

Carrying the Bizen Tradition—Ono Yoshimitsu

by
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Among the modern swordsmiths of today, there are many working within the Bizen tradition. Bizen province was the largest production center of Japanese swords. In the Heian period came the impetus of exceptional craftsmen. Later, in the Kamakura period, Bizen became the centre of the country's sword production world. This status would continue until the end of the Muromachi period (1392-1573). However, each period displays its own remarkable style of workmanship. For example, Bizen blades are typically constructed in *itame-hada*, display a prominent *utsuri* and focus on a *choji* based *hamon*. In addition, there are excellent works in *ko-midare*, *gunome*, *suguha* and so forth. The forging characteristics called Bizen-den were to continue by Edo period Shinto smiths and Meiji smiths onwards. Still today, there are many artists who are continuing this Bizen tradition. At the forefront of these is the swordsmith Ono Yoshimitsu. Born in 1948 (after the Second World War), he entered the swordsmith studio of the Yoshihara brothers, Yoshindo and Shoji (Kuniie III), and began learning the craft from the age of 21. Bizen-den was the speciality of the Yoshihara brothers. As a result of his clever nature and diligence he made exceptional progress and was awarded the Award for Excellence on his first entry to the *Shinsaku-meitoten* in 1975. Since that time, he has continued to try to recreate the golden age of Bizen Ichimonji workmanship from the Kamakura period. In 1982 in the Japanese sword world's Grand Prix he was awarded the top prize of the Prince Takamatsu Award. Two years later, he took on the challenge of reproducing the famous national treasure sword from the collection of the Uesugi family (known as the *Yamatorige*), resulting in a blade with an elegant beauty close to that of the Fukuoka Ichimonji School.

This exhibition has been separated into two parts. The first half—*Pursuing Koto Bizen*—includes blades mirroring the different representative styles of Bizen-to from the Heian period through to the Muromachi period, and exhibits the different characteristics of each period. The second part of the exhibition is called *The Ayumi Chronology*. Extremely attracted to the exuberant charm of the world of *juka-choji* displayed in the blades of the Kamakura Bizen Ichimonji smiths, he took on many challenges in an attempt to successfully revive such work. This is a showcase of his progress, a selection of excellent works illustrated by a year-by-year display of his entries to *shinsaku-meitoten* from his first entry until today.

In this exhibition in Okayama, Ono Yoshimitsu's hopes from a few years prior have been realized. In other words, he is paying his respects to the motherland of Bizen-to. This satisfaction aside, he remains unsatisfied, devoting himself to undertaking further challenges in a spiritual quest. Furthermore, as a representative smith of the Showa and Heisei periods, I hope Ono Yoshimitsu continues to carry the Bizen tradition.

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