

“Size Doesn’t Matter!!.”

Perhaps one of the most used terms in the language, covering a multitude of occasions. Regrettably when discussing Japanese swords size is a major factor affecting a blades desirability, value and saleability. But as with many other aspects of Nihon-to should one accept the quoted rule without question? To help decide I have listed a few thoughts below. To assist in appraising the importance of size I have also outlined in brief the history and development of blades and the stated intelligence regarding size and value. These points are generalities and as always there are exceptions to the general rules. The comparison in values is based on comparing a Daito and wakazashi for example, by the same or equal smith or school and in the same condition.

1. History:

1-1 The Heian Period

Tachi were long and slender, typically 75-80cm in length. Warriors also carried a small companion sword or “waist sword” of 15 to 30cm.

1-2 Kamakura Period

In the early Kamakura blades were similar to those of the Heian. However by the Mid-Kamakura they became broader with much less narrowing towards the Kissaki. They were altogether more robust. Tanto of Hira Zukuri form and exhibiting uchizori were produced with many superb examples being made.

As the Kamakura period proceeded blades became even larger with a more even curve.

1-3 Muromachi Period

As the style of fighting changed so the size and shape of blades were modified to meet the needs of the fighter. Many swords with a sugata of around 2 Shaku (60cm) were made. Thus the uchigatana form was developed. Tanto were produced at 30cm in Hira Zukuri.

In addition a shorter companion sword identical in form to the long sword but substantially shorter became more commonly worn. This was the side sword or “wakazashi”.

1-4 the Edo period

By the early Edo period the daisho (long and short) pair of swords had become established and was standard wear for Samurai. By Law only samurai were entitled to carry the long sword (exceeding 60cm). Merchants, physicians etc were allowed to wear daggers for personal protection or carry wakazashi when travelling.

In 1638 the government imposed limits on the size of different types of swords. Initially the maximum length for a katana was set at 2 Shaku 8 or 9 Sun (80cm) and wakazashi at 51.4cm.

This was later relaxed slightly to 87cm and 54cm respectively.

The above appears to be a very precise progression from one state to another. Needless to say the reality was undoubtedly much less clear. Through out the Koto period some samurai carried a shorter companion sword the Ko-tachi as a secondary weapon to their long fighting sword which one could argue was a form of wakazashi. In the late Muromachi many continued to carry Tanto as a second blade rather than the more fashionable wakazashi. There is still some debate as to the true purpose and value of a wakazashi. One of the most plausible descriptions suggests that the Long sword would be used for fighting out of doors while the prime function for the wakazashi was for personal protection whilst inside.

By the Mid Edo period the form size and even the type of mounting was clearly prescribed by the shogunate (although in the latter case particularly subject to local variation) Size and shape underwent little change thereafter. Although there were considerable aesthetic development as smiths continued to produce more complex and showy hamon.

2 Value

The factors governing value are: quality, rarity, condition and age. The order of these factors is up to the individual, although age alone is no indicator of value. I believe the record auction price for a sword sold outside Japan remains with the Kiyomaru blade made in the mid 1800s sold from the Festing collection for in excess of US\$ 400k.

At the time of the sale this blade was just 150 years old. It was however of supreme quality and Kiyomaru was very short lived resulting in his work being extremely rare. Having said the above there are published guidelines for relative values.

I have summarised below some of the quotations from the great and good regarding what one should collect. As you would expect experts view differ but I hope the list below is reasonably representative.

1. "The most desirable blades are Koto, Ubu, signed and in good condition."

The general view is the sword making reached its zenith in the Heian and Kamakura, therefore the quality of these blades is second to none. The changes in fighting practice and laws restricting size means that few blades from this period remain unaltered. This makes Ubu examples very rare.

2. "If you can't buy a signed ubu koto blade go for a good Suriage Koto blade."

Many Japanese collectors concentrate only on Koto blades keeping the demand in Japan relatively high. Despite the overall economic climate Koto blades in good condition generally find their way back in to Japanese collections.

3. "If you must buy Shinto blades buy Ubu signed Katana."

Not as desirable as Koto but these blades were the exclusive property of the warrior classes throughout the Edo period. They do therefore command a premium.

4. “Shin-Shinto Katana are of a higher quality than Shinto swords.”

There are those that argue Shin Shinto smiths were more skilled than Shinto and were trying to emulate the best of Koto. They are also rarer being produced for a relatively short period. There are also those who believe Shin-Shinto swords are as exciting as a yard of pump water.

Again I think it will depend more on who made it and condition

5. “Do not buy shortened or unsigned Shinto Katana”.

There is little justification in terms of usage for shortening a Shinto Katana. This has a significant impact on a blades desirability and value.

6. “The only reason to buy a wakazashi is to complete a Daisho” and my favourite
“If you collect mainly Wakazashi then you aren’t a true Nihon-to collector”

Wakazashi are common. They were also carried by non warrior classes which reduces their nobility and desirability. It has even been suggested that smiths put less effort in to making Wakazashis for merchants putting their best efforts in to making long swords for samurai.

7. “Unsigned Wakazashi are common and very cheap in Japan”

The least desirable of all. Unless it has some great merit mumei wakazashi should be avoided.

Not mentioned anywhere above are Tanto, Naginata or Yari. Naginata and Yari are the bottom of the line, least collected, least well made and cheapest. I have no doubt that those amongst the readership who specialise in these weapons will even now be putting pen to paper in their defence and quoting examples of exquisite pole arm blades. Don’t do it. I agree with you, there are some absolutely stunning examples of the smiths art demonstrated in Yari, Naginata and Nagamaki. Some argue the skill required to successfully harden the edges of a Yari far exceeds those needed for a sword. This may be true, but with some noted exceptions Pole arms are not as sought after, collected or valued as are swords.

Tanto on the other hand are very desirable and win on several levels; firstly they are associated with the nobility, they are rare and, most importantly some of the finest examples of the sword-smiths work survive as Tanto.

Having now offended everyone except those who collect Ubu signed Koto long swords I will return to the main theme of this paper which is to question whether the obsession with size and the considerable difference in pricing is truly justified. Or are we all guilty of following the hype and as a result missing out on the opportunity to study some fine examples of the sword smiths’ art?

My own collection comprises of about 60% wakazashi so based on the quotation above I am only half interested in Nihon-To.

Some while ago I specialised in Hizen swords (like so many others) and those amongst you who share this habit will know too well the extremely high prices Hizen Katana command. The majority of my Hizen collection is represented by good wakazashi. I could not have considered replicating this collection with Katana. It would offend my

Bank Manager, my wife and my Socialist ethic. Put simply I couldn't afford it. I could, however, afford to buy, on occasion, work by mainline Tadayoshi smiths and Masahiro. I would argue very strongly that the workmanship in these swords is every bit as good as that seen in their katana. Based on this I would like to challenge some of the quotations above. Particularly those which so easily dismiss shorter swords as in some way sub standard. Taking some of the points made above:

I believe that it is beyond argument that the finest Japanese swords were made during the Koto period and that good examples of Koto workmanship are extremely desirable. The key word here is GOOD. The vast majority of extant Koto blades are not good examples. Centuries of use, alteration and polishing have greatly changed their shape and eliminated much of their detail. It is very difficult to appreciate the finer points of a blade that is tired and with poor or at least not original shape. Not surprisingly the vast majority of koto blades outside of Japan fall in to this category. Likewise a much used or abused Shinto Katana cannot show the finer points of a smiths work.

Returning more specifically to the arguments relating to size. The summary of the above views is I believe that Wakazashi are not worth the consideration of the serious collector as:

A) The majority were made for merchants and therefore lack the noble heritage of the Katana.

B) The Smiths were less conscientious when making swords for merchants

C) They are relatively common.

Taking each of these in turn,

A) The majority were made for merchants.

Based on the current NBTHK description to be a Katana a blade has to exceed 2 Shaku (60cm). If it falls below this it is a wakazashi.

It is documented that in 1638 the longest permissible size for a wakazashi was 51.4cm. I have recently studied a wakazashi by the second generation Tadahiro made around 1655. It is Ubu and 55cm long. It exceeds the maximum permissible length for a wakazashi and if made for a merchant would have been illegal. But according to current criteria it is a wakazashi. It is my belief that this was made as a primary fighting sword for a samurai. The workmanship is exactly what you would expect from this well documented smith and is to my biased mind superb. Were it 5cm. longer it would command a price 2 or three times higher and I could not have afforded to buy it.

B) Smiths put less effort in to Wakazashi.

Based on the Hizen wakazashi I have seen in a number of collections and works displayed in various museums I can see no evidence for this.

It is worth remembering at this point where the wealth resided in the Edo period. A rich merchant could afford a much superior blade to that available to an impoverished Samurai. Also knowing the spiritual attitude of a smith to his vocation it would seem very unlikely that he'd risk his reputation or that of his schools by putting less than his best efforts in to the swords he made.

C) They are common

Yes they are. There are more wakazashi than anything else. And a lot of those are unsigned and lack any great merit. However there are very fine blades in superb condition whose only failing is that they are less than 60cm long.

Conclusion

It is right that when studying Nihon-To one should take great notice of those who have studied before, have gained experience and understand the subject better than you do. This does not mean that one has to follow doctrine blindly and without asking “why?” More important is that one should not be fooled by pretension and misguided snobbery. Whilst it is right to try and follow the guidance of those with greater knowledge it is foolhardy to the point of stupidity to accept the blanket dismissal of a large part of history based on a sweeping generality. There are very fine examples of the sword smiths’ art which exist as wakazashi both in original form and as Suriage long swords. If one chooses to ignore these blades they run the risk of missing the opportunity of owning and studying the work of top rated smiths in pristine condition. Whilst I accept that there are many wakazashi on the market would do nothing to enhance a collection there are also excellent and affordable pieces which will give many hours of pleasure in study. These deserve to be preserved as a part of the long Nihon-To heritage.