

THE TO-KEN SOCIETY OF GREAT BRITAIN

for the Study and Preservation of Japanese Swords and Fittings

Hon. President: B.W. Robinson. M.A., B.Litt.

Secretary: 16 Brightwells, Clancarty Road, S.W.6.
(01-736 6838)



XX
NON PRESIDENT XXX
SECRETARY XXX

PROGRAMME

NEXT MEETING Monday, September 9th, 1968 at the Masons Arms,
Maddox Street, London W.1. at 7.30 p.m.
NOTE: One week later than usual due to Bank
Holiday.

SUBJECT: Mr. Peter Cottis will talk on Japanese Bows
and Arrows. Will members who have bows, arrows,
arrow-heads, quivers or associated equipment
please bring them along. This meeting should
be an interesting change from the usual sword-
stuff, although I expect dead crafty Len
Holtaway will turn up with another fine sword
as he did again at the last Meeting!

LAST MEETING Was a very good one: a fair number of members
turned up. The meeting was graced by the
omnipotent presence of our President, and we had
some Japanese guests. The conversation was
lively and at times scandalous, the opinions
and discussions heated. It often happens that
meetings which are unprepared and of a general
nature, turn out to be the most interesting.
One of the points of Business was the matter of
the "Arms Fair 1968", to be held for two days,
September 27th and 28th at the Cumberland Hotel
in London. For members unaware of this event
the Fair will be for the sale of arms by the
trade. The To Ken Society will be represented
there however, not for the sale of swords but
to publicise the Society. We will have a
small display of swords and armour and will
sell the Society's literature. Members will be
on hand to answer questions. These members
will be: 27th September a.m. Bon Dale.
p.m. John Simpson, Malcolm Hutchinson.
28th September, All Day. Sydney Divers. Any other
members free are welcome to come and help.

NEXT
MEETING

Following from my publication of details of the sword polishing services of the Japan Sword Company Ltd. a discussion arose at the last meeting on the merits of various polishing experts in Japan. It is a fair comment that the work executed by the above firm is not always of high quality, the firm's advantage is that they maintain a reasonable waiting period for the return of the repolished blade from Japan. Some polishers of greater repute certainly have a waiting list of at least two years. It was pointed out that there are basically two kinds of polish: Kesho, a face with rice powder and make-up; Sashi-kome, natural beauty without make-up. The second of these is the desirable polish, being much more delicate and revealing the full details of a blade. It was also suggested that if one asks for a panel origami (judgement by a panel of experts) with the repolish, the polish will be of a higher quality than that required for a Japan Sword Co. origami, or no origami. But, all this will be more expensive, approximately twice the normal cost. Following from this discussion, Sydney Divers has promised to bring to the next meeting examples of both kinds of polish, so that members may judge their relative merits for themselves.

NORTHERN
BRANCH OF
THE TO-
KEN
SOCIETY

Next Meeting Tuesday, September 17th 1968 at the Seven Oaks Hotel, 5 Nicholas Street, Manchester at 7.30 p.m.

Subject Ian Bottomley will give a demonstration of hilt binding. A general chat on restoration, bring any home polishes and other work you have carried out or attempted, so that we can pool our ideas in this field. Also anyone wishing to send swords in the bundle that's going to Japan for polishing, please bring them along. I'm afraid we must restrict it to attending members.

Last Meeting John Hymas gave a very interesting talk on 'Animals in Japanese Art'. He concentrated mainly on the Zodiac and then digressing onto other animals that are sometimes seen. The talk was widely interspersed with funny anecdotes and well illustrated with tsuba and netsuke from his collection. Members also brought along exhibits to augment the number of examples.

The enquiries proved very interesting, being as follows:-

Blades Yamato no Kami Hidekuni (HI 32).
Unshu no ju Fujiwara Fuyuhiko
Shikkake Norinaga (red lacquer attribution)
Masahiro (Soshu school)

A modern blade and a 17th century naginata whose signatures I have unfortunately forgotten.

A yari by Motoyoshi MO 667 (a very unusual 'yoshi') and a tsuba by Hagi Yenri.

'Inari' During the talk when foxes were mentioned I brought up Inari; but was unable to remember the connection, anyway the story is this:

Inari presides over the sowing, growth, ripening and gathering of the rice and manifests herself in the form of her messenger, the fox.

THE UNUSUAL
KUKRI

Comments have been arriving and bandied about on the article in last month's Programme. These have varied from Clement Milward's "Doesn't everyone realize that they are all made in Birmingham" to Alan Bale's "Why doesn't Len Holtaway write a Kukri Book?" More serious comment follows below:

From Sydney Divers

I was unable to be present at the last meeting, owing to pressure of work, and consequently missed Len Holtaway's talk on Kukris. Regarding the making of these, with clay, bellows on charcoal and quenching, he is quite right. During the last war when we were recruiting Gurkhas as fast as we could, the village smithies could not produce anything like the quantity of Kukris required, so it was decided to set up a "factory production unit" in India to make Kukris, using more modern methods than the village smithy's rather antiquated processes. Gurkha's were issued with these factory made blades which looked identical to their village jobs. After the first couple of actions with the enemy it was evident that these blades were not much good. In fact, the blades were breaking and Gurkha's were throwing them away. They continued to buy and replace these from the village smithies, who, as expected, had grins a mile wide!

FROM AN
OVERSEAS
MEMBER

"I have a short comment on the article on the unusual Kukri. Good Kris blades found in sheaths of the Kingfisher-kris (the type found in the Malayan peninsular) have a clear hamon running down the sides of the blade; this is always suguha. They also have masame-hada".

It would seem that general opinion is that any genuine kukri will always have a hamon. Further comment please.

APPEAL

A member well known to the other member to whom this appeal applies, asks, please who was it that took away his katana hilt to have it rebound, about last February (March?). A hilt with dark green binding, silver kashira with a design of shells, two silver dragon menuki secured by elastic bands. Please will the Other Member contact the original owner of the hilt who is worried because he now has a nice sword with no hilt!

SWORDSMITHS OF JAPAN. Suishinshi Masahide by B.W.Robinson.

In the history of the Japanese sword the middle of the XVIIIth century is a period of unrelieved mediocrity. The brilliance of the previous century flickered out with the deaths of the Satsuma smiths Ippei Yasuyo (1728) and Mondo no Sho Masakiyo (1730), and although inheritors of such great names as Tadayoshi, Yoshimichi, and Sukesada were still at work, their names were all the greatness that had descended to them.

The amazing revival of the Japanese swordsmiths' craft which marked the early XIXth century was very largely due to the genius of one man, known at first as Suzuki Saburo, and later universally acclaimed as Suishinshi Masahide. He was born in 1750 at Akayu in the southern part of Dewa province, of samurai family, though his father was a ronin, that is, unattached to any feudal lord. In his youth he was fond of fencing, and often practised in the neighbouring town of Yamagata with some of the retainers of the nobleman Akimoto Tajima no Kami, lord of the castle of Yamagata, and they also taught him the rudiments of swordforging. In due course he himself entered the service of the lord Akimoto who, noting his bent for the craft, sent the young man up to Yedo in 1771 to study under the foremost smiths then working in the capital. He remained there for the next four years.

He apprenticed himself first to Yoshihide, a smith of Shitahara, who was also under the patronage of the lord Akimoto. This man belonged to a tradition which went back to Yasutsuna (b.749; d.811), foremost among the earliest smiths; he gave his young pupil a good grounding and passed him on to Ishido Korekazu IV, who taught him the principles of the Bizen style. Finally he spent a period at the feet of Tsunahiro VIII, who boasted himself seventeenth in descent from Masamune, and from whom he imbibed the Sagami tradition.

Thus on his return to his native province in 1774 he was fully conversant with the finest traditions of Japanese sword forging, and was already a qualified smith. The lord Akimoto was well satisfied with his progress, admitting him among his regular entourage, granting him quarters in his own residence, and allotting him a salary equivalent to seven men's rations. To mark this important stage in his career, the young smith renamed himself Kawabe Gihachiro Masahide (the three names being family, personal, and professional respectively,) and it is probable that at this time he also assumed the additional nom de guerre (go) of Suishinshi, though he is not recorded to have used it in his signatures until 1777. It is by this last name that he is most generally known

among the Japanese. Its literal meaning is "Water's heart's child", and both this and his adopted family name of Kawabe (kawa means "river") were derived from the beautiful view over the river obtained from his house. The more romantically-inclined authorities, however, have felt the name Kawabe to be an echo of that of the semi-mythical smith Kawakamimoto. This character, who lived in the 1st century B.C. is said to have made a thousand swords called "the Kawakami set" or "the Naked Companions" which were dedicated at the shrine of Iso no Kami, and to have been the ancestor of the Yokoyama swordsmiths of Bizen.

During the last quarter of the XVIIIth century Masahide experimented with several styles of forging, but his work in general has the characteristics of the Sagami school and of the Osaka smith, Tsuta Sukehiro (b.1635; d.1682). His blades gradually achieved a reputation, and in order to guard against forgeries he began in 1787 to add a fanciful device or "hand-seal" (kakihan) to his signatures. This appears to have been an insufficient safeguard, and in 1798 he began to use a die-stamped device of a sword blade issuing from the character ten ("heaven") either as a substitute for, or in addition to, the kakihan.

This period of experiment served to crystallize Masahide's convictions and principles, and so it was that in the first years of the XIXth century he came into conflict with the Honami family. For over two centuries this family had been hereditary judges of swords to the Shogun, and in all matters pertaining to the sword were the acknowledged arbitri elegantiarum. After a long period of peace the practical qualities of the Japanese sword as a fighting weapon were being gradually thrust into the background by considerations of elegance and aesthetic refinement. Swordsmiths and associated craftsmen were encouraged to concentrate on delicate patterning in the steel texture, an artificial or fanciful moulding of the tempered edge, and a sumptuous elaboration of mountings, and engraved ornament. Against these tendencies Masahide found himself in revolt, for he had deliberately steeped himself in the older traditions of the craft. He had been communicating his ideas for some time in letters to two connoisseurs, Uyeda Tanshi and Ishida Sadakuni, and in 1811 he began publishing them in the form of books. The most important of these were Essay on the Practical Sword and The Sword for Fighting. The titles are a sufficient indication of their contents and purpose, and, in spite of bitter opposition from the Honami, and their supporters among the "artistic" swordsmiths, Masahide's views gained ever-widening approval, and the demand for his blades increased enormously.

In order to satisfy this demand he not infrequently had his own name engraved on the best work of his pupils, of whom he was by this time training a considerable number. Indeed, the continuous flow of blades, all bearing the master's signature, and priced accordingly, provoked a contemporary connoisseur to write a satirical account of Masahide's methods entitled "Unlimited Partnership - the Kawabe Workshop" in which he makes merry at the master's expense, describing him as manager of the "workshop" and

head of the "forging department", whilst his pupils constitute the "ghost forging branch". Such practices, however, are by no means rare among Far Eastern artists and craftsmen, and though they are the source of endless headache and controversy to Western collectors and connoisseurs, are not viewed with any marked disapproval in the countries where they are carried on. The case of Masahide only attracted such unfavourable notice because it was on a larger scale than was usual, and one biographer says that he "did this type of thing so unconsciously that he could not understand why he was criticized".

Masahide was now at the height of his fame and ability, and it was also about this period (1810) that he began to forsake the Sagami style of forging which he had followed for most of his life and turned his attention to the old Bizen style. In 1819 at the age of seventy (by Japanese reckoning) he changed his name to Tenshu (which may also be read as Amahide) with which most of his later blades are signed, and passed his former name of Masahide on to his son and pupil Sadahide, who thus became Masahide II. His wife died in 1823, and two years later, on the twenty-sixth day of the ninth month, he followed her to the grave, and was buried at the Saikoji temple in Yedo.

The character of Suishinshi Masahide is described as rough but generous; he was a good father and a staunch friend. He never toadied to riches and power, and in spite of his high reputation he never became a wealthy man owing to his unselfish support of no less than twenty-eight dependents. He was extremely conscientious in his work, and it is told of him that when commissioned to make a blade for the nobleman Niwa Kaga no Kami he forged six and only offered the one he considered best. His critics have censured his inconsistency, saying that his blades are "either trial efforts or imitations" lacking all individuality. But experiment was necessary if he was to break with the stagnant mediocrity of the XVIIIth century, and his experiments were successful not only in themselves, but in that they laid the foundations of the great revival of the craft which was well under way before his death. He is credited with numerous apophthegms on swords and sword-forging, and used to say "The merit of a sword depends on the ability of the man who uses it; but a man can only harmonize himself with his sword if it has been made by a good swordsmith." He personally trained over seventy pupils, and as his books became standard texts for all swordsmiths, he indirectly influenced hundreds more. In fact, with the exception of the great Masamune, no other Japanese swordsmith has exercised so powerful an influence on his fellow-craftsmen as Suishinshi Masahide, and this circumstance, combined with his outstanding ability and the splendid qualities of his best blades, entitles him to a place with Yasutsuna, Masamune and Mioju among the epoch-making figures in the long history of the Japanese sword.

OSHIGATA

A reminder to new members who may have difficulties in reading tang inscriptions due to inadequate references, that if they care to send a rubbing (oshigata) of the tang, addressed to Bon Dale at the Society's address, I will check it for them and send them all available information I have on the swordsmith or inscription. Please remember to make a careful rubbing of the whole tang, both sides, not just the inscription.

NIHON TO NEWSLETTER

New members will like to know and others be reminded of a venture started in Japan in January 1968, by Albert Yamanaka and Associates. The Nihon To Newsletter is a bi-monthly publication in English, 30 plus pages, on Japanese swords and its related fields. Packed with information from authoritative Japanese sources, there is no other publication in English which can offer such a wealth of knowledge to the serious student of the Sword. Members wishing to subscribe to this non-profit making publication should write to:

NIHON TO NEWSLETTER,
C.P.O.Box 967,
Tokyo, Japan.

Enclose: Name, Address, City, State, etc. and remit Twenty (20) U.S.Dollars or equivalent. Bank Cashiers cheque only - NO personal cheques.

SWORD ACCESSORIES

Various sword accessories will be available and can be obtained from Japan. Sword bags, cleaning materials, uchiko etc. oshigata ink, paper, etc. Members should write to Andrew Ford, 18 Park Drive, Shelley, Huddersfield, HD8/8JE, England for further details.

SWORD POLISHING

For the information of members wishing to have a blade repolished in Japan, one firm specializing in this work is the Japan Sword Company. For the best but more expensive result it would be best to specify a Sashi-kome polish and ask for a Panel origami, if a certificate of authenticity is required. Write for information initially before sending a blade, to:

The Director,
The Japan Sword Company, Ltd.
81 Tomoe-Cho, Shiba.,
Minato-Ku,
Tokyo, Japan.

CHANGE OF ADDRESS: William K.Kikuchi to :

1116 East Drachman,
Tucson, Arizona 85719.
U.S.A.