

Restoring Armour and Swords – Contrasting Points of View Part C: *Shirasaya*

The series of articles co-authored by Bottomley, Coutinho, Hennick and Tanner examines restoration vs. conservation when dealing with armour and swords. Each article includes historic information and attitudes as reflected in the treatment of antique artifacts both by occidental (European and American) museum curators and Japanese specialists. Examples are provided in specific case studies which examine the choices made—either to restore or conserve—and the wisdom or error of these choices based on the resulting condition of the artifact(s).

Each of the earlier articles concentrates on a specific category of artifacts: Part A explores the treatment of armour, while Part B focuses on the treatment of sword blades.

As the series continues, Part C considers the restoration / conservation of *shirasaya* (white wood storage case).

The term *shirasaya* is quite specific and should not be confused with *saya* (sword sheath). The *shirasaya* consists of the *tsuki* (handle) and the *saya* (sheath) and is made of *honoki* (a white wood). While *saya* on a sword is usually lacquered, a *shirasaya* is typically not lacquered.

Shirasaya have played an important role in sword history. While swords may be displayed in their *koshirae* (mounts), many are stored alternately in *shirasaya*. Important details of the sword's pedigree--such as attribution to a particular smith, the name of the owner and, in some cases, how the sword was obtained,--are sometimes recorded on the *shirasaya*. Further, the wood used and its patina may provide clues as to the date of the *shirasaya*'s manufacture and possibly even the identity of the person who fashioned it.

Even though the body of information about the *sayashi* (*saya* craftsman) and *shirasaya* manufacture may be limited, the information provided by the *shirasaya* should be included in the sword's history.

In one particular case, a sword with an old *shirasaya* and *sayagaki* (writing on the scabbard) was sent to Japan to be polished. The polisher decided to enhance the appearance of the *shirasaya* by restoring it, so that it would match the improved condition of the newly-polished sword. By way of justification, the polisher

claimed that the old colour of the patina was currently not popular and did not adequately compliment the now-beautiful sword. In making the *shirasaya* look brand new, the *sayagaki* and patina were lost and, with them, any information they could provide about the sword's history. Even without *sayagaki*, old *shirasaya* may reveal a great deal about the time period the sword was last modified, evaluated or inventoried and perhaps even the identity of the previous owner.

The owner of the piece was very unhappy with the resulting restoration. He would have preferred to pay for a new *shirasaya* and keep the old one as part of the blade's history. Another possible approach would have been to merely clean the inside of the *shirasaya*, thus retaining its historical information, even though the *sayagaki* would have a wrong attribution.

In this case, the restoration described was unnecessary. The *sayagaki* and the *shirasaya* original patina should be maintained; the restoration here should have been limited to opening and cleaning the *saya*.

Four examples of restored *shirasaya* are described below.

Example 1:

Figure 1 and Figure 2 below illustrate the appearance of the *shirasaya* before and after restoration, respectively. In this case, the *shirasaya* was in such poor condition that the *sayashi* had to determine whether to repair it or replace it with a new one. Fortunately, the sword's history was not lost, as the original *shirasaya* and the owner's inventory was retained. The *sayashi* accomplished this by leaving the owner's inventory record and restoring around it.



Figure 1: Example 1 – *shirasaya* before restoration

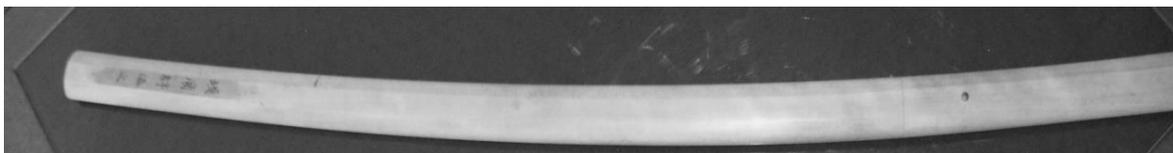


Figure 2: Example 1 – *shirasaya* after restoration

Example 2:

Although the *shirasaya* shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4 below appear quite different in colour, they are, in fact, the same. In Figure 3, the actual colour of the *shirasaya* is shown, while Figure 4 has been photo-enhanced to show *sayagaki*, which was added during restoration without touching the original patina. Although it may be argued that the old dark patina makes it difficult to read the *sayagaki*, this is an honest addition to the history of the sword, which was signed and dated.



Figure 3: Example 2 – illustrates actual patina of *shirasaya* , before restoration

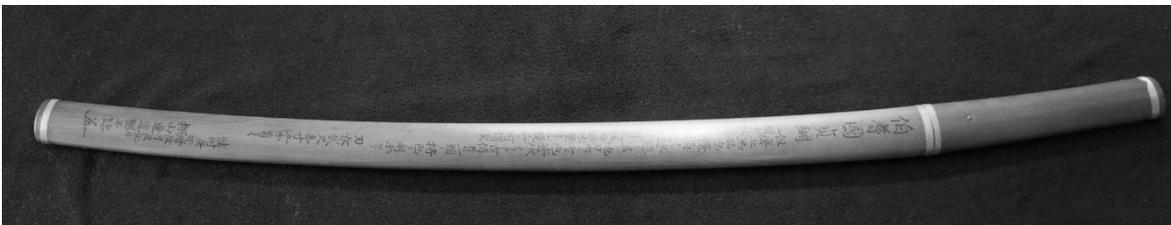


Figure 4: Example 2 – photo-enhanced image of *shirasaya* to make *sayagaki* visible, after restoration

Example 3:

Figure 5 below includes a variety of views of a partially-cleaned *shirasaya*, where the *sayagaki* was added after the *shirasaya* was cleaned. For this restoration, the original patina was removed from only a portion of the *shirasaya* prior to the addition of the *sayagaki* later on. As a result, none of the sword's history was lost; in addition, traces of the original patina are clearly visible on other parts of the *shirasaya*, thus authenticating its age. European restorers would be pleased to see so much evidence of the sword's history.



Figure 5: Example 3 – views of partially-cleaned *shirasaya* and added *sayagaki*

Example 4:

The two images included in Figure 6 display before (top) and after (bottom) views of this example, where the *shirasaya* was cleaned, removing any writing, and then restored. Although the result is a beautiful *shirasaya*, the history recorded there has, sadly, been lost.

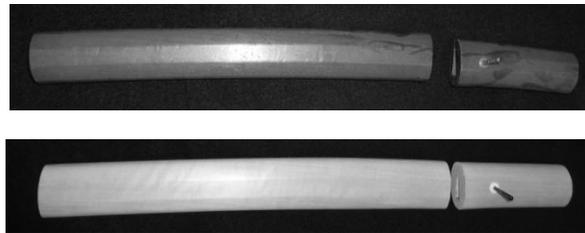


Figure 6: Example 4 – before (top) and after (bottom) restoration of *shirasaya*

When a sword is submitted for restoration, whether it be due to the personal preference of the owner/collector or for preparation for *shinsa*, there are many details to be considered when communicating with the craftsmen who will be performing the work. This article has focused on the importance of the instructions regarding the treatment of the *shirasaya*, which has the potential to carry the sword's history via its *sayagaki* and/or patina as it travels forward in time.

Thanks are offered to Sylvia Hennick for her excellent work in editing this series of articles. The difficulty in harmonising four voices into one unified voice is a challenge that she manages well.

References

Bottomley (2015) - Bottomley I., Couthino F. A. B., Hennick B., and Tanner W. B. Restoring armor and swords – contrasting view points Part A – Armour, Newsletter of the Japanese Sword Society of the United States Vol. pages -

Bottomley (2015) - Bottomley I., Couthino F. A. B., Hennick B., and Tanner W. B. Restoring armor and swords – contrasting view points Part B – Swords, Newsletter of the Japanese Sword Society of the United States Vol. pages -

John please add the correct pages and volume numbers. Thanks! Barry