

interview with tokuno kazuo

The Lone Wolf of Japanese scholarship

SS: Why did you start to study the sword?

T: - Just from curiosity.

SS: Just curiosity?

T: Yes, I guess everything goes to the same thing (with me). Someone without curiosity may be alive as a creature, - but not as a man.

I don't think age is a concern. A curious man is without age. I think it is an active person who has curiosity, a person who looks into the various areas of his circumstance.

Yes, because Japanese swords were one of my big curiosities, I had to look at it first. Try to figure it out. Try to understand whether my opinion was right, - or not.

(At first,) it was just a simple thing, (exercising my curiosity).

SS: Under the question of studying the sword, what should we study?

T: This goes to the extension of one's curiosity. It begins with an effort to resolve one's own questions. However, if you really try to understand in a systematic way, you really must understand and place the historical background, first.

Among the historical considerations, we have to delve into the method of fighting and the genesis of the technique of sword production. Certainly the level of metallurgical engineering at a time, but also how much attention was brought by the people to (integrate) the BIJUTSU-HIN fine arts (at a particular time). We then can tell whether the sword was the same thing as the fine arts, - or not.

Because all Japanese swords are weapons, first and last.

Because Japanese swords were weapons, they were under massive restrictions. Without knowing the history of these restrictions, it is impossible to judge the JI-DAI or time period of a sword.

For example, IMI-GA-NAI, there is no sense arguing the sword is more of a weapon as a TACHI (horse style fighting) than as a KATANA (from the ground). To figure out what a sword is, we must know the history.

Dr Tokuno
at his
office
in
Tokyo



Author of TOKO-TAIKAN, MINO-TO TAIKAN, NIHONTO JITEN

First knowing the Japanese sword for its efficiency as a weapon and then looking at the capacity to produce them, we can find a difference from the other fine arts.

Usually a weapon doesn't require any other demands, (but) ancient Japanese tried to find a second sense of values. It was the same with YOROI (Japanese armor). Sometimes we see splendid, luxurious YOROI. Like the kind you see at ceremonies. As with swords, we also have to consider the mentality of the SAMURAI, - wearing the YOROI as he threatens his enemy or tries to upset the enemy's calm by displaying his presence in such an elegant YOROI.

So there were many purposes, not only the practical, not only endurance or durability, the sword also had a margin for art in the mentality of fighting. (*ss note*: use of "margin" or "room" invokes the idea of scale between the strictly practical and fine art. If swords were only for utility they would only be practical. But the SAMURAI made them beautiful. This inference speaks to the history and roots of their fighting mentality. That it was envisioned as beauty, or that it was elevated to the level of artistic beauty.)

Not only the art and beauty, we see that the ancient Japanese paid for the effort to produce a sword which would not bend or break, and should be possible to really cut “great.” Essentially, however, it is not possible to produce a sword that cannot break, but they made a great effort to produce just that.

It was this effort that caused them to invent the soft SHINGANE wick-iron surrounded by a hard KAWAGANE skin-iron.

They paid much attention to making a superior sword from the existing designs. This drive was carried out, not only in weapons but in the fine arts as well.

We can say, definitively, that the Japanese sword was a fine art based in the military hardware.

ss: What do you think, for what purpose should we study?

T: It's difficult. The person who trades (in swords) needs to recognize the genuineness, - and the price is important. Fine art collectors look for swords which are special or nice art. This is their first matter of concern. The situation changes depending on who is studying. Because there are people with different backgrounds and study levels, there are people with vastly different editorial attention.

It is my pleasure to talk with these people in such controversies. (wry smile)

ss: From the historical view, how were swords made between the SENGOKU and the EDO?

T: This is a very interesting question. The MUROMACHI period is the heterogeneous era. The time that is called SENGOKU was Euro-influenced and marks a change in Japanese history. In the KAMAKURA and NAMBOKUCHO eras, the reason the people of the BUSHI class appeared was as the antithesis power against the KUGE governing classes**. The pursuit of the execution of these trials was the most important theme for the BUSHI at that time.

**ss note: this is to say that the power-match against the KUGE created the strength of the BUSHI class.

We often hear that the BUSHI changed their master at will for the difference of a new salary. For the time before the MUROMACHI, however, the SAMURAI were connected by family blood as ICHIZOKU, or as employed retainers known as ROTO 郎党 whose lives and family shared the fate of the community. Because of the interwoven family relations, the problem of betrayal was comparatively rare.

For the MUROMACHI, however, survival became the biggest subject for the SAMURAI. Even if one would not take part in the killing, he would likely be killed. And this time after the O-NIN-no-RAN in the MUROMACHI (referring to the SENGOKU following the O-NIN War of 1467) was the time of the arrival of the Europeans. Swords began appearing with the same utilitarian expression found in the European weapons, rather than the sophisticated fine art of the past.

This SENGOKU era, saw the majority of produced weapons geared toward the utilitarian aspects and away from the margin for elegance. (which accounted a population at war)

However, in the EDO, we have the TOKUGAWA, and while utilitarian arms represented a potential danger, they also brought an uneasy concern that such an arms pool might rebound at a later time.**

The TOKUGAWA tried to turn the BUSHI's social direction to the Confucianist mind - CHU忠 "Loyalty for a sovereign," and KO 孝 "Filial duty for the family." At the same time, the government tried to settle the BUSHI into the feudal system, which brought a cultural spirit into the EDO climate and a stability over the MUROMACHI.

On the other hand, after the MOMOYAMA period, new cultural stimulus emerged through the international cultural exchange.

**ss note: Here we find in the EDO, a promotion of sword and arms as art. The reawakening of elegance. Soft metal fittings were celebrated and special styles were integrated to the social strata.

The TOKUGAWA then consolidated Japan to isolation with the SAKOKU 鎖国 "Chain the land" which flowered a peculiar Japanism in the country.

SS: As a result, they did not mix for 300 years.

T: Yes, EDO culture was given a birth with plenty of time for success. The people could fully develop their interests. So (it might become) self-complacent, or (they might) find a few week points in their peculiar and long Japanese culture. But on the other hand, I think EDO culture was created under a very similar historical condition to that of the FUJIWARA. They had completed (their cycle of) cultural (development) through the suspension of the dispatch of the KENTOSHI to TO.**

Considering the history, the MOMOYAMA was the precursor or pioneer for the EDO. It was inadequate because it was formed in a time of stimulus and quick tempo. Through SAKOKU, (however) the MOMOYAMA culture filtered down into its own, including other famous Japanese art styles - like UKIYO-E.

SS: Do you think the successful EDO culture was indebted to the SAKOKU?

T: Exactly. -But some scholars of history say just the opposite. (smile)

SS: Throughout history, what are the most significant points?

T: I always say, it consists of three factors: SUGATA, JIGANE, HAMON.

SUGATA is almost the same as sculpture, in the end. Its shaping consists of 2 lines. SORI is a curve, SHINOGI or YOKOTE are straight lines in the construct. So it is the subtle variation of contrasts in the combination of curved and straight.

For example, the sculpture of Brancusi emphasizes curved lines. This has much of the same characteristic. - You know a stone sculptor named MASAYUKI NAGARE uses several nice curves in his art. Originally, he was a sword smith studying with SUMITANI HOUSEI under Dr SAKURAI at RITSUMEI-KAN University.

**ss note: The KENTOSHI or SAIKAI-SHI were messengers to the Chinese TO dynasty. SUGAWARA MICHIZANE ended them in KAM-PYO 7, 895. (Reviewed in depth later in the interview.)

In NAGAREs' sculpture, we can see this slight combination of balance between curves and straights.

So this admirable sculpture of the SUGATA of the Japanese sword has evolved with curves and straights.

Also, we must talk about JIGANE. The very brilliant beauty found in JIGANE is the result of the way confined carbon is saturated through trained iron. We might say, it is the same material beauty found in jewels like diamond or opal, which are formed from pressure in the earth. The only difference between JIGANE and jewelry is one is an artifact and one is natural. Consequently, I think the beauty that exists in the Japanese sword is the beauty of JIGANE as a material.

SS: I think it's strange (that) the difference (in beauty) depends on the way of training (or folding).

T: Yes, and moreover, this limited beauty is remarkably emphasized by polishing. You know, the same thing with jewels. Polishing makes a stone into a fabulous gem...

continued in the next issue

Profile of Dr TOKUNO KAZUO

Recognized as the foremost scholar in Japan today, he was born in TOYAMA, SHOWA 8. Dr TOKUNO's methodical approach to history reaches back to his detective years with the Japanese police. He is largely the creator of the new sword study that proposes common sense over myth and which has proved a vindication to controversy arising from a challenge history had made against past notions. Dr TOKUNO carries a tireless, yearly lecture schedule.

-BUNKA-CHO TOROKU as SHINSA-IN

-Consultant to the TOKEN RENGO Sword Union

-President of DENTO TOSO KOGEI KAI Sword Fittings Society

The readers may feel free to submit limited questions for Dr TOKUNO, to be forwarded and answered in a following interview. Submit: **sho-shin**, Box 4469, Arcata, CA 95521