

THE TO-KEN SOCIETY OF GREAT BRITAIN  
for the Study and Preservation of Japanese Swords and Fittings



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PROGRAMME 87

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25 Dorville Crescent,  
London W.6.

NEXT MEETING

Monday 1st September, 7.30 p.m. at the Princess Louise High Holborn. To get there:- underground to Holborn, turn west, cross Kingsway and the P.L. is 50 yards down on the left hand side.

The July meeting consisted of a talk on Bizen blades of the Muromachi period and was followed by a Kantei session.

I myself did not attend this meeting due to an unfortunate attack of chicken pox (very inconvenient). However I have been told that the talk was very informative.

Apparently Chris Allen brought along a very interesting dirk which had a very broad blade and horimono - in fact a very impressive piece of Koto craftsmanship. Malcolm Hutchinson, however, "stole the show" with a very beautiful long sword which I am sorry to have missed for I am told it was a really beautiful piece.

The August meeting included an informative talk by Dave Parker on the reading of signatures found on Japanese swords.

This particular part of sword study often causes many headaches. I can remember the first few signed blades that I acquired and the many hours of frustrating work trying to decipher them due mainly to the fact that I did not know where to begin. Now, however, although I can rarely remember the characters I can usually translate most signatures with the aid of reference books.

This is due not to any particular skill but because of a few basic rules. Dave covered these basic rules and therefore we hope provided a basis of study for those members who are not

familiar with signatures. Anyway let us begin.

First of all take one Japanese sword (that's the really difficult part). The first thing to do obviously is to remove the Tsuka or hilt. This is done by removing the mekugi or peg which is usually made of bamboo or occasionally horn or ivory. If the tsuka comes off easily all well and good. However in most cases, especially if the sword has been lying unattended for a long time, this is not so easy. In this case hold the tsuka in the left hand with the edge of the blade facing away from you and hit your left hand with your right. This will send vibrations through the tsuka and will usually dislodge the tsuka.

The sword is then dismounted and the nakago or tang is visible. Sometimes the nakago will be covered with paper to fix it in the tsuka and this should be taken off to observe the signature if any. As a matter of interest I once owned a katana which had fine doe skin neatly sewn around the nakago, presumably to protect it or make a better fit.

The nakago should now be examined for characters. These characters are punched into the metal and are usually quite visible. Sometimes, as with early koto blades, the nakago is worn and rusty and in this case a strong magnifying glass is useful.

Let us assume that a particular sword bears a signature. If this is so it is referred to as Mei, if not Mumei. The signature will be on the side of the Nakago which faces outwards when worn. Thus Katana and Tachi have their signatures on opposite sides and the signatures thereon are referred to as Katanamei and Tachimeai.

Now we look at the characters themselves. They should be read from top to bottom. The simplest signature is that of the smith's name which in most cases will consist of two characters. These characters, of which there are many, appear in a number of publications referred to later. Very often a swordsmith would put details of the province in which he was working, e.g. Bizen, Mino, etc. and such details will be carved before the smith's name. Sometimes he would inscribe details of his town or village. Again this will be carved before the smith's name. Also, since early days, the smiths were given the right to use certain titles, e.g. Kami (lord) or Daijo and they also used famous clan names such as Fujiwara, Taira etc.

When smiths had the right to use the title "Lord" of

such and such province this did not mean that they were really lords but it was merely an honorary title bestowed by Court officials. Obviously smiths tried very hard to obtain such titles and this was often achieved with the gift of a sword or two to the correct officials.

The smith's name itself was his craft name or professional name and could be changed at any time. Many smiths never changed their names yet others changed them so often it is difficult to keep up with them.

A few characters will appear after the smith's name such as Saku - made, or Saku Kore - made this, or Tsukuru - worked.

So to recap the signature reading from top to bottom will have:

1. Details of the Province
2. Details of Provincial titles (e.g. Lord of)
3. Details of the village (if any)
4. Details of honorary Clan names
5. Details of the smith's professional name.

If we are lucky we often find that on the opposite side to the signature there are further characters. This will be a statement of the date of manufacture.

The first two characters will be the year-period. This can again be looked up in a reference table. The present day period is known as Shōwa and began in 1926 when the present Emperor came to the throne. The year period is referred to as the Nengō. Next comes details of the year of the period, e.g. 4th year etc. and this, together with the date of the commencement of the period, allows us to work out the exact year of manufacture. Lastly there will be details of the month, e.g. second month and the day. We sometimes see references such as "lucky day" (common or Shōwa-To) or "one day in August", and so on.

This then covers most signatures but occasionally we find unusual inscriptions. For example, smiths often state that a special type of iron was used, e.g. Mantetsu or Manchurian iron. Also some smiths will give extra particulars of the place of manufacture, e.g. "at the Summer Palace". They often give extra details of themselves such as their age or their descent. Sometimes the smith will inscribe details

of the name of the man that commissioned the making of the blade.

One inscription which is interesting and which does not turn up too often is that giving details of cutting tests or Tameshigiri. In this case details such as "cut through two bodies" will be seen. I have heard of inscriptions stating that the sword had cut through as many as five bodies which takes a bit of believing.

Finally a rare and very exciting type of inscription is that which makes use of gold. Often if a sword was Mumei or unsigned a sword appraiser would state that the sword was made by a particular smith and such details are sometimes found inlaid with gold on swords.

A useful tip to those members who are "new" to signatures is this:-

Some characters turn up more frequently than others e.g. Kane, Hiro, Masa, Naga, Nobu, Sada and so on and if these are memorised a lot of trouble can be saved. Also in relation to Provinces some provinces produced more smiths, therefore a knowledge of the characters relating to the Provinces of great production, e.g. Bizen, are useful. Other characters such as Kuni, Kami etc. can be memorised with the result that with a handful of characters most of the average signatures can be translated fairly easily.

One final point which is very important is that the Japanese together with everybody else in the world have been faking signatures in order to increase the value of swords for many centuries. The result is that although signatures on swords are interesting and, if they are correct, very useful in finding out more about the sword in question, they cannot in the majority of cases be relied upon.

Therefore if we find a sword which bears the name of a very famous smith we cannot assume that the sword was made by him just by looking at the signature. We must look at the overall appearance and quality of the blade and base our opinion on these facts, not on the signature. This may appear to be common sense but it is amazing how easy it is to believe that which we want to believe. So look at the sword and leave the signature to the end.

An interesting story is told regarding an event in the famous village of Osafune in Bizen Province, the home of many famous smiths:

"One day Kanemitsu, one of the towns famous swordsmiths, was enjoying a rest in his forge when he noticed the sound of chisel strokes from his neighbour's forge next door. He rushed next door and seized the sword on which the neighbour had been working. 'You are putting my name on that sword' said Kanemitsu. The other smith admitted this and apologized. 'How did you know' said the smith 'were you watching?' 'No' said Kanemitsu, 'but I was listening and I heard you use a greater number of strokes than was necessary for your own name'."

Books useful for the translating of characters found on swords are:-

1. "The Arts of the Japanese Sword" by B.W. Robinson, also
2. "Primer of Japanese Sword Blades" by the same author (now available as a re-print).
3. "The Samurai Sword" by John M. Yumoto
4. "Japanese Swordsmiths" by W.M. Hawley (containing details of swordsmiths, when they worked and where etc.).

I have received a letter from Arnold Frenzel, the Chairman of the Japanese Sword Society of the United States, Inc., which is reproduced here:

Aug. 11, 1975.

I am writing you today to call upon your good offices on behalf of the JSS/US of which I am currently the Chairman. I hope you agree with me that multiple society membership is a healthy thing, and that support and co-operation between the various societies can only enhance the welfare of all collectors and students outside Japan. To that end, we would very much appreciate it if you would put a small announcement in your Programme indicating our existence for those who might not know about our group.

The Japanese Sword Society of the United States, a non-profit corporation, has functioned for about fifteen years. We essentially are a correspondence group offering a variety of benefits and services to our membership. We are growing rather rapidly and have about one hundred members currently. We publish a bi-monthly Newsletter that usually runs around 8 pages, and a yearly Bulletin of about 40 pages. We offer a translation program, the last output of which is an English translation of Suzuki's Tanto. Our society is open to all those interested in Japanese swords, tsuba, and related items. Dues are \$10.00 US annually, payable to the JSS/US. Those

wishing to send in a subscription, or who wish further information, should write: Mr. Ron Hartmann, Treasurer, JSS/US, 5907 Deerwood Dr., St. Louis, Missouri 63123, USA.

A number of our members, such as myself, are members of the To-Ken Society, but there must be a number in both groups who know nothing of the other. We would of course be pleased to put a similar announcement for you in our Newsletter if you would just let Ron or I know.

Cordially,

(sgd.) Arnold Frenzel  
Chairman.

I am sure that we can all learn from each other and I think that Arnold's suggestion is a good one.

I have not met all that many American collectors but those that I have met seem to be very keen. I think that it would be very beneficial if American and British societies could co-operate and exchange information and so on and I think a mention of To-Ken G.B. in your Newsletter would not go amiss.

MONDAY, 28th JULY saw a mammoth sale of Japanese swords, armour and sword fittings at Sothebys with some interesting results.

I viewed the sale as best I could but due to the vast number of items this proved to be very hard work.

A few of the lots have been seen before, either in previous London sales or in dealers hands. However there were plenty of unseen items to study. Unfortunately I wouldn't say that there were any great bargains although there were many items that sold for fair prices. If a person was prepared to pay there were some good clean examples to choose from. For example there were a high number of swords with really crisp polished blades, either mounted or in Shirasaya. It is always a pleasant change to be able to "see" a blade and its workings rather than looking at lemon etched hamons.

I got the impression that many blades in the sale had only returned from Japan recently, together with a brand new polish. I think we should watch out for such swords and be careful if they bear famous signatures.

One thing I did notice was the comparatively high prices for Mumei blades which is interesting.

One interesting sword was a Katana blade by Nobuyoshi and Kuniyoshi which was described as:-

68.4 cm, koshi zori, shinagi tsukuri, chu kissaki, choji midare hamon of nie and nioi, komaru sagari, tight nokune jihada, ubu nakago, sujikai yasurime, one mekugi-ana signed ECHIZEN (No) KAMI MINAMOTO NOBUYOSHI with kiku-mon and on the reverse BUNGO (No) KAMI KUNIYOSHI in Showa military pattern koshirae - an interesting sword especially the dual workmanship (also an example of an unusual signature.) This sword returned to Japan at the price of £1,200.

A most interesting sword was I think a very fine tachi, the koshirae of which were fabulous. Apparently this sword was the property of the late Lieutenant General Wybrandus Schilling and the description reads as follows:-

"A very fine EFU-NO-TACHI blade: 61 cm slender koshi zori, shinogi tsukuri, Ko-kissaki, Ko-midare hamon of nie and nioi, omaru boshi, nokune jihada, suriage nakago, four mekugi-ana, katesagari yasurime, indistinctly signed.

Koshirae: Saya is gold nashiji lacquer with areas of aogai with broad gilt copper bands pierced and carved with foliage and triple tomo-e mon, the Tsuba and other mounts are gilt copper nanako with further mon and foliage in relief, the Tsuba is fine, large same applied in shakudo and gilt with rows of rice-bales and inome.

Lieutenant General Schilling of the Royal Netherlands Army was Chief of the Dutch Military Mission to Japan in 1946. The lot is accompanied by a photograph of the presentation of the sword in June of that year at Camp Drake Tokyo by Major General William C. Chose of the 1st Cavalry Division."

This very interesting sword sold for £3,000 and again, returned to Japan.

There was a fair quantity of armour in the sale but the prices were low as compared to previous sales. Perhaps it's a good time to buy armour but unfortunately, even though prices were down, most armours were still out of the reach of most collectors.

Tsuba and Fuchi-Kashira prices were stable and I don't

think there were too many bargains for the British dealers. There was one beautiful Tsuba which was of Shakudo of Mokko form, the raised rim carved in imitation of basket weave and the remainder beautifully decorated with coloured enamels with a mass of flowering peonies etc. A very beautiful object which sold for £600.

I am informed that the next Sothebys sale of swords etc. is in November with again vast quantities of swords. I think that as the number of swords available on the market is decreasing now is the time to "pawn everthing" and take advantage of the good swords which are still available, for the chances of collecting good swords will become less and less in the next few years.

Some interesting "thoughts" are now published from Richard D. Wilson of Northants.

#### "BITS & PIECES"

For the collector of the Japanese Sword the search goes on. Gone are the days of "bundles of swords", "strings of Tsuba", Tanto's and Tachi's at prices that would make your eyes stand out like temple hat pegs.

However with patience it is possible to uncover a few forgotten pieces. With a pocket full of pennies from your wage packet one invades the shops and stalls we come across hoping to find that forgotten Japanese Art. Searching every shelf, cupboard and corner with dust everywhere one sees under a heap of bric-a-brac the handle of a sword.

Charging over pots and pans, Victoriana and object d'art and falling Kabuto over Abumi in the effort to "Once more save a sword from Nambam hands", you enquire to the startled owner of the shop as to whether or not the treasure is signed. "Don't know" he says. After a short spell of viewing one asks to be allowed to remove the handle to see the tang. "Well, I don't like messing it about really" is the reply. It then comes to mind the Samurai code "Cut and Leave" but as the law would not cater for such action you apply your favourite Judo hold on him (called in the trade "twisting my arm") with the aim of coming to some price agreement.

Rushing home and bursting through the door as if besieging a castle one gets down to the business of stripping the sword. Relatives in the room show little interest or

emotion as if to say "one more of those days" and, apart from the distant voice "the lawn wants cutting" one carries on with the much more important thing to do as the brain ticks 63 seconds to the minute. On further examination one sees the usual Nambam finger marks of someone who thought it looked sharp but wanted to make sure. Now let's have a look at the tang, a signature, books, books where are the books. Eyes dance from tang to books, books to tang, nearly cracked it. "Move your bits I want to lay the table", that distant voice again - no time to eat one thinks but sure enough reality prevails. Think I will go and see my friend tonight for sword chat, see what he thinks of it all.

On stepping out of the house one sees the stars through veils of clouds, "Yakiba!". One feels like shouting as if to bring to the attention to all for miles around the arts of the Japanese sword.

But neighbours and non-indulging friends already know you as the "One who likes Japanese Stuff" or "He's mad about Japan" or perhaps just "He's mad".

Sure enough how can you explain the fire that glows when a piece is put before your eyes, when confronted with the question Why Japanese? When the information for the reply floods into the brain Tsuba, Tachi, Bizen, Masamune, Horimono, Menuki and the rest and yet you reply "Why not".

Not only was the 47 Ronin a loyal little band I think.

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The next meeting is the Annual General Meeting wherein the Committee is elected and a general "stock-taking of affairs" is made for the following year.

It is most important that as many members as possible appear for this meeting is really the most important one of the whole year. It is at the A.G.M. that ideas for the next year are proposed and discussed and also potential committee members are vetted and elected. PLEASE TRY TO COME BECAUSE IT IS IMPORTANT.

#### OSHIGATA

A reminder to members who may have difficulties in reading tang inscriptions due to inadequate references; if

they care to send a rubbing (oshigata) of the tang addressed to Alan Bale, 46 West Close, Woodthorpe Road, Ashford, Middlesex, he will check it for them and send them all available information he has on the smith or inscription. Please remember to make a careful rubbing of the whole tang, both sides, not just the inscription.

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NEW MEMBERS

R.A. Dunn                    87 Parkside Drive, Berkeley, Calif.94705,  
U.S.A.  
John Van de Weert, Van Alkemadestraat-40, Rotterdam 3001,  
Holland  
A.J. Woodliffe,            68 Pant-y-Graigwen Road, Pontypridd,  
Glamorganshire

CHANGE OF ADDRESS

D.M. Lorber to:    25 East 86th Street, New York, N.Y.10028,  
U.S.A.