

Pursuing Koto Bizen
By
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The Japanese sword is one of the fine art objects created by the Japanese people. There are not many objects as inherently beautiful as the Japanese sword. The sensitivities of the swordsmiths, growing up in the Japanese climate rich with the change of the four seasons, can be seen reflected in the Japanese sword. However, we should be mindful not to forget that the Japanese sword, although it was developed as a weapon, is a pure and beautiful object. As Japanese people it is very natural for us to be able to accept such seeming contradictions.

Heian Period

This exhibition is divided into two parts. The first half is entitled *Pursuing Koto Bizen*, and takes a look at the shape of the perfected Japanese sword (swords with curvature) from the end of the Heian period (794-1184) through to the end of the Muromachi period (1333-1596). This introductory exhibition by modern swordsmith Ono Yoshimitsu is an attempt to revive the sword production techniques of the Koto-Bizen smiths.

Ko-Bizen

The work of Heian period Bizen smiths is called Ko-Bizen. During this time there were generally many thin *tachi sugata* blades made. They have *funbari* and a deep curvature. However, there is no curvature between the *monouchi* and the small point section; it is quite straight. The forging of the *ji* is *itame* and displays *utsuri*. The *hamon* is a *ko-nie deki* mix of *ko-midare ko-choji*, with some *ko-ashi* and *yo*. In places *kinsuji* can also be seen. There are many blades between 76cm-79cm in length. The smiths of the Ko-Bizen school were Tomonari (友成), Sukehira (助平), Kanehira (包平), Masatsune (正恒) and Nobufusa (信房). There are two famous swords which are almost 3 *shaku* (90cm) in length. One is called *Okanehira* and is from the Ikeda family collection, and the other is called *Kunozan Toshogu no Sanetsune*—久能山東照宮真恒 in the Tokugawa Kunozan Toshogu shrine, Shizuoka City. *Okanehira* was listed among a sword ranking list printed during the Edo period. However, the ‘O’ does not only imply that it is a big sword, but also a great sword.

(Swords No.s 1, 2, 3.)

The Kamakura Period

This period begins in 1186, when Minamoto no Yoritomo became the Commander in Chief of the 66 provinces of Japan, and it ends with the dissolution of the Hojoji *bakufu* in 1333.

Ichimonji (Fukuoka Ichimonji)

The swordsmiths selected by retired emperor Gotoba Joko were collectively known as the *Goban kaji*. Selected smiths from Bizen prefecture were: Norimune (則宗), Nobufusa (延房), Muneyoshi (宗吉), Sukemune (助宗), Yukikuni (行国), Sukenari (助成), and Sukenobu (助延). However, in addition to these Bizen smiths, Nobufusa (信房) was also employed as a swordsmith instructor to Gotoba. The *Goban Kaji* was also made up from members from the Bitchu and Yamashiro Awataguchi schools. It is said that Norimune was authorized by Gotoba Joko to sign his blades with an *ichi* stroke, and these members were to become known as the Ichimonji school. Among the early Kamakura period Ichimonji who would also sign the *ichi* character along with their own names were Norimune, Sukemune, Narimune (成宗), Nobufusa, and Muneyoshi. There were many smiths during the mid-kamakura period signing with the '*ichi*' character. During this period the blades have a slender shape and the *hamon* is almost an *o-busa choji-midare*. However, whilst these blades are constructed in *nioi-deki* they do have lots of *ko-nie* giving them an old flavour, which is an advantage that they have over the later Ichimonji works.

(Sword No.4)

The Peak of the Ichimonji

By the middle of the Kamakura period, during the pinnacle of the samurai's influence, we can see a leap in the progress of sword making, exhibiting a magnificent and elegant workmanship.

This period's *tachi* have a wide *moto* and *saki-haba*. The *kasane* is thick and the *kissaki* has become *ikubi*. The *ji* is very clear and displays a prominent *utsuri*. The *nioi-deki hamon* has a rich, undulating *o-choji midare*, which can be described as absolutely dazzling. Among the *ichi* signed works are a flamboyant Nanbokucho blade that was worn by the military commander Sasaki Dōyō and consequently called *Dōyō Ichimonji*, and a blade given to Okudaira Nobumasa by Oda Nobunaga at the battle of Nagashino. Also there are typical *mumei* blades that are thought to be part of the same *ichi* signing school, such as the *Yamatorige* of the Uesugi family collection, the *Nikko Ichimonji* of the Kuroda family collection and so forth.

(Sword No.s 5, 6, 7.)

The Fukuoka Ichimonji School Sansaku

The Ichimonji smiths of the mid-kamakura period who would sign with the *ichi* character along with their own names were Yoshifusa (吉房), Norifusa (則房) and Sukezane (助真). Among these Yoshifusa is the one with the most extant works. As for Sukezane and Kunimune (国宗), they went to Kamakura to pioneer the Soshu group of smiths, and are referred to as the Kamakura Ichimonji. Yoshifusa has five of his blades assigned as national treasures. Sukezane's national treasure work is the sword that was loved by the

Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu, called *Nikko Sukezane*, which is enshrined at the Tokugawa shrine in Nikko. This blade has been shortened somewhat, but the Sukezane signature remains. It has a wide *haba*, an elegantly forged prominent *hada* with lots of *ji-nie* and prominent *utsuri*. The *hamon* is an undulating, deep *nioi* based *o-choji midare* with *ko-nie*. Among the magnificent sparkling blades of the Ichimonji, this one is also very powerful.

(Sword No.8)

At the end of the Kamakura period the Fukuoka Ichimonji were in decline. Schools signing with the *ichi* character opened up further down the Yoshii river in Iwato and Yoshioka. The Yoshioka school also began inscribing below the *ichi* character the location of the school and the maker's name (Bizen no Kuni Yoshioka Ju Sakonshokanki Sukemitsu—備前國吉岡住左近將監紀助光). Some of the smiths signing in this way during the late Kamakura period between 1319 to about 1333 were Sukeyoshi (助吉), Sukemitsu (助光) and Sukeyoshi (助義). There are many works in *o-choji midare*, *ko-choji* mixed with *togariba*, and *suguha*-based *ko-choji* with *togariba*. However, they are not quite as skilful as the works of the Fukuoka Ichimonji.

(Sword No.9)

Kamakura Period Osafune School

Besides the Ichimonji there was another big group in Osafune. When one thinks of Japanese swords, one must think of Osafune blades. The founder of the Osafune school was Mitsutada (光忠). It is said that his workmanship was represented in the book *kokon-meijin* (古今銘尽). Mitsutada has lots of two character signed blades but he also has some long inscriptions on *tachi*: *Bizen Kuni Ju Osafune Mitsutada* (Imperial collection). This is conclusive evidence that Mitsutada lived in Osafune. His workmanship is a gentle deep *nioi choji-midare* with *kawazu-no-ko choji* mixed in. The *ji* is wet and lustrous looking; the quality of the steel is unique. His vibrant *hamon* is recorded in old documents as resembling a row of four or five overlapping cherry blossoms in bloom.

It is said that Nagamitsu (長光) was Mitsutada's son, and that his workmanship was no less skilful than his father's. Nagamitsu's many extant works from the Kamakura period are of substantial quality. When compared to his teacher's work it is not as relaxed and has a much sharper feeling. The first generation Nagamitsu was to pass his crown to the second generation Nagamitsu, who was given the imperial ranking of *Sakonshokan*. It is thought that the second generation Nagamitsu (the first generation Nagamitsu's son) worked between the years 1293-1302. Also within this school were Nagamoto (長元) and Sanenaga (真長). Each of their works has distinctive characteristics.

(Sword No.10)

Kagemitsu (景光) was a third generation Osafune smith, and worked for about thirty years between the Enkyo and Kenmu periods (1308-1335). His workmanship does not contain many splendid *choji-midare* works like that of his teacher. Kagemitsu's works were *suguha* based *choji* and he originated the *kataochi-gunome hamon*. His later works would include many *tanto*. He produced *tachi* and *tanto* among which are some very precise *Fudo-myo* and *Kurikara horimono*. He would also accept custom orders from clients, as seen on the *tanto* carved with the characters for *Chichibu Daibosatsu*. Among his masterworks are national treasures blades: *Koryu Kagemitsu*, and a *tanto* said to have been worn by Uesugi Kenshin called *Kenshin Kagemitsu*.

It is said that Kagemasa (景政) was Kagemitsu's younger brother. There are very few extant works of Kagemasa. However, among these are two *gasaku tachi* that he made with Kagemitsu. Other members of the Kagemitsu school include Chikakage (近景), who successfully carried the school into the Nanbokucho period.

(Sword No.s 11, 12)

Other eminent smiths of the Kamakura period include Hatakeda Morie (畠田守家) and Sanemori (真守). Also among the Naomune school (直宗) of Bizen was the famous smith known as Saburō Kunimune (三郎国宗). Kunimune, Ichimonji Sukezane and Awataguchi Kunitsuna (国綱) all moved to Sagami province and opened schools.

Of the many Bizen smiths residing along the Yoshii river, the Ukai school were located in Inishi no Ukangō (Modern day Mizugun, Mizumachi). Members of the school include Unshō (雲生), Unji (雲次) and Unju (雲重), who also worked in the Nanbokucho period

Bizen Smiths of the Nanbokucho period

Continuing from the Kamakura period into the Nanbokucho period, there were still many smiths in Osafune. The name of Osafune had become very famous for sword production and had absorbed many local schools. Within the group there was much competition between the old school of Osafune (the Kanemitsu school) and the newcomers like the Chogi school.

During this period extremely long blades, extending to more than 3 *shaku* (90cm) began to appear, along with the production of long *naginata*. *Sunobi-tanto* with a wide *mihaba* known as *ko-wakizashi* came into existence at this time.

Osafune Kanemitsu

It is said that Kanemitsu (兼光) was the son and apprentice of Kagemitsu. He produced blades for a period of about thirty or so years: from the end of the Kamakura period through to the Nanbokucho period. It is thought that during this period, some of the works are by the second generation Kanemitsu. At first, the workmanship is similar to his

father Kagemitsu's Kamakura period blades. However, the works of the Kan'ō, Bunna (1352-55) and Enbun periods (1356-1360) take on a *notare* theme mixed with *gunome*.

Kanemitsu's pupils were: Motomitsu (基光), Tomomitsu (倫光), Masamitsu (政光) and Shigemitsu (重光). It is thought that Yoshimitsu (義光) was Kanemitsu's younger brother.

(Sword No.s 13, 14)

Osafune Chogi

The Chogi school, along with the Kanemitsu school, were the Nanbokucho period representatives of Bizen works. Contrary to the typical Bizen characteristics, there were *nie-deki* works being made. This kind of workmanship is called *Soden-Bizen*. This kind of *Soden-Bizen* work produced by Chogi (長義) also maintained a splendid traditional *tachi* shape. The special characteristic of the Chogi school is a *nie* based *notare-gunome hamon*. Many of the extant works have been shortened and the inscriptions have been lost. Even though Bizen-to are generally inscribed with the date inscriptions of the northern court, the Chogi school often inscribed with the date inscriptions of the southern court. However, they later changed to the northern court date inscriptions. This is due to the local Daimyo Yamana originally being a supporter of the southern court while the *bakufu* of the southern court were more powerful. The Chogi school were not the only school to change date inscriptions. There are many extant Kyushu works inscribed with southern court date inscriptions. This is a very interesting display of how close the relationship between the smiths and the warrior class was. The members of the Chogi school include Nagamori (長守), Kanenaga (兼長), Morinaga (守長) and so forth. They all follow the workmanship of Chogi well.

Other Osafune smiths include the Motoshige school (元重), Morikage (盛景) and Yoshikage (義景). At the end of the Nabokucho period there were many small groups making blades called *ko-zori mono*.

(Sword No.15)

Osafune smiths of the Muromachi Period

The problematic Nanbokucho period lasted about 60 years. This chapter of Japanese history was brought to a close when Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu reunited the country. Yoshimitsu had previously set up a *bakufu* in Muromachi in Kyoto to protect the court nobles who were longing for the prosperity of trade with China. This climate is reflected in the large changes in swordmaking from around this time. *Tachi* have a wide *moto-ha* with a regular *mihaba* and *kissaki*. The *hamon* is a mix of *choji* and *gunome* and the shape is reminiscent of early Kamakura blades. Also from this period (Oei 1394-1412) just prior to the Muromachi period, are *hira-zukuri*, *sunobi*, *muzori tanto* and *wakizashi*. Many of them display *bo-utsuri*, and all are in the typical shape known as *Oei-Bizen*.

During this period there were many smiths who used the Oei *nengo*: Morimitsu (盛光) Yasumitsu (康光), Moromitsu (師光), Iesuke (家助), Tsuneie (経家) and so on.

The Oei-Bizen workmanship continued until about Eikyo (1429-1440), until gradually it became the Sue-Bizen workmanship. It would seem that the Onin incident is the point when the smiths were making both kinds of blades. The smiths working at this time were Norimitsu (則光), Sukemitsu (助光) and Morishige (盛重).

(Sword No.17, 18, 19)

Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa's successor's first problem was the Onin disturbance that developed into civil war. This resulted in an urgent demand for swords with many of the sword production centres churning out mass-produced swords (*kazu-uchi*) for practical use. These swords are vastly inferior to the higher quality artistic swords. However, during this period there were many special order swords made called *chumon-uchi* of excellent quality. For instance, there were many produced for the commanders of the Urugami family and the Ukida family. I believe it may have been some kind of special ranking or privilege for the smiths. As the warfare tactics had changed to infantry foot soldiers, so had the shape of the blade changed from a *tachi* style to a one handed *saki-zori* blade for infantrymen called an *uchigatana*. In addition to the *uchigatana*, there were *tanto* with a thick *kasane* called *yoroi-doshi* (armor piercing) for close-quarter fighting. Also *uchi-zori tanto* with a long *nakago* and *moroha-zukuri tanto* appeared in this period. These Bizen-to had no *utsuri*, and there was much *nie* in the *jigane*. In addition to *suguha* and *notare* there are *hamon* with double *gunome*, *kani no tsume* and a complicated *midare*; on the whole they have strong *nie* feeling. There were also many *horimono* on the *koshi-moto*, such as *kurikara*, *bonji* and the names of religious deities. The smiths of the Sue-Bizen period include Sukesada (祐定), Katsumitsu (勝光), Munemitsu (宗光), Tadamitsu (忠光), Kiyomitsu (清光) and so forth. There were many smiths using the same name working during this period. Yosozaemon no jo Sukesada (与三左衛門尉祐定) was the best of these. There was also Genbei no jo Sukesada (源兵衛尉祐定) and Hikobei no jo Sukesada (彦兵衛尉祐定). Other skilled smiths include: Ukyo no suke Katsumitsu (右京亮勝光), Jirousaemon no jo Katsumitsu (次郎左衛門尉勝光), Sakyoshin Munemitsu (左京進宗光), Hikobei no jo Tadamitsu (彦兵衛尉忠光), Gorozaemon no jo Kiyomitsu (五郎左衛門尉清光), and Magouemon no jo Kiyomitsu (孫右衛門尉清光).

The Sue-Bizen smiths, at the invitation of wealthy customers, also made swords in the nearby Harima, Mimasaka and Bitchu provinces.

(Sword No.s 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26)