

A Tanto signed Rai Kuniyoshi来国吉



Description:

Sugata 23.3cm

Sori- Uchi-zori <0.3cm

Motohaba 2.3cm

Kasane 0.6cm

Nakago 8.8cm



The blade is hira zukuri with iori mune. There is a noticeable uchi-zori. The blade has hira-niku.

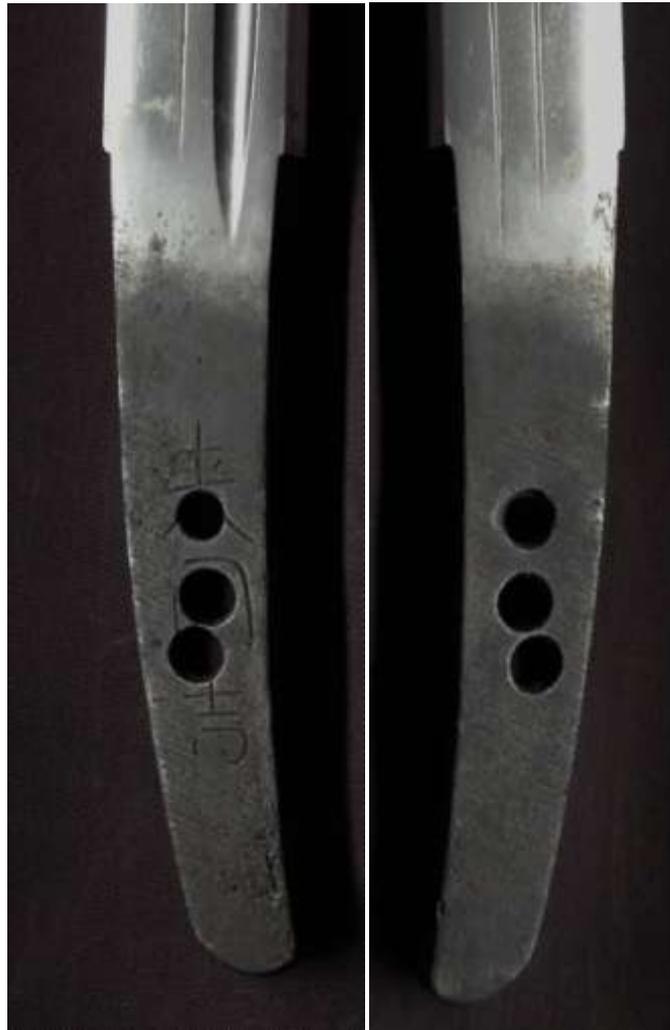
Jigane:- The hada is a combination of itame and nagare which is prominent. There are areas of clear dark steel giving the blade an overall blackish appearance. The surface of the jihada is also covered with minute ko-nie and chickei. There is bo utsuri.



Hamon:- a narrow suguha with a tight nioi-guchi liberally covered in ko-nie. There are uchinoki and sunagashi running above and through the hamon. The boshi is o-maru with a small kaeri and is liberally covered with clear bright nie which cascades through the boshi.



Nakago:- The nakago has a significant sori. There are three mekugi-ana and a naga-mei signed Rai Kuniyoshi. 来国吉. The first two characters largely removed by the mekugi-ana. The nakago jiri is Ha-agari kurijiri. The Yasurime are sujikai.



When attempting to identify a blade it is sometimes easier to determine what it isn't before trying to determine what it is. Based on the sugata and mei this work is trying to be a piece from the mid kamakura Yamashiro tradition. It resembles classic works by such great masters as Rai Kunitoshi, Shintogo Kunimitsu or his Soshu contemporary Yukimitsu. It isn't.

The blade is signed Rai Kuniyoshi. A Kuniyoshi is listed as the founder of the Rai School and working in the early to mid Kamakura period (1236). There are no extant works by Kuniyoshi and his existence is only known through earlier oshigata. Like those of his son Kuniyuki, Kuniyoshi's works were signed Niji Mei. The Rai character seems only to appear with Rai Kunitoshi, Kuniyoshi's grandson. I believe this Kuniyoshi can be eliminated from the list of possible makers. The characters in the oshigata of his work are dissimilar to those on the blade. In addition the style of the blade indicates a later date of manufacture. Having eliminated the Rai founder what are the other possibilities? There is an Oshu smith working in the Kanbun period who signed "Sagami no Kami Fujiwara Rai Kuniyoshi". The characters do not match the piece under study and again the Sugata is atypical for this period. There is also an Enju Smith working in the early Muromachi who signed Kuniyoshi. The hada does not suggest Enju work.

It is of course possible, or even very likely, that the mei has been added later or more likely the existing mei adulterated in an attempt to increase potential value. This is not a new practice and many will be familiar with stories of blades by the infamous Muramasa 村正 having the mei altered to Masamune 正宗 when the Tokugawa edict banning the wearing of Muramasa blades came in to force. Examination of the nakago offers further indication that the mei is gimei. Based on the overall sugata and the shape of the nakago I am assuming the blade is ubu. If this is the case one of the three mekugi ana would be original however they all cut through the first two characters of the mei. Enough of each kanji is left to identify what it was but all of the detail has been obliterated.

Further examination of the blade casts further doubt on its origins. The majority of tanto blades made in this style by Yamashiro smiths were mitsu-mune. This blade is iori mune. More significant still is the jigane which is not the very tight ko-itame one would expect to see in a Rai work.

Taking all the above in to account I believe it is reasonable to conclude that this is not a Yamashiro Rai blade by Kuniyoshi or any other Rai smith. If this is the case one must then try and identify what it may be.

Having established that the blade is not a work from the mid Kamakura Rai School what are the other possibilities? As is often said I believe in this case "The jigane is key". There are a number of indicators in the description. Firstly the hada is described as a combination of itame and nagare which is clearly visible. It also states that there are ko-nie and chickei present. The hamon is suguha with a great deal of ko-nie, uchinoki and other activities. This would initially point to Yamato work as a possibility. However the description also mentions that there are dark plain areas in the jihada giving a blackish appearance. There is also bo-utsuri. The dark steel suggests Northern Province work. The Yamato influenced hada in combination with uchinoki and Bo utsuri are all features identified in work of the Uda School.

Having reached this point I posted images on the Nihonto discussion group and asked opinions. One respondent, someone who has an enviable track record in kantei, and based purely on the images supplied, suggested that it was the work of the Uda smith Hirakuni.

The Meikan lists 4 generations of Uda smiths signing Hirakuni dating from Eikyo to Meio (1429 - 1501).

Revisiting the Nakago it is possible to see how an original mei of Hirakuni 平国 might be adulterated to the commercially more attractive Rai Kuniyoshi 来国吉.

This is pure speculation. However I do believe that the attribution to Uda is understandable and most likely accurate. While the shape suggests an earlier date it is perfectly possible that this work was produced as a special order for someone wanting an example copying the style of the golden

age of tanto production. Further research showed a number of authenticated works by Hira-kuni and the jigane looks to be very similar to the work under study.



Original



Authenticated (NBTHK) blade for comparison

Conclusion:

This is a very well made and attractive sword. When I bought it I had little doubt that it was gimei. However it had many interesting characteristics. I was initially attracted to it by the shape which I believe to be beautiful. It illustrates all of the classical elegance seen in the great works of The Yamashiro and early Soshu smiths. The combination of sori in the nakago with uchi-zori in the blade produce an overall appearance that I believe cannot be bettered.

The condition of the blade is good, the hada full of activity and fine detail such as the uchinoki and sunagashi are clearly visible. They combine to illustrate a very well made work of the Uda School of this period. If the theory relating to the smith is correct, at some point in the swords history it was modified in a possible attempt to increase its value to an unsuspecting buyer. However this does not alter the fact that it is a very good sword.

The blade is stored in shirasaya but came with a koshirae. While it had a number of attractive elements it was in overall need of restoration. This work has been completed and the result is a koshirae which suits the blade very well.

