

Relooking at attribution.

Introduction:

The subject of attribution is complex and often controversial. In the last decade as purchases are frequently made online and at great distance the value of attribution from a recognised authority such as the NBTHK or NTHK has become increasingly important, especially to Western buyers. Unfortunately this has also had a negative effect. More and more frequently papers are relied on as a substitute for study. People often appear to be buying a paper rather than a sword. The first question is no longer about features of the blade it is “what papers does it have?” The impression given is that blades are not purchased because the buyer likes them but because it has a certain level of certification. I have often received emails from new enthusiasts who “want to buy a Juyo sword”. It doesn’t matter what it is or who made it as long as it has the piece of paper.

As this tendency has grown I believe our expectation regarding attributions has become distorted. Rather than being seen as an opinion (albeit a very learned one) they are treated as a guarantee of authenticity. They dictate the saleability and sales value of a piece. Collections are measured in the number of certain levels of papers they hold rather than the substance of the work.

I must say from the start that I am a great supporter of the current system of attribution. I have been a member of the NBTHK for many years and have great respect for their work as indeed I do for other authenticating bodies. They offer an excellent service which can greatly assist the student and collector to increase their understanding. The issue I have is not with the authentication system; instead it is what I believe to be an inaccurate view of what such attributions actually offer. I repeat they are an opinion they are not a statement of fact. In the following I have attempted to explore some of the challenges facing anyone trying to make an attribution and how those challenges may influence the outcome of their appraisal.

What is a shinsa and how does it work?

Originally the objective of Kantei was to determine the quality and age of a blade. Over time this progressed and professional appraisers were asked to determine the maker and the value of blades. This became more important during the Nobunaga and Hideyoshi shogunates when it became increasingly difficult to offer land to loyal servants and instead valuable swords were given as reward for service.

After WWII the NBTHK was established and their role was to authenticate and preserve culturally and historically important “Art Swords”. Now some 70 years after the formation of the NBTHK the shinsa process has become well established and the appraisals offered are seen as a commercially valuable asset for anyone wishing to buy or sell a sword.

The Process:

A blade is submitted to shinsa and examined by an appointed panel of appraisers. This panel is usually chaired by a very senior member of the appraising organisation. The members of the panel offer an opinion as to the blades authenticity and condition and a consensus reached.

In the case of the NBTHK if a blade is deemed to be authentic (if signed) and of acceptable condition it will be granted a Hozon paper meaning it is “worthy of preservation”, and if mumei (unsigned) an attribution to a particular school or smith may be offered.

If the owner believes it to be of very good quality and state of preservation and fully in line with what one might expect from the school or smith they can submit the blade to a subsequent shinsa for the next level of Tokubetsu Hozon papers (especially worthy of preservation).

To go further is more challenging. NBTHK Juyo and Tokubetsu Juyo certification are not purely based on the quality and condition of the sword. They are effectively a competition and success at this level depends not only the sword but what other swords are submitted in that session. For example you may submit a very good example of a Hizen blade. However Hizen blades are quite commonly seen and in submission it will be compared to and compete with many others and only the best of those submitted will be granted higher level certification. The average pass rate for Juyo and Tokubetsu Juyo blades is around 15% but sometimes less. If a sword fails at a given Juyo Shinsa session it may be resubmitted two years or more later and, depending on what other swords are submitted in that later session it may subsequently pass.

In addition the opinion of the shinsa panel may be constrained by other factors. If a blade has a shumei (a lacquered attribution added to the nakago) from a recognised scholar a panel may find it difficult to contradict what has been written. Also in the case of the NTHK they are limited by the wording of their own certification (assuming it hasn't changed in recent years) in which they say they “guarantee the work to be genuine”. Because of this they may err on the side of caution and make a more conservative judgement call.

Some basic facts:

1. Shinto and Shin-shinto swords-

- To receive a higher level paper (Juyo or Tokubetsu Juyo) a Shinto or Shin-shinto sword must be ubu (unshortened) and signed. There is no practical reason for such a blade to be shortened, so if it is suriage (shortened), regardless of who made it or the quality it cannot obtain higher than Tokubetsu Hozon papers (I don't doubt there are rare exceptions but the general rule holds for the vast majority of blades)
- The Mei is examined before anything else. If it is obviously gimei the NBTHK will reject it without further consideration. The NTHK do offer an opinion as to who the maker of a gimei blade might be or at least the age and tradition.

2. Koto Swords-

This becomes more difficult. The majority of early swords are suriage or O-suriage (greatly shortened) and have lost or are without a Mei. Any appraisal must be based on shape, ji-hada and hamon. Mumei koto blades may receive higher level papers. However because any assessment is based on an appraisal of workmanship rather than the signature they become more subjective. This is especially true if a piece is in older polish or a poorer state of preservation.

The changing views of attribution-- A shinsa example:

In the early 2000s the NTHK held a shinsa in London. Over 300 swords were examined over the two day session and the rate of pass was more or less in line with what one would find in Japan. Many of the signed works failed shinsa and were given a pink paper with an opinion as to what the blade was.

When the second Shinsa was held a few years later things had changed. The mindset of the applicants appeared to have shifted from authenticating their sword to “getting a paper” and people realised that if they submitted a mumei work provided it was in reasonable condition it would receive a paper. As a result the percentage of mumei blades at the second event was far higher than the first. Often these blades were in less than good polish, certainly far poorer than the shinsa team would typically see in Japan.

The result was that many more papers were issued but the attributions were possibly less accurate. But for many it achieved the desired result “it got a paper”. However although playing the system may have resulted in more papers being issued this did not lead to better understanding or greater knowledge.

The challenge of appraisal

Nobuo Ogasawara, the former curator of swords for the national museum, gave a lecture some years ago in which he discussed the difficulty and challenges faced when attempting to appraise a blade. I am unable to find the original text so the following bullet points paraphrase some of the key points made.

- When appraising swords identifying the work of a top master or tradition is relatively straight forward. There are many recognised genuine pieces to use for comparison.
- As you move down to the next level the challenge increases but reasonable attributions may still be made
- Below this second level accurate attribution becomes increasingly difficult and to some extent less important.
- The attribution confirms the age quality and condition. It may offer an opinion as to the tradition or maker but in reality when working at lower levels such speculation becomes less relevant because such blades offer less to learn and an attribution is commercially less significant.

The majority of koto blades seen in the West are O-suriage and often in less than perfect polish.

The “Bucket Theory”

I believe this was first described by the late and much missed Darcy Brockbank. If you consider the number of practicing swordsmiths that have worked over the past 1200 years and the number of extant blades that exist which are suriage or mumei attempting to pinpoint a given work to a specific smith becomes an impossible task. Taking the points made by Ogasawara above it is possible to identify the top work in the same way an art historian may be able to identify an old master painting. As you move down the scale it becomes increasingly challenging until you reach a point where it becomes impossible to be specific. At this level one can determine that it is a genuine Japanese

sword, estimate when it was made and the likely tradition. To go beyond that becomes very speculative. However it is in this area that the vast majority of swords we collect lie. At this level there is little benefit, commercial or intellectual, to speculate on a maker. It is enough to place it in a time period and tradition and this appears to be what happens. When faced with an indeterminate blade some attribution organisations tend to place the sword in to a “bucket”, a general attribution. Examples of what might be described as bucket attributions include:

Bungo Takeda

Echizen –seki

Aizu

Uda

And for fittings

Shoami

Umetada

Commercially there is little difference in the value of a blade with a Hozon paper attributing it to Echizen-Seki and one to Uda.

Some examples of varying appraisal:

Appraisal can cause disappointment and frustration for the applicant. This frustration can be magnified and confusion increased when we hear stories of blades being resubmitted and receiving very different attributions. One’s first reaction may be that the panel got it wrong; however looking at the cases below may help explain at least some of the differences that can occur.

1. The blade was originally attributed to Fukuoka Ichimonji. However on resubmission the NBTHK attributed it to Ishido School.....which is unfortunate
The Ishido School specialised in trying to reproduce Ichimonji style swords. The later appraisal believed the blade to be a later copy. Commercially this made the sword less desirable, hence the comment. However the sword had not changed and the tradition was consistent
2. A blade originally awarded Juyo papers to Taima was resubmitted and was reattributed to Soshu Yukimitsu and then went on to pass Tokubetsu Juyo shinsa.
There is a recognised similarity between very good Taima blades and those made by Yukimitsu. Attributing a blade to one of the top Soshu masters carries a heavy responsibility and it may be the initial assessment was conservative. A later shinsa with more data available were sufficiently confident to upgrade the attribution and the level of paper.

3. A Yukimitsu tanto with shumei passed Juyo shinsa and was submitted for Tokubetsu Juyo. The collector was told if he had the shumei removed it would pass Tokubetsu Juyo to Go Yoshihiro. If he left it on it would pass as Yukimitsu.
As mentioned above a Shinsa team may be reluctant to disagree with an historical attribution made by a recognised scholar. However in the intervening years subsequent research may lead them to a different conclusion. In this case they would rather remove the shumei than be seen to contradict an important historical attribution
4. A blade was attributed to Ko-Bizen Masatsune. It was then reattributed to ko-Aoe Masatsune of the same period. Subsequently it was decided they were the same smith.
Ko- Bizen and Ko-Aoe smiths worked within 20 to 30 miles of each other. They used the same material and had many common characteristics. Old records vary and to try and determine whether there was one or two smiths using the same name 800 years ago is a challenge
5. Mihara have been attributed to Aoe and vice versa.
The schools were in neighbouring provinces and Mihara work heavily influenced by Aoe. Very good Mihara work is comparable in quality to Aoe in the same way that top Enju work may be mistaken for Rai School. There is a quality cross over which makes accurate attribution very difficult
6. A blade thought to be ko-Bizen was attributed to Echizen-seki, on resubmission to the same shinsa it was re-assessed and papered to ko-Uda. When submitted to an alternative shinsa panel it was attributed to ko-Aoe.
This is a classic "Bucket attribution" example. The blade was initially placed in the Echizen-Seki bucket. When challenged it was re-assessed and attributed to the Uda bucket. The blade was subsequently polished resulting in more detail being clearly visible and the blade was then attributed to Ko-Aoe.

When looking at unsigned work from more than 650 years ago attribution is not an exact science. It is an opinion based on what can be seen and the data that is available at the time of attribution.

Conclusion:

Attribution papers from a recognised authority offer significant benefit. They offer reassurance to a potential buyer as to the likely authenticity and quality of what they are buying. They also make selling easier and can influence the potential sales value.

What they are not, nor can they be is an absolute guarantee of authenticity. They are an opinion based on considerable experience and reference material.

Papers are not a shortcut to understanding or a substitute for learning. They are an aid within that process.

Buy an artefact because you like it and it fulfils your collecting criteria, not because it has a certain level of paper.

