

## Ashmolean Museum study day – 16 October 2021

The Ashmolean Museum (the 'Museum') hosted an educational To-Ken Society of Great Britain (the 'Society') day dedicated to exploring some of the Museum collection of metal fittings and works of art (predominantly comprised of the Bowden and Church bequests). Our Society has established a friendly and collaborative relationship with the Museum, to whom we are grateful for their generous support and assistance with the event, as well as graciously sharing their time and resources with us. Some of our Society members also exhibited various high-quality koshirae, tosogu and blades from their collections for the study benefit of the thirty or so attendees.

### Morning session

10:00-10:20	Registration	
10:20-10:30	Introduction to the day	M Spasov
10:30-10:50	Formal Edo-period koshirae regulations	M Spasov
11:00-11:20	Symbology of Manji in Japanese art	J Miles
11:30-11:50	Banzashi koshirae	I Chapman
12:00-12:20	Brief introduction to the basic techniques of inlay on iron tsuba	M Radburn

### Lunch

12:30-13:30	Participants' free time
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### Afternoon session

13:30-16:00	Opportunity to study Ashmolean collection or members' items
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In the morning, there were several short presentations in the Headley lecture theatre themed around tosogu and koshirae, followed by brief but highly interactive question-and-answer sessions. We were introduced to metal-inlay techniques for iron tsuba; heard presentations about Edo-period koshirae and the regulations that governed them; and went back in time to understand the inception of manji symbology in Japanese art and its applications in samurai accoutrements. The theoretical presentations were amply illustrated with hands-on study material from the Museum and also brought by Society members, which encompassed sumptuous koshirae, elegant fittings and sword blades spanning from Koto to Gendai swords. Refreshingly, there were several younger and highly active members who enthusiastically participated in the questioning of some of the more seasoned members and challenged the presenters with well-supported arguments and theses. It was highly rewarding to experience a dynamic and engaged audience, especially with new members present.

In the afternoon, the attendees spent their time either viewing the selection of Ashmolean artefacts in the Eastern Art study room or visited galleries of the Museum. One of the attractions was the specially curated 'Tokyo: Art & Photography' exhibition with highlights which included historic folding screens, iconic woodblock prints, video works, pop art, and contemporary photographs by Moriyama Daido and Ninagawa Mika. The Shikanai Gallery houses a great Edo period armour and wonderful Oei Bizen daisho in kinko fittings koshirae clearly made for the peaceful Tokugawa shogunate period, with aesthetics in mind rather than the ascetic martial spirit.

Our members split into smaller groups and took turns to visit the Eastern Art study room, where with the help of the curator Clare Pollard we explored items from the Ashmolean collection. There was a lot to take in from a study perspective, as the event organisers had selected around 50 sword guards and half a dozen of swords from the Museum collection. While the Museum's samurai and nihonto collection includes a number of Japanese swords, the aforementioned armour (on loan from Magdalen College) and metal fittings, it is predominantly comprised of tsuba. The selected study items encompassed tsuba from various schools including, among others, Echizen Kinai, Akasaka, Choshu, Nara, Kyo Sukashi, Owari, Hirata, Heianjo, Higo (e.g., Hayashi, Nishigaki, Shimizu), and various kinko tsuba including examples from Ishiguro and even one signed Natsuo. There was also a metal panel by the renowned metalworker Unno Shomin.

Many of the descriptions and attributions used by the Museum originate from the initial cataloguing by Arthur Church done at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and hence it was interesting to compare that historic information to the present-day scholarship associated with many of the items. Helpfully, Mark Radburn in his formal presentation on inlay and iron tsuba had explained the theoretical concepts with specific illustrations from the Ashmolean collection, so we could visualise and relate to what had been described.

As the main topics of the day were associated with koshirae and fittings, members had brought a high number of kodogu and tosogu to share with those present. There were several swords too, as rightfully behoves a study day organised by a to-ken ('Japanese art sword') organisation such as ours. The participants showcased various remarkable items, some of which included:

- Hizen Masahiro katana
- Koyama Munetsugu katana
- Kaneshige katana
- Moriyoishi gendaito (a Kiyomaro utsushimono)
- Daimyo Edo period banzashi daisho koshirae with Mukai Cho mon and Kamata Joju fittings
- Higo daisho
- Edo period itomaki no tachi

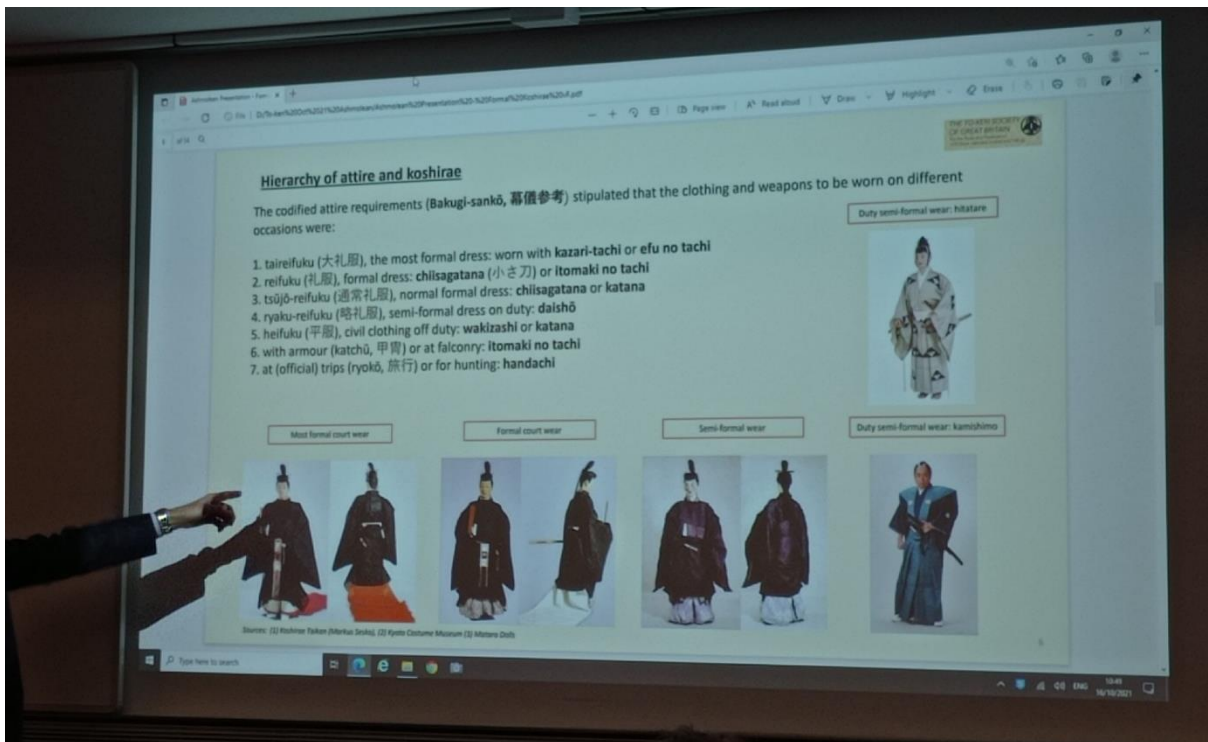
Our honorary president, Clive Sinclair, also presented his artistic oshigata, the product of a passion which, however, also helps one understand, visualise and memorise one's swords.

Among the koshirae on show, the Higo daisho and the facing-butterfly (Mukai Cho) mon court daisho stood out as highly elegant and portraying different aesthetic and also functional aspects – one made to wear during the day and one for more formal occasions.

The day was quite eventful and replete with information, social interaction and opportunities to further one's knowledge. We are grateful to the Ashmolean Museum, in particular Clare Pollard and Bettina Zagoritis, for their wonderful and generous help, as well as all participants who made this a successful and highly enjoyable event.

## Presentations













### Shikanai Gallery (Japan 1600-1850) armour



Japan from 1600 to 1850 covers the Edo period when the country experienced 250 years of peace and prosperity. The suit of Samurai armour which sits in pride of place in the gallery is actually a ceremonial piece and was given to Magdalen College, Oxford, by former student Prince Chichibu in 1937. A glass cabinet nearby displays a collection of netsuke, inro and ojime – all essential accessories for Japanese dress at the time.

This gallery highlights the artistic developments of the period including porcelain production, painting and woodblock printing. The Ashmolean's collection of Japanese export porcelain of this period is one of the finest and most extensive collections outside Japan. The porcelain, along with some examples of export lacquer, is displayed as it might have been arranged in a European stately home of the 17th or 18th century. The museum's collection of Japanese screens is displayed in the long wall case to the rear of the gallery. Lacquerware and ceramics made for the domestic Japanese market are displayed nearby.

Oei Bizen Yasumitsu and Norimitsu daisho in Shikanai Gallery





## Hands-on study









