

IROGANE KO-TSUBA: OLD SOFT METAL TSUBA



from Kamakura to Momoyama
How to recognise it if you see one

THINGS TO LOOK FOR

- Tsuba shape
- Metal or alloy used
- Patina
- Lacquer remnants
- Shape of hitsu ana
- Size of nakago ana relative to plate
- Decoration and execution

SHAPE

- Some shapes were typical and are not seen in the Edo period, e.g. the squarish Aoi tsuba of the Kamakura period



Aoi tsuba,
Kamakura/Nambokucho



Aoi tsuba,
Muromachi (and later Edo, too)

SOME RARE SHAPES

- sometimes you will see a shape reminiscent of earlier shitogi tsuba
- sometimes you will see a very prominent rim (mimi), hardly ever seen in Edo. The mysterious entrant is also a pre-Edo affair...



shitogi reminiscent tsuba
15th century



Aoi tsuba with prominent
mimi and entrant
15th century

METALS AND ALOYS

Metals and alloys used before the Edo period*:

- *yamagane* (unrefined copper) - cheap
- *suaka* (refined copper) - rather rare, unlike *yamagane*
- bronze (copper and tin allot) - resilient and hard, expensive
- *nigurome* (copper + *katashirome*, a copper/tin alloy) - base for shakudo, it can be made to look like shakudo
- *shinchu* (brass) - expensive, imported from China
- shakudo (*nigurome* and gold alloy) - very expensive because of the gold component

* metals and alloys NOT used in the Edo period are marked in *Italics*

COLOURS OF METALS & ALLOYS



bronze



shakudo



suaka



yamagane



shinchu

PATINA

Find me an Edo period tsuba with such a rich patina!

- yamagane (unrefined copper) has particularly rich patina in different local varieties, depending on the composition of the unrefined metal



Splendid, shakudo-like patina in a simple uchigatana tsuba



Patina with rich plum undertones in a yamagane ko-Umetada tsuba

LACQUER

- Applying urushi to the plate was a practice before Edo jidai. It served two purposes:
 - protection against corrosion
 - making a yamagane or nigurome tsuba look like it was made from shakudo



Remnants of urushi on
a suaka plate



Very well preserved urushi
on a yamagane sukashi plate

HITSU ANA

Some of the old tsuba have hitsu ana shapes reflecting the kozuka and kogai used back then... as well as fashion, I think.



Kamakura



Muromachi

Most of the time such openings disclose great age, but they have been sometimes used in Edo, too.

NAKAGO ANA

Late Muromachi was a time when it was fashionable to fit a small tsuba to an uchigatana, which was almost as long as the Edo katana*

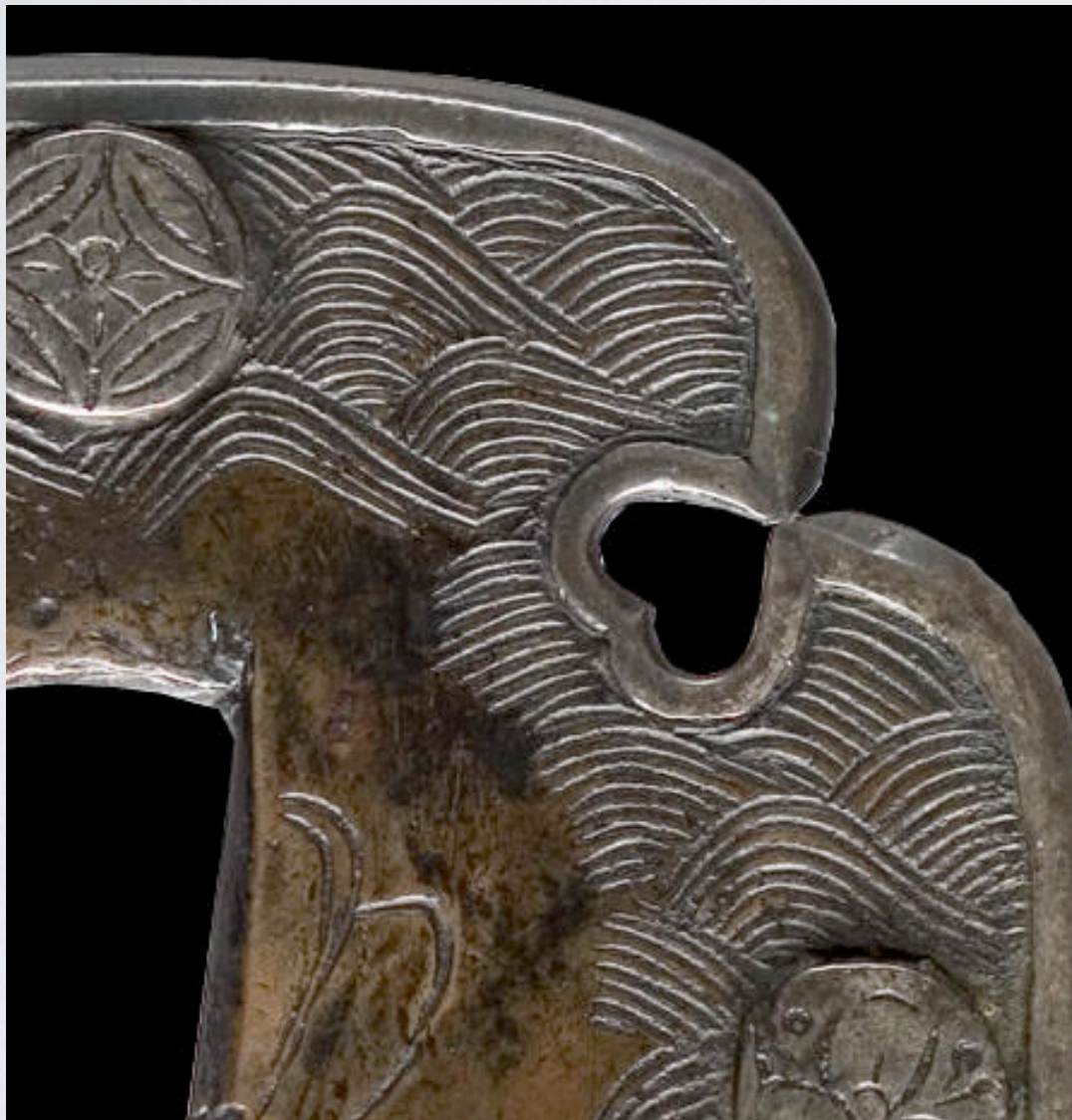


Look at the pic: isn't the nakago ana huge when compared to the overall size of the tsuba?

* for examples of such mounting look at:
"Uchigatana no Koshirae", Tokyo National Museum, 1985

DECORATION STYLE

- Relatively simple and naive



Waves, Kamakura/Nambokucho



Waves, Edo

FINISH

Sometimes a bit sloppy...



visible fukurin joining seam,
simple ishime, Muromachi



primitive nanako,
Muromachi



simple surface punching
Muromachi

FINISH

But the effect is excellent!



Yamagane tsuba with
fukurin, and
awa ishime punching,
Muromachi



Yamagane tsuba,
wisteria, nanako,
Muromachi



Large tsuba with
ouchmark and mon-
sukashi, Muromachi

ATTRIBUTION

Problems

- Sorry, no signatures!
- Sorry, no sources
- Sorry, but all those convenient categories have been devised in the late Edo period and are pure constructs

ATTRIBUTION

“Orthodox” categories:

1. **tachi kanagushi** - the tachi kodogu makers
2. **ko-kinko** - old gold- and silversmiths (including Goto)
3. **kagamishi** - mirror makers

Real categories defined by the production process

1. **forged tsuba** (made mainly from yamagane), including:
 - simple and functional, with only rudimentary adornments
 - highly ornamental (silver, gold applications plus carving) - they often look like Mino or Goto
2. **cast tsuba** (made mainly from bronze) - usually described as “kagmishi”^{*} tsuba, featuring:
 - stamped motives
 - naive motives

^{*} too many styles to attribute them all to mirror makers

KAGAMI & “KAGAMISHI” TSUBA

Mirrors
(kagami)...



and
“kagamishi”
tsuba



Hard to believe these are all by mirror makers?
Because they aren't!

KAGAMISHI? NO, REALLY?

NBTHK Origami - attribution to ko-kagamishi!



No seppa dai, nakago ana cuts through the motif - this is not a tsuba. And it is not a mirror, either, as both sides are identical. This object (a bronze lid?) has been converted into a tsuba. And it has not been made by kagamishi - their technique and details being totally different

Conclusion: the NBTHK is dead-wrong here! Still, this is a lovely, early item (Kamakura?)

KAGAMI CONVERSION

- a Momoyama/Edo kagami converted into a tsuba
- cranes and turtle motif (symbols of longevity)
- the turtle in the middle has been filed down to accommodate the seppa dai and nakago ana
- omote is smooth (this used to be the actual mirror - polished bronze)



NAME THE TSUBA...



THANK YOU...

I have used mainly my own pics in this presentation. Exceptions:

- Aoi tsuba by Boris Markhasin (yamabushiantiques.com)
- Shakudo ko-kinko tsuba by Richard Turner (kodogunosekai.com)
- Nami tsuba from the Edo period - Andrew Quirt (nihonto.us)
- Little “kagamishi” with birds and flowers - Ed Marshall (yakiba.com)

