

THE TO-KEN SOCIETY OF GREAT BRITAIN

for the Study and Preservation of Japanese Swords and Fittings

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PROGRAMMENEXT MEETING

Monday, March 4th 1968 at the Masons Arms, Maddox Street, London, W.1. at 7.30 p.m.

SUBJECT:

This will be a General Meeting in which we can draw breath and pause momentarily, after the putting on of the Great Exhibition. There will be some general business and discussions arising out of the Exhibition. We need Invigilators - we have had some volunteers but need more. The Ashmolean Museum have lent us the space but they cannot provide staff to invigilate. So if any member proposing to visit the exhibition can also spare a few hours to "sit in" and be responsible for selling catalogues, whilst he views the exhibits, this would be a great help. If you can do this please write immediately to Headquarters. Forms about this have been sent out; this is a reminder to do your bit if you can, please.

THE EXHIBITION

Was opened today to the public; the first morning's attendance was pretty encouraging for a weekday. Yesterday afternoon, 26th February, was the private view, about sixty people attended. The exhibition was officially opened by the patron, His Excellency The Japanese Ambassador, Mr. Shigenobu Shima. It was the culmination of many months work on the part of some of us and I think a reward for all our efforts to receive the appreciative company which attended yesterday. Our thanks are due to the Ashmolean Museum who provided sherry and refreshments for the visitors, and to Sir Frank and Lady Bowden who gave tea beforehand to the Ambassador and To Ken Committee members.

I would also like to record sincere thanks to those members who have helped to make this exhibition possible. In particular, Prof. MacFarlane, his wife, son and daughter, who have worked extremely hard during the last seven days. Also many thanks to Dr. M.P. Esnouf, who is not a member of this Society but without whose terrific effort in building the "props" of the exhibition, we would have been

completely unable to put the show on at all. As he said to me yesterday when we finally made it - "It's not words that count, it's those who get their jackets off and get stuck in".

The Press were there yesterday, the report by the Oxford Mail was the most sensible and sensitive to result from this and I publish it below for the benefit of those who are unlikely to read it elsewhere. The B.B.C. arrived this morning and a report on the exhibition is due to appear on television later this week, probably in fact before this Programme reaches the membership, and this time I make no apology for that. I know the road from London to Oxford like the back of my hand and that is why this is late.

FROM THE OXFORD MAIL. February 27th 1968

The Japanese Ambassador, Mr. Shigenobu Shima, opened at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford yesterday the largest exhibition of Japanese swords ever held in Europe, and the first since 1910.

It lasts for a month from today. Organised by the To Ken Society of Great Britain (To Ken means "swords" and the society fosters appreciation of the Japanese swordsmith's art), it displays more than 200 swords, sword-fittings, armour and other warlike, art objects from the fourth to the 20th centuries. Special security precautions have been taken.

It includes what the catalogue calls "probably the most important Japanese sword in the country" lent by Stowe School. It was forged nearly 1000 years ago by the first swordsmith whose name is recorded in history, but the only sign of its age is that centuries of cleaning have worn it slightly shorter and thinner. The form of the samurai (professional soldier's) sword remained almost unchanged until modern times, as a glance at the 1944 blade on show indicates.

There are 15th century Muramasa blades, reputed to make their owners bloodthirsty and bring them ill-luck.

Swords were sometimes tested on dead bodies or living criminals: one of 1663 is inscribed "three bodies cut at one stroke", an even more impressive feat when the tester records his age as 66.

The unique blend of sharpness and toughness of the Japanese sword came from a cutting edge of super-hard steel supported by the toughness of the rest of the blade. The blade was covered with clay, heated and plunged into water; where the clay was thinnest - at the edge - the steel chilled rapidly and became very hard.

One of the most impressive swords to look at was not intended for use. One of the 40 items which come from the collection of Sir Frank Bowden, of Thame Park - the finest in the country, including some 600 swords - it is a temple sword 7ft. 2 in. long, made for display in honour of an ancestor and having a hilt and scabbard richly decorated in cloisonne.

Full appreciation of the blades must be left to the connoisseurs, whose highly-specialised Japanese vocabulary requires a four-page glossary at the end of the catalogue, but any layman can enjoy the colour, beauty and variety of their mountings and fittings.

Materials include wood, the skin of a ray fish, ivory, silver, gold and, above all, lacquer, in using which to exquisite pictorial effect the Japanese were the world's masters.

All these things are beautifully mounted in a display designed by Mr. Bon. Dale and built by Professor R.G. Macfarlane and Dr. M.P. Esnouf.

It leads the eye to a fine display of formidable armour which, with the prints of warlike scenes on the walls, recalls with something of a shock the deadly purposes of all this art - a familiar contradiction in the Japanese character.

APOLOGY ? I hope this is not necessary, but two exhibiting members have reported that they did not receive their invitations to the private view. One fortunately telephoned before the day and we were able to put this right, the other unfortunately telephoned after the day. All invitations were sent out about two weeks ago, all replies were to be sent direct to the Ashmolean; unless a member telephoned as above we were not to know he hadn't received his invitation. If this has happened to anyone else we do apologise.

THE CATALOGUE Is now available. Illustrated, 90 pages; with 28 plates illustrating mounted swords, blades, armour, guns and tsuba. There are 206 exhibits fully described, except in the case of a very few swords and blades which were not available to me and only arrived on the day of the exhibition. In these instances the description is brief. Each section has an introduction; there is a four page glossary and a brief sword Bibliography. Our only way to recover the expense of the exhibition is by selling the catalogue, so please write in and order a copy, or two, now. Price to members in the U.K. eleven shillings (11/-d), including postage. Elsewhere in American dollars \$1.70 including postage.

COMMENT That is enough about the exhibition for the moment, the only other item time makes it possible to include this month is the following interesting article from Ben Vincent. This is on Horikawa Kunihiro, and is, as he says in an accompanying letter, not a rebuttal of Andrew Ford's previous offering on the same swordsmith, but a different approach. I thank Ben Vincent for it; this is the sort of stuff we want.

Horikawa Kunihiro

- A Different View -

If we consult Japanese books on KUNIHIRO, many differences of opinion will be found. Unfortunately many pre-war books often contain erroneous legends and since they were based on previous books which had the same misinformation, rather than being based on conclusions drawn from inspection of the swords concerned and reliable documents, it is often dangerous to place great emphasis on their content.

Recent intensive research in Japan has shown that KUNIMASA was KUNIHIRO'S father. The style of KUNIMASA'S work and KUNIHIRO'S early works is, for all practical purposes, identical. SANETADA'S work seems to resemble that of KUNIHIRO'S students, but what conclusion can be drawn from this fact?

Since KUNIHIRO'S father was also a swordsmith does it not seem dubious that he waited until Jensho 3 (1576) when he was about 45 years old, to begin making swords?

In Jensho 5(1578) the Ito family went to war against the all-powerful SHIMAZU family, and needless to say, were beaten. KUNIHIRO was therefore out of a job and at this time he became an itinerant swordmaker.

We have no proof that he went to Kyoto during this period. Perhaps he did but there are no swords with inscriptions to this effect, nor is there any documentary evidence.

Therefore modern researchers tend to think that he roamed around until he was called to the Ashikaga Gakko, a famous university-like institution of the time, by the warrior priests who were also teachers there. Since the Ashikaga Gakko was a school for learning and not a school of swordsmiths, how could KUNIHIRO possibly have made a sword in the "Ashikaga Gakko" style?

We do know definitely that he went to the Ashikaga Gakko for there is a tanto with an inscription to the effect that it was made there. On page 5 of Shinto Shu by SHIBATA or illustration number 117 of Nihon-to no Gendai Jeki Kenkyu by KOIZUMI, this work can be seen.

We also know for a fact that this swordsmith went to Odawara with the troops of the Ashikaga Gakko for there is a katana of CHOGI that KUNIHIRO shortened at Odawara and left a notation of the fact on the tang. Page 111 of Reimei Ki Meito Zuraku by YOSHIKAWA has a photograph of this blade which is now in the Jokugawa collection.

Did KUNIHIRO'S Ashikaga Gakko peers fight with or against HIDEYOSHI? The answer must be against him for wasn't this one of HIDEYOSHI'S many wars against the warrior priests?

HIDEYOSHI, being a brilliant tactician etc. won the battle and perhaps captured KUNIHIRO. By this time KUNIHIRO was an

established swordsmith, although his fame was not one-tenth of what it was to become.

During, or shortly after this period, there was a signature change of importance so could it be that KUNIHIRO was "requested" to come to Kyoto to amend the obligation that he had incurred by fighting with the Ashikaga group against HIDEYOSHI?

The arguments of the various schools of sword thought are very interesting in regard to this point but are too complex to enter into here.

The matter of going to Korea with Kato Kiyomasa seems to be another legend. There are many swords with tang inscriptions claiming to have been made in Fusan by KUNIHIRO, but all known examples are forgeries. Until an authenticate specimen with the Fusan signature comes to light, we will not be able to tell for sure if KUNIHIRO made swords in Korea.

Now one of the classic myths of the Japanese sword world has been that KUNIHIRO was a student of UMETADA MYOJU. There is a book called Hyugashi-Shi that provides us with the information that KUNIHIRO was 27 years older than Umetada Myoju. If KUNIHIRO started making swords at the not unreasonable age of 25, then Myoju must have been - 2 years old when some Japanese contend that KUNIHIRO first became Myoju's student! Anything is possible in the Japanese sword world, but ...

As for the contention that they studied together at a later date, the comparison of the workmanship of the two shows that there is no basis whatsoever for this idea. Myoju's blades are far inferior to KUNIHIRO'S. Myoju's carvings are quite good as are KUNIHIRO'S, but here again the styles are very different.

As long as we are on the subject of styles, it should be pointed out that the Koya uchi (Hyuga) works were in the style of a Jokata or Seki wakimono. After he went to Kyoto, KUNIHIRO obviously saw better blades than he did in his wandering days; Blades from this period have a much stronger hada which is found with a notare or midare hamon that somewhat resembles Shizu work and some earlier Soshu productions. The shape will resemble these older blades that have been shortened and this came to be known as the "Keicho Shinto" shape and style.

Many blades were made by his students, who were quite good and signed by the master himself. These are called "dai saku". These blades have a violent hamon instead of the rather restrained hamon on the works that KUNIHIRO made himself. Perhaps 75% of the blades having an authentic Kunihiro signature are "dai saku".

One possible area of interest that is often overlooked in articles in English, about Kunihiro, is the signature variations involving the character KUNI. In his Hyuga period we find a square Kuni. In the early Kyoto period a slanted top right corner is seen. Finally, in the latter part of his life, the character was written with a rounded upper right hand corner.