

Using Kantei as a learning tool.

Introduction:

At the April Meeting of the Token Society of Great Britain I gave a brief presentation on the subject of kantei and its benefits as an educational tool. The following notes are aimed at supporting the message of that presentation and use some, although not all of the illustrations made for the slides.

Why does kantei help sword appreciation?

Over many years of study with other collectors and students the subject of doing kantei has often been discussed. Most recently at the Study day in Leeds Clive Sinclaire described how he had regularly been asked to do kantei on blades when visiting Japan. I think it is Clive's view and it is certainly mine that doing kantei offers one of the most effective learning tools available to us. All students wishing to understand swords better should take up kantei.

What is kantei?

Participants examine a sword with the nakago covered (usually in tsuka) and determining age, quality, tradition, school and smith.

Originally kantei was a methodology used to determine the age and quality of a sword. For the teacher it offers a useful guide to the level of understanding and attainment of a student, helping them target their teaching at the correct level. For the participant it offers a disciplined approach to looking at a sword. Although there are competitions this was not the original intent (but they can be fun). Kantei cannot tell you what to like but it may help you understand why you like the swords you do.

For those, like me, who lack a degree of self discipline kantei offers a methodology to enable the student to make an objective assessment of a blade. The remainder of this paper discusses the various features of a sword and what to look for. It also suggests the order in which to look at them.

For each section I have quoted some statements (*in blue italics*) often appearing in references and tried to understand these a little better. As said above kantei will not teach you what to like. That is as much a subjective view as an objective one. But within the process please remember:

Not liking a sword doesn't mean it is bad- liking it doesn't necessarily mean it is good.



Elements to consider (in the order you should look)

Shape/Sugata

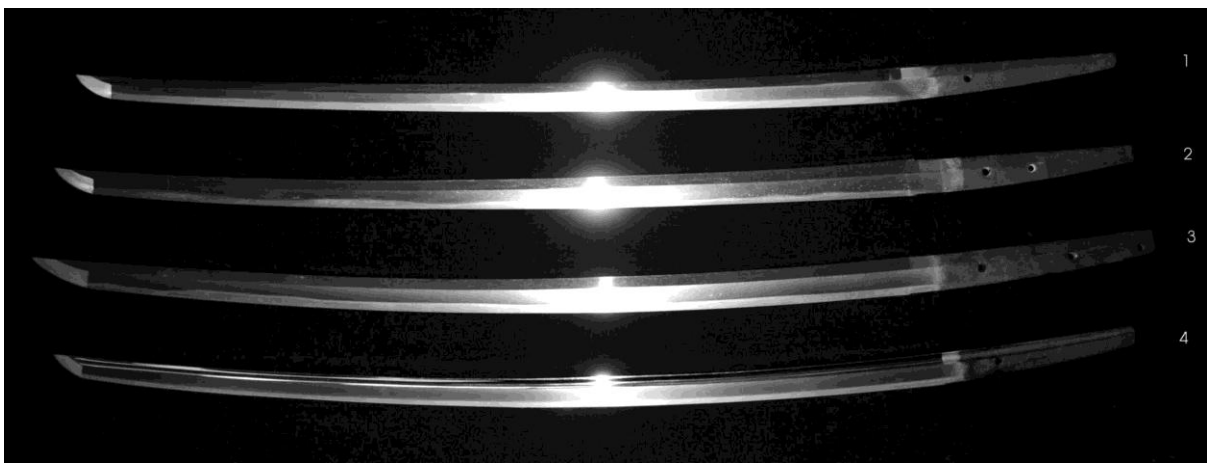
Jigane/hada

Hamon

Nakago

Shape

“The Shape indicates the period”



There is a 650 year age gap between the earliest and latest blade above.

It has often been printed and repeated that the shape of the blade tells you it's age. I am sorry but I disagree. If a blade is ubu (not shortened) it can tell you how young a blade is but not how old. To explain this further, more or less since the beginning of manufacture smiths have copied earlier work. In the Kamakura period a group of smiths known as “the unchanging smiths” were producing blades in the style of earlier Heian work. Shinshinto smiths were copying the grand Nambokucho sugata of the 14th century. However some shapes developed in specific periods to meet the requirements of the day. For example if you are looking at a sword with a classically Kanbun sugata it can only have been made during this period or later.

If a sword is suriage or even O-suriage the shape can still give you a great deal of information. It is important to look at this before going on to anything else. Avoid the temptation to immediately looking at hada, hamon or taking the tsuka off to look at the mei. See what the shape is telling first.

“Study the shape before looking at anything else- Once you can describe it in detail without looking move on”

Walter Compton essay on shape

Look at the overall shape, the balance between length, width and thickness. What is the cross section structure? If it is shinogi zukuri or hirazukuri? is the shinogi high or low?

Something I would add: A good sword whether ubu, suriage or O-suriage will never have a bad shape.

Once you have a clear picture of the shape and have explored all it can tell you move on.

Jigane

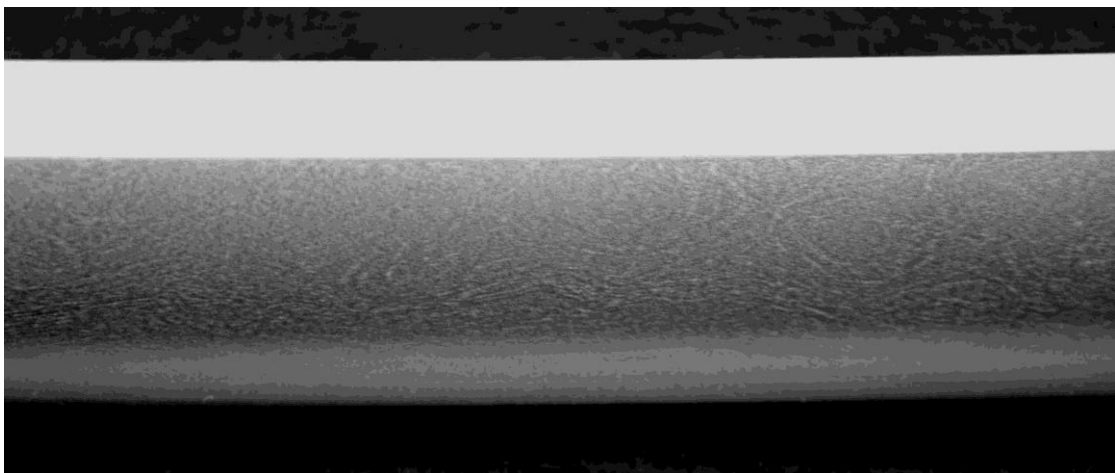
“The Jigane/hada indicates the tradition”

- What is the hada pattern?
- Is it fine or coarse, small or large patterned?
- Is there utsuri if so what type
- Is there other activity within the Jigane such as ji-nie, chickei or muneyaki?

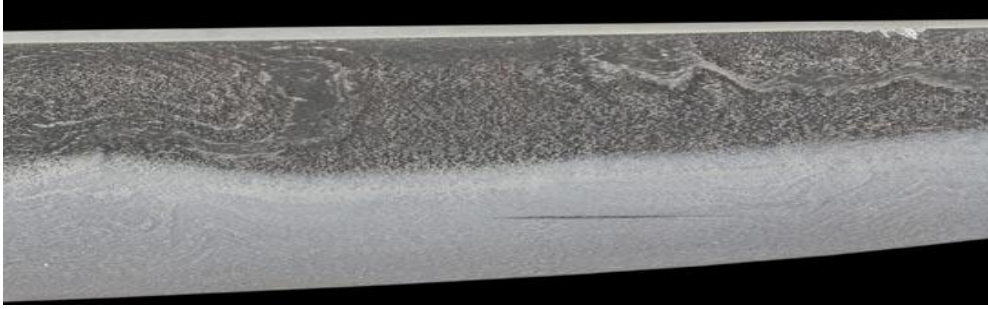
Unfortunately many references tend to be a little simplistic. For example many when referring to Yamato work immediately say it creates masame hada. It does, but not exclusively. Other than Hosho which is almost entirely masame other Yamato traditions combine masame with itame and mokume. Masame in a koto blade is certainly a good indicator of Yamato or at least Yamato influence but it is more complicated than that. There are many and I think I am one of them that believe jigane is the key to a high quality sword. Everything other than shape is dependent on the quality of the jigane and the forging. Many of the features you see in a blade are caused by the composition and structure of the jigane.

When looking at the jigane and having identified the basic structure look or activity. Activity within the jigane is generally caused by the formation of martensite within the skin steel. Whether this is seen as ji-nie, chickei or anything else it generally appears as bright inclusions within the body of the sword.

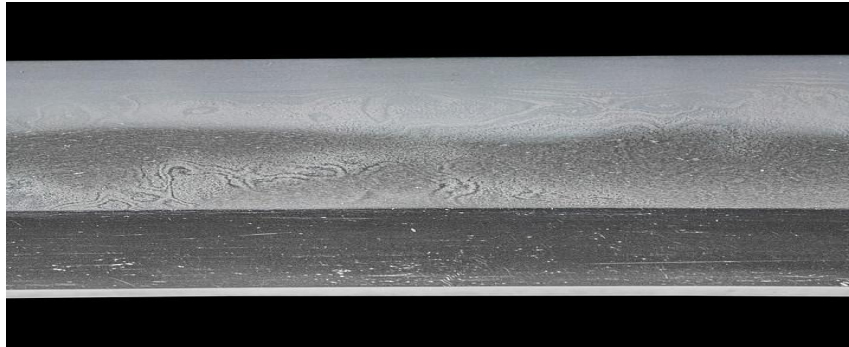
The examples illustrated are deliberately extreme and often such activity is very subtle.



Example of ko-itame hada in an Enju blade



Ji Nie (extreme example)



Chickei

Regardless of pattern the hada should be well made and free from faults. It should complement the sugata and hamon. Activity within the jigane should enhance its appearance.

Hamon

“The Hamon indicates the School”

In any reference there are numerous illustrations of different hamon patterns. However they are really variations of two types:

Sugu-ha- straight

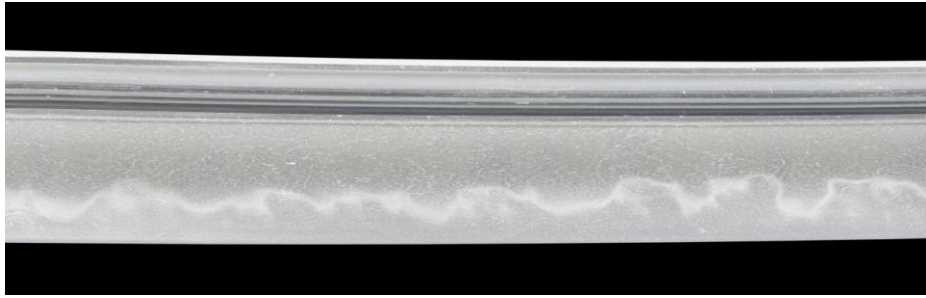
Midare-ba- Not straight.

All other patterns are developed on these two basic foundations. When doing Kantei it is certainly beneficial to learn a number of basic variations which can lead you towards an answer.

Important things to look for other than the pattern

Is the blade Nioi deki or nie deki?

By way of explanation because of the way nie is formed there will always be nioi within the hamon. The above really refers to the prominent form visible. Is it mainly nioi or predominantly nie with some nioi visible?



Nioi Deki in a Bizen blade



Nie deki in a Soshu blade.

As well as pattern and deki look for activity such as inazuma and kinsuji. In addition check whether the hamon is continuous or broken/interrupted.

Boshi

“The Boshi Identifies the smith”

It is true that in some cases the boshi can be an excellent indicator of a smith. Smiths such as Kotetsu and those of the Mishina school produced swords with very specific boshi patterns. However there are numerous examples of exceptions. Often in references such as Koza the author will state a certain school exclusively used a particular type of boshi and then the first illustration shows something totally different. Use the boshi as an indicator but not as a definitive characteristic.

Nakago

“The Nakago confirms what the blade has told you”

Is the nakago Ubu, Suriage or O-Suriage

What is the colour

Look at the taper, the kiri (butt) and Yasurime

Look at the mei

The Nakago whether ubu suriage or O-suriage can give you a great deal of information. Hopefully it can confirm what the sword has already told you.

Final assessment:

Having looked at all the elements re-look at the whole

The Japanese often use two terms:

Josun - roughly translated as “correct size”

Koroai- “Just right”

All the elements of the sword should balance and complement each other so that the whole offers something far more meaningful than any individual element.

This is where subjectivity takes over having identified all of the key features is the end result aesthetically pleasing.

Having examined a blade in this way the observer should then either feel able to identify the blade or to know its detail sufficiently well to use any available reference material to help identify what is in front of you.

Conclusion:

The mention of kantei can generate considerable emotion. There are those advocates that believe it is singularly the best way to learn. There are others who feel so strongly against it that they would rather avoid a meeting than take part. As said before kantei was never originally intended as a competition. Although there are competitions today the real aim of kantei is not to demonstrate publically how clever an individual is nor is it a method to publically humiliate someone who doesn't know the answer. Often the only person who knows your answer is you.

For many years I have taken part in the monthly NBTHK Shoji kantei. While not as challenging as a true kantei (it gives a description of the blade as well as an oshigata so you don't need to identify all the features yourself) it is an excellent learning tool. Taking part forces me to look at the blade, assess what it is telling me and then if I don't know hit the reference material. Interestingly I have just completed this months. Having supplied an answer I am less than confident that it is correct. There are features that don't quite fit my chosen smith and also things missing from the description I would expect to see. However I am absolutely sure that in attempting to find the answer I have learned a great deal more than I would have had I immediately known who the maker was.

In many ways the answer is not important it is what you learn going through the process.

Using this approach to looking at swords gives you an objective appraisal of what you are looking at. Once you have that information you can then decide whether you like what is in front of. As said at the beginning kantei cannot tell you whether you like a sword or not. It can help you understand why you like what you do.

If I am totally honest it took my teacher many years of bullying to get me started in doing kantei. Since starting I have learned more in the last 5-10 years than I had in the preceding 20. I believe it is without doubt one of the most effective learning tools valuable to us.

