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Meito Kansho: Examination of Important Swords

Tokubetsu Juyo Token

Type: Tachi

Mei: Sukezane (Bitchu Senoo school)

Length: 2 shaku 5 sun 1 bu 8 rin (76.3 cm)

Sori: 1 sun 1 bu 4 rin (3.45 cm)

Motohaba: 1 sun 2 rin (3.1 cm)

Sakihaba: 6 bu 6 rin (2.0 cm)

Motokasane: 2 bu 1 rin (0.65 cm)

Sakikasane: 1 bu 5 rin (0.45 cm)

Kissaki length: 9 bu 2 rin (2.8 cm)

Nakago length: 7 sun 8 bu 2 rin (23.7 cm)

Nakago sori: 2 bu (0.6 cm)

Commentary

This is a shinogi-zukuri tachi with an ihorimune. It is wide, and the widths at the moto and saki are a little different. It is slightly thick, there is a large koshi-sori, the tip has sori, and there is a short chu-kissaki. The entire jigane has a tight ko-itame hada which is mixed in places with mokume and itame hada, and the fine hada is visible. There are ji-nie, frequent fine chikei, mizukage shaped utsuri at the machi which continues to form jifu utsuri. On the ura side in the center there are pale suji-shaped utsuri. The hamon is a wide suguha hamon, with a small and shallow notare pattern, and on the bottom half of the blade at the koshimoto there are ko-gunome and square shaped gunome. There are small ashi, yo, a tight nioiguchi which is almost nioi-deki (i.e. a nioi based habuchi), and in places along the upper half of the hamon, there are pale suji shaped hataraki. The boshi is straight and there is a komaru. The nakago is ubu, the tip is ha-agari kurijiri and the yasurime are o-sujichigai. There are two mekugi-ana. On the omote, on the shinogi-ji, there is a slightly large two kanji signature made with a thick tagane (chisel).

In the historical sword books the "Genki Mekiki-sho" and the "Kokon Mei-zukishi" there are lists of Bitchu smiths and the Aoe kaji (Aoe smiths) and Senoo kaji (Senoo smiths) are listed as two separate schools. Concerning the Aoe kaji, it says that Yasutsugu was the Bitchu Aoe's school's founder, and most of the smiths used the "tsugu" kanji in their names. The books also says that the smiths were prosperous with many sons and grandsons working too. Concerning the Senoo kaji or Senoo group, the book entries

say that they were located in the Aoe valley but on the east side and close to Bizen. Noritaka and Senoo Kyobu Shiro are Bitchu kaji and the founders of the school, and their styles are similar to Bizen styles. The Aoe kaji or school was very prosperous at the end of the Heian period up to the Nambokucho period, and were mainstream smiths. However, the Senoo kaji or school has few signed blades, and many of them do not include the “tsugu” kanji. The signatures we have today are Noritaka, Masatsune, Tsuneto, and Yukizane. Senoo yasurime are o-osujichigai or sujichigai, the same as Aoe’s, but many of them are signed on the omote side, which is different from Ko-Aoe work.

We should note that there are no definitive details which can clearly distinguish between the work of the two schools. In examining the Senoo smiths’ works, it is sometimes possible to confuse their work with Bizen smiths, so these swords must be further studied.

Senoo Sukezane is listed as being from the “Noritaka school and working around the Joei (1232-3) period”, or from the Tsuneto school and working around the Bunei (1264-75) period”, so this name is listed as two different smiths. Sukezane’s only other signed work is the 31st sword classified as Juyo Token.

This tachi is slightly wide, and the difference in widths at the moto and saki are not very pronounced. It is thick, and the upper half is also thick which adds a sense of weight to the blade. There is a large koshizori, the tip has sori, there is a slightly short chu-kissaki, and a healthy shape. The jigane is based on ko-itame hada, and mixed in places with a small pattern itame and mokume hada. The entire ji is well forged with no irregularities, and there is a fine visible hada. On the ura side around the center there are jifu utsuri, and you can also see slightly pale suji shaped utsuri, and this is a Bichu characteristic feature. The entire hamon is based on a wide suguha hamon. From the machi to the tip there is a tight nioiguchi with no soft areas and no irregularities. There is a bright and clear nioiguchi, and this is a very good example of characteristic Aoe work. The nakago edge on the hamon side is relatively thick, and there are o-osujichigai yasurime. There is a dynamic shape, and clear jiba (jihada and hamon) characteristics, and from these details, one could judge this as work from around the Bunei period from the Senoo school. In addition, Dr. Kunzan has said “this work is later than Ko-Aoe work and appears to be mid-Kamakura period Aoe work.” Around the Bunei period, Sukezane’s style and mei are quite different from Ichimonji work, and this is a characteristic Aoe tachi.”

This tachi has kept its original shape from the time it was made, and is in an amazingly healthy condition. It has a dynamic shape with a clear jiba without any defects or irregularities. This is a very valuable sword and a very rare signed Senoo Sukezane work.

Explanation by Ishii Akira and photo by Imoto Yuki.

Tosogu Kansho

Tokubetsu Juyo Tosogu

Fukurokuju zu (design showing one of the seven Gods who determine happiness, prosperity, and a long life) tsuba

Mei: Somin with kao

This tsuba's Fukurokuju design is recognizably based on a Sesshu painting from around 1420-1500, and from Somin's use of the same design on a kozuka (classified as Juyo Bijutsu Hin).

There is an amazing takabori technique used here to depict the god. Somin makes full use of the subtle heights and depths in the carving, variable depths in the carving, and variations in color (using iroe or colored metal inlays), and has carefully carved every small fine detail, and we are overwhelmed by the quality and presence of this work.

Looking at the other side, the scene shows a bold use of color from the gold inlayed into the shakudo ground, and Somin has carved the crane looking backwards with a dignified feeling. The crane's head and neck are a deep katakiribori (very fine engraving). The sides of the katakiribori work are kebori (a very fine but different style of engraving), and this produces an image of shadows. Compared to this, the crane's wings are thin and flat, and Somin used katakiribori to create a feeling of motion here.

The tsuba's mimi (rim) is a gold fukurin or foil. According a gold smith's comment, possibly Somin prepared a solid gold band with the same width as the mimi, and then attached it with colored solder. This could be evidence for a very special order, and the tsuba comes from the Heki Shimazu family.

In the Meiji period, the great master Natsuo was teaching at the Tokyo Art University, and he praised Somin's work. Looking at the tsuba in front of me, one can see that Somin's art is very special even today.

Examining this great work with the Fukurokuju and a standing crane, I wish to pray for the coming new year.

Explanation Kubo Yasuko

This tsuba is currently being exhibited at the NBTHK Museum's "The Japanese Sword's Omote and Ura (front and reverse) World" until December 24th.

Shijo Kantei To No. 767

The deadline to submit answers for the issue No.767 Shijo Kantei To is January 5, 2021. 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 January 5, 2021 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 3 sun 7 bu (71.81 cm)

Sori: 6 bu (1.82 cm)

Motohaba: 9 bu 7 rin (2.95 cm)

Sakihaba: 6 bu 3 rin (1.9 cm)

Motokasane: 2 bu 8 rin (0.85 cm)

Sakikasane: 1 bu 5 rin (0.45 cm)

Kissaki length: 1 sun 6 rin (3.2 cm)

Nakago length: 7 sun 3 bu 6 rin (22.3 cm)

Nakago sori: 3 rin (0.1 cm)

This is a shinogi-zukuri tachi with an ihorimune. It has a standard width, and the widths at the moto and the saki are slightly different. There is a large koshizori even though the blade is suriage, and it is sakizori. It is thick for the width and there is a chu-kissaki. The jigane is itame-hada mixed with mokume hada and nagare hada, and the hada is visible. There are ji-nie, and the school's unique utsuri is present. The hamon and boshi are as seen in the picture. There is hotsure at the edge of hamon. There are uchinoke, ko-ashi, a bright nioiguchi, abundant nie, kinsuji and sunagashi. The nakago is suriage and the tip is kurijiri. The old yasurime are kate-sagari and the new yasurime are kiri. There are two mekugi ana. On the omote, on the nakago tip along the mune side of the nakago, there is a two kanji signature. On the ura slightly higher, there is a date.

In the school this smith belongs to, more nioiguchi type hamon were made in this period.

November, 2020: Shijo Token Kansho Kai for Issue 767

Because of the new Coronavirus pandemic and due to various other circumstances, the NBHK has canceled the "Token Teirei Kansho Kai" since in March of this year. As a result, our members and readers currently have no opportunity to examine meito. Due to this situation, in each issue, in place of the Kansho Kai, we are presenting three blades along with a commentary.

Explanation Hinohara Dai

Kansho To No.1

Type: tachi

Mumei: Den Norishige

Length: 2 shaku 6 sun 1 bu

Sori: slightly over 7 bu

Shape: shinogi-zukuri

Mune: ihori-mune

Jigane: itame hada mixed with mokume hada, and entire ji is tight. There are abundant ji-nie and frequent chikei.

Hamon: suguha style ko-choji midare hamon, mixed with a komidare hamon; on the bottom half of the ko-choji hamon, there are vertical variations. There are frequent ashi and yo, a slightly dense nioiguchi, abundant nie; in some areas there are prominent strong bright, clear rough nie; there are frequent kinsuji and sunagashi.

Boshi: on the omote and ura the boshi is straight, with a komaru, and fine hakikake.

Kansho To: No. 2

Type: tachi

Mei: Yasutsuna

Length: slightly over 2 shaku 6 sun 4 bu

Sori: 9.5 bu

Shape: shinogi-zukuri

Mune: ihori-mune

Jigane: itame mixed with mokume hada, and some areas have nagare hada; the entire ji has a large visible pattern. There are ji-nie, frequent chikei, jifu, jifu utsuri, and a dark steel color.

Hamon: yaki-otoshi above the machi; above this, there is a suguha style hamon with komidare, ko-choji, and ko-gunome; some parts of the hamon have hotsure. There are ashi, yo, a worn down nioiguchi with abundant nie, and frequent kinsuji and sunagashi.

Boshi: shallow notare with a komaru.

Horimono: on the omote and ura there are bo-hi with kaku-dome.

Kansho To: No. 3

Type: tachi

Mei: Sanekage

Length: 2 shaku 6 sun 1.5 bu

Sori: 9.5 bu

Shape: shinogi-zukuri

Mune: ihori-mune

Jigane: itame hada mixed with a large pattern itame hada and mokume hada; the entire ji is visible. There are ji-nie, chikei, jifu, jifu-utsuri, and a dark steel color.

Hamon: yaki-otoshi above the machi, and above this, primarily ko-midare mixed with ko-gunome and ko-notare; some areas of the hamon edge have hotsure, and inside of the hamon the hada is visible. There are frequent ashi and yo, abundant nie, kinsuji and sunagashi.

Boshi: it is almost kakedashi (i.e. wear or polishing has made the boshi very thin or narrow).

This month, we are discussing a Juyo Bijutsuhin mumei den Norishige tachi, a Juyo Bijitsuhin Ko-Hoki Sanenaga tachi, and the Chofu Mori family's ancestral Ko-Hoki Yasutsuna tachi.

Our main focus is on the den Norishige tachi. This is the Bizen Ikeda family's heirloom tachi, and is supposed to have been presented by the third Shogun Iemitsu to Ikeda Mitsumasa.

Norishige has obvious Soshu-den style work, the same as Masamune. Besides this, he has classic ko-midare style work modeled after Ko-Bizen, and Ko-Hoki work. This is one of those blades and very difficult to appraise. When making an appraisal, most beginners judge this as Ko-Bizen or Ko-Hoki work.

Some people look at this as work from the end of the Heian Period to the early Kamakura Period, and vote for Ko-Hoki, Ko-Bizen and Ko-Aoe work and this is wrong. On the other hand, some people ask, after making three votes, could they make an additional vote, so they are trying hard to identify this sword and realize that it is difficult.

As an example of how to judge this type of sword we can note that if this is Ko-Bizen, Ko-Hoki, or Ko-Aoe period work, we do not have any candidates in mind for the smith, so we might have the period wrong. Also, for work from the end of the Heian Period to the early Kamakura Period work, the blade is too wide, and "the tip falling down going forward" shape (i.e. the curvature of the blade becomes shallower going towards the point) is not clearly visible. In view of this, I would wonder if this could be work from the end of the Kamakura Period. The jiteteu does not have jifu utsuri, which is seen in Ko-Bizen work, and the hamon has more prominent nie and frequent hataraki such as kinsuji and sunagashi. From this period, you could guess what smith might work in this kind of style.

If you looking at the workmanship in detail, gradually you can analyze and understand a sword's characteristic points. Then, with your knowledge of shapes and each smith's characteristic style, and comparing it to many sword styles which you have seen by now, you should be able to recognize details in the work and identify the sword front of you.

In a martial arts match, when competing against a competitor for the first time, one would be watching his competitor's style and techniques. Each competitor is using his skills and techniques, and noting details such as his competitor's speed, how much power he has, what kind of style he uses to advance during a match, what is his signature move to try to win, and does he have good stamina. One gradually understands and analyzes his competitor, and at the same time, begins to make countermeasures to defeat his competitor.

For an appraisal and a vote or bid, in judging a difficult sword at a first examination, one often uses a process similar to what is seen in martial arts competitions. In looking at this sword, one has to think about his knowledge of all kinds of small details, summarize all the information they have about a sword, and this would be a good opportunity for improve one's appraisal skills.

After three bids or votes, some judges may not allow another vote, but my personal opinion is that if someone wishes to vote again, they are welcome to do that. This means a sword is handled a bit more, but it will be remembered well and never forgotten, and at the same time, I think this is good training for judging swords.

In the past in the Tokyo area, while viewing a major collector's huge sword collection, there was one mumei sword present which was of great interest.

On the sword's shirasaya there was a sayagaki. The sayagaki or inscription was about judging the smith's name, and four big connoisseurs or collectors such as Kozu Haku, Hirai Chiba, and Kunifuji Renta all had different opinions.

The opinions about the sword included Ko-Hoki work, Norishige, or Yukimitsu.

At that time, in our NBTHK meetings, we used to make comments such as "I think the Ko-Hoki opinion is reasonable" and another was "My opinion is it is Norishige". That means that Norishige and Ko-Hoki work can be similar to each other. This means that Norishige's work could be approaching or be very similar to older classic master works. To replicate this situation at this time, we are comparing a Norishige tachi with classic master works from Ko-Hoki Yasutsuna and Sanekage.

Indeed, they are similar, but when you compare them to each other, if you can observe clear differences, we would be happy to hear about that.

Shijo Kantei To No. 765 in the October, 2020 issue

The answer for the Shijo Kantei To is a tachi by Ko-Bizen Tomonari.

This is over 3 shaku in length, and is an outstandingly long tachi. As we wrote in the comments, usually when a tachi is about 2 shaku 6 sun in length, the widths at the moto and saki are different, there can be a large koshizori, and the tip falls down going forward. From this, you can judge the period is the end of the Heian to the early Kamakura period.

Among the Ko-Bizen swords, we see a more lightly colored steel jigane, and Tomonari's jigane has a slightly dark color, there is a visible itame hada, and pale utsuri, which is sometimes inconspicuous.

The hamon in Ko-Bizen work commonly contains round top ko-choji which are not really prominent or bold. The hamon shows hotsure, uchinoke, and small sized and complex details. We also see a midare-hamon which has a more classic elegance, and this is his big characteristic point.

In voting, the majority of people voted for Tomonari. Beside Tomonari, some people voted for Ko-Bizen and Ko-Ichimonji smiths, such as Kanehira, Sukemura and Norimune.

This tachi shows Tomonari's characteristics, but on the other hand, Ko-Bizen, and Ko-Ichimonji works are similar each other. It is difficult to identify individual names, so because of this Ko-Bizen and Ko-Ichimonji names are treated as correct answers at this time.

Now, I would like to talk about niku on Japanese swords and continue last month's discussion.

Last time I explained that katana with a rich niku sometimes feel heavier than they appear to be when you pick it up. Sometimes when you look at a sword being held vertically and pointing up, you can feel or get a sense of the weight or mass.

Thirty some years ago, when I was in my twenties, I looked at new swords at the Shinsaku Meito Ten. At that time, many of Shinsaku-to were prominently wide and had magnificent shapes, and the trend is the same today. Among these swords, one of the blades stood out for me because it was wide with a magnificent shape, but somehow felt like it was thin and light.

I could not understand the reason why it felt so light. I measured the kasane, and it had a normal degree of thickness across the mune.

My sword experience at that time was short, but these swords were thick but had a small amount of niku, and I could not understand why a sword could somehow feel light or thin, even though it was wide and had a normal thickness.

At that time, some shinsaku-to smiths made swords with a rich niku and a good shape, and when these swords were held vertically upright, many of them had a strong feeling of solidity.

On the other hand, among Muromachi period Seki work, there were swords with poor niku and shapes, but many of them appeared to be good for cutting and produced an impression of being sharp.

Also, among old classic works, when looking at them held vertically upright, some were wide with a beautiful shape and sori, and with a rich niku. Looking at these seems to produce an emotion, and they have an overwhelming power and presence.

Previously, I wrote that if you look at a vertically held katana's shape, we can learn a lot about them, and discern their characteristic points, good and weak, and also observe their highlights. A considerable amount of information can be obtained from examining swords in hand, and we can gain experience by looking at many swords and their shapes. For a beginner it is a hard to understand just what to look at. I think in understanding and appreciating a sword, an observation of whether it has a rich niku or not affects the impression it can make on us, but it takes some experience to learn about this.

Explanation by Hinohara Dai