

NBTHK SWORD JOURNAL
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Meito Kansho: Examination of important swords

Juyo Bunkazai: Important Cultural Property

Type: Tanto

Mei: Yoshimitsu (Meibutsu Shinano Toshiro)
Owner: NBTHK

Length: 8 sun 2 bu 2 rin (24.9 cm)
Sori: slightly uchizori
Motohaba: 7 bu 6 rin (2.3 cm)
Motokasane: 2 bu (0.6 cm)
Nakago length: 3 sun 6 bu 3 rin (11.0 cm)
Nakago sori: very slight

Commentary

This is a hirazukuri tanto with a mitsumune. The width is standard, it is slightly thick, there is a standard length, and a slight uchizori. The jigane has a tight ko-itame hada, and on the bottom half of the omote some hada is visible. There are abundant dense jini, and the bottom half has nie utsuri. The hamon around the machi has a pale yakikomi, and above this it is a wide suguha with small variations in the hamon width. There are ko-ashi, suji shaped hataraki, the nioiguchi line has wide and narrow variations in its width, there are abundant ko-nie, pale nijuba, and the entire nioiguchi is bright and clear. The boshi is straight, the point on the omote is a komaru, and on the ura the point is a togari style komaru. Both sides have hakikake and a long return. The horimono on the omote and ura are goma-bashi carved through the nakago. The nakago is ubu, the tip is kurijiri, and the yasurime are katte-sagari. There are two mekugi-ana and one is closed. On the omote, under the second mekugi-ana (the original ana) on the center, there is a two kanji signature made with a slightly large and fine tagine (chisel).

Toshiro Yoshimitsu is famous and known as the last master smith of the Awataguchi school which was active for one century during the Kamakura period in Kyoto. He is supposed to be Kuniyoshi's son or student. Kuniyoshi has a blade shown in an old oshigata dated during the Kenji and Koan era (1275-88), so from this evidence, Yoshimitsu's active period is reasonably thought to be around the Shoo (1288-93) period, which is listed in the Meikan book. Yoshimitsu is admired as being a master at making tanto along with Shintogo Yoshimitsu, and he produced many masterpieces.

Beside tanto, Yoshimitsu has a few ken, a kanmuri-otoshi zukuri blade called "Namazuo Toshiro", an imperial family sword called "Ichigo hitofuri Toshiro", and the Owari Province Inuyama clan's Naruse family heirloom wakizashi, which was classified as Tokubetsu Juyo Token in recent years. During the Edo period, Yoshimitsu's work was valued as being among "the three best smiths" along with Masamune and Go. In the historical sword reference "Kyoho Meibutsu Cho" Yoshimitsu has 34 pieces listed, including some which have disappeared. Masamune has 59 items listed, and this indicates the respect that Yoshimitsu's work received.

Yoshimitsu has a several different styles among his tanto shapes. They can be wide or narrow, long or short, and there are a variety of shapes, and this is also a common trait with Kuniyoshi, and likely indicates that there was a close relationship between the two of them. Yoshimitsu has two styles of jigane: one is a refined nashi-ji hada, and the other is a barely visible itame hada, and both styles have abundant dense ji-nie. Notably, the nashi-ji hada style produces an appearance of moisture (uruoi), but still leaves a feeling or impact which is stronger than same province's Rai school. Yoshimitsu has many well defined suguha hamon, but some of them are a ko-gunome style midare hamon. In the case of suguha hamon, around the yakidashi area, you can see continuous ko-gunome. Also, around the fukura area, the hamon width becomes narrow, and it is pointed out that these characteristic points are seen more often in narrow suguha style work. Furthermore, Yoshimitsu's boshi have strong nie, and some of the nie appear to be dropping or trailing into the ji, and this is called "nie no kuisagari" and this characteristic point is hard to miss. Yoshimitsu's signatures do not consist of just a few uniform styles, but show very fluent inscription styles which appear like using a brush tip, and he is considered to be the best calligrapher in Japanese sword history. This is an important point for appraisal along with his excellent workmanship.

This tanto's balance of width and length is just right, the fukura's volume forms an exquisite curve, and this is a good example of a well proportioned and balanced tanto shape. It is thick and has been preserved in a healthy condition. The jigane is a very tight ko-itame hada, there are abundant dense fine ji-nie, and the school's unique "nashiji hada" produces a delicate impression like a silk fabric, but at the same time the jihada produces a unique strong impression. The hamon does not have any characteristic features around the yakidashi area which has ko-gunome, and it is narrow around the fukura area. The hamon has the same uniform width from the machi to the tip. The hamon's width and proportions are as good as the midare hamon in the Goto Toshiro work which is classified as Kokuho and owned by the Tokugawa museum. Among his suguha works this is one of the best, and among Yoshimitsu's work, one could say it is unusual. On the omote and the ura boshi, we can see some slight "nie no kuisagari" and nijuba style hataraki, especially on the omote, and this style is close to the Goto Toshiro's and these characteristics are hard to miss.

Yoshimitsu has some gomabashi horimono examples, and we sometimes see horimono on the omote and the ura, just like on this tanto. He carved or engraved along the mune side of the blade following the school's custom. The jiba (jigane and hamon) is clear, and there is a good shape, and a crisp appearance. Also, the fluently written and interesting mei is admirable, and the entire tanto has a dignified and elegant feeling.

This tanto has a meibutsu or name, and the name's origin isn't known. Nagai Shinano no kami Naomasa was Ieyasu's vassal. After his roles in the battle of Sekigahara and the Osaka summer battle, he became a roju (a shogunate council or cabinet member) and lord of the Yamashiro Yodo clan. Naomasa presented this tanto to the Shogun's family, on December 5 of Kanei 10 (1633) after the third Shogun Iemitsu's adopted daughter Ohime traveled as a bride to Maeda Mitsutaka's fief. Ohime was presented with this tanto along with Iemitsu's gift of the "Tarosaku Masamune" which is now a Kokuho blade. In the "Kansei jushu shoka fu" (records), the Maeda family's Mitsutaka entries say that "Princess Ohime married Mitsutaka, and when she was visiting the palace with Mitsutaka, she was honored with a toast in front of the shogun, and was given the Tarosaku Masamune blade and this blade, the Shinano Toshiro tanto. The samurai family genealogy records in Kanei 20 (1643), the "Kanei shoka keizu-den" records this same story. However, the "Tokugawa jiki (diary)" records the story on its December 25th page.

Afterwards, this tanto was owned by the Shonai clan's Sakai family until now. It is not yet definitely confirmed, but at the Chido museum, there is a document dated September 27th of Kanei 13 (1636) from Honnami Koson and his younger brother Koyu. According to this document, we can verify that the third generation lord Sakai Tadatsugu bought the tanto at the Honnami appraised value of 3215 ryo.

Explanation and photo by Ishii Akira.

Tosogu Kansho

Juyo tosogu

Oni Shoki (demon and God) sukashi tsuba

Mei: Mito ju Michihisa saku

In the world of metalworkers, the "Mito kinko" group held a highly regarded position. Even today there are many master smiths recognized in this group, and there seems to be no end to this list.

Among these metalworkers, we can say that Yatabe Michihisa is a master metal smith who produced unforgettable work, and was an exceptionally good artist with his robust chisel work.

Michihisa was born in Genroku 10 (1697), studied under Nara Toshihisa, and passed away in Meiwa 5 (1768) at the age of 72.

This is one of Michihisa's masterpieces. The Shoki is calmly glaring at the demon, and the impression of his face and body volume overwhelms the viewer, and this work reminds us of his teacher Toshihisa's influence. The demon's fearful face in the presence of the Shoki is expressed exquisitely, and is strangely lively. His fear is clearly transmitted directly to us. This small tsuba clearly shows us a confrontation between the demon and Shoki.

For the Mito metalwork smiths following Michihisa, the quality of the work shown in this tsuba seems to have become a goal. Many tried to equal Michihisa's great work, and

worked with the same scene. However, because of the tsuba's elaborate detailed workmanship, successive smiths did not surpass this work. This tsuba's workmanship had an impact on the metal smith's world. When talking about Mito metalwork history and style, this is a master work which left a big impact.

This tsuba will be shown at the Ibaraki Prefectural History Museum in the exhibit "Copper and Colored Metal: A Sword and Tosogu Exhibit" from February 20 to April 11, 2021.

Explanation Kurotaki Tetsuya

2021 New Year Shijo Kantei To No. 768:

The deadline to submit answers for the issue No.768 Shijo Kantei To is February 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 February 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 9.5 bu (63.48 cm)

Sori: 7 bu (1.4 cm)

Motohaba: 7 bu 3 rin (2.2 cm)

Sakihaba: 4 bu 6 rin (1.4 cm)

Motokasane: 2 bu (0.6 cm)

Sakikasane: 1 bu 3 rin (0.4 cm)

Kissaki length: 5 bu 9 rin (1.8 cm)

Nakago length: 5 sun 5.5 bu (16.82 cm)

Nakago sori: 3 rin (0.1 cm)

This is a shinogi-zukuri tachi with an ihorimune. It is slightly narrow, and the widths at the moto and the saki are different. There is a large koshisori, even though the blade is suriage. The tip has sori and there is a chu-kissaki. The jigane is a tight ko-itame hada, there are fine ji-nie, clear midare-utsuri, and a bright ji. The hamon and boshi are as seen in the picture. There are ko-ashi, a tight nioiguchi, nioiguchi like ko-nie, and a bright nioiguchi. The horimono on the omote and the ura are bo-hi with kaku-dome. The nakago is suriage, and the nakago tip has the original kurijiri shape. The yasurime are katte-sagari, and there are two mekugi ana. On the omote by the nakago tip along the mune side there is a two kanji signature.

Shijo Kantei To No. 766 in the November, 2020 issue

The answer for the Shijo Kantei To is a tachi by Ko-Hoki Yasutsuna.

This is a narrow blade, and the widths at the moto and saki are different. There is a large koshisori, the “tip falls down going forward” (i.e. the sori becomes more shallow going towards the tip of the blade), and there is a small kissaki. From this you can judge that this is work from the end of the Heian Period to the early Kamakura Period.

From the end of the Heian to the early Kamakura Period, in many schools, it was common to see a classic ko-midare hamon. The Ko-Hoki school's characteristic hamon have been described as a ko-midare style hamon mixed with individual ko-gunome, and sometimes ko-notare areas.

Among the Ko-Hoki smiths, Yasutsuna has a smaller number of ko-midare hamon. His hamon are mainly ko-gunome and ko-notare and midare, and this is different from the other smiths in the same period.

Also, the jigane's itame and mokume large pattern hada is visible, the iron color is dark, the hamon is yakiotoshi at the koshimoto, and these are Ko-Hoki characteristic points.

In voting, a majority of people voted for Yasutsuna, and for another proper answer, a few people voted for Yasuie.

Among Yasuie's works, the Kuroda's family heirloom tachi which is classified as Kokuho is famous. This is Ko-Hoki work, and the ko-choji hamon is prominent, the upper half of the hamon has more notable vertical variations when compared to the bottom half, there is a wider range of motion or activity in the midare hamon. This work is gorgeous and has a technically restrained feeling when compared with Yasutsuna. Besides this specific tachi, Yasuie's work is rare.

In the last two issues I wrote about niku in Japanese swords. At this time, I would like to talk about how to examine the condition of the niku on a sword.

Beginners, when trying to look at the condition of the niku, usually hold a sword horizontally with the edge aimed up and the mune aimed down and facing the floor (picture A). One then tries to look at the condition of the niku from looking at the edge of hamon (as shown by the arrow).

At first glance this seems to be correct, but with this viewpoint, you cannot see the condition of the niku very well.

Another way to examine the niku is to hold the nakago in hand with the point facing forward away from you. The hamon edge and the mune side should be facing to the left and right sides. There should be some kind of flat horizontal area in the room in front of you and parallel to the ceiling.

In this situation (drawing B), you begin to look at the top of the nakago, and move the sword's point slowly up and down, which is similar to the way you look at a hamon. (drawing B)

While doing this, and you look the reflection of a flat area on the ji, and I think this would help you to examine the condition of the niku. The reflection of the flat area above the sword on the ji will indicate the condition of the niku. If the reflection is very straight, the condition of the niku is poor, but if the reflection of the flat area is more curved on the blade, the niku is stronger.

In this case, the lighting you use is not an incandescent bulb which you would use to examine a hamon. Instead, you can use a fluorescent light on the ceiling.

If it is hard to see in this way, you can look around the ceiling or overhead for some straight feature or line, and examine the reflection on the ji. The straight feature or line should be reflected from the shinogi to the ha across the ji. In a Japanese style room, for example, one could use a ceiling beam or wood frame which is part of a shoji panel. In a Western style room, you could use the line between the wall and ceiling, or part of a window frame to reflect on the ji of the blade.

Once you have a straight line of some kind to reflect on the ji of the blade, you move the sword up and down, and follow the reflection of the straight line as it travels along the length of the ji. If the reflection is straight or close to being straight, the niku is poor. If the reflection of the line is curved across the ji, the niku is stronger. This should help one to evaluate the condition of the niku on a blade

Explanation by Hinohara Dai