

A Daisho by an often overlooked master.

Note: I thought hard before using the term Daisho. Today if we hear it we expect to see a pair of swords in matching koshirae. The swords may or more likely may not be by the same hand. However the fittings are usually made to sit alongside each other in what has become the iconic Image of a Samurai's armament. In reality the term Daisho literally translates as big and small, Dai referring to the katana and sho to the wakizashi or occasionally tanto. In this case I am describing a pair of swords made by the same Master Smith. Both are held in shirasaya without koshirae.

Introduction:

When one mentions Hizen the vast majority of collectors and students are likely to think of that province's most famous son, Tadayoshi (忠吉). Shodai Tadayoshi was incredibly skilled and his school was extremely prolific. Some sources quote that at its peak Tadayoshi's forge in Saga employed more than 60 students. His line continued through nine generations and in addition there were many branch lines and famous students such as Masahiro, Yukihiro and Tadakuni, all of whom have a justifiably high reputation.

I first wrote about the Tadayoshi School in the early 1990s. At the time I studied such literature as was available. I have quoted below one of the first sources I read (sorry I can't remember which)

Tadayoshi's family name was Hashishimoto Shinsaemonjo. He was born in 1572. His Father and Grandfather served the ruling Hizen family led by Ryuzoji Takanobu. Tadayoshi's grandfather died at the battle of Shimabara in 1584 (not to be confused with the Shimabara revolt of 1637) both his parents died later the same year. At the age of 13 and an orphan he was taken in by a relative who was a sword smith manufacturing mass produced blades for the Nabeshima clan. At some point Tadayoshi's prodigious talent was recognised by the then ruler of Hizen, Nabeshima Naoshige, who sent him to Kyoto to learn under the master metal worker Umetada Myoju. On his return he began to develop the classic Hizen features emulating Yamashiro Rai and Enju koto masterpieces.

The above initially seems quite plausible, is conveniently simple and describes the epic rise of one of the best and most famous Shinto traditions. However the reality is somewhat different and if one studies Shodai Tadayoshi's work it is not really until his name change after his second visit to Kyoto in 1624 that the classic Hizen style really becomes established. Much of his early work involved a great deal of experimentation and the production of utsushi copies of koto masterpieces. On His return to Saga with a title and new name he was made the head of the Hashimoto smiths. However the head of all Hizen smiths was Hizen Munetsugu (肥前宗次).

Munetsugu and his family were priests for the Tenman-gu Shinto shrine in Nagase. During the twelfth year of Tenshō (1584) Munetsugu succeeded to the head of the family and as such he also became the head priest of the Tenman-gu shrine. In 1608 he was appointed Jō Tsuka-no-Kashira. Jō Tsuka-no-Kashira is the person in charge of all of the Hizen smiths.

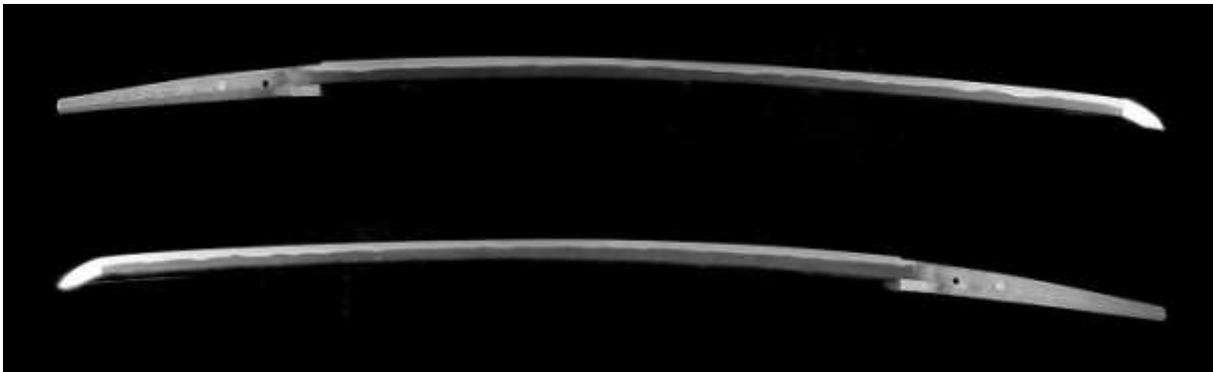
Munetsugu is the smith quoted above as being the relative producing mass produced swords. This greatly under values the skill of Munetsugu as both smith and teacher. While it is likely his forge was engaged in making kazuuchi-mono Munetsugu was personally making very good swords. Like many

smiths of the Tensho period He experimented, attempting to reproduce works from the Kamakura and Nambokucho period he worked in Soshu (Shizu), Bizen and Yamashiro styles and he was extremely successful. Many scholars believe that the rarity of his Yamashiro style long swords is the result of dealers of his time removing his mei and selling the blades as original Rai or Enju work. Looking at Tadayoshi's earlier work a clear link can be seen between his swords and those of his master.

To summarise; although Tadayoshi is perhaps the greatest of Hizen masters the suggestion that high quality sword production began with him is incorrect. Munetsugu was working in Hizen and was highly regarded before he was joined by the 13 years old orphan who would become Shodai Tadayoshi. Munetsugu was an extremely skilful smith working in three different traditional styles, something few smiths could do. As I believe the swords being described in the following will demonstrate he did this extremely well.

The Swords:

Dai:



Description: A Katana the blade is ubu, shinogi-zukuri, slightly koshi-zori and iori mune.

Nagasa: 72.2cm

Motohaba 3.3cm

Sakihaba 2.3cm

Sori 1.5cm

Kasane 0.7cm.



Jigane: The hada is a combination of itame and mokume with nagare. It is tightly forged and is hadadachi-goroku (stands out/is clearly visible). The surface is sprinkled with bright ko-nie.



Hamon: Midare with ko-gunome and ko-notare elements. Ko-nie runs through and above the nioiguchi forming small togari peaks. There is sunagashi and some kinsuji. Overall the hamon looks uncontrived and natural like many of the best Soshu works. It is very active and attractive.



Kissaki- Chu kissaki which is healthy and beautifully proportioned to the blade. The boshi is midare with a short kaeri.



Nakago: The Nakago is long and sharply tapering forming the tanago-ba (fish belly) shaped used by Soshu smiths and which is a characteristic of this smiths work. It has two mekugi ana one of which is plugged

Mei: The blade is signed katana-mei. It is signed Hizen (no) Kuni Jûnin Iyo (no) Jô Minamoto Munetsugu (肥前国伊予掾源宗次).

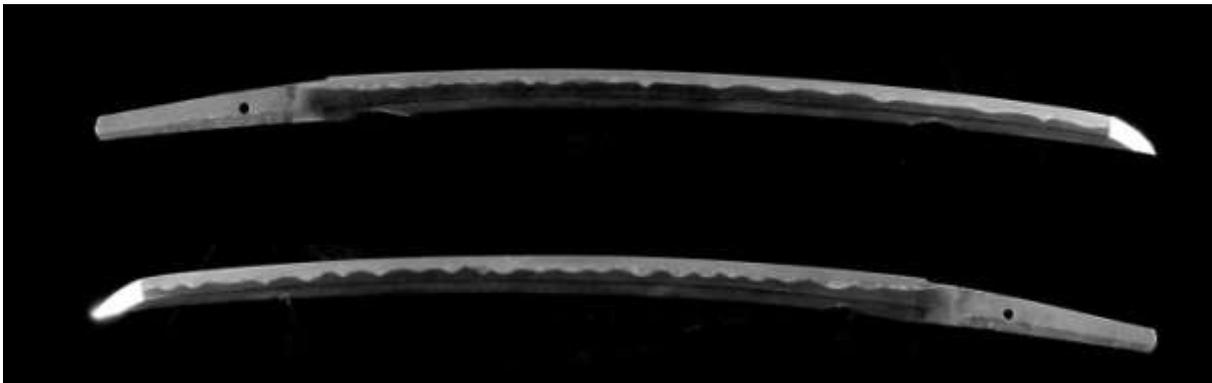
Comment:

This is a beautiful sword with a powerful sugata. It is in excellent condition and clearly shows Munetsugu's Soshu style. I admit to having seen very few Soshu blades in hand but the hada and

hamon have similarities with both Kaneuji and Sadamune blades I have seen. One thing which I think differentiates this blade is the relative lack of activity within the ji-hada. There is plentiful ko-nie which is very beautiful but there is little other activity such as chickei which one would expect to see in a Soshu original. Likewise the hamon is beautifully created and gives an appearance of effortless natural construction. The Sunagashi is clear and nie laden but there is little other activity such as inazuma or kinsuji which one might expect to see in a koto piece. I believe many of these features owe a great deal to the steel that was used and the lack of activity (I am being ultra critical) is a reflection on the raw material available at the time rather than the skill of the smith.

This is a fine blade in excellent condition it clearly illustrates the ability of Munetsugu to work in Soshu den.

Sho:



Description: A wakizashi, the blade is ubu, shinogi-zukuri with a deep koshi-zori and iori mune.

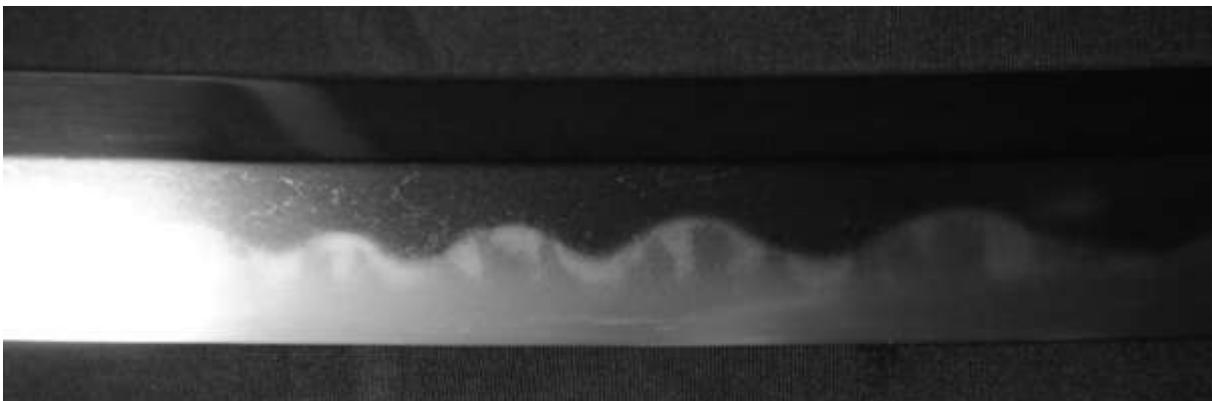
Nagasa: 52.6cm

Motohaba 3.0cm

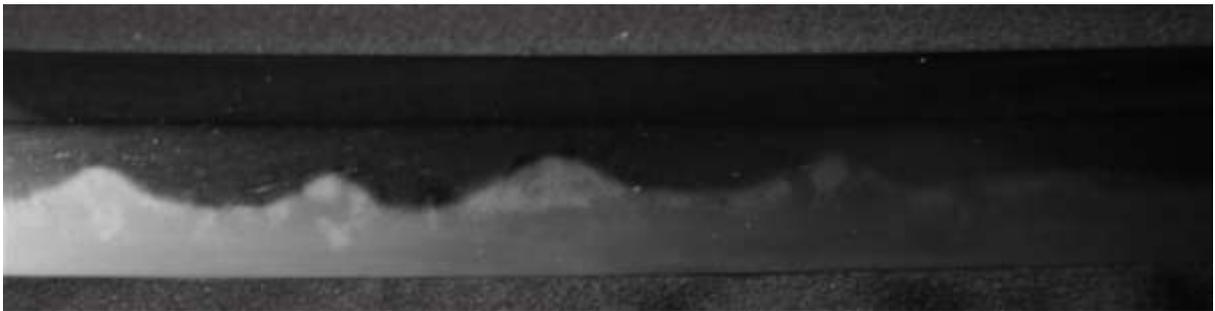
Sakihaba 2.2cm

Sori 1.5cm

Kasane 0.7cm.



Jigane: Less prominent than the katana, the Jihada is itame with mokume. There are sporadic Tobiyaki comprising of small clusters of very bright ko-nie.



Hamon: The hamon comprises of an energetic combination gunome-midare with a bright and thick nioi-guchi. It is rich in ji-nie. In addition there are isolated pointed areas of togari-ba which one might expect to see in this smiths work. However their presence points away from a possible mainline Bizen attribution.



Boshi: The boshi is beautifully executed with a wide ko-midare pattern which is ko-maru with a short Kaeri;



Nakago: The nakago is ubu and it narrows slightly on the ha edge toward the nakago-jiri. The yasurime are indistinct but appear to be kiri

Mei: There is a six Character Mei. It is signed Iyo (no) Jô Minamoto Munetsugu (伊予掾源宗次).

Comment:

This blade offers a significant contrast to the katana. Although it is also a very powerful and robust work it differs considerably in the detail. It clearly demonstrates the smith's ability and diversity. Overall it has a very Bizen like appearance the only feature taking from pure Bizen are the togari-ba

which as mentioned a strong feature and kantei point for Munetsugu's work. The nioi-guchi is broad and bright and flows in a flamboyant Midare down the length of the blade, terminating in a beautifully crafted ko-midare boshi which is in perfect proportion to the rest of the hamon. The small Tobiyaki appear to burst through the hamon to reside just above the nioi-guchi.

The blade is extremely healthy and an excellent example of Munetsugu's Bizen oeuvre.

Conclusion:

Hizen-To have an almost iconic place in the history of Japanese swords. So successful and prolific was the Tadayoshi lineage that when the name Hizen appears we (I) anticipate seeing a sword with an elegant shape, beautiful konuka hada and a bright nioi-guchi usually in suguha but with other possibilities. If you are not a Hizen enthusiast you may choose not to look at a blade described with Hizen in the mei. If you are then when you look at a blade by Hizen Munetsugu you will not see what you are expecting which might prove both puzzling and disconcerting. I think this may in part be the reason that the work of this extremely skilful smith has lurked in the shadows of his more famous student. His work would not necessarily appeal to the Tadayoshi Hizen purist and might well be ignored by those expecting to see a typical Tadayoshi school work.

As you will have gathered I believe Hizen Munetsugu was an extremely skilled smith and stands alongside some of the other great smiths of the period. The Tensho period was a time of experimentation and development. Nobunaga and especially Hideyoshi were Soshu enthusiasts and many smiths worked at producing blades in Soshu style. Few succeeded as well as Munetsugu. As can be seen by the example here he was equally skilled in Bizen work and we know from the few Yamashiro style works that are seen he was very skilled in that discipline as well.

I often describe my interest as being almost exclusively in koto blades. I need an occasional reminder that there are great swords and skilled smiths in all periods of manufacture. This pair by one of the most skilled of early Shinto smiths is a clear example of how good blades of that period can be.

Should you have the opportunity to see work by Hizen Munetsugu take the opportunity to do so. You will not be disappointed.

Bibliography

In writing the above I have once again leaned heavily on the sources listed below. I am particularly indebted to Mr. Fred Weissberg for allowing me to use images from his website of the swords discussed and for information contained in his extensive articles which may also be found on his website www.nihonto.com.

Other sources include:

Nihonto Koza KShinto volume

The connoisseurs book of Japanese swords by Nagayama

The NBTHK monthly journals Nihonto Bijutsu vol. 660

Koto Kantei by Markus Sesko