

A Tanto by Iyetsugu "Kaga Aoe" .



Introduction:

I rarely have the opportunity to spend time with tanto. I think this is in part because they are not especially common when compared wakazashi and katana and generally they do not seem to be greatly sought after or appreciated outside of Japan. This is a great shame because when I have had the chance to examine them the quality of work is often very high. I would even suggest that for many smiths the level of quality they achieve when making tanto exceeds that of their larger swords.

The golden age of tanto spanned the mid Kamakura and Nambokucho periods. As wakazashi came in to fashion in the Muromachi era production of tanto fell away dramatically. In the Shinto period apart from some notable exceptions, made by masters such as Hizen Tadayoshi, few were produced and the quality did not compare to the best work of the earlier smiths. In the Shin-Shinto period, when so many smiths looked to earlier times for inspiration, there was a re-kindling of interest in the production of tanto. However other than a limited number of copies of earlier work the majority of blades made had very different form to those made between the 14th and early 16th century.

Good quality tanto have always been appreciated and cherished in Japan. In the koto period tanto were very much the personal protection blade of the nobility. As a result high quality pieces have been preserved and often the koshirae made for them was of exceptional quality.

I think it is no coincidence that some of the most revered names within the sword making art such as Shintogo Kunimitsu, Awataguchi Yoshimitsu and Yukimitsu were all great Tanto makers. Personally I think the three greatest blades I have ever seen were tanto. These were:

1. A Yukimitsu blade in the collection of the late Michael Hagenbusch and previously the Compton collection
2. A Rai Kunimitsu- seen in Japan in 2016 at the DTI
3. A Shintogo Kunimitsu in the British Museum (ex Compton collection)

The School and Smith:

Iyetsugu is listed in Markus Sesko's Genealogy as belonging to the Sanekaga lineage of the Kaga School. Sanekaga was active in Joji (1362-1368). The first Iyetsugu is listed in Bunmei (1469-87) and there were several generations using that name, the last working in the Eiroku period (1558-1570).

For many years Iyetsugu was believed to belong to the Aoe School. This was mainly due to the beautiful ji-hada he produced which was thought to be indicative of that school. His use of the Tsugu character seemed to confirm this belief. However further research confirmed that he was a member of the Kaga School as mentioned above. The similarity of his work to Aoe caused people to give him

the nickname of “Kaga Aoe”. Something of equal significance when looking at the sword is that Sanekaga is listed as a student of Norishige and so the school has some link to the Soshu tradition of which more later.

The Sword:

Description: An ubu hira-zukuri tanto with mitsu-mune and slight uchi-zori. The blade is well proportioned with an elegant sugata. There is very slight sori in the nakago. There is a naga-mei which runs centrally down the nakago on the omote. The single mekugi ana cuts through the first character. The mitsu-mune is well proportioned and adds to the overall impression of quiet, refined quality.

Sugata:

Nagasa 27.3cm Motohaba 2.6cm Sakihaba 1.8cm

Kasane 0.5cm.

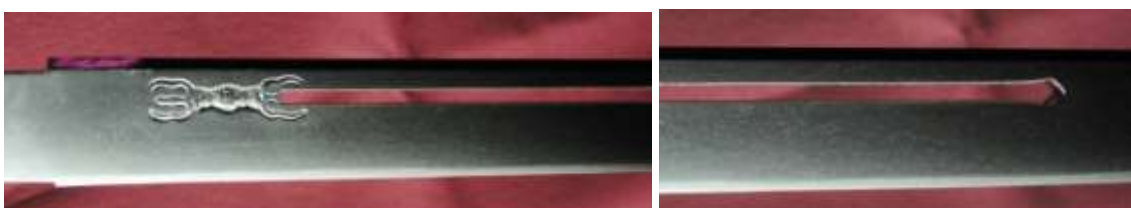
Jigane: The hada is a combination of very fine ko-itame with tightly formed nagare. Although small the hada is clearly defined and stands out. There is ji-nie and chickei. In addition there are isolated areas of slightly darker steel which look like jifu utsuri. Overall the hada is very tight well formed and attractive. The ji-nie offers a frosted appearance which is reminiscent of Yamashiro and early Soshu jigane.



Hamon: The hamon is a hotsure ito- suguha. The nioi-guchi is interspersed with minute and very bright ko-nie. The frayed appearance of the hotsure adds to the overall frosted appearance so clearly evident within the jihada.

Boshi: The boshi is sugu and ko-maru with a very small kaeri.

Horimono: There is a horimono in the form of a Ken with Sankozuka. However the blade of the ken is pierced through the body of the sword. This unusual form is reminiscent of the famous pierced “kitchen knife” tanto made by Masamune.



Nakago: The Nakago has very slight sori and taper. The Yasurime are indistinct and there is some pitting. It is kurijiri. There is a single mekugi ana with a mei running down the centre of the omote. The first character of the mei is partially obscured by the mekugi ana. It reads Kashu Fujiwara Iyetsugu saku,



The blade has been awarded Tokubetsu papers by the NBTHK and the shirasaya has a sayagaki:

Kaga no Kuni Iyetsugu. Showa go jurokunen nichi juichinichi. Jusenji.

Inzuka Tokutaro + kao.

Iyetsugu from Kaga Province. Feb 11. 1971

Jusenji. Inzuka Tokutaro + monogram

Note: Inzuka Tokutaro is a published author on Nihonto. Jusenji may be his pen name.

Koshirae: The blade has a skilfully made aikuchi style koshirae. The fuchi kashira and koi-guchi are of black horn. The tsuka appears to be baleen coated with red-brown lacquer. The menuki are shakudo catfish which have an excellent blue black colour. The saya is carved to resemble the tsuka and is a rich brown red hue. This has been made with great artistry and the deceptively simple design completely compliments the blade. It is a beautiful koshirae.



Conclusion:

As I said in the introduction I do not have the chance to see many tanto and I am very grateful to the current custodian for giving me the opportunity to study this blade. It is a very beautiful 10.5" of steel accompanied by an equally attractive koshirae. The whole ensemble exudes a quiet elegance and it is a very easy to imagine this blade sitting in the obi of a daimyo as he took part in a tea ceremony. It exemplifies the quiet good taste associated with the nobility of the early Edo period.

The blade is a beautiful example of the swordsmith's craft. To be honest it reminds me much more of the Shintogo Kunimitsu and Yukimitsu jigane I have seen than it does of Aoe. I admit to being unable to understand why the maker decided to add such an unusual horimono. Having created such a fine blade to risk cutting in to it in such a way appears to be either foolhardy or the act of a supremely confident maker. Whichever is the case it worked and the end result is spectacular. It is tempting to believe that this is a Shintogo Kunimitsu utsushi and the combination of Kunimitsu style hada and Masamune style horimono is homage to the founder of his school's Soshu routes. Another hypothesis is that the horimono may be a representation of a Buddhist quotation "form is emptiness, emptiness is form". Whatever the motivation will remain unknown. However I am glad he made the blade and that I have had the chance to spend some time with it. It is by any measure a very attractive piece.

