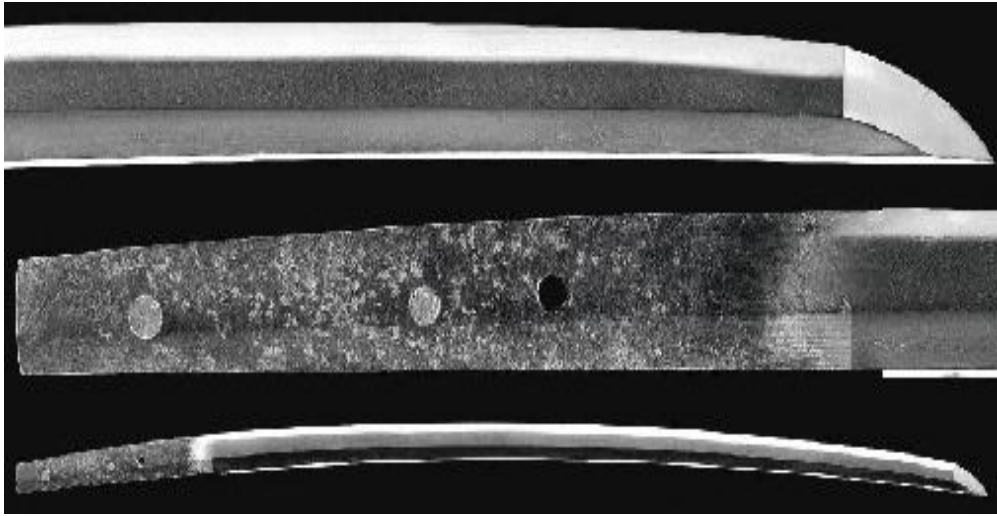


When does a weapon become a work of Art?



A recent post on the Nihon-To message board opened an often recurring debate centred around a question “why is this sword important?” other variations include “why is this so much it only has a Hozon paper?” “Why is this Juyo?” etc. Often these questions can lead to passionate, even on occasion, unpleasant debate with each camp claiming the rightness of their position.

One of the more damaging criticisms that re-occurs if anyone attempts to explain why a collector should study high end work is the cry of “elitist”. It is suggested that in some way guiding people to study the best deters newcomers from taking up the study, or is based in some form of snobbery.

Very few people in the art world can afford a piece by a top master. This doesn't stop them being admired and studied. By studying these works one can better understand what they are looking for in lesser work. Top quality swords are expensive (although in comparative terms they are much more affordable than top quality pieces in other fields). This does not mean they should not be studied, or worse still, ignored and condemned as over rated and not fit for purpose, that purpose being cutting.

While being frustrated in seeing these arguments recur with fair regularity it does point out the need to explore what makes a good sword in more detail.

The following is a personal view it is aimed at defining at least in part what I believe makes a sword more than a cutting weapon. In other words to define what makes it an art sword. As said this is a personal view which I have arrived at after many years of study and listening to people who know far more than I do. I have no doubt that some who trouble to read this will disagree with many of the opinions but please remember they are just that, personal opinions based on experience, that does not make them fact or the only opinion, they happen to be mine. It is also true to say that my own opinion changes as I study more so some of the comments here may be transitory.

I have started this piece with a brief summary of the place of the sword in history and the Japanese sword in particular which I wrote some time ago as the introduction to another work. I appreciate that for many I am saying nothing new in this introduction but hopefully it will set the scene for the comments that follow.

The unique place of the sword in history.

In most nations of the world the sword has enjoyed a unique position in their martial history. It has become the symbol of all those emotions held dear in conflict; courage, honour, nobility and martial prowess. Why should this weapon in all its guises command such a position in the human psyche? Even when it has become redundant as a weapon it is still carried in ceremony by officers of most armies as the ultimate symbol of authority.

The sword is perhaps unique in that it was developed for one specific purpose, to fight. The origins of other edged weapons can be traced to hunting or agricultural tools the design of which became modified to meet the fighting needs of their owners. In 1066 the majority of Harold Godwinson's army faced the invading Normans with sickles, scythes and axes. Swords were difficult to make, they required a lot of rare and expensive raw material and they were therefore expensive. They were the exclusive weapon of the nobility for many years.

As a result of their rarity and value they were treated with great respect even reverence with cherished blades being handed down through the generations. Mythologies developed around heroes and their swords. Swords were named and endowed with spirituality and emotions. Legends grew around a blades manufacture and origin. Perhaps the most famous in British Legend was Excalibur, the sword of King Arthur given to him by The Lady of The Lake. In Nordic Mythology there are numerous accounts of heroes carrying out incredible feats of courage and valour to obtain a sword with a history or believed to be of supernatural origin.

Equal to the mythology of the sword and its user was that which developed around the smiths who made them and the techniques they used. In the West perhaps the most renowned swords were made by the Saxon and Nordic people who combined iron of varying hardness in intricate patterns to create the famous "worm weld" patination which can be seen in existing examples from the 8th and 9th Century. The techniques used by these smiths were jealously protected, Smiths often taking their secrets to the grave.

In Japan during the same period Sword smiths were developing a design based on a methodology of Korean origin, but which was refined into a uniquely Japanese product. Unlike their Western counterparts Japanese swordsmiths passed on their secrets to their students. The result was an almost continuous period of manufacture lasting for more than 1000 years.

The Japanese sword is unique, both in construction and reputation.

Why study Japanese swords?

The study of Japanese swords rapidly becomes a consuming passion. It demands time, patience and expenditure. It is also enthralling captivating and very rewarding in many ways.

Why do people collect Japanese swords? They are expensive, forgeries out-number authentic works by famous smiths. The only way a student can see a lot of top quality blades "in the flesh" is by visiting Japan. The majority of information written about them is in Japanese, using terminology that confuses modern Japanese readers as much as it does the western student. You can spend a lifetime studying the subject and still know only a little. So what is the attraction?

Ian Bottomley said in the Royal Armouries video "bamboo and steel" - "The Japanese sword is the finest cutting weapon ever made". George Cameron Stone in his definitive work "A glossary of the construction, decoration and use of Arms and Armour" describes the Japanese sword as the nearest thing to perfection ever made by human hand.

In fitness for purpose no other weapon has reached the level of perfection achieved by the greatest sword smiths of Japan. In realising that purpose the Japanese sword blade was imbued

with a number of unique characteristics which made it not only an efficient cutting tool but a work of great aesthetic beauty. Although there are great differences in shape and construction of swords made by different schools and in different periods they have in common features which make them unmistakably Japanese.

Alongside the technical excellence of construction the Japanese Sword has a spiritual association which takes it beyond being an efficient or even beautiful weapon. Tokugawa Ieyasu famously called the sword “The soul of the Samurai”. Not only his most prized possession or badge of office the sword was a symbol of his honour, integrity and courage, it was the embodiment of his nobility.

It is perhaps this combination of the technical perfection and spiritual representation, whilst not unique to them, has been taken to a much higher level of appreciation by the Japanese. The study of the subject is challenging, intriguing and at the same time extremely fulfilling. It encompasses such a breadth of information historical, technical, theological and artistic that one cannot but help be enriched by the study.

What makes a Japanese sword unique?



The two major factors which affect the efficiency of a sword are its shape and construction. By the middle of the 14th.Century Japanese sword smiths had perfected their work in both of these areas.

Shape: In cross section the wedge shape was strengthened with a longitudinal ridge line (the shinogi) which ran on both sides of the blade. This added great rigidity to the blade and also enabled smiths to modify the taper below the shinogi towards the edge to maximise its cutting efficiency.

Equally important was the introduction of the curved shape. Some would argue the most beautiful aspect of the Japanese sword is its shape and in particular the graceful curve of the blade which conveys a powerful austere beauty without parallel in any other weapon. However this beautiful attribute of the sword is the direct result of refining the blades cutting ability. When cutting with a curved blade only a small part of the edge is in contact with the target at any time therefore the total energy of the blow is focussed on that point. As the stroke progresses the edge is drawn more deeply into the unfortunate victim.

Construction: An efficient shape is fundamentally important if a sword is to cut well. However there is little value in have an efficient cutting shape if the blade lacks the resilience to hold its shape and edge. The rigidity of the blade as a result of its cross section helps to prevent it from bending out of shape; but it is the material structure of the blade which enables it to maintain a supremely sharp cutting edge but at the same time enable it to withstand the stresses of combat.

Iron in its basic state is relatively soft. By adding small amounts of carbon to it, and creating steel, the resulting compound becomes increasingly hard. However as it gets harder it becomes

more brittle and likely to shatter under impact. Thus swordsmiths were faced with a dilemma. To increase the hardness of the steel by increasing the carbon content would result in the blade becoming brittle and liable to fracture. To work with lower carbon content steel would improve the blades ability to withstand impact shock but would result in the loss of its ability to hold an edge.

Swordsmiths overcame these opposing characteristics by developing a sophisticated laminate structure, combining iron with varying levels of carbon into multi layered blocks of steel. A soft inner core was then encased in a sleeve of harder steel and the blade hammered out. The outer skin could in itself have many thousands of layers of metal. This was achieved by welding small pieces of smelted sand iron (Tamhagane) into blocks by heating and hammering them together. At the same time the smith adjusted the carbon content of the metal to achieve the level of hardness he required. The resulting blocks were then cut and folded up to 16 times to produce a homogenous structure and to eliminate impurities. It is this process that created the characteristic grain structure of the surface steel (Jihada or Jigane) which is so highly regarded and studied by students of the Japanese sword.

The hardness of the cutting edge was further enhanced by a method unique to Japan.

Steel has a granular structure. As the metal is heated it develops granules of hard steel, the higher the temperature and the longer the blade is exposed to heat, the larger the granules grow. As the metal cools the granules decompose. This decomposition can be arrested by cooling the steel rapidly. The Japanese sword smith developed a method of heating and rapidly cooling the blade which enabled them to maintain the granular structure and greatly enhance the hardness of the edge; but at the same time leaving the body of the blade soft enough to enable it to withstand impact in conflict.

As mentioned above, this method of differential hardening is unique to Japan. It was done by coating the blade in a clay mixture which was thick at the back and thin on the edge. The blade was then heated (by tradition until it was the colour of the moon in August) and then plunged into a bath of warm water. Where the coating was thin the blade cooled rapidly stabilising the harder steel granules, where it was thicker the blade cooled more slowly and the granules decomposed. This process also dramatically affected the curve of the blade. Where the blade cooled more slowly the metal shrank to a greater extent pulling the edge into the curved shape. This developed incredible stresses within the blade and it required great skill from the smith when forging and hardening the blade to ensure that it could withstand the process. Modern sword smiths expect a failure rate of at least 10% when hardening blades, with the steel cracking as the metal contracts.

It has become fashionable to refer to the technique as “tempering” and the border between the hardened edge and body of the blade as the “temper line” These are both inaccurate and misleading. The act of tempering steel by heating and cooling in oil is designed to relieve the stress in a blade. The Japanese technique was aimed at creating a supremely hard edge whilst maintaining a softer, more resilient body.

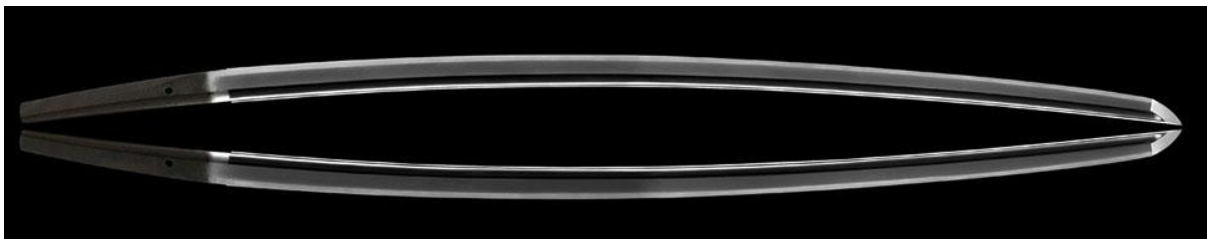
The hardened edge, known as the Hamon is one of the most important features of a sword and great value is placed on its shape, granular structure and beauty. It is one of the major characteristics used to determine the age, school and even sword smith when appraising a sword.

So by devoting great effort, ingenuity and skill The Japanese produced a supreme cutting weapon. The characteristics which make it, as Cameron-Stone says “the nearest thing to perfection made by human hand” is its shape, the multi-layered structure of the welded steel and the granular structure of the hardened edge. It is also these features which elevate the Japanese sword to a work of unique and extremely beautiful art.

The study of this art form, together with its related subjects of fittings and armour, is fascinating, frustrating, and very time consuming. It is also very rewarding.

As Robert Haynes, the famous American collector of sword fittings, said recently “The one thing you can be sure of is that as you study more you realise just how much you still don’t know”

When does a weapon become art?



Around 800 years ago some enterprising Japanese artisan gathered iron sand on tatami mats suspended in a river near Kyoto as it was washed from the adjacent mountain ranges. Another felled trees in the local pine forests to make charcoal. Eventually these materials were processed and brought together to produce what George Cameron Stone, a 19th century collector of arms and armour, described as “*The nearest thing to perfection made by human hand*”. Today I have spent time making an oshigata, or trying to, of the end product, a sword made approximately 790 to 800 years ago in Kyoto by an Awataguchi swordsmith.

I have been captivated by the study of Japanese swords for more than 30 years. Like Cameron Stone I believe that at their best they are the nearest thing to perfection made by man, not only in fitness for purpose but as an art object. The Study and collection of Japanese swords is a fascinating and frustrating subject. It is also not without controversy not least amongst those who participate in the activity (I am loath to call it a hobby or pastime as for most, me included, it is far more important than either of these titles could suggest). So having sat for a goodly amount of a wet February weekend trying to capture some of the subtle detail and beauty of an 800 year old artefact I have started to try and understand why the Japanese sword has occupied the greater part of my adult life.

One of the problems in attempting to define motivation in studying Nihon-To is that the appeal is multi faceted. People coming to the subject do so for a host of different reasons and with different ambitions and targets. As a result there is often debate both healthy and otherwise as to what is important; shape, construction, surface features and pretty much everything else. In the following

I have tried to analyse my own interest. I am not suggesting it is the only or the right view point, it is one of many and personal to me.

As said before the subject is multi faceted. Motivation for collection includes those who practice martial arts and look at the sword as a functional cutting tool. There are people keen on military history and come to the subject through a study of the second war or earlier Japanese history. There are the romantics who are fascinated by Japan's feudal history and seek an object which symbolises the martial spirit of the warrior elite. Then there are those who see the sword as a supreme work of art. Of course none of these motives are necessarily exclusive and many can be driven by a combination. Others may have started in one area and as they have learned more have developed in to others. However I do think it is this range of motivation that has led to such fierce debate and disagreement in the past and continues to infect the pursuit of knowledge in what is a fascinating subject.

I should say straight away that my own starting point was an interest in Japanese feudal history. I became fascinated by the spiritual significance and value placed on swords throughout history in Japan. While by no means unique to Japan the obsession with the sword as a symbol of honour, courage or as Tokugawa Ieyasu famously described it "The soul of the Samurai" far surpassed other cultures. As I learned more I found I looked at swords differently. I am now at the point where if I had to categorise my interest it would be swords as works of art. I have no interest in using a sword or in knowing if it has been used by someone else, either in anger or for cutting tests. I am interested in it as something created from naturally occurring raw material and using basic hand tools and which cannot be surpassed despite hundreds of years of technological evolution.

I am aware that this is not a view shared by all and as said above I am not suggesting it is the right or only view but I would like to take a little time to explain this further.

What is an "Art Sword"?

"The purpose of the sword is to cut. If a sword does not cut well it is a poor sword."

I fully accept the above statement to be true. There is no doubt that the development of the Japanese sword was the result of form following function. The shape and structure of the sword evolved as smiths attempted to improve a blades performance and in this one critical function-To cut efficiently while maintaining the blades structural integrity and keenness of edge. However I would argue that the intrinsic beauty of the Japanese sword goes far beyond that needed to create a functional cutting tool. The skill and artistry employed in creating a blade was not only to enhance functionality it was to enhance the aesthetic quality of the work. It is this extension and employment of skill beyond the mechanical requirements to make an efficient weapon that elevates the resultant blade to a work of art.

To try and explain further it is worth taking a short diversion to look at parallels in other forms of art. One of the best known portraitists of the 17th century was Anthony van Dyke. Along with many other artists of the day he painted a number of portraits of the reigning monarch Charles the first and his family. Other painters of high reputation created work which was unmistakably of

the same subject. If you place the work of one of his contemporaries alongside there is no doubt they are the same sitter. However van Dyke's work offers the observer far more than an illustration. It is an intimate insight in to the sitter full of emotion, pathos and a myriad of other emotions that are not evident in the work of other artists.

Both artists were working with the same raw material and using similar technique but the end result was considerably different. It is too simplistic to define these differences as being the result of talent (whatever that might be) I believe the differences are the result of the level of personal, emotional or spiritual investment the artist made in creating the work. In swords it is this spiritual investment that takes the result beyond being a functional weapon and makes it a piece of fine art.

In recent years I have had the very good fortune to spend time with one of the leading and most influential collectors of swords outside of Japan. His collection is superb and I have spent several evenings studying examples. Needless to say I was made to work hard in these sessions having to attempt to kantei each blade that appeared. Fortunately the quality of each was such that the features and characteristics were clearly visible, this certainly made the task much easier although still challenging. During our conversations he suggestion some definitions for swords as art objects. These have stayed with me and I think I am now beginning to understand. I have paraphrased his definitions below.

He believes that swords may be classified under three main headings

1. Art
2. Fine Art
3. High Art

In his view all traditionally made swords may be described as art. As the level of quality improves it progresses from simply being an art object to something which may be defined as fine art. The quality seen in a fine old blade is self evident. In all aspects of shape and construction it stands above the ordinary. The untrained eye can quickly identify the quality of such a work and can appreciate the fineness of workmanship and the material. There are many swords which fall in to this category. Examples exist from throughout sword making history.

Beyond fine art blades there are those he categorised as "High Art". This group is by far the most difficult to define and to appreciate. To be able to differentiate between fine and high art demands attention and study. The observer must go beyond superficial observation and truly examine and study the work. To understand swords which might be categorised as high art requires time commitment and study. There are no short cuts.

My first reaction when hearing this was to remember the occasions in the past when a self proclaimed expert would hold court and while trying to convince his audience that the piece of iron in his hand was an important artefact would come out with comments such as "Of course you really have to know what you are talking about to be able to appreciate this workmanship!" (The Emperor's New Clothes appears in another guise)

However the man making the statement above had nothing to prove, he wasn't trying to sell me anything or impress me with his superior knowledge. He didn't need to. The more I thought about it the more this definition started to make sense to me.

He mentioned his own experience when looking at a Shintogo Kunimitsu tanto. When he first saw it he couldn't, in his own words, "understand what all the fuss was about" why was it important had someone special used it? Was the koshirae special? No and he left dissatisfied. Some 10 years later he had the chance to see it again and he couldn't believe the transformation. He said he sat with tears in his eyes totally captivated by the beauty he saw in this 8 inch piece of steel. Of course the sword had not changed. He had. In the intervening 10 years his study and research enabled him to recognise all of the finer features that had eluded him on his first viewing.

I had a similar experience with another friend's sword, a beautiful Bizen blade. When I first saw it I knew it was a good sword. 8 or 9 years later and having had the chance to examine many more good Bizen blades I saw it with very different eyes. I looked for the fine detail which I now knew should be there and wasn't disappointed. Again the sword hadn't changed my level of understanding and appreciation had.

How do you recognise an Art Sword?

This is very dangerous ground. There are two points to remember: you do not need to like a sword to fully appreciate its quality. Because you don't like it doesn't make it a bad sword. Conversely just because you like it doesn't mean it is good!

We cannot help letting our own tastes and prejudices influence our view. If we recognise that it makes it easier to try and make an objective appraisal based not on what we like but what we know.

There are very many reasons why doing kantei is such a valuable way to learn. One not automatically considered is that it instils a discipline in to the way one looks at a sword, examining each element in a methodical way to ensure no detail is overlooked. For people like me who lack a great deal of self discipline this is a good approach and one I have cultivated to help me. So when assessing a sword one needs to look at particular features in turn:

1. Shape. Is it ubu, suriage or O-suriage? If shortened try and picture what the original shape might have been. Also look at the thickness of the blade above and below the ha-machi. It will give you an idea of how much metal has been removed by polishes over the years.
2. Look at the jihada look at the pattern, look for activity such as ji-nie, utsuri etc. try and define what you are seeing. Look at the hada in the shinogi-ji.
3. Hamon-Style and composition. What activity can you see?
4. Nakago- look at the colour shape and yasurime. If there is a signature look at the quality of the carving.
5. Finally relook at the work in total. In translations of some Japanese descriptions of blades you regularly find a blade being described as "Just right". This was explained to me as seeing all the elements of the blade sitting in harmony and creating a work where no single feature stand out to the detriment of the others but all combine to create something that is far greater than its individual constituents .

A personal view

If I have practiced what I have preached and looked at a sword as described above what should I see? And what determines whether it is utility, art, fine art or high art? In other words is it a skilfully made weapon or a work of art.

The non subjective part of any such appraisal is fairly straight forward. Does what you are looking at contain some or all of the elements you associate with a given period, tradition, school and smith? If the answer is yes and you have been able to identify them then it is fair to say you are looking towards the better end of the quality spectrum. Do remember however that just to make life complicated some smiths did like to experiment and do things just a little different so non conformity does not necessarily mean something is bad. I suggest it comes down to is, was the different feature intentional? If so did it work and does it add to or detract from the whole?

Now going a step further and again looking at the piece as a whole. In my other main passions of painting and sculpture I have tended to find that the work that has greatest impact on me often appears deceptively simple, or if not simple, of natural composition. It is almost as though the artist has not had to work too hard at the piece and it has a simple and uncontrived beauty. Of course achieving such a natural effect takes incredible skill.

The same holds true for swords. The very best blades I have seen have all had a balanced look where all the elements sit together as though the blade has grown naturally from the raw material rather than having been constructed. It truly does look "Just right". This effect is not school or period specific. It's true the best examples I have seen (for me) date from the Kamakura period but I have also felt much the same about a number of Shinto and Shin-Shinto works I have examined. A masterwork is about what you see not who made it or when (and certainly not the level of papers it may or may not have).

In recent years I have had the extreme good fortune to see some beautiful swords in some outstanding collections. This was completed last year with my first and long overdue visit to the DTI and the NBTHK museum. I have seen some staggering swords (I saw more high quality Rai Tanto in 1 hour at the DTI than I had in the previous 30 years in Europe). This experience was greatly enhanced by having the opportunity to see and discuss good swords with people who have not only spent large sums of money to accumulate fine swords but have given much of their life to the study of the subject.

I think the reader will have gathered from this that I am deeply committed to the study of Japanese swords which, as an art form, sits alongside any other genre as an example of mans ability to produce artefacts of outstanding beauty. There is no right or wrong way to collect and no one's specific area of interest is better or worse than anyone else's. What is important is that you approach the subject with an open mind and are prepared to study. It takes time, commitment and discipline. I think the rewards when you make the effort are incredible. I will end by repeating a quotation I have used before from my first real teacher in this subject, Deryck Ingham. In justifying a poor purchasing decision in the early days I used the classic excuse "I just buy what I like" His response was immediate."That's fine. Study more and you can understand why you like what you do!"

I believe the study of Japanese swords and their associated fittings has been a life changing and enriching experience. This has nothing to do with money or buying a better sword than someone else, it is about observing and trying to understand something which has an almost ethereal beauty and has captivated the minds of men for more than 1000 years. The subject is there to be enjoyed. The more a student studies by looking at very good work and as many references as they can, the more they will understand and the greater the appreciation and benefit will be.



Paul Bowman 02/15