

Resurrection

Definition- Rising from the dead, rebirth, Restoration.

Introduction:

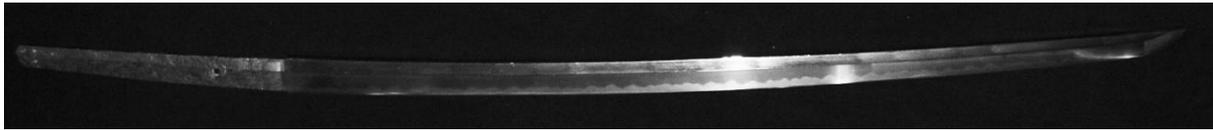
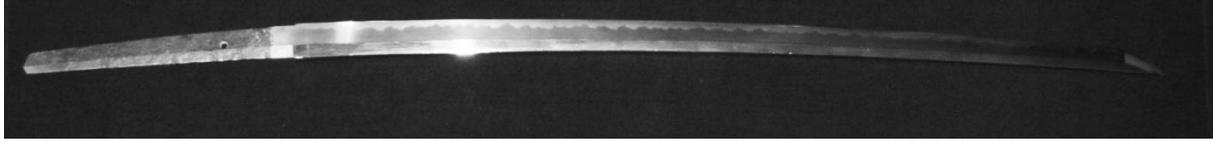
It has been a cold snowy Easter weekend. The highlight of what might have been a very dull few days was the visit of a very good friend, his wife and one of his latest acquisitions.

I have often said before I am not what I would regard as a brave collector or great risk taker. I have not, as far as I can remember, bought a sword in need of a great deal of restoration. I have preferred to buy something that has been through that process and where I can clearly see condition and the detail of what I am buying. While this has meant I have never purchased a great bargain "in the rough" nor have I thrown money away on a gamble that failed to materialise in to the anticipated gem. Not sure whether this is wisdom, cowardice or lack of imagination but it happens to be how I approach collecting. My visitor on the other hand is the polar opposite of this. He has regularly bought pieces in poor condition and not always at low price, being prepared to take the risk and make the commitment to revive something that might otherwise be lost. To be clear his motivation isn't financial gain. He gets a great deal of satisfaction from saving pieces regarded as in terminal decline and learning as much as he can from them. Sometimes this has ended in disappointment but sometimes he has achieved an excellent result. If he sometimes hits hidden gold it offers some compensation for those that have failed to respond to restoration.

I didn't see the sword under discussion when he first bought it but his description produced that cold leaden feeling in the stomach as my dread increased with each new piece of information. In touring an arms fair he had come across a piece of rusty iron resting in a koshirae that was basically held together by the rust on the fittings. Close examination of the nakago revealed it had suffered as much as the blade; it was rusty and heavily pitted. There was evidence of a long signature and date and such chisel marks that remained visible were well cut, unfortunately less than 30% of the strokes were decipherable and most of those resided in 3 of the 10 or 11 kanji. Likewise the date on the other side had day, month and 2 or 12 visible but not a lot else. So he was faced with a 27+ inch blade (rusty bit of steel) an indecipherable nakago all encased in a dilapidated koshirae whose primary component was iron oxide. He did what all sensible people would do when considering such a gamble, he sought other opinions and they were largely unanimous "Don't do it!" One colleague suggested there was greater chance of the local hospital returning the bacon in his under cooked sandwich back to life than there was of restoring the sword in question.

Armed with this advice he did what he often does in such circumstances. He bought it. Now some months on he arrived at my door with this piece, having had it polished and mounted in shirasaya. I admit to feeling more than a little anxious when presented with it wondering how I could possibly find something positive to say about what I was sure would be the sorry remains of what was once a decent sword. Well not for the first time I was totally wrong and the remainder of this paper details what can now be seen and what we believe the sword to be.

The Sword:



An Ubu Katana, shinogi-zukuri, iori-mune, tori-sori

Nagasa 70.6cm sori 1.3cm kasane 0.7cm

Motohaba 3.1 cm sakihaba 2.0cm

Description:

Sugata:

This is a large, powerful blade. The length at 70.6cm (27.75") balances the 3.1cm depth to stop it appearing oversized or cumbersome. Overall it is elegant in appearance but exhibits a quiet and powerful look. The blade has a shallow sori and does not taper significantly over its length. The shinogi is standard height and the iori-mune moderate. There is a chu-kissaki which is well shaped and proportionate to the depth of the blade. The kasane is just over 7mm. Allowing for the loss from what I think must have been a significant polish I think originally the kasane would have been between 8 and 9mm making this an extremely large and quite heavy blade.

There is a small kirikomi on the mune.

Taking all of the above in to account it is reasonable to place this as a Shin-shinto work.

Hada:

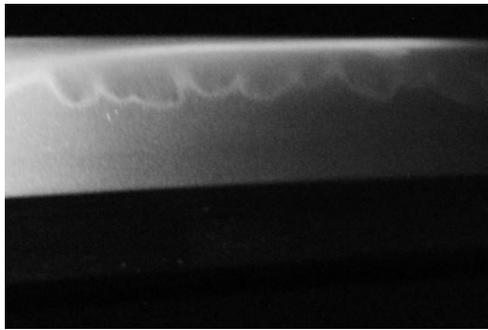
The term Muji hada translates as "grainless" or "featureless". In the 1980s and 90's this term became much misused by dealers and collectors alike using it to describe the featureless steel to be seen on machine made gunto. This was not the original concept of Muji hada. As shin-Shinto smiths endeavoured to re-create the tight nashiji hada of the Kamakura period Yamashiro schools they produced a very fine ko-itame hada. So fine was this that at first glance it might appear grainless. On closer examination however the observer can see and incredibly tight and close welded ko-itame. In the best examples this often includes a considerable amount of evenly dispersed and minute ji-nie which shines across the surface. While not achieving the level of beauty and the amount of activity seen in koto steel these smiths did make something very special.

The hada on this blade is a very fine ko-itame. It is tight and uniform in appearance there is a great deal of extremely small ji-nie and tiny chickei visible. The combined effect of this activity is to create a surface that sparkles through the full prismatic spectrum as you re-orientate the blade in a single light source. It is beautiful comparing well with the finest konuka hada of the Hizen School and the even finer hada seen in Yamashiro pieces.

As a result of its hard life there are two areas each with a number of deep pin-prick pits which are too deep to polish out. This is a shame as the uniform tightness of the hada tends to make them show up more than they might in a sword with a more prominent hada.

Hamon:

The hamon is a medium sized midare-choji. The choji are generally rounded but irregular in height. Several are placed together to form small clumps there are deep and broad ashi. The nioi-guchi is thick and bright. The hamon shows very little activity other than the ashi. Below the hamon, progressing to the ha, there is little or no activity to be seen.



Boshi:

The boshi is healthy and clear it is suguha with ko-maru turn back of medium length.

Nakago:

The Nakago is long and the kiri is Iriyama-gata. Although badly corroded the Yasurimei that are visible are a deep and clearly cut sujikai. There is an originally well cut naga mei much of which has been rendered largely illegible by the condition of the steel. On the ura there is a date but once again the critical detail is lost to corrosion.

As mentioned in the introduction there is a long signature. Unfortunately this is now almost illegible. Of the 10 or 11 original characters only three are clearly visible. These are "Fujiwara Mune". Based on this and after a great deal of examination of the other partial kanji still visible we have come to the conclusion that the mei is that of **Mutsu Shirakawa (ju) Koyama Fujiwara Munetoshi**.

When comparing the nakago with an illustrated example from the Shin-Shinto Taikan the similarities are apparent. The overall shape and size of the nakago match well. The positioning of the mei and the spacing of the characters match extremely well. In addition the odd chisel stroke visible from the destroyed kanji matches with those in the oshigata. Comparison of the hamon with the illustrated

example further support this view as does the positioning and the visible characters of the date seen on the other side of the nakago.



Shinshinto Taikan Oshigata



Study sword

Conclusion:

Based on the above I think the attribution to Munetoshi is reasonable. Having said that I have not been able to find too much information about him. His main claim to fame is that he was the father of the much more famous Munetsugu, whose work is held in very high regard.

The workmanship, the details of the nakago (such as can be seen) all support this attribution.

Regardless of who made it it is clearly a very good sword. I admit to being somewhat conflicted about it. On one hand I am annoyed and frustrated that what was obviously a well made, expensive and important work was allowed to fall in to such a state of disrepair. On the other I am full of admiration for the smith and the quality of his workmanship that has enabled something to suffer such abuse and deterioration but still return from the dead and present something that has so much to offer the observer.

Alongside admiration for the smith I must also congratulate the now current custodian of the blade who had the imagination and courage to fly against all given advice and follow his own view. His commitment and courage has enabled an important work to resurface and be appreciated by a new generation of students. It could so easily have gone in to oblivion without anyone really noticing.

I would like to add a final word of caution. In writing this brief article it might appear that I am endorsing or recommending the "buying diamonds in the rough" approach to sword collecting. I am absolutely not doing that. As said I have never done this for reasons already expressed. I also deal with regular correspondence from people starting out in this field believing they have just happened to chance upon a national treasure on eBay that no-one else has recognised. It is difficult to disillusion them and try to keep them interested in the subject when they find out they haven't. In this case my friend had a great result. His choices were backed up with more than 40 years experience and also the acceptance that he could easily be wrong. By his own admission he has had many more negative outcomes than positive. There are certainly good swords in the field in poor condition that could be returned to something near their original glory. However unless you are prepared to accept the risk taking such chances are best avoided, especially when starting out (for some of us ever!!)

That said when it does produce such a positive result it is certainly worth celebrating.