mokume and nagare hada, and the hada is barely visible. There are fine ji-nie, chikei, and jifu utsuri. The hamon is a wide suguha mixed with ko-gunome, ko-choji, and square features. There are frequent ashi and yo, and some places have saka-ashi. There is a tight nioiguchi with abundant ko-nie, and some kinsuji and sunagashi. The boshi on the omote is straight and there is a large round tip. The ura has a round tip, and there is a return. The nakago is suriage, and the nakago jiri is almost kiri, and the newer yasurime are sujichigai, and we cannot determine what style the old yasurime were. There are three mekugi-ana, On the omote, under the third mekugi-ana (the original mekugi-ana) there is a two kanji signature.

In the Bizen Kuni, in the Yoshii River basin, where the Osafune school was started, there are many sword schools. On the other hand, on the west side of Bizen in the area near the Asahi River and the branch Ukai River, there is another group of smiths called the Ukai School. The Ukai area today is around Okayama city's Kita-ku, Mitsu Ukai area, and close to the border of the neighboring province Bitchu Kuni, and located relatively deep in a mountainous area. In this school we see the names of Unsho, Unji, and Unju on signed blades, they used the "Un" kanji signature, and because of this,

they were called the “Unrui” smiths. Some historical sword books document several generations in this school and some genealogical information. But at the moment, we do not have clear reliable information about the smiths and their family lines.

The Unrui smith’s styles are unique in Bizen, and there are few Bizen characteristics in their work. The characteristics in their work closely resemble Bitchu Aoe characteristics, and geographically, Bitchu Aoe is close to their location.

Common characteristic points in the Unrui smith’s work which are associated with Aoe work are the fine visible hada has prominent mokume hada mixed with jifu, the hamon has some saka-ashi and is a midare hamon, the nakago shape has thick ha-mune (i.e. it is thick on the ha side of the nakago), the yasurime are o-suji-kai, and often use a gyaku-tagane technique in inscribing the mei (i.e. using a chisel to write in the opposite direction of a brush stroke). The school’s works also have a wazori shape, sometimes there is a refined ko-itame hada which resembles what is seen in Kyoto work, and is especially similar to the Rai school’s style. Sometimes there are irregular large jifu, and this is characteristic of the Rai school too.

In addition, the Unrui School’s unique characteristic point in their hamon is that the upper half of the hamon is suguha and simple, but the bottom half of the hamon has a midare hamon, and in the hamon valleys, the bottom of the valleys have a sharp acute angle called “in-no togariba”. The boshi has a large round style and return.

This sword is supposed to be by Unsho’s son Unji, and is a very rare signed work. Today, besides this tachi, there are swords dated Bunpo 2 (1318) which was the 30th blade classified as Juyo Token, and another dated Kenmu 2 (1335) and which is classified as Juyo Bunkazai, so his active time period is clear. Many of Unji’s signatures are two kanji or are “Bizen Kuni ju Unji”. He inscribed them in the center of the nakago and under the mekugi-ana, or slightly towards the mune edge. Unjo’s signatures are usually above the mekugi-ana and the mune side of the nakago.

Most of Unji’s work consists of tachi, but there are kodachi, tanto, and naginata, and they are suguha and in suguha styles. In this case, besides the narrow gentle hamon in Unsho’s style, we see Unji’s own style with a wide strong shape, saka-ashi, and prominent hataraki. There are relatively abundant ji-nie and frequent sunagashi and hotsure.

This tachi is suriage, but still has a large wa-zori tachi shape, and the jigane in some places contains jifu. There are irregular large jifu utsuri, which reach almost to the shinogi. The hamon shows “in-no togariba” features, and people describe this as appearing like a wedge driven down into the hamon. There are saka-ashi too. Compared to this, the upper part of the hamon, especially around the the monouchi area, has less hataraki and appears like a gentle hamon. The omote side boshi is an o-maru (large round) style, and the shape and jiba (jigane and hamon) exhibit Unji’s characteristic points very well, and this is an excellent example of his work. Notably, the hamon’s width covers almost half of the ji, and in some areas, covers more than half of the ji. There are fine even ha-nie, and we can see Unji’s characteristics here. From the location of the mei, this blade must have originally been over 2 shaku 7 sun long and has a dynamic tachi shape.

This tachi belonged to Kozuke no Kuni, who was the Tatebayashi clan’s lord and a member of the Akimoto family during the Bakumatsu period. It was acquired by the family’s fourth generation head Takatomo, who worked as the shogunate’s

administrator of temples and shrines, and belonged to the shogun's Council of Elders. He was considered an able administrator in the Genroku period. In Hoei 5 (1708) in March, he supervised an imperial palace construction project in Kyoto for the shogun, and after he finished the project, during the following year on September 1st, he received this tachi from the sixth Shogun Ienobu. The "Tokugawa jikki" (official records) says that Sir Bunshoin (the shogun Ienobu), presented "Akimoto Tajima no Kami Takatomo who had administered the Kyoto construction project with this blade by Unji". Also, the "Kansei Jushu Shoka Fu" says that Akimoto Takatomo "on the first day of September, received this blade as a gift from the Shogun himself". This tachi is listed in the "Kozan oshigata".

Explanation and photo by Ishii Akira.

Tosogu Kansho

Oyako tora, hyo-zu (parent and child tiger and leopard design) menuki Warikita mei: Echizen daijo Nagatsune saku

Nagatsune's sketch book for his carvings is enjoyable if one just looks through it. His great skills for drawing and excellent choices of motif and compositions are clearly seen. We can recognize Nagatsune's careful thoughtful preparations and ideas for his tosogu work.

Ichinomiya Nagatsune was the student of Yasui Takanaga, who was a student of Goto Shichirohyoe school's sixth generation head Ryujo. His drawings are in Kano Tanyu's style, and he studied under the imperial artist Ishida Yutei. He received the Echizen daijo title when he was around 50 years old, and the Kehi Shrine records, the "Shakuchu Yoyo Hikae" (the important records of the Shrine), document Nagatsune's visit when he returned to his home town. He was called one of the three master Kyoto gold smiths along with Otsuki Mitsuoki and Tetsugendo Shoraku. He was a great kinko artist, and among the best that Echizen has ever produced.

The entire menuki is gold and a single color, and therefore this work demonstrates Nagatsune's exceptional chisel work.

There is a calm feeling between the father and son tiger, but the tiger and leopard have ferocious faces, and in particular, their powerful eyes were obviously influenced by the Goto school.

The tigers' nails are holding firmly onto earth, their spots are expressed by using katakiri bori carving, and these details display Nagatsune's skills very well.

Nagatsune planned the design and executed it on these menuki. A picture is just a two dimensional presentation and has limitations. However, on these menuki, he implemented a three dimensional expression, and brings depth and power to the image, and exhibits the tiger and leopard's potential power in three dimensions. The menuki give us a feeling of Nagatsune's precise work going from his initial concepts. This is a master work, and permits us to enjoy Nagatsune's talent as a kinko artist.

Explanation Kurotaki Tetsuya

Shijo Kantei To No. 766

The deadline to submit answers for the issue No.766 Shijo Kantei To is December 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 December 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: Tachi

Length: 2 shaku 4 sun 8.5 bu (75.3 cm)

Sori: 8.5 bu (2.58 cm)

Motohaba: 9 bu 6 rin (2.9 cm)

Sakihaba: 5 bu 8 rin (1.75 cm)

Motokasane: 2 bu 3 rin (0.7 cm)

Sakikasane: 1 bu 2 rin (0.35 cm)

Kissaki length: 8 bu 7 rin (2.65 cm)

Nakago length: 6 sun 8 bu (20.7 cm)

Nakago sori: 1 bu (0.3 cm)

This is a shinogi zukuri sword with an ihorimune. It is narrow, and the widths at the moto and saki are different. There is a koshizori, a large degree of funbari, and the tip has a "falling down going forward" shape (i.e. the curvature going towards the point of the sword becomes shallower), and there is a small kissaki. The jigane is itame hada mixed with mokume hada, and there is some nagare hada. The large pattern jihada is visible. There are ji-nie, chikei, some jifu, jifu utsuri and the steel color is dark. The hamon and boshi are as seen in the picture, and the midare hamon has some prominent ko-notare in places and ko-gunome. There are ko-gunome, ko-ashi, abundant nie, nie-hotsure, kinsuji, sunagashi and it is yakiotoshi at the koshimoto. The nakago is ubu, and the tip is kiri. The nakago has been slightly shortened, and the tip was originally kurijiri. The yasurime are kate-sagari. There is a one mekugi ana. On the omote above the mekugi-ana there is a two kanji signature, and the bottom kanji in the mei is slightly larger than the upper kanji. The mei is located along the right side of the nakago.

November, 2020 Shijo Token Kansho Kai

Because of the Coronavirus pandemic, and also to other related circumstances, the NBHK has canceled the monthly “Token Teirei Kansho Kai” meetings since March of this year. Currently, our members and readers have no chance to examine meito. Because of this, in this issue, instead of the “Teirei Kansho Kai” report, we are describing three blades and providing a commentary about them.

Explanation Ishii Akira

Kansho To No.1

Type: wakizashi

Mumei: Den Masamune

Length: 1 shaku 8 sun 9 bu 9 rin

Sori: 3 bu 4 rin

Shape: shinogi-zukuri

Mune: mitsu-mune

Jigane: itame hada; the entire ji is well forged, and in some places, the hada is visible. There are abundant ji-nie, and frequent chikei.

Hamon: ko-notare hamon mixed with gunome, ko-gunome, and ko-choji; the entire hamon is a slightly narrow midare hamon. There are frequent ashi, yo, a dense nioiguchi, slightly uneven, small and large abundant nie; there are some areas with nie-kuzure; there are frequent kinsuji, nie-suji, sunagashi, yubashiri, and tobiyaki.

Boshi: midarekomi; the entire boshi is nie kuzure; the tip is hakikake, and there are nie-suji and yubashiri.

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

Sagami Koku Goro Nyudo Masamune is a great master smith in Japanese sword history. He was a master smith who inherited a nie based hamon in the Soshu Den school style from Kunimitsu and Yukimistu, and elevated his work into art. This is known not only in the sword world, but the general population is also aware of this. In the Edo period, the sword book “Kyoho Meibutsu-cho” listed 59 Masamune blades among a total of 235 swords.

According to an old story, he passed away in the early Nambokucho period on Koei 2 (1342). This is accepted, so it is likely that his active period would have been around the end of the Kamakura Period.

Today, there are only four signed blades. There is the “Meibutsu Fudo Masamune” classified as Juyo Bunkazai, but many of the others are mumei and have been judged as being Masamune’s work. Among the katana, many of them have a standard width and a chu-kissaki.

The jigane appears to be moist (uruoi), and there is a unique jihada with abundant chikei. It does not appear to be too flashy or garish as is seen in later periods with a strong jihada.

Masamune's hamon which are described as having "Abstract beauty", have all types of shapes just like this one, and are described as being "free, wild, and open hearted", but never lose their high degree of sophistication. We can say this is the reason that Masamune is Masamune.

We also see large and small sized nie, and strong and weak variations of nie-kuzure. The nie-deki work has a characteristic charm, and we see elements such as nie-suji, yubashiri, and tobiyaki. The nie and the nioiguchi interact harmoniously. There are nioiguchi areas which are dark and which are pale, and which are wide or narrow, with abundant activity and variations. Conventionally, these are said to be like Haboku san-sui sumie pictures (a type of ink picture). With his unbalanced areas and dynamic hamon, and we can say these are Masamune's unique and the most attractive points. We can recognize the high level of his artistry which no other smith can match.

In the early Edo period, this wakizashi is supposed to have belonged to the supervisor or shogunate administrator for ships, Mukai Shogen Tadakatsu. He supervised the construction and maintenance of battle ships and other ships for patrol work.

Kansho To Number 2

Type: tachi

Mei: Bishu Osafune Morimitsu
Oei 12 nen (1405) 8 gatsu hi

Length: slightly over 2 shaku 3 sun 7 bu

Sori: 8.5 bu

Shape: shinogi zukuri

Mune: ihori-mune

Jigane: itame mixed with mokume hada, the entire ji is well forged, there are ji-nie, some jifu-like dark areas in the ji, and midare utsuri.

Hamon: mainly based on open valley gunome, mixed with choji, square shaped gunome, and togariba; the entire midare hamon is high. There are ashi, yo, nioi, kinsuji and nie-suji at the koshimoto, and small tobiyaki.

Boshi: midarekomi with a komaru and return.

Morimitsu is a mainstream Osafune smith, and is supposed to be Moromitsu's son. Today we can confirm he worked from Meitoku 5 and Oei 1(1394) to Oei 33 (1426). During this period, some sword books listed a shodai and nidai, or two different generations, but this is not definite. Considering a thirty year sword making career, a single generation smith seems to be reasonable.

Looking at Moromitsu's work, he produced tachi intermittently all through his career, but many of them were made before Oei 10 (1403). After that date, he produced more

hira-zukuri tanto, wakizashi with a long length for their width and with shallow sori, and then shinogi-zukuri wakizashi, and uchigatana with lengths over 2 shaku.

Moromitsu's hamon before Oei 10 are a kozori style, and are small midare hamon. Most of them are based primarily on prominent round top gunome or choji. Possibly he inherited his notare hamon style from the previous period. The valleys in his midare hamon are open, and compared with Yasumitsu's slightly small hamon, Moromitsu's hamon are slightly large, and are known for his characteristic points. In addition, both Morimitsu, and Yasumitsu have some excellent suguha work which was supposed to have been modeled after Kagemitsu's work or from an Aoe style, and they are notable works.

His signatures are dominated by many "Bishu Osafune" mei, and very rarely with "Shurinosuke", and short two kanji signatures. On tachi, he chiseled his signatures to fit on the shinogi-ji, just like the Kosori smiths. On other style swords, hira-zukuri or shinogi-zukuri, he usually used a slightly large kanji signature on the center of the nakago, and close to the nakago tip.

This tachi is from relatively early in his career, and the shape does not have a prominent koshizori. The sori near the tip is emphasized, it is thick for its width, and this is the period's characteristic shape, which is also common in other provinces.

The jigane is a well forged itame hada, and the hamon shows his characteristic points as I explained above. In Morimitsu's work, this relaxed hamon emphasizes a more relaxed style in his work.

This blade belonged to the Kishu Tokgawa family in the Edo period.

Kansho To Number 3

Type: tachi

Mei: Bungo Kuni so Sadahide saku

Length: slightly less than 2 shaku 5 sun 9 bu

Sori: slightly less than 9 bu

Shape: shinogi-zukuri

Mune: ihori-mune

Jigane: tight itame hada mixed in some places with a large pattern hada; the entire ji has a soft appearance; there are ji-nie, and some chikei.

Hamon: yaki-otoshi at the koshimoto; narrow suguha style hamon mixed with ko-midare; there are some hotsure, some uchinoke and some niju-bu. There are abundant ha-nie, kinsuji at the koshimoto, and on the ura koshimoto, pale yubashiri. The entire hamon has a worn down nioiguchi, and is soft looking.

Boshi: straight and almost yakizume.

From historical times, there were sword smiths in Bungo and Satsuma. Among famous smiths, we can mention Sadahide and Yukihiro. At the end of the Kamakura Period, the sword book "Kanchi in Bon Mei Zukushi" lists Sadahide as either Yukihiro's teacher or

his student. Yukihiro has a blade dated Genkyu 2 (1205) which is classified as Juyo Bijutsuhin. From this you can estimate their active period.

Sadahide is supposed to have lived at a 3000 shukubou (a lodging for pilgrims at a temple) near a training dojo in Hikoizan (a mountain). His signature has the “so” (monk) kanji in it, so this is likely to have been true.

Today, three signed blades are classified as Juyo Bijutsuhin and include this tachi and the signatures are “Bungo Koku so Sadahide saku”. A historical oshigata book of “Bungo Koku Sadahide saku” signatures shows signatures without the “so” kanji, signatures with “so Sadahide”, and signatures with just “Sadahide”.

Usually, Yukihiro’s signatures are on the ura side, along the mune edge, and are written with small sized kanji. Sadahide’s signatures are on the omote side, almost along the center of the nakago, or in the center of a flat area, with relatively large sized kanji. These are differences between the two smiths.

Sadahide’s styles are similar to Yukihiro’s. His itame hada is a well forged, soft looking hada, his hamon are yakiotoshi at the moto, and are either a narrow suguha or a narrow suguha mixed with ko-midare. There is a soft nioiguchi, and this is a common characteristic for Kyushu’s classic style.

This tachi is very valuable, and a very rare work, but also has large koshizori, a relatively long length, and the widths at the moto and saki are different. There is a small kissaki, a very elegant tachi shape, and the workmanship is excellent as explained above. There is a classic dignified appearance and the highlights are clear.

The yasurime are a shallow gyaku-takanoha yasuri. In the book “Genki Gan Nen (1570) Token Mekiki-sho” this sword has the same style yasurime as the yasurime which are described as “shida yasuri” which is a different name for gyaku-takanoha yasurime.

Shijo Kantei To No. 764 in the September, 2020 issue

The answer for the Shijo Kantei To is a katana by Mondo-no-sho Masakiyo.

This is a wide blade and the widths the moto and the saki are not very different. It is thick, there is a long chu-kissaki, a rich hiraniku, and it is heavy. The hamon is notare mixed with gunome, and there are large nie mixed with rough nie, and frequent thick nie-suji.

From this, you can list as candidates Satsuma Shinto and Shinshinto smiths.

Among these Satsuma smiths, Shinshinto period smiths such as Yamato no Kami Motohira and Hoki no Kami Masayoshi have jigane which are a tight itame hada, and places where slightly different colors are seen in their steel which is called kawari-tetsu (or “different steel”). This effect appears in belt shaped areas which are thicker than chikei, but Masakiyo’s work does not often have this.

Masakiyo’s hamon are based on notare mixed with gunome, there are some togariba, abundant nie, prominent rough nie, thick nie suji, and frequent sunagashi, and these characteristics are fairly similar to Motohira and Masayoshi.

But in Masakiyo's hamon, besides these characteristics, the top of his hamon have intermittent yubashiri, and we see nijuba. There is a dense tight nioiguchi, and his boshi has frequent hakikake and form a kaen shape. His hamon edge has many hataraki, and variations, more than we see in work by Motohira and Masayoshi, and Masakiyo's work is dynamic, and these are his characteristic points.

In voting, a majority of people voted for Masakiyo.

At this time, I would like to talk about niku in Japanese swords.

In a Japanese sword, what we call a "rich niku" is shown in figure A in the brackets. This is in the area from the shinogi-suji (or shinogi line) down to the edge of the hamon. Due to the shape or cross section of the blade, there is a volume of steel in the area and a slight curve or bulge on the surface.

What we call "poor niku" is shown in figure B. There is not much of a curve or bulge along the surface going from the shinogi line down to the edge. The blade appears thin looking.

On the ji, the niku surface or volume is called the "hiraniku", and in the hamon area, the niku is called "ha niku".

The historical Japanese sword was a practical product, and the presence or absence of any niku is supposed to depend on how the sword would be used. There would be a rich niku (or a large amount of steel) on a blade intended to use to cut hard materials. That would make it more difficult to damage the blade or produce a crack in the hamon. Such a blade would be more durable. On the other hand, if a blade was intended to be used for cutting rolled tatami mats, a thinner blade with poor niku would seem to be suitable.

In the mid-Kamakura Period, a wide tachi blade with an inokubi kissaki would have a rich niku, and these shapes or cross sections are called "hamaguri-ba" (i.e. the cross section of the blade would have clam-like shape). This shape would appear to be practical to use against robust armor such as an o-yoroi. In the Edo period, the majority of Shinto blades were made with a poor niku or were thin when compared with older blades. This was probably because in the Edo period, it was unlikely to suddenly have to fight with someone who was wearing armor.

For a katana with a rich hiraniku, one of characteristic points is that when you handle it, it often feels heavier than one expects.

People who have experience handling a blade several times are not thinking that "this is heavy" or "how much does it weigh?". They look at a blade in front of them, and from the width and length, they have a rough idea of the weight they expect.

However, when comparing blades which are similar in width, length, and thickness, a katana with a rich niku has additional material or steel on its sides, and those will feel heavier than expected.

In looking at especially old master works with rich niku, they are not the same as wide shinshinto swords which are heavy. Many of the older blades with a rich niku seem to be more comfortable to handle when one holds them, and they feel responsive in the hand and produce a good impression or feeling when one handles them.

Explanation by Hinohara Dai