

The journey of an almost lost cause



The story starts in Dublin 2018. I was contacted by a gentleman who had a few Samurai related items which he had kept for around 20 years He asked if I would like to come down to look at them.

There in his furniture workshop was a pole arm Naginata with Mon, a few wakizashi, a few tsuba and a katana with a broken tip, Nothing was really of much interest to me but I did have "that feeling" about the katana. It was out of polish and had a broken tip but it had a long mei which looked to be well cut and right (although I had no idea what it said), everything was expensive for the condition they were in, but I had to take a chance on the Katana. It had a split saya which was in a bad way but it had a Mon, and what remained of 2 ashi, it had some age to it.



Chipped and damaged kissaki



General condition of the blade



Split saya with remains of Aoi mon



Partial remains of copper Ashi

I held onto it for a few months not knowing what to do, whether to keep it as it was as a piece of history flaws and all, or throw more money at it and try to have it restored to how I thought it might have looked when the saya was new and its Koshirae was intact. I had asked other collectors for advice on this as it was questionable whether the boshi could be saved as the kissaki would have to be reshaped.

I asked John Bolton if he thought it was possible to save, I said if he thought not then it should be left as it was and to send it back to me. We spoke each night that he worked on it regarding his progress. I must say he did a wonderful job, as he had done with other swords I sent in the past, all of which subsequently papered at shinsa.



Repaired and repolished kissaki



In the intervening time period I had the mei translated and a date of sorts. It read “shortened by Gassan Sadahide, at my Master Masahide's house- original signature was Umetada Shigeyoshi - on a day in the 3rd month of Bunka five.” (1808)



The Nakago and Mei

I thought as it came out so well I would push my luck a little more and ask Paul Martin to put it through shinsa. At this stage in the process we are now in 2020 and the results are in, it passed! To be honest I was surprised, the result was- “Den Joshu Umetada Shigeyoshi. Bunka go nen sangatsu jitsu, ko-mei: Umetada Shigeyoshi oite, shitaku Gassan Sadahide ue kore. (Previous inscription was Umetada Shigeyoshi, Shortened/inscribed at my teacher, Gassan Sadahide’s, house, a day in the third month of the fifth year of Bunka 文化)

Shinogi-zukuri, iori-mune Tightly forged Itame hada. Chu-suguha Boshi: chu-suguha yakizume
Horimono: Omote: koshi-futasuji-hi Omote: bo-hi Mekugi-Ana 2 Yasurime: Kiri Around Kanei
寛永 (February 1624 through December 1644.)

Having reached this point I felt I had to go the whole hog and have the koshirae restored. It sounds easy but I didn't have a clue regarding a lot of the detail involved in this process so a big thank you has to go to Ian Chapman who oversaw it from its conception and was able to source the appropriate menuki and Tsuba and conversed with both craftsmen at each step of the way. First of all the saya went to Mike Hickman Smith who cleaned, fixed and re lacquered the original saya And applied new Mon to mirror the originals which were too far gone to save. He also made new seppa, a new tsuka as the sword came with no Tsuka or fittings. While undertaking the work Mike discovered another hidden secret. The inside of the saya had kanji written on the inner wooden surface as can be seen in the images below:



Tsuba sourced by Ian Chapman



mon created by Mike Hickman-Smith



Tsuka by MHS, Menuki sourced by IC Rice bails, fuchi and Kabutogani by RA

Everything was then sent to Richard Adams to fix the ashi, (originally made by Graham Hanley). He made the doeskin obitori and seppa for the hangers and suspension loops, two pairs of seppa one with kiku edge, fuchi and kabutogane and rice bails. All of these were made from flat copper sheet nothing was cast. They were patinated in rokusho or gilded. He also made the left hand screw mekugi with aoi mon engraved on the heads. To complete the piece he repaired and refinished the habaki and carved in the Tokugawa Mon to match the wonderful job Mike had done on the saya, which was a really nice touch.



I may be mistaken on who made what but combined they have made a terrific job and I am very happy with everyone's participation on this project which was all carried in the UK.