

1. letada wakizashi

This companion sword ('wakizashi') has an interesting history carved into its hilt. Made in 1654 in Kaga province (modern-day Ishikawa Prefecture on the west coast of Japan) by Fujiwara letada, it was given in 1791 as a present by the feudal lord ('daimyo') of Kaga to one of his retainers. The dedication would appear to have been carved by one Fujiwara Kinmichi, 'master smith of Japan', who would most likely have been the sixth or seventh-generation smith using that name and title. Another inscription, most likely that of a later owner, gives the name and title 'Yamazaki Hikoshiro Minamoto Yoshinao aged 26, retainer of Sagami province' (modern-day Kanagawa Prefecture, near Tokyo). These various inscriptions bear the mark of possibly three different hands and show clearly how a good sword, even one made during the peaceful Edo period (1600-1868), could become a treasured family heirloom.

Physical description

Companion sword (wakizashi) by Fujiwara letada of Kashu (Kaga) province.

Place of Origin

Ishikawa (made)

Date

1654 (made)

Artist/maker

letada (maker)

Materials and Techniques

Forged steel

Marks and inscriptions

Kashu ju Fujiwara letada

Fujiwara letada, resident of Kashu (Kaga) province (modern-day Ishikawa Prefecture)

Signature and title; Japanese; outer face (omote) of the blade

1. Jo-o san nen, hachi gatsu kichi jitsu

2. Kunko Kaga no kami mizukara tamawaru kore o

3. Imina Tadaaki-ko, Kansei san nen Kanoto I, Chuto juichi nichi

4. Sagami (no) kuni (no) Omi; Yamazaki Hikoshiro Minamoto Yoshinao; Jinen niyu-roku

1. A lucky day in the eighth month of the third year of Jo-o (1654)

2. A gift personally presented by the Daimyo and Lord of Kaga province

3. (presented posthumously to) Lord Tadaaki on the eleventh day of the twelfth month, Pig year, third year of Kansei (1791)

4. Yamazaki Hikoshiro Minamoto Yoshinao aged 26, retainer of Sagami province.

Dedication; Japanese; on inner face (ura) of the blade

Nihon Kaji Sosho Iga no Kami Fujiwara Kanamichi Kincho

Respectfully carved by Fujiwara (honorary family name) Kanamichi, Lord (honorary title) of Iga province (modern-day Mie Prefecture), Master Smith of Japan

Signature and title; Japanese; on the upper back ridge of the hilt (mune)

Dimensions

Length: 72 cm overall in scabbard

Production Note

Ishikawa Prefecture encompasses the former Kaga Province

2. Kanemichi wakizashi

This Japanese companion sword ('wakizashi') blade is signed 'Kanemichi saku' ('made by Kanemichi'). The wakizashi was the shorter of the two swords (known together as 'daisho') worn by the samurai at all times. The characteristics of this blade are typical of the simple and functional blades produced by the smiths of Seki in Mino province (modern-day Gifu Prefecture) during the 16th century. At Seki, the traditions established by the great smith Kaneuji were continued by a number of other smiths, who all signed their names beginning with the character 'Kane' after the founder of the school. This blade was most likely made by one such smith, Kanemichi, who was working during the Tensho era (1573-1592).

In the latter part of the 16th century, the town of Seki in Mino manufactured blades on a near mass-production scale to meet the growing demand for swords for the ever-increasing numbers of samurai who were by now fighting in massed ranks on foot. Consequently there were many swords produced of little aesthetic merit, being purely practical cutting weapons and lacking any great artistic distinction. At Osafune in Bizen province, blades were also mass-produced at around the same time and these too were pure fighting weapons of little or no artistic merit. These mass-produced blades were referred to as 'bundled swords' ('sokuto') or 'mass-produced thing' ('kazu uchi mono'), a term that carried with it certain notes of contempt.

Physical description

Japanese companion sword blade (wakizashi)

Place of Origin

Japan (made)

Date

16th century (made)

Artist/maker

Kanemichi (maker)

Materials and Techniques

Forged and polished steel

Marks and inscriptions

'Kanemichi saku'
made by Kanemichi
Japanese; outer face (omote) of the blade

Dimensions

Length: 29.8 cm blade

3. Nobukuni tanto

This decoratively carved dagger blade shows a dragon wrapped around a Buddhist-style blade ('ken'). Much of the detail of the carving has been removed or softened through subsequent polishing of the metal. The blade is signed 'Made and carved by Nobukuni in the precincts of the Hachiman Temple at Hakozaki in Chikushu [Chikuzen on Kyushu] on a lucky day of the first month of the third year of the Shotoku period'. This date is equivalent to the year 1713.

The tang or 'nakago' - the part of the blade that goes into the handle - was where most inscriptions were carved and a wealth of information can be found there. This might include not only the smith's name, but also the date and place of manufacture, the owner's name, dedicatory or admonitory inscriptions, and the name of the person who created the decorative carving on the blade ('horimono'). Also carved on the tang were records of any cutting tests - a practice established during the Edo period (1600-1868), when official blade appraisers tested swords in various prescribed ways, often using condemned criminals or their corpses, which were sometimes bundled together to increase resistance to the cut. As fashions and styles of fighting changed, good early blades might be shortened and remounted in more contemporary styles. During a shortening process much, or indeed all, of the information on the tang could be lost and even the simple act of drilling a new hole for the securing pin could obscure important information.

Physical description

The hilt of the blade for this tanto (dagger) is inscribed: "Made and carved by Nobukuni in the precincts of the Hachiman Temple at Hakozaki in Musashi on a lucky day in the first month of third year of the Emperor Shotoku" (equivalent to 1713). The blade is engraved with the design of a dragon entwined around a vajra handled ken (a Buddhist ritual sword).

Place of Origin

Japan (made)

Date

ca. 1713 (made)

Artist/maker

Nobukuni (maker)

Materials and Techniques

Forged and carved steel

Marks and inscriptions

'Do saku horu kore, Nobukuni'
Made and carved by Nobukuni
Inscription; decoration; Japanese; Hilt

'Chikushu Hakozaki Hachiman (ni) oite keidai Shotoku san-nen Mizunoto Midoshi Shogatsu kichijitsu'
Made in the precincts of the Hachiman Shrine in Hakozaki, Chikushu province on a lucky day in the first month of the third year of the reign of Shotoku, Mizunoto (33rd year of the 60 year zodiac cycle), snake year.
Japanese

Dimensions

Length: 30.3 cm, Length: 45.3 cm scabbard

4. Shinto Tsunahiro katana

This Japanese sword ('katana') is signed by Tsunahiro of Soshu province (modern-day Ibaraki Prefecture). Although an inscription on the scabbard attributes the blade to the first generation Tsunahiro, the characteristics of the sword indicate that it was most probably made by Tsunahiro III, who worked from about 1590 to 1615.

The blade displays the distinctive broad, slightly wavy tempered edge ('hamon') of the Soshu school of swordsmiths. It has been shortened at the hilt end (for reasons of personal taste or simply to rebalance the blade) and would have originally had a more distinctive curvature. As fashions and styles of fighting changed, so good early blades could be shortened and remounted in more contemporary styles. This sword, however, is simply mounted in a plain wooden scabbard known in Japanese as a 'shirasaya'. This is traditionally how a sword blade would be kept when not being worn for battle or ceremonial use.

The scabbard bears some interesting inscriptions which, in addition to attributing, dating and giving the measurements of the sword blade, state that Japanese Infantry Major Fukano Usushige gave the sword to British Infantry Major Somerville in 1906. Britain had military observers in East Asia during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). Precisely what Somerville was doing in Japan at this time is at present unclear, but he later became British military attaché in Tokyo.

Physical description

Japanese sword (katana) by Tsunahiro of Soshu province (modern-day Ibaraki Prefecture)

Place of Origin

Ibaraki (made)

Date

1590-1615 (made)

Artist/maker

Tsunahiro (maker)

Marks and inscriptions

'Soshu ju Tsunahiro'

Tsunahiro, resident of Soshu [province] (modern-day Ibaraki prefecture)

Signature and title; Japanese; outer face (omote) of the blade

'Shodai Soshu Tsunahiro Yasumizaya; nagasa ni shaku, san sun, san bu'

First generation Tsunahiro of Soshu [province], 'resting' saya [scabbard] length 2 shaku, 3 sun, 3 bu [approximately 71cm]

Japanese; on one side of the plain wooden scabbard

'Hoheishosa Samubiru-kun, Meiji sanjuku-nen, juni gatsu, Hoheishosa Fukano Usushige tei'

Respectfully given by Infantry Major Fukano Usushige to Infantry Major Somerville, 12th month of Meiji 39 [1906]

Japanese; on one side of the plain wooden scabbard

Descriptive line

Met, Japan, SWORDS and DAGGERS

shirasaya hilt for a sword blade, Met, Japan, swords and daggers

shirasaya for a sword, Met, Japan, swords and daggers

Inscribed in ink: Shodai Soshu Tsunahiro Yasumizaya; Nagasa 2 shaku, 3 sun, 3 bu. (Tsunahiro 1st of Soshu, "resting" saya: length - 2 shaku, 3 sun, 3 bu): Hoheishosa Samubiru-kun, Meiji sanjukyu nen, juni gatsu. Hoheishosa Fukano Usushige tei (Respectfully given by Infantry Major Fukano Usushige to Infantry Major Somerville, twelfth month of Meiji 39 [= 1906])

Production Note

Ibaraki Prefecture was previously called Soshu province

5. Tomomitsu tachi

This slung sword ('tachi') blade is inscribed with the name of its maker, 'Tomomitsu', and with the date 'Kemmu ni nen' - equivalent to 1335. The graceful blade, with the long curved point ('kissaki') so typical of the Nambokucho period, has been considerably shortened and the current inscriptions have been inlaid in gold. Any original inscriptions would have been lost during the shortening of the blade. The sword was given by the Emperor Meiji to Sir Harry Parkes, who from 1856 to 1883 was Britain's first accredited minister in Japan, on the occasion of Parkes' private audience with the emperor in May 1871. Parkes subsequently gave the sword to the South Kensington Museum, later the V&A.

The sword is superbly mounted in a gold lacquered scabbard decorated with relief lacquer ('hira-makie') blossoms on a sprinkled ('makie') background. Even the rayskin on the hilt is lacquered with gold. The metal fittings are of solid gold (including the suspension chains) by Ota Yoshihisa. It is in the 'Ito-maki' style, with the expensive lacquer protected by silk where it would otherwise rub against armour. Underneath a plate on the gold sword guard ('tsuba') is a lengthy dedicatory inscription dated to the second month of 1871, suggesting that all of the fittings, as well as the mounting, were made especially for the presentation of the sword to Parkes.

Physical description

Ito maki no tachi with mounts by Ota Yoshihisa; blade inlaid with gold signature of Tomomitsu (of Bizen) on the omote in katana-mei and dated in gold inlay 'Kemmu 2' (1335 in the Nambokucho southern court period) on the ura.

Place of Origin

Bizen (made)

Date

1335 (made)

Artist/maker

Tomomitsu (maker)

Marks and inscriptions

Tomomitsu

Tomomitsu - smith's name

Japanese; outer face (omote) of the blade

'Kemmu ni nen'

2nd year of the Kemmu reign (equivalent to 1335 of the southern court of the Nambokucho period)

Japanese

Dimensions

Length: 97 cm overall

6. Mishina (Osaka) Rai Kinmichi wakizashi

This Japanese short sword ('wakizashi') is signed 'Mishina (or Sanpin) Izumi Fujiwara Rai Kinmichi' - 'Fujiwara Rai Kinmichi, of Mishina in Izumi province' (modern-day Osaka Prefecture) and 'Nihon Kaji sosho + Kiku mon' - 'Master Smith of Japan + chrysanthemum crest'. The blade is broad and flat with a fine-grained structure to the steel. The tempered edge ('hamon') is straight ('suguha') and wide. The collar ('habaki') has a stylised carving of a dragon in clouds. The style of the signature on the tang or 'nakago' - the part of the blade that goes into the handle - is extremely graceful, but tends to lack some of the strength of the signature of the first-generation Rai Kinmichi. There were four recognised smiths who signed with these characters, but it was the third-generation Rai Kinmichi who used precisely this style of signature and he worked during the Eppo period (1673-1681). The inscription on what would be regarded as the outside of the blade (the 'ura') appears to have been added later by a different hand.

Physical description

Japanese short sword; wakizashi

Place of Origin

Izumi (made)

Date

1673-1681 (made)

Artist/maker

Rai Kinmichi (maker)

Marks and inscriptions

Mishina (or Sanpin) Izumi Fujiwara Rai Kinmichi
Fujiwara Rai Kinmichi, Mishina in Izumi Province (modern-day Osaka Prefecture)
1) Signature; Japanese

Nihon Kaji sosho + Kiku mon
Master Smith of Japan + chrysanthemum crest
1) Signature; Japanese

Dimensions

Length: 49.5 cm

7. Mino Kanefusa tanto

This guardless dagger ('aiguchi') blade is signed 'Kanefusa' and shows Kanefusa's characteristic strong tempering pattern ('hamon') of undulating clove flowers ('gunome choji-hamon'). The second character of the

signature is, however, unclear and this, together with some other characteristics, including the relative thinness of the blade, casts some doubt on the authenticity of this attribution. All the mounts are of silver (except for the hilt fitting) and are signed by a 19th-century maker. The wooden scabbard has been lacquered in a rich scarlet and is decorated with a clump of autumn plants in gold and silver lacquer.

Although the Muromachi period (1333-1568) is characterised by the mass production of swords, there were still many smiths of the Gokaden (the name given to the five main schools of sword production: Bizen, Mino, Soshu, Yamashiro, and Yamato) producing fine blades and introducing interesting and distinctive variations in the hamon patterns of the blade. At Seki in Mino, the traditions established by the smith Kaneuji were continued by a number of other smiths who all signed their names beginning with the character 'Kane', taken from the name of the founder of the school.

Kanefusa developed an especially undulating form of gunome choji-hamon that had rounded peaks and became known as 'priest's head' gunome. The cutting ability of Kanefusa's swords was clearly shown in the Edo period when one especially broad-bladed sword was allegedly used to cut through seven bodies in a test of the blade. This form of cutting test also illustrated the ability of the person using the sword.

Physical description

Japanese guardless dagger (aiguchi) signed Kanefusa (last character slightly unclear)

Place of Origin

Mino (made)

Date

16th century (made)

Artist/maker

Kanefusa (maker)

Marks and inscriptions

'Kanefusa'

Kanefusa - smith's name although the last character is slightly unclear
Japanese

8. Gassan tachi

The blade of this slung sword ('tachi') is by Gassan Sadakazu. The scabbard is of wood covered with iron sheet, inlaid with a decoration of dragons, phoenixes, 'shishi' (mythical lion-like creature) and 'mon' (family crests) in silver and gold flat inlay ('hira-zogan'). The scabbard is more or less contemporary with the sword and is signed in a silver cartouche 'Nihon Koku Kyoto Ju Komai Tsukuru' ('Made by Komai, resident of Kyoto, Japan').

Although it has been mounted as a tachi, the blade is a 'katana' (a mounted sword that would have been thrust cutting edge uppermost through the sash worn with the kimono). The blade is signed 'Naniwa ju, Gassan Unryushi Sadakazu hori do saku' ('Gassan Unryushi Sadakazu of Naniwa (Osaka) made and carved this'), with a seal with the character for 'Sada' inside. It is dated 'Meiji ni hebi doshi hachi gatsu hi' ('Second year of Meiji, snake year [equivalent to 1869] a day in the eighth month'). On the outer face of the blade ('omote') is a splendid carving ('horimono') of a dragon chasing a flaming pearl; on the inner face ('ura') is a carving of a Buddhist-style sword ('ken') and the character for the Buddhist deity Marishiten.

The V&A was originally offered this sword in 1915 but declined because it felt the sword was too modern. Fortunately the Museum was then given the sword as a gift in 1971 and it now makes a valuable contribution to our study of late 19th-century Japanese art.

Marks and inscriptions

Naniwa ju Gassan Unryushi Sadakazu hori do saku + seal with character for 'Sada' inside
Gassan Unryushi Sadakazu of Naniwa (Osaka) made and carved this
Signature and makers' mark; Japanese

Meiji ni hebi doshi hachi gatsu hi
Second year of Meiji, Snake year (equivalent to 1869) a day in the eighth month
Date; Japanese

Nihon Koku Kyoto Ju Komai Tsukuru
Made by Komai, resident of Kyoto, Japan
Makers's mark; signature; Japanese; In a cartouche on the scabbard

Descriptive line

Long sword (*katana*) mounted as a *tachi*, signed Gassan Sadakazu and dated 1869, metal hilt and fittings by Komai of Kyoto, Japan, wooden scabbard inlaid with iron decoration, Japan

Illustrations of the event

Fig. 1-2 Senior Curator Greg Irvine presenting to the attendees



Fig.2



Fig.3 Gassan tachi in its koshirae; Tomomitsu tachi and koshirae



Fig.4 Nobukuni tanto; Kanefusa tanto



Fig.5 Kano Natsuo tsuba



Acknowledgements and limitations

The text has been created by the V&A museum and is extracted from their online collection database available at <http://collections.vam.ac.uk> .

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