

Restoring Koshirae – contrasting viewpoints: Part D

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There are different attitudes towards restoring swords and antiques in general among European and American museum curators and Japanese specialists in swords and armour.

These different points of view were explored in three previous articles: The first was on armour, the second on swords, the third on *shirasaya* and this one will be on *koshirae*.

Many parts of the Japanese sword *koshirae* are very easy to damage or lose. One often sees mounts with lost *kashira*, *fuchi*, *kuzuka*, *kogai* or *tsuba*. When this happens collectors must make a decision on what to do with an incomplete *koshirae*. Another problem is that since the pieces of the Japanese sword *koshirae* are individually desirable, they are frequently collected separately. In these cases the sword is put in a *shirasaya* and the *koshirae* is disassembled and becomes part of collection of *fuchi-kashira* or more frequently *tsuba*.

In a recent post on Nihontomessageboard, Darcy Brockbank wrote:

“ Some of that we see working out on a daily basis as dealers in Japan actively destroy *koshirae* to remove the *kodogu* and put them in boxes. It's because fittings collectors and sword collectors come at this with different perspectives. The fittings collector devalues the sword and the sword collector devalues the fittings. Both groups view it to some degree as a "nice to have" to have the complimentary part there.

The result?

High end *koshirae* is often empty and high end swords often have no *koshirae* or a poor *koshirae*.

I just saw some fittings that were taken off of a *koshirae* for a *Juyo* blade, they were very high end old work. The dealer said, "too good for the sword." A *Juyo* sword! What he was saying really is if he leaves it together a fittings collector won't buy it at all, and a sword collector will pay for the sword then mentally add about \$5k in his head as a buffer in which he will accept the fittings.

The solution is to shred the *koshirae*, put the fittings in a box, sell them for top dollar to a fittings collector who wants his stuff in boxes, take some other low class fittings that the fittings guy won't buy, put them onto the *koshirae* to drop its value, return the *koshirae* to the sword now with low end stuff on it. As a result you max the value of all the items and take advantage of the different perspectives of these two groups. Now you have a 60% return vs. where you were starting out with them together, plus you got rid of some unsaleable junk.

It is... heartbreaking.

And every day it makes any sword that is both a high end sword and has high end koshirae that much more rare. And so more valuable. But it requires a bit of education so that people understand the situation. Not hype.

I have examples now where I can look back and see what has been done to some blades. I see a solid gold two piece high quality Aoi mon habaki ... and then it has a zoo of mismatched low quality fittings. On a black lacquer saya. Well... this probably had something like Yoshioka school menuki, kogai and kozuka that matched the habaki in quality and style... they got ripped off and put in a box, and then all this other stuff mounted up in its place. ”

For the complete discussion of the thread please follow the link below. The quoted section is on page 2.

<http://www.militaria.co.za/nmb/topic/16234-juyo-shikkake-in-germany/>

Like in the other articles there are strong differences in attitude among North American collectors, British/European collectors and Japanese collectors that we will continue to explore in this sequel. First, we would like to give two examples where we thought the decision to restore was justified, but two different approaches were used.

Example A: The first example is a sword that was bought with a *koshirae*. All the pieces of this *koshirae* were en suit, in silver, except the *tsuba* that was iron and out of character with the *koshirae*. A Japanese expert confirmed that the *koshirae* was a *shinto koshirae* but that the *tsuba* was a 16th century *tsuba*. By accident a restorer found a Japanese art object where a *tsuba* in silver with the same material and similar decoration was being used. The art object was sacrificed and the *tsuba* removed from it. Unfortunately the *tsuba* was altered when incorporated into the art object: the *nakago ana* had been enlarged. Accordingly a piece of metal was inserted in order to adapt the *tsuba* to fit the sword.

The result is show in figures below:

Figure 1a shows the *koshirae* with the present restored *tsuba*. We believe the present *koshirae* looks much better than before.



Figure 1a

Figures 1b shows the 16th century *tsuba* that came with the sword. (This *tsuba* had no *fukurin* (rim), but represents a fishing net.). Figure 1c shows the adapted *tsuba* in detail. Unfortunately the art object where this *tsuba* was removed from was destroyed.



Figures 1b & c

Example B: This example may sound untrue but it really happened.

One of the authors bought an excellent sword in Japan made by Bungo no Kami Minamoto Masayasu that came in a handsome *Edo* era *handachi koshirae*. All the pieces were en suit except for the *tsuba*. This author showed the sword to a friend who is also a collector and a dealer. When the friend saw the *koshirae* he became very pale, rushed upstairs and brought back a *tsuba* that he bought many years before in Argentina and was an **exact** match to the *koshirae*. This person was very religious (a Shintoist) and believed that the sword came all the way from Japan to find its *tsuba*. The owner however believes the *koshirae* was part of a number of duplicate *koshirae* probably made for some battalion or for sale to foreigners. Most likely one of them was destroyed or broken apart and the *tsuba* ended up in Argentina. (Argentina was the second richest country in the world in the beginning of the 20th century and even today it is possible to find many Japanese works of art there.)

Figures 2a & b shows the *koshirae* as it is now with the found *tsuba*. Although this was a case of de-restoration it makes sense to replace the *tsuba* and no harm was done.



Figure 2a & b

Figures 2c & d shows the new and old *tsuba*. The *koshirae* now has a perfect match.



Figure 2c & d

Difference in attitudes between collectors with respect to restoration

It is generally believed that a good sword in Japan would have more than one *koshirae* to mount the sword to a specific situation. This is probably true because we can find many sets of *fuchi-kashira* and matching *menuki* in antique stores for sale in Japan. So restoration of *koshirae* in Japan presents no problem to Japanese collectors. The reader can verify this in any magazine that specializes in Japanese swords.

However, it is worth noting that very few samurai could afford to buy *koshirae* in which all the pieces matched. In fact, many lower ranking samurai had difficulty in buying any kind of sword or fittings, having to wear whatever they had inherited or were issued by their Lord. In these cases their swords and fittings probably were very eclectic. In the Western world we often imagine samurai strutting around *Edo* period Japan wearing a *daisho* whereas a glance at old photographs taken shortly after Japan was opened to the world shows many samurai wearing a disparate pair of a *katana* with a *tanto*. (We will elaborate about the income of samurai versus the income of the merchant class in another article.)

The situation in Europe and USA is different. European and American collectors like to have authentic old *koshirae* in which every piece matches - that is the *koshirae* is "en suit."

In the UK if a collector is confronted with a missing *kashira* they will likely try to find in the market a piece of the same age that more or less matches the rest of the *koshirae* and restores the *koshirae*. This is perfect and agrees with the principles of the restorer Emma Shumucker (Shumucker (2007)) describe in part A of this series. However the end result may not satisfy the aesthetic sense of an American collector.

In fact, in the USA, some collectors look for very good artisans that can make an exact replica of the missing part. In the figure 3 we show an example of a *koshirae* restored this way. In this case the *kashira* was lost and a replica was made. The result is very pleasing and the authors do not see anything unethical about this. We are not sure if this

practice will be done by museums in the future, since as explained in part A of this series, there are strong objections to this type of restoration.



Figure 3a - Replicated *kashira* by an expert in the UK



Figure 3b - Complete *koshirae* with replicated *kashira*

Another area of focus is on how to restore a damaged *saya*. (The scabbard portion of the *koshirae*) Most *koshirae* have *saya* that are covered with *urushi*, which is a strong, chemical resistant natural lacquer. The versatility of this lacquer allows a variety of textures, colours and patterns to be applied to a *saya*, however, when the lacquer cracks, or is damaged, it is difficult to repair. As discussed in Part A, there are a couple of approaches used in restoring *urushi* on armour. In the case of *saya*, three typical approaches are used.

Approach one is to completely refinish the *saya* in new *urushi*. Although the results can be spectacular, this is basically the same as creating a new *saya*. This approach is commonly used in Japan, particularly with *saya* of a single colour. See figure 4 for an example of a completely refinished *saya*.



Figure 4 – Refinished *saya* in patterned black *urushi*.

Approach two is to repair and refinish the damaged part of the *saya* in the same colour lacquer as the original *saya*. Figure 5 is an example of a *Muromachi* era *koshirae* where a section was gouged and damaged, but repaired with the original colour *urushi*. This type of repair would probably be considered acceptable to most Western collectors and does not distract from the original *koshirae*.

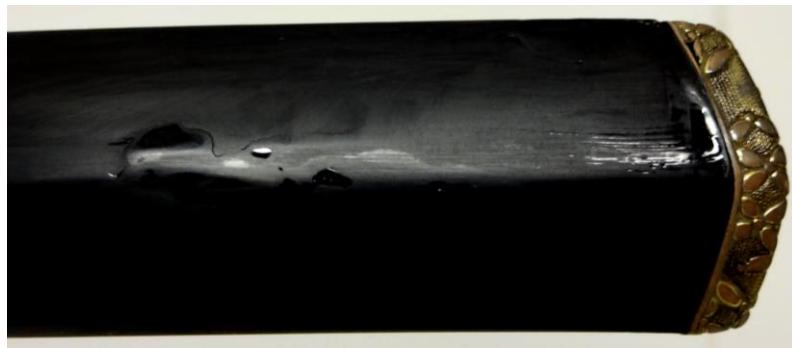


Figure 5 – *Urushi* repair on a damaged *koshirae*

Approach three is to fill or repair the damaged area with clear or solid colour *urushi*. This has the benefit of using the *urushi* as a glue to stop further flaking or chipping as well as preserving the wood in the *saya*. Although it is not aesthetically pleasing, it does follow the practice of many European conservationists who want to preserve the original appearance of the artifact. It is also, in many cases, the only practical way of repairing a *Bakumatsu* Era *makie* *saya* where the designs and patterns can't be easily replicated. Figure 6 is an example of *Bakumatsu* Era *saya* which was repaired using both methods.



Figure 6 – Solid colour (black) *urushi* repair and clear *urushi* used to stabilize flaking *makie* on a *saya*.

Sometimes a collector is faced with a rusty *tsuba* or one with damaged patina on an otherwise good *koshirae*. Again the collector is faced with several choices. First choice is to do nothing – that is to leave the *tsuba* as is, since it is a piece of history that tells of its age.

However, many do not want active red rust on an iron *tsuba* so the second choice is called “*tsuba* fussing” is a term often used for the gentle restoration of iron *tsuba*. This may involve putting the *tsuba* in the back pocket of a pair of jeans and walking around with it in the jeans. Over time the cotton denim rubs against the metal and gently removes the rust and polishes the piece. Some will use deer antler, ivory or an old copper penny to scrape away the red rust. All three have the advantage of being harder than red rust but softer than black rust. Here is a quote from Nihontomessageboard by one of the authors found at this URL <http://www.militaria.co.za/nmb/topic/9463-tsuba-restoration/>

“Tsuba fussing” is a great name that is often used for what you want to do.

Recommendations that I have heard and seen in practice are:

1. put the *tsuba* in your blue jean's pocket and let your walking around etc. gently rub the *tsuba*.
2. use ivory pieces to rub the rust off. Whatever you use must be harder than red (bad) rust and softer than black (good) rust.
3. using choji oil on the rusted area
4. boil the *tsuba* in distilled water - dry completely after boiling
5. put the *tsuba* in a freezer to freeze the rust off

I RECOMMEND NONE OF THE ABOVE - IF IT IS WORTH RESTORING
GIVE IT TO A PROFESSIONAL FOR A PROFESSIONAL RESTORATION.
If it is not worth restoring then sell it and get one that is in such good condition that it does not need restoration or buy one that is worth the restoration and get it professionally restored.”

The third choice is professional restoration. The *tsuba* is given to a trained professional who will remove the active rust and repatinate when necessary. Having recently spoken to such a professional one of the authors can confirm that he has worked on many amateur attempts at restoration. This is often more difficult than starting with the original *tsuba*. His work when completed allows one to see the *tsuba* as the original maker intended. This same individual has repatinated soft metal as well.

John Stewart on Nihontomessageboard wrote:

“You can be quite sure *tsuba* are restored. This usually is a matter of repatination. Ford Hallam repatinated a *sentoku tsuba* for Brian (I believe) that

turned out fab, for example. Even removing active rust from iron *tsuba* and pocket buffing them could be considered restoration, yes? “

Figure 6 shows before and after photos of a professional restoration of the soft metal *tsuba* mentioned above. The owner of the *tsuba* wrote:

“The gold flash coating was determined by Ford to be not original and not part of the design. It is assumed and presumed to be *gimei*, and not of huge value, but is a wonderful example of a careful and necessary restoration.”



Figure 6 before and after professional restoration of a soft metal *tsuba*.

Figure 7 shows before and after photos of an iron *tsuba*. This restorer works in the U.S.A.



Figure 7 before and after restoration of an iron *tsuba*.

A Bit of History

In another article it was described how difficult it was to study Japanese swords in the occident (Europe and the USA) (Coutinho (2011)). It is therefore interesting to remember that restoration of Japanese art objects was also incredibly difficult. Here is a description of what one was forced to do:

"When I was about 14 I bought a rather mangled sword with mismatched fittings of dreadful quality and a leather combat cover. For some reason this remained in the parental home when I married, being rediscovered in his study on the death of my father. Being now of sentimental value, I decided to restore the blade and mount it in a better *koshirae*. This was in the days when contact with Japan was for me virtually impossible, and materials such as *samé* or *urushi* absolutely unobtainable. I did however manage to acquire a plain wood scabbard from a military combat cover and a military hilt from which I managed to produce a bare wood scabbard and *samé* covered hilt. Next to be acquired was a set of iron *handachi* fittings and a pair of *menuki*, which dictated the style the new *koshirae* was to be. There remained the problem of how to imitate the lacquer on the scabbard. After playing around with different materials I settled on acrylic resin of the type used with fiber-glass. A couple of coats pigmented with carbon black were put on as a base followed by a clear layer sprinkled with sieved pieces of crushed abalone shell. Two more coats of clear gave the necessary visual 'depth' that when sanded smooth and polished produced a finish that has a fair resemblance to *urushi*. The sword was finally completed by a large *tenpo tsuba* with later decoration of the *kamon* of the Date family given me by an old friend. Although it is an absolute fake, it holds memories for me of my parents and a dear departed friend and I wouldn't alter it for the world."

Consider next the economics of restoration.

One of the authors had a discussion with several serious American collectors of fittings.

The first discussion was summarized in the note below:

"I spoke to another serious fittings collector about restoration and his conclusion is that it is almost always a losing proposition. Having lost money on every attempt, he has decided not to have any more restoration done. He gave the example of finding a nice *tsuba* paying, \$500, then \$300 for restoration and then \$250 for papers - only to end up with a *Shoami* attribution and having to sell at a big loss."

Another collector put together a *higo koshirae* where all the fittings matched. He also made a leather *sageo* for the *koshirae*. The *sageo* looked fine, but he will surely lose money when he tries to sell this *koshirae*.

Many occidental collectors seem to like to "improve" their *koshirae*. However it is very easy to lose money in this kind of operation. However, if the collector feels that he is

satisfied esthetically with the object he should do it provided that the *koshirae* is honestly described as not original. Many *koshirae* have been seen where the *tsuba* had "bling" but did not go with the *koshirae*.

As with anything in the art world, don't buy it to make money, buy it because you love it! So it is with restoration, there is no right or wrong approach, only the one which provides the owner with the biggest sense of satisfaction.

References

Coutinho (2011) - F. A. B. Coutinho, *Real-life kantei of swords, Part 7: Small mysteries*, Newsletter of the Japanese sword Society of the USA , **43** (5), 22-42

Schumacker (2007) - Emma Schumacker, *The conservation and Display of a Japanese helmet*, Arms & Armour **4 (2)** **145-158**