

Overview and Development of *Tsuba* made by Japanese Swordsmiths

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Introduction

I will introduce new Japanese language terms with an English, non-italicized explanation followed by the standard italicized *Romaji* and *Kanji* if possible. The italicized Japanese terms are not punctuated or pluralized like normal English words.

To begin, I would like to introduce the topic of my essay: the handguards of Japanese swords referred to as *tsuba* (鐔) made by professional Swordsmiths, *Tôshô* (刀匠), or their apprentices. In part one of the essay I will present a historical background to the early swordsmith handguards *Ko-Tôshô tsuba* (古刀匠鐔) as well as characteristics that define them as a group. In part two of the essay I will present *Tôshô tsuba* (刀匠鐔) and the characteristics that define them as a group. There is an important caveat that must be stated in regards to this article. The reference material used for this introduction to *Tôshô tsuba* were written in English or were translated at some point from Japanese to English and are of a secondary nature. New historical or contemporary primary references were not translated and used for the basis of the article.

Historical Background of *Ko-Tôshô Tsuba*

The earliest *Tôshô tsuba* are referred to in Japanese as *Ko-Tôshô* (古刀匠) and date from the Genpei War (*Genpei kassen* 源平合戦) (1180–1185) to middle Muromachi Period (室町時代) (1400–1500). The Genpei War was the legendary conflict between the *Taira* (平氏) and *Minamoto* (源氏) clans during the late *Heian* Period (平安時代) (794–1185). There are references in historical documents of the *Genpei* War to the hand guards and blade collars made by professional swordsmiths or their apprentices.^{1,3} Another historical document detailing the early *uchigatana* (打刀) with *Tôshô tsuba* was the *Ban Dainago ekotoba* (handscroll of the Tale of the Courtier *Ban Dainago*) detailing important events of the late twelfth century, where one of the lower-class foot-soldiers: *ashigaru* (足輕) can be seen using a short *uchigatana*.³

During the late *Kamakura* Period large *Ko-Tôshô tsuba* were developed and were used mostly as field mounts for *o-dachi* (大太刀) by high-ranking *Samurai* during and after the Mongol invasion of Japan in *Genkô Jidai* (元寇) (1274–1281)^{1,4} In the *Muromachi* Period (室町時代) (1336–1573) the *Ko-Tôshô tsuba* became even more common with the development and popularization of the one-handed sword *uchigatana* as the only sword of low-ranking foot soldiers. In terms of the historically extant examples of *Ko-Tôshô tsuba*, the oldest pieces date from the later part of *Kamakura* Period (鎌倉時代) (1199–1333). The previous statement was encountered in multiple sources but runs contrary with the attribution of one *Ko-Tôshô tsuba* in the collection of the late *tosogu* collector and researcher, *Sasano Masayuki*. *Sasano* dates this earliest *Ko-Tôshô tsuba* to the late *Heian* Period.

Due to the necessity of mounting much shorter swords, the *Ko-Tôshô tsuba* of the early to middle *Muromachi* Period (1336–1500) have a larger range of sizes. However, it should be noted that the size of a *tsuba* is not always proportional to length of the sword.

Characteristics of *Ko-Tôshô Tsuba*

The most common design characteristic, next to the plain flat plate, for *Ko-Tôshô tsuba* is the sparse and simplistic use of small negative silhouetted openwork. The Japanese term for this is *ko-sukashi* (小透). When the small negative silhouetted openwork is in the design of a family crest the

Japanese term *mon-sukashi* (文透) is used. The most common openwork designs are of sun, moon, tools, family crests, and plants; or Buddhist, Shinto, and sometimes (rarely) Christian religious symbols on some of the later examples.

Generally the thickness of the center is greater than of the rim but this rule does not hold for all *Ko-Tôshô* examples. The plates' iron is characteristically of a good temper, having good hardness and elasticity. The plate is made of local iron forged by the swordsmith or apprentice, the same as for Japanese sword blades. The Japanese term for this locally smelted iron, *oroshi gane* (卸鐵), can be applied to early Japanese swords as well as *Ko-Tôshô tsuba*. On the plate of early *Ko-Tôshô tsuba* the only surface treatment other than the application of a patina is the natural hammer marks the swordsmith produced when the iron of the tsuba was forged. This is in contrast to other types of early tsuba such as the Onin (應仁), Ko-Katchûshi (古甲冑師), and Ko-Kinko (古金工), which often had a thin layer of black lacquer applied.^{1,2} The overall shape or *gata* (形) of *Ko-Tôshô tsuba* will be round, oval, or different variations of the cross, *mokko* (本瓜). The plate is characteristically very thin with a thickness ranging from 2.0 to 3.5 mm. The color of the iron patina ranges from black to a bluish-black in color. In determining the age of *Ko-Tôshô tsuba* it is necessary to carefully examine the shape, thickness, design, and color of the iron. All extant examples are unsigned, *mumei* (無銘). *Ko-Tôshô tsuba* will have smaller, more abstract openwork, with age appropriate wear and pitting to the surface.³

Figure 1 displays a *Ko-Tôshô tsuba* from my personal collection, intended for a low-ranking foot soldier's *uchigatana*. Measurements are 6.1 cm wide by 6.5 cm high. The thickness at the rim is 3.0 mm and 2.5 mm at the center. One must keep in mind that the average blade length of an *uchigatana* at this time was only about 30.5 cm.¹ The small negative silhouette openwork is a bottle gourd, *hyotan* (瓢箪). The shape of the tsuba is six sided, referred to as *mutsu-mokko-gata* (六本瓜形).

A. Omote (表)



B. Ura (裏)



Figure 1: *Ko-Tôshô tsuba* example with bottle gourd openwork design dating from the middle *Muromachi* Period (circa 1400-1500).

Figure 2 is another *Ko-Tôshô* from my collection. The *ko-sukashi* design is of a war fan or *gunbai* (軍配). A very similar tsuba in terms of design and characteristics of the iron can be found in Sasano's final book [Japanese Sword Guards: Masterpieces from The Sasano Collection](#) page 48. I date this *Ko-Tôshô* to around the same time as *Sasano* dates his: the middle *Muromachi* (1400-1500).⁴

A. Omote (表)



B. Ura (裏)



Figure 2: Ko-Tôshô tsuba with openwork design of a war fan, dating from the middle *Muromachi* (circa 1400-1500). The measurements are 8.05 cm round with a thickness of 3.0 mm at the rim and 3.2 mm at the center of the tsuba.

Historical Background of *Tôshô Tsuba*

The formal history of the *Tôshô tsuba* (刀匠鑄) is regarded as starting during the late *Muromachi* Period (1500-1573). This was also the same time the long and short sword combination, often associated with the classical *Samurai*, referred to literally as big and small in Japanese *dai sho* (大小) was first developed. Production continued, sometimes by true swordsmiths or their apprentices and other times by professional tsuba makers working in a *Tôshô* style, up until the early part of the *Meiji* Period (明治時代) and the issuance of the *Haitorei* in 1876.

Characteristics of *Tôshô Tsuba*

Generally, *Tôshô tsuba* are similar to their earlier counterparts with the exception of a few important points. The thickness of the center of the tsuba is often greater than the thickness of the rim. The negative openwork designs are generally more complex and naturalistic in form. These more complex designs are generally facilitated by thicker plates and softer more homogenous iron. The natural hammer marks of the swordsmith often found in *Ko-Tôshô tsuba* are sometimes replaced by either a smooth surface or a surface with some type chisel carving of a decorative nature. The overall shape or *gata* (形) of *Tôshô tsuba* will range from round, oval, or different variations of the clove like shape referred to as *mokko* (本瓜). The rim of the plate is often round but in late examples the shape of the rim can be square. Another observable change in *Tôshô tsuba* is the introduction of signatures or *mei* (銘) of the *tsuba* maker in works produced from the middle *Edo* Period (江戸時代) (1670-1776) onwards. Why there still would be a need for such relatively simple *Tôshô tsuba*, in a time of more decorative tsuba such as the different *kinko* groups and other schools such as *Akasaka* (赤坂), *Higo* (肥後), and *Shoami* (正阿弥) to name a few, is an important question. The best answer to this question, which is anecdotal at best, is that many swords had multiple sets of fittings, *koshirae* (拵), used for different social settings.¹

The first *Tôshô tsuba* example I will be presenting is an early example from my collection. This *Tôshô tsuba*, based upon the dark color of the patina and application of surface carvings, is from the earliest period of production of *Tôshô tsuba*, the late *Muromachi* Period (1500-1568). This type of surface carving isn't observed on earlier *Ko-Tôshô tsuba*. The small negative openwork *ko-sukashi* is of a Japanese style Buddhist stupa or pagoda: *gorinto* (五輪塔). The surface carving is referred to as *amida yasuri* (阿弥陀鑿) and represents the Amida Buddha's aura radiating out to a world in suffering.⁶

A. Omote (表)



B. Ura (裏)



Figure 3. *Tôshô tsuba* with the ko-sukashi design of a Buddhist pagoda or stupa. The measurements are 5.8 x 6.7 cm with a average thickness at the rim of 3.2 mm.

This next *Tôshô tsuba* example from my collection dates a bit later. The larger overall size and thickness of the plate with bold but simplistic openwork design is the reason I place this tsuba during the *Azuchi-Momoyama* Period (安土桃山時代) (1569 – 1615). The openwork is of twin dragon

leashes referred to as *nihon hikiryō* (二本引き竜) in Japanese. There is an interesting Japanese proverb in regards to this specific design: "If one were to lead a dragon, it would be of the utmost concern to keep a considerable distance."⁴ An alternative interpretation of the openwork is two cross measuring sticks: *nihon shaku* (二本尺). The iron has a characteristic bluish-black color. Lamination fold lines can be seen intermixed with the hammer marks leftover from the iron forging of the tsuba plate. The rim shows a few elongated projections of higher carbon iron referred to as *tekkotsu* (鉄骨). The term literally translates as "iron bones".¹

A. Omote (表)



B. Ura (裏)



Figure 4: This *Tōshō tsuba* measurements are 8.4 X 8.4 cm with a thickness at the rim of 3.0 mm and 3.4 mm towards the center.

The final two examples, both from my collection, are *Edo Period* (江戸時代) (1616-1868) *Tōshō tsuba*. Generally the iron in these younger *Tōshō tsuba* is more homogenous and doesn't display the individualist character that earlier *Tōshō* and *Ko-Tōshō* had. Often the designs were more complex and naturalistic compared to the earlier *tsuba* already discussed.

The first *Edo Period* example dates from the early Edo, 1616-1670. The elongated *kozuka hitsu-ana* (筭櫃穴) is a characteristic of *Tōshō tsuba* from the Muromachi Peirod all the way up until the early part of the Edo period. The open work design is simple but more naturalistic then the earlier

Tôshô tsuba. The greater thickness of the plate and hammer marks on the surface are more refined due to the more homogenous iron. The rim displays a few fine granular iron bones: *tekkotsu*. This work, like earlier *Tôshô* works, is unsigned by the maker. The small openwork design, *Ko-sukashi* (小透), of this tsuba is the cherry blossom, *sakura* (桜), and is likely a family crest: *kamon* (家文). The crest might be for the Sakurai, Yoshida, or one of the many other *samurai* families that used a cherry blossom during this early part of the Edo Period.⁴

A. Omote (表)



B. Ura (裏)



Figure 5: The measurements for this *Tôshô tsuba* are 7.5 X 6.6 cm with the thickness at the rim of 3.6 mm and 4.0 mm towards the center.

The final example is a classic late *Tôshô tsuba* from the middle part of the Edo Period (1670-1770). This example, like most *tsuba* in general from this time period, is signed by the maker. The signature, *mei* (銘), from right to left, top to bottom of the *nakago hitsu-ana* is: *Sagami (no) Kami* (相模守), *Yoshimichi* (義道). This swordsmith, who worked in the city of *Kyoto* ((京都) in *Yamashiro* Province (山城國), also made *tsuba* in the *Tôshô* style. Two generations are recorded in both W. Hawley's Japanese Swordsmiths (First Edition ID# Y0920) and R. E. Haynes' Index of Japanese Sword Fittings and Associated Artists (ID# H 11843.0).^{7,8} This *tsuba* was made by the second generation, who signed his work using *Sagami (no) Kami* (相模守) circa 1750. The plate surface shows no hammer marks, only a polished smooth surface, *migaki-ji* (磨地). The rim is square in shape, unlike earlier *Tôshô tsuba* which are normally rounded. The rim does not show any *tekkotsu* (iron bones) but does show some long lamination folds, with one coming to the surface on the *ura* (裏) side. This indicates that the plate of the *tsuba* was forged much like the steel of a sword blade. Based upon the large size of the *nakago-ana* and overall weight of the *tsuba* I think this was likely mounted on a *katana* (刀) or *o-wakazashi* (大小刀), even with the diameter of the *tsuba* being relatively small.

A. Omote (表)



B. Ura (裏)



Figure 6: The measurements for this *tsuba* are 7.0 cm X 6.5 cm. The thickness at the rim is 5.6 mm at rim and 5.7 mm towards the center.

Conclusion

I have discussed some examples, detailing the evolution of the *Tôshô tsuba* group, ranging from middle *Muromachi* Period (1400-1500) during the early development of the *uchigatana* up until the mid Edo Period (1670-1770) when the *daisho*, either in the field or at formal social occasions, was primarily used not as a weapon but as a status symbol of the *Samurai* class. I hope this article is an interesting and helpful introduction to *Tôshô tsuba* for students and connoisseurs of the Japanese sword.

References

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