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Meito Kansho: Examination of Important Swords

Classification: Tokubetsu Jujo Token

Type: Katana

Mei: Bizen koku ju Osafune Yosozaemon Sukesada
Taiei 3 nen (1523) ni-gatsu kichijitsu

Length: 2 shaku 1 sun 3 bu 2 rin (64.6 cm)

Sori: 6 bu 6 rin (2.0 cm)

Motohaba: 1 sun 7 rin (3.25 cm)

Sakihaba: 7 bu 9 rin (2.4 cm)

Motokasane: 1 bu 7 rin (0.5 cm)

Sakikasane: 1 bu (0.3 cm)

Kissaki length: 1 sun 4 bu 9 rin (4.5 cm)

Nakago length: 5 sun 8 rin (15.4 cm)

Nakago sori: 3 rin (0.1 cm)

Commentary

This is a shinogi zukuri katana with an ihorimune. The widths at the moto and saki are not too different, there is a thin shinogi ji area, and a high shinogi line. The blade is slightly thin, there is a large sori, which becomes a saki-zori, and there is a long chu-kissaki. The jigane shows a tight ko-itame, there are ji-nie, fine chikei, and midare utsuri at the koshimoto. The entire hamon is wide with a high yakiba. The hamon is composed of primarily open bottom double gunome, mixed with ko-gunome and togariba. There are ashi and yo, a tight nioiguchi, some ko-nie, and on the omote around the monouchi there are tobiyaki, some kinsuji and sunagashi, and there is a bright and clear nioiguchi. The boshi from the yokote has a prominently wide yakiba, and on the omote it is a small midarekomi with a round point and return. The ura is a notare style with a komaru, and both sides have hakikake near the tip.

The nakago is ubu, the tip is a square shaped ha-agari kurijiri, and the yasurime are katte-sagari. There is one mekugi-ana, and on the omote along the mune side, there is a long kanji signature, and the ura has a date.

After the latter half of the Muromachi Period, there were many Sue-Bizen smiths working in Bizen Koku. Notably, many smiths used the Sukesada name, and there are many Sukesada works seen with all kinds of common names. Among these, a prominent smith who produced many master works, and who is ranked among the best smiths, is the shodai Yosozaemon Sukesada.

Yosozaemon Sukesada is the son of Hikobeijo Sukesada, and his last name is Nakagawa. From his tanto dated Tenbun 6 (1537), which states his age is 71 years, we

know that he was born on Onin 1 (1467). His earlier work with his common name started to appear in the Bunki period (1501-04) and his latest work appeared around Tenbun 10 (1541). From this, it appears that he was working for about half a century, and this includes works without his common name. We can recognize, for that time, he was a very long lived sword smith.

His hamon are versatile. There is his typical open bottom double gunome hamon. There are hamon based on suguha or notare, where the bottom half is a midare hamon and the upper half is a suguha style, or the opposite with a suguha bottom half and a midare upper half. There are midare hamon at the koshimoto and around the monouchi, with the middle being a suguha hamon. There are hamon with double gunome only around the koshimoto which are irregular type hamon, and hitatsura hamon. All of them are excellent, and we can recognize his high level of skill.

His characteristic styles include blades with ihorimune and mitsumune, and we sometimes see marumune, just like on this katana. We see bo-hi with another hi, and many of these other hi are tsure-hi or companion hi. This is seen not only in Sukesada's work, but also in the work of other Sue-Bizen smiths. Sukesada also produced thick yoroi-doshi style tanto.

This katana's shape includes a short length with saki-zori, and a short nakago in the latter half of the Muromachi period, and this is a suitable shape for a typical katate-uchi uchigatana. Also, the entire shinogi ji area on this blade is thin, and thin blades are sometimes seen in the work of Sue-Bizen smiths. There are dense ji-nie, fine chikei, a refined ko-itame hada, and there are no defects or flaws. There is no visible hada, and it is well forged, and as might be expected, this shows Yosozaemon's excellent skill. However, the hamon is based primarily on the Sue Bizen characteristic open bottom double gunome, and in addition has what is called "crab claw" gunome which is a unique hamon. The entire nioiguchi is bright and clear and we see typical and excellent workmanship.

After the latter half of the Muromachi Period, the Bizen hamon has a less characteristic nioiguchi and ji-utsuri, and the jiba(ji and hamon) have a tendency to change towards a nie style. This sword shows a style leaning more towards a nie style, and the utsuri is clear.

This work is full of energy, and from the date, he was 57 when he made this sword. It is an enthusiastic and focused work. From the workmanship we can understand this is a very carefully made sword. The blade is wide, and the widths at the moto and saki are not too different, and there is a long kissaki. We feel that this blade has not been altered by polishing since it was initially made, and it has a healthy shape. The ubu nakago and original single mekugi ana show a complete and original work, and this makes it of more interest.

However, this is a master work, and we can again recognize Sukesada's excellent skill and the high value given to his work. In the Edo period, this blade was owned by the Awa Tokushima Hachisuka family.

This sword will be exhibited at the NBTHK's "Tokubetsu Juyo Token: 50th Anniversary of the Classification System: Treasured Japanese Swords" from September 25th to December 22. This sword will be shown in the exhibit until October 24th.

Explanation by Ishii Akira and photo by Imoto Yuki

Shijo Kantei To No. 776

The deadline to submit answers for the issue No. 776 Shijo Kantei To is October 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 October 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 5 sun 5 bu (77.27 cm)

Sori: 5.5 bu (1.67 cm)

Motohaba: 1 sun 2 rin (3.1 cm)

Sakihaba: 6 bu 8 rin (2.05 cm)

Motokasane: 2 bu 3 rin (0.7 cm)

Sakikasane: 1 bu 5 rin (0.45 cm)

Kissaki length: 1 sun 9 rin (3.3 cm)

Nakago length: 7 sun 6 bu (22.03 cm)

Nakago sori: slight

This is a shinogi-zukuri tachi with an ihorimune. It is slightly wide, and the width at the saki is not too different from the width at the moto. It is suriage, there is a koshi sori, the tip has sori, and there is a chu-kissaki. The jigane has itame hada mixed with mokume, and nagare hada, and the entire hada is visible. There are ji-nie, chikei, jifu and midare-utsuri. The hamon and boshi are as seen in the picture. There are ashi and yo, and the entire hamon is a saka-ashi style. There are ko-nie, kinsuji and sunagashi. The nakago is suriage and the tip was originally kurijiri. The yasurime are sujichigai. There are two mekugi-ana, and on the omote, there is a long kanji signature along the mune side. The ura has a date.

We do not see gyaku-tagane chisel work in this smith's signatures.

Tosogu Kansho

Juyo Tosogu

Kiku (chrysanthemum flower) Sukashi Tsuba

Mei: Iwamoto Konkan with kao

There is a chrysanthemum festival in Japan. The chrysanthemum is supposed to have been imported from China to Japan for use as a herb and for ornamental purposes around the end of the Nara Period to the early Heian Period. In the Kamakura period, the emperor Gotoba loved the chrysanthemum, and he is supposed to have decided to use the “Kiku mon” as the imperial family’s mon. Different types of chrysanthemum were developed rapidly during the Edo period after the Genroku era, and in later periods, chrysanthemum fairs become popular, and this is the same period as Konkan’s career. In Japan, during the Meiji to Taisho periods, many types or varieties of chrysanthemum were developed, and today we call these the “Koten kiku” or classic chrysanthemum. Among these, the “Edo kiku” are enjoyed from the beginning of their blooming season to the very end of the blooming season.

This is an impressive niku-bori sukashi work with lively multiple layers of petals and we can enjoy the delicate movements of these petals and leaves. There are no defects in the depiction of the petals, leaf textures, or leaf veins and this is Konkan’s characteristic triangular chisel work. Not only the sides of the flowers, but also the backs contribute to an exuberant expression. But in Konkan’s work depicting plants, only brass was used which is an unusual style.

From his hitsu-ana shape you can recognize that Konkan is a smith who signed more on the ura side. He is conscious of the tsuba omote and ura sides. So first you enjoy the omote side design, and then you look carefully again and enjoy the ura side. On the omote and ura chrysanthemum designs you can see that the flowers are carved faithfully and show the flower’s appearance going from the omote to ura side.

People say “between iki (stylish) and yabo (unsophisticated) the difference is only a single sheet of paper” and it does not matter whether the subject is people or flowers. This tsuba reminds us of Konkan’s sophisticated style of work.

Explanation by Kubo Yasuko

Shijo Kantei To No. 774 in the July, 2021 issue

The answer for the Shijo Kantei To is a tachi by Osafune Tomomitsu.

This tachi is wide, and there is almost no difference in the widths at the moto and saki. Besides being suriage, there is a large koshi-zori, the tip has sori, and there is a large kissaki, and from the shape you can judge this as a peak Nanbokucho period tachi.

The jigane is an itame mixed with mokume, the entire ji is tight, there is a bright iron color, and there are midare utsuri and refined forging. The hamon is based on kataochi-gunome, the boshi is midarekomi, and the tip is very sharp. From this, a majority of people voted first for Tomomitsu, and also for other Kanemitsu school smiths

such as Kanemitsu, Motomitsu and Masamitsu. The school's leader, Kanemitsu, has three types of hamon styles, suguha, kataochi-gunome, and notare. Among these, the kataochi-gunome styles were used by Motomitsu, and the notare styles were used by Tomomitsu.

This kind of kataochi gunome style is seen more in work from Motomitsu than from Tomomitsu. Just like on this tachi, kataochi gunome mixed with saka-ashi style gunome, gunome, togariba, and variations in the entire hamon are seen often Motomitsu's work.

However, Kanemitsu school smiths worked in styles similar to each other, and are sometimes hard to distinguish, and so at this time, all Kanemitsu school smiths' names are treated as a correct answer.

Previously, I wrote a little bit about the Nambokucho period Enbun-Joji style large tachi, and people have not had many chances to look at the original ubu shapes of these blades. Consequently, it is hard to make a clear statement describing what kind of shapes we can see. Sometimes there is a good example, and a blade has sori at the tip, and a large koshizori at the moto, just like this tachi.

The other day, at the NBTHK shinsa, a large ubu Enbun-Joji shape tachi was shown. The tachi length was 3 shaku 3 sun. We asked, "if we shorten it by 1 shaku, and it becomes a standard 2 shaku 3 sun length, what would the sori look like. If it were 1 shaku suriage, the large sori at the koshimoto and the funbari will be gone. We can then see visually what this wide blade would look like when it has a common length of 2 shaku 3 sun with a large kissaki.

I remember, once a respected person in the sword world held a 2 shaku 5 sun long Kokuho classified tachi with an ubu nakago, and told me "if you shorted this just 3 sun, the koshizori and funbari would be gone".

This tachi will be exhibited at the NBTHK Museum from September 25 in the "Tokubetsu Juyo Token Classification System: the 50th Anniversary: Treasured Master Piece Japanese Swords". This blade will be shown in the second part of the exhibit from October 26 to November 21.

In next month's issue I will continue to discuss the use of oil on Japanese swords.

Explanation by Hinohara Dai