But is it Art?

The enforced lockdown caused by the Corvid-19 pandemic has resulted in the cancellation of sword meetings and events. This means for collectors and enthusiasts we have temporarily lost the opportunity to look at different works. For some time friends and fellow collectors have loaned swords to me to enable me to study them in detail and write a detailed description of what I was seeing. In the absence of such opportunity the enforced limitations on normal daily life offer time for reflection. In the following I have revisited a subject I have previously discussed in an article 4 years ago. I have tried to explain why the Japanese sword, a uniquely efficient weapon, is so often described as an art object.

Foreword:

Below I have reproduced an introduction I wrote some years ago for an earlier article. Hopefully it identifies some of the challenges and benefits and sets the scene for what will follow

Why study Japanese swords?

The study of Japanese swords rapidly becomes a consuming passion. It demands time, patience and expenditure. It is also enthralling captivating and very rewarding in many ways.

Why do people collect Japanese swords? They are expensive, forgeries out-number authentic works by famous smiths. The only way a student can see a lot of top quality blades “in the flesh” is by visiting Japan. The majority of information written about them is in Japanese, using terminology that confuses modern Japanese readers as much as it does the western student. You can spend a lifetime studying the subject and still know only a little. So what is the attraction?

Ian Bottomley said in the Royal Armouries video bamboo and steel “The Japanese sword is the finest cutting weapon ever made”. George Cameron Stone in his definitive work “A glossary of the construction, decoration and use of Arms and Armour” describes the Japanese sword as “the nearest thing to perfection ever made by human hand.”

In fitness for purpose no other weapon has reached the level of perfection achieved by the greatest sword smiths of Japan. In realising that purpose the Japanese sword blade was imbued with a number of unique characteristics which made it not only an efficient cutting tool but a work of great aesthetic beauty. Although there are great differences in shape and construction of swords made by different schools and in different periods they have in common features which make them unmistakably Japanese.

Alongside the technical excellence of construction the Japanese Sword has a spiritual association which takes it beyond being an efficient or even beautiful weapon. Tokugawa Ieyasu famously called the sword “The soul of the Samurai”. Not only his most prized possession or badge of office the sword was a symbol of his honour, integrity and courage, it was the embodiment of his nobility.

It is perhaps this combination of the technical perfection and spiritual representation, whilst not unique to them, has been taken to a much higher level of appreciation by the Japanese. The study of the subject is challenging, intriguing and at the same time extremely fulfilling. It encompasses such a

breadth of information historical, technical, theological and artistic that one cannot but help be enriched by the study.

Defining A Japanese Sword as an Art object…….Why?

Introduction:

Early in the study of Japanese swords the term “Art Sword” will appear. For many it is the study of blades as an art form that is the driving motivation. Others prefer to concentrate on what they describe as functional or utilitarian pieces, focussing on the blade as a practical weapon and regarding art swords as in some way inferior or losing sight of a swords original purpose. These discussions are often passionate between people with sincerely held views. I admit to having changed my point of view over time and if I am in any camp at all it is the “Art Sword” group. However I hope the following may explain why I regard swords as an art form and what has motivated me to collect and study them for the major part of my adult life. In writing this piece I can only offer a personal perspective and it requires some explanation. The opinions expressed are just that, opinions, they happen to be mine and over time as I hopefully learn more they may change but I think the core elements will remain unchanged. By way of explanation I need to delve in to another consuming passion of mine, painting.

For as long as I can remember I have been interested in fine art, specifically painting and sculpture. From the age of 7 my sole ambition was to become a painter. It is an ambition I still have and I continue to try although realistically I think I have left it a bit late for my breakthrough in the art world. A lack of talent and imagination tended to make this ambition unrealistic. What it has done however is driven me to study both painting and sculpture and I have done that in detail for more than 58 years. When thinking about how to approach this piece I realised the way I look at swords and paintings is very much the same.

I hope the reader will indulge me here and stick with me as I try and explain the points being made. To illustrate the idea I have drawn parallels between the way I look at a painting and the way I look at a sword.

When looking at a painting or a sword there are a number of features which I examine in order these are:

Painting:	**Sword:**
Composition	Shape- Sugata
Paint structure	Welding patterns- hada
Colour	Quenching pattern – Hamon.
Carrier and Signature	Tang- Nakago and Mei

Within the features mentioned above there are additional characteristics in a sword such as colour of the steel, activity within the jigane and hamon. All of these elements are important but what is of equal relevance is the way they sit together. It is important that each feature compliments the

others and enhances the overall form of the blade (composition). To copy the Japanese description they should create something that is “Just Right”.

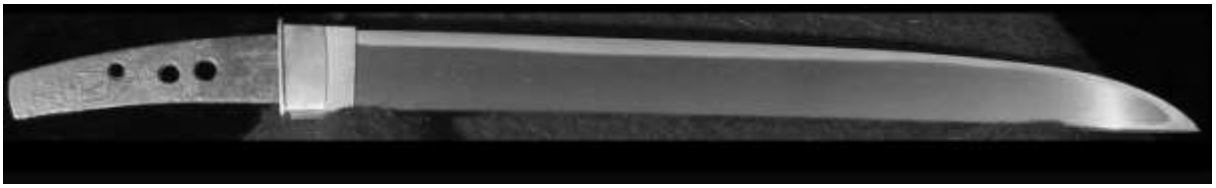
Step 1 Painting composition:

The Haywain by John Constable 18th century

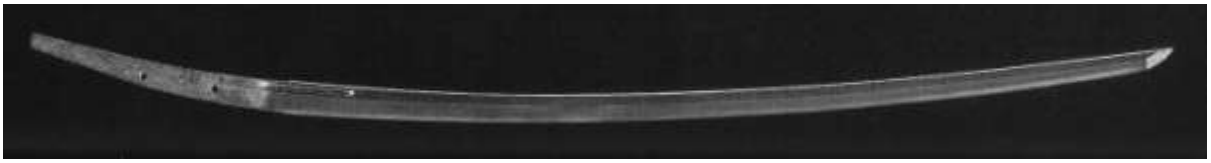
If you consider a painting the first impression you (I) have is based on the composition. Looking at the piece as a whole is it well balanced? Do all the elements work together to create the intended goal? If the composition is wrong or out of balance the end result is unsettling. It isn’t possible to easily move on to see finer detail if the overall image jars the senses. I think the same is true of sword blade

Step 1 Sword Sugata

“When studying a sword first look at the shape”: Walter Compton Essay on shape from 100 masterpieces



Tanto by Rai Kunimitsu (late Kamakura)



Tachi by Awataguchi Kunitomo (mid Kamakura)

It has often been said that a good sword will never have a bad shape. There is huge diversity in the range of shapes and sizes of what are defined as Japanese swords but within this diversity each individual piece should look right. The proportion, the interaction between different elements should be in harmony. Starting with the curvature, is it in the right proportion to the length and

depth of the blade? A sword can be slim with gentle sori such as seen in early Kamakura works or like examples from late Kamakura and Nambokucho periods robust and magnificent. However regardless of these proportions do they work well on the individual piece? In a good sword they look as they should, if that isn't too vague a concept. If the smith got it wrong the end result can look weak and ineffective or clumsy like a cleaver. When they get it right the end result is sublime.

O-suriage katana attributed to Awataguchi (mid Kamakura)

O-suriage Katana attributed to Aoe Tsunetsugu (late Kamakura)

This is equally true when a blade is shortened (suriage). Done correctly the blade maintains its "just right" appearance, done wrongly it looks clumsy and inelegant. If the shape is wrong it glares at you and inhibits appreciation of finer detail.

Step 2 Painting- Paint Structure

Lucian Freud self portrait 20th century

Having established the composition works and is harmonious one can look in greater detail at the structure of the painting. Look at how the paint is applied; the way different colours and textures combine to create the image the artist is attempting to portray. Figurative painting offers a major deception. The artist is taking a two dimensional surface and through the application of different colour and texture attempting to create the illusion of a three dimensional living being. How well do they create that illusion? If they do it well there is an energy and tension in the work as seen in

Freud's self portrait above. The combination of colour and texture can achieve a sublime deception turning inanimate material into something that appears to exist as a sentient being. Also studying the way paint is added and the type and structure of the end result can give indications of how the piece was constructed and methods employed.

Step 2 Sword Jigane and hada:

Itame and Mokume Oei Bizen Yasumitsu Nambokucho period

Chirimen hada Chu Aoe Tsunetsugu late Kamakura period.

For some, including me, the jigane is the key to the production of a great sword. The creation of a good hada from high quality steel is of key importance and has a direct influence on the later creation of hamon and all the activity within both jigane and hamon. As with painting the smith is working in an almost two dimensional surface and by combining different qualities of steel is creating abstract patterns that suggest an organic natural creation rather than a mechanical process. The organic appearance of the hada is confirmed in the way it is often described in terms such as itame (wood grain) Mokume (burl wood grain) and Konuka (rice bran). In some work these descriptions go still further. The ji-nie in the work of Inoue Shinkai has been described as looking at Ice crystals in a deep, dark pool. At its best the jihada of a sword looks uncontrived, natural and full of detail. Amongst the sinuous lines of the hada other activity shines out in the form of ji-nie and chickei. As seen in good painting, the patterns in the steel can convey an image of energy and strength combined with serene beauty. As in studying brushwork in a painting, analysing the patterns and forms created in the welding of the jigane offers an insight in to the methodology and techniques employed by the swordsmith.

Step 3 Painting –Colour

Caravaggio 16th century Italian

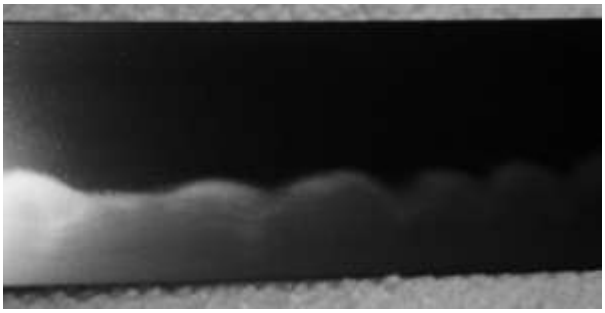
J M W Turner English 19th century

Having looked at the way paint has been applied I would then move on to colour, or more specifically look at the range of colours used how they interact with each other and combine to create the overall image desired. Within what appear to be blocks of a given shade there can me

numerous subtle blends of different hues which transform the area from a flat surface to a much more vibrant and variable work. The way different shades and hues interact, how they confirm the illusion and attempt to transmit the artists vision all tell the observer something about the process and the craftsman. Certain colour ranges work well with specific techniques. The colour palette employed by Titian or Rubens would not work for other artists such as Vermeer, van Mieris or Turner. It is important the range of colours used complement the overall composition and the method of application to help create harmony in the whole.

Step 3 Swords Hamon

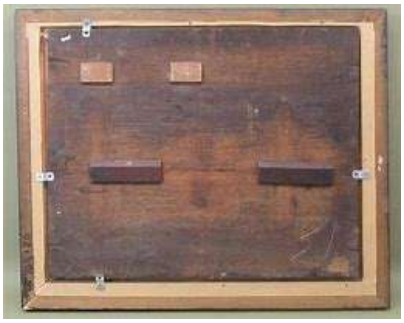
Activity within an Aoe blade Kamakura period



Koyama Munetsugu late Edo period

There has been much written and many theories proposed regarding the most effective hamon on a Japanese blade. It has been variously suggested that the flamboyant Choji of the Ichimonji Schools were in some way superior to the gentler midare and suguha of the Aoe and Yamashiro traditions. As with most theories opinions flow back and forth and some appear more convincing than others. However when you examine the hamon in a top rated sword there is very much more to see than the pattern formed by the border between thick and thin clay in the Yakiire process. A truly fine hamon includes a great deal of activity it has infinite variations in structure and movement. In addition to this activity the hamon combines or blends with the jigane and complements the sugata in such a way as to harmonise the overall appearance. The subtle shading of the hardened edge highlights much of the activity above it in the jigane. In the same way the colour palette adds atmosphere to a finished painting a beautiful hamon can transform and highlight the beauty of the steel used. I would argue that this is not created out of a functional need. It is purely and aesthetic creation to enhance the beauty of the whole.

Step 4 Painting Carrier and signature:



Antique wooden carrier

signature of Peter Paul Rubens

The carrier (substrate to which the paint is applied) can tell the observer a great deal about the age of the painting. Is the piece on wooden panel, canvas or paper? What is the colour of the carrier? Does it show signs of wear? Different artists painted on different substrates. Many of the works of Peter Paul Rubens are on wooden panel and the type of wood, the way the panel is assembled and the colour can give a good, non- destructive indication of age and authenticity. The signature if present can confirm what the painting should already be telling you. As in all other fields of collecting forgeries exist. I once said that with practice I think I could likely create a reasonably convincing copy of a Rubens signature. If I attempted to create a Rubens painting it would take the most inexperienced student seconds to see it was not by the master. The signature should confirm what the work is already telling you.

Step 4 Sword Nakago and Mei:


Aoe Tsunetsugu


Oei Bizen Yasumitsu


Awataguchi Norikuni


Ishido Yasuhiro


Hosakawa Tadamasa

Having studied the body of the sword in detail one should then focus on the nakago. The tang can offer the observer a great deal of information which hopefully will confirm what the body of the blade has already told you. The number of mekugi-ana (peg holes) can give an indication of whether the blade has been shortened. The colour of the nakago is an indicator of age. The shape and the file marks are a good initial indicator of school. Then finally the mei, if present, can tell you who made the sword and when. As said previously forgeries are common so hopefully the mei confirms the conclusion you have reached based on the workmanship. The nakago is extremely important and its condition and form can tell you a great deal about a blade.

But is it Art?

In a discussion with the late and much missed Michael Hagenbusch we discussed using the word "art" to describe a sword. I remembered his comments in detail and have used them before in previous articles I hope no reader will mind that I repeat them here albeit paraphrased slightly.

All hand-made swords may be classified as "art". Superior work which shows greater mastery of technique may be defined as "fine art". One then goes a stage further and the master creates work which may superficially fit in to the previous category but on careful study reveals far more detail and much greater skill. This he described as "high art" Its appreciation requires application and study. It takes a very long time to obtain sufficient understanding to fully appreciate what is sitting in front of your eyes.

All painting is art. In its most basic form the artist takes a number of disparate ingredients and creates something totally different from the original material. At its simplest a painting illustrates an object or concept. At its finest it goes far beyond illustration and imparts energy and emotion and generates far greater emotional response than might be achieved with simple illustration. The first painting below clearly illustrates a Scandinavian market scene from the 19th century. It is competent, the subject matter clear but with the greatest respect it could not be considered high or even fine art.

The second work by the renaissance master Caravaggio is technically competent and well painted but it is conveys a level of energy and emotional charge which goes far beyond simple representation and illustration. While such reactions are purely personal and subjective and will differ between observers the work demands response

Scandinavian Market scene 19th century

Caravaggio the denial of St. Peter 16th century

In a similar fashion the swordsmith takes metal extracted from sand iron and pine charcoal and through great skill and application transforms the material in to something totally different. All Japanese swords include a number of common features. It is what defines them and makes them

immediately recognisable. However the finest smith takes the application of these features far beyond the level of pure practicality. The result goes far beyond functionality and is capable of inspiring a response on a far deeper abstract and emotional level. The two swords below were made in the same area of sword making and same village. They were made less than 50 years apart. The first is classified as Kazu-uchi mono (bundle sword), a mass produced blade produced in the 15th century. It incorporates tamahagane there is a hada and hamon present and it is fully functional. The second made earlier in the same school is by the Osafune smith Motoshige. Awarded Tokubetsu Juyo papers this is a masterwork that clearly illustrates the smith's mastery of materials and technique.

Katana signed Bishu Kiyomitsu Muromachi period

Katana attributed to Osafune Motoshige Nambokucho period

Summary and conclusion:

Common requirements for all swords

The function of any sword is to cut. If it fails to cut efficiently it is a poor sword regardless of any aesthetic qualities it may possess. To cut efficiently the blade must be hard enough to maintain a sharp edge, be of a shape that facilitates efficient cutting and be robust enough to withstand impact in combat while maintaining both shape and edge. This is true of every sword that is made whether it is considered an art sword, a utilitarian sword a bundle sword or whatever. They must all be capable of meeting these requirements.

In achieving the necessary characteristics the Japanese swordsmith employed a number of techniques. Every one of them was originally inspired by a need to improve functionality. Sword manufacture is a classical example of "Form following function". The different aspects of a blade which define it as a unique work of art are all derived from an attempt to improve its cutting ability.

Utility or art?

To determine the functional efficiency of a sword is relatively simple. You give it to someone with the necessary training and skill and they cut things with it. Its value and quality may be determined by how much and how easily it cuts through whatever target is chosen. If it cuts well and withstands the strains incurred it is a good functional weapon.

To go beyond on this and look at a sword as a work of art the observer needs to focus on the aesthetic qualities of the blade. In this the study of a blade is no different from the appreciation of any other art form as I hope the above clearly illustrates.

For me the true beauty of the Japanese sword is seen when the swordsmith employs their talent and abilities to create something which goes far beyond functionality. They combine and work material in a way that enables them to produce and end product of infinite variety. The shape is sublime and harmonious, the hada and hamon include incredible activity which offers a unique image to the observer. It is possible to look at a fine sword on numerous occasions and to see something new. To re-quote a story from Michael Hagenbusch:

He once saw a blade by Shintogo Kunimitsu and confessed he was greatly disappointed. It was boring and uninteresting. He revisited it some years later and sat in tears looking at its beauty. He was “amazed at how much it had changed”. Of course it hadn’t, in the intervening years he had learned more and was able to see and appreciate what previously had eluded him.

All traditionally made swords may be described as art. Being described as an “art Sword” does not mean it is not fit for purpose or in some way inferior to a more obviously practical weapon. It is simply that the smith has committed more of himself in to its manufacture and created something beyond utility. To understand what lifts a blade in to the category of art sword requires a great deal of effort and study. The result of that effort is hugely rewarding. It is the incredible beauty achieved by the swordsmith and the infinite variety of their work that keeps me returning to see more after nearly 40 years of study. A practice I expect to continue for the rest of my life.

Paul Bowman 2020

Bibliography:

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