Preface to the 2016 Edition

This article first appeared in the Kokusai Tosogukai 9th International Convention and Exhibition Catalog published in 2013, and is reprinted here in its entirety. A few readers have asked, “why are there no pictures”? This article is intended as a guide in developing a critical thought process – it provides questions to ponder while examining a tsuba. Keying off of images rather than principles is both misleading and limiting, because it is not possible visually present all the component variations and combinations that determine quality in tsuba. In any event, I hope you find the following useful in the progression of your studies.

Tim Evans

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Assessing Quality in Iron Tsuba

By Tim Evans

The tsuba fancier (tsubaka) has a long tradition in both Japan and the West. To collect, study and appreciate tsuba is a very rewarding pastime as there are literally thousands of tsuba and a myriad of variations to investigate. So why study quality in tsuba? As a tsuba can be an important art object, one can learn fine aesthetics and appreciation from viewing the best examples. And by studying quality in tsuba, the tsubaka has the opportunity to learn accurate aesthetic judgment, understand the peak artistic accomplishments of this art form, and can then comparatively evaluate the quality of the other tsuba encountered.

For the occidental tsubaka, we have two main sources in English on the topic of quality: Dr. Kazutaro Torigoe¹ and Masayuki Sasano². The underlying theme in both Torigoe and Sasano is that the Craft of the tsuba is the foundation for the Art of the tsuba. As with Torigoe and Sasano’s works, the focus here will be on tsuba made by superior professional tsuba smiths (tsubako). Although Dr. Torigoe admits some soft metal tsuba were made by tsubako, the comments below will refer to the characteristics of iron tsuba. The term iron will be used generally throughout, although some iron tsuba are technically made of steel. High quality tsuba material is most often steel, as it must have some carbon in it to get the crystal structure that is the source of the beauty within this material.

A high quality work of art will be comprised of strong fundamental elements³, so the initial step of qualitative analysis is to look at how the tsuba is made by evaluating the material, construction and form (the Craft). After assessing the fundamental quality of the tsuba, the next step is to look at the quality of the design and decoration (the Art). From a qualitative perspective, the “kantei points” that identify a type of tsuba (quantitative analysis) are not important. Instead we need to learn to see the power, vigor and intensity that define a masterpiece.
The Craft - Material, Construction and Form

Material – Color
An important clue to evaluating the material of the tsuba is the color, which is clean, clear and bright in a quality iron tsuba and not muddy or dull. The color should be blue-black, purple-black or reddish-russet. The color comes from the oxide layer formed on top of the base metal. Sasano⁴ describes the desirable oxide as “black rust”, which is fine-grained and forms a stable, uniform surface. The undesirable type he calls “red rust”, which is coarse-grained, flaky, dull, and causes pits to form in the base metal. The objective of iron tsuba care is to reduce and prevent red rust and to increase and preserve black rust. Red rust forming on or within the black rust of a quality tsuba can turn the color muddy and dull. The depth of the color is affected by the optical properties of the surface texture, the material crystalline structure, and the depth of the oxide that is built up over time. These factors create what is known as the “flavor” of the patina.

Tsuba with poor quality iron do not form an attractive black rust layer, but stay muddy and dull in appearance despite improvement efforts. The experience of caring for iron tsuba will provide the knowledge to judge the color or the potential color of other iron tsuba. Color is very important to the quality experience and it is necessary to understand that color is reflected light. One component of the color is the desirable oxide developed by the base metal, and the other is how the texture and protective coatings affect light reflection.

Material – Texture
The next factor in evaluating material is the texture, or quality of the surface. In addition to controlling the reflection of light, texture can also unify the design and create visual interest and movement.

Texture can come from:
- The crystalline structure of the iron
- The forge welding and folding of the iron
- Heat treating of the iron
- Finishing techniques such as hammering, stamping and punching, filing and polishing
- Chemical treatments such as acid etching and patination
- Protective coatings such as lacquer, waxes and oils

Texture overlaps into the Construction area because many texture effects are due to the skill of the smith as well as how the material reacts to being tooled.

Construction
There is a strong relationship between Japanese swords and quality iron tsuba in the way that both are constructed. The three main areas of study for Japanese swords, - forging (jigane), firing (yakite) and form (sugata), are also useful divisions to study the construction and form of tsuba. The qualitative analysis approach to tsuba is not very different from learning to distinguish between a great sword blade, a good one and a poor one.
Forging – The construction of a quality tsuba is like the *jigane* on a sword and the same quality criteria apply: Consistency, integrity, control, energy, and harmony. The *jigane* in a tsuba may be more or less visible (coarse grained vs. fine grained). The quality of the *jigane* in an iron tsuba is apparent in the vitality of the surface and the color.

Firing or heat treating – The use of heat in the forging process, and also to adjust the final hardness (if steel) and texture of the plate. Heat-treating affects the crystal structure of steel and is similar to the *yakite* process in sword making. Heat-treating can create a number of surface effects on the texture of an iron or steel tsuba, such as iron bones (*tekkotsu*), and also light reflective effects that are like *nie* and *nioi*. These textures cause visible movement and visual depth within the steel and can create visual interest, tension, and vitality in the surface.

**Form**
The tsuba, as a component of a koshirae, is subject to form constraints due to its function as a sword guard. There are size and weight limits, there can be no sharp projections and no weak parts that can bend or break. The tsuba must also complement the movement of the sword while in use.

Tsuba occupy space three dimensionally and so have sculptural form. The quality factors of the form are how well it commands space, the distribution of mass, and the distribution of positive and negative spaces. Form relates to the idea of *sugata* in sword study and is created in the same way as in sword making to create harmonious shapes and volumes\(^5\). Form overlaps into design, as design controls the contours of the various shapes; the main shapes requiring attention are the outside shape of the tsuba, and the shapes of the washer stand (*seppadai*) and implement holes (*hitsuana*). The proportions of the shapes and the relationship in space between these shapes are another area of critical examination.

**The Art - Design and Decoration**

**Design**
The design of the tsuba refers to its graphic composition comprising of lines, edges and spaces. The design will include the outside contour of the tsuba as well as any positive or negative shapes caused by piercing the plate (*sukashi*). *Sukashi*, however, has a structural impact on the tsuba and ideally preserves the integrity of the plate. Quality factors in design are:

- Shapes should be strong, clear, harmonious, logical and proportional as opposed to clumsy, busy, cluttered and confused. Shapes should have presence, energy and articulation. Here you can refer to books and images of tsuba for learning excellence (at least in two dimensions) for shape, proportion and composition
- Linear elements control the visual direction, movement and speed. Line in tsuba can be formed by the edges of *sukashi*, or by carving, or by adding inlay and onlay
- Better designs have a point of interest. Designs that are too uniform lack energy and focus
- The tsuba should appear visually centered and stable and can be either symmetrically
or asymmetrically balanced in its composition. Balance can be sublety manipulated to provide a sense of motion to the composition.

Decoration

The decoration on a tsuba provides the detail in the design. The quality aspects of the decoration are evaluated by the same visual arts criteria, as drawing, painting and sculpture, so education in art and design generally, will be of help in evaluating the design and decoration of a tsuba.

There is a craft element to the decoration that is different from the crafting of the tsuba base plate. The quality of these decorative additions is to be critically examined as well, particularly if they are of different materials from the base plate.

- Inlay and onlay (nunome) – Quality of the material and color, quality of the craftsmanship, consistency and appropriate expression in the image
- Carving and etching – consistency and appropriate expression in the line
- Punching – the quality of how the punch marks are distributed in a pattern, consistency and/or variation of the impressions

The Synthesis of Craft and Art

Synthesis deals with the viewer’s perception of the tsuba’s overall visual impact. There exists a truly intimidating array of factors to consider and correlate with one another; however, in general, we are looking for appropriate fit and functionality as a component of the sword, strength (both visual and physical), vitality, liveliness, movement, energy, depth of feeling, visual and emotional cogency, and the overall impact resulting from the synergetic integration of the Craft and the Art.

How to Learn

The best way (and traditional way) is to find the opportunities to study top quality tsuba in hand. Quality is relative; you have to know what the best quality looks like in order to make judgments on other tsuba (is the tsuba relatively Better or Less Good than others you have seen?) Akiyama Kyusaku had a method for developing this critical vision that I highly recommend. It is good practice to relentlessly rank a group of tsuba from Better to Less Good. These comparisons can be done either unmounted or mounted on a sword (koshirae); the resulting ranking may be different, however. This ranking is easier to do initially if limited to a type or style or time period. Start with one style of tsuba and then learn others. Once you get experienced you should be able to sort out and rank the quality of a group of tsuba on their relative (Better to Less Good) merits. A more advanced approach is to grade tsuba into Poor, Average, Superior and Outstanding groupings. Experience and knowledge of the relative differences between these categories is required, however.

How to Look at and Evaluate an Iron Tsuba for Quality

- Look at the metal (if the condition is poor then you may need to find a spot that shows the true color and texture). Evaluate the quality of the color and texture of the iron. Is it
high quality material?

- Look at the construction and evaluate the consistency, energy and creativity shown in the forging, heat-treating, hammering and carving. The skill of the smithing must be outstanding. Is it well made?

- Look at the sculptural form of the tsuba. Look at the distribution of mass (nikuoki), particularly the progression from the center to the outside edge. Look at how the face of the tsuba transitions to the rim. Look at the balance of the shapes such as the relationship of the seppadai to the outside shape of the tsuba. Is the form well composed and harmonious?

- Look at the shapes and the composition of the design. Does the tsuba demonstrate a high-class and dignified style and taste?

- Look at the decoration and evaluate the quality of workmanship and composition in the carving, inlay and onlay and other surface treatment used to decorate the tsuba. How well does it complement the form of the tsuba?

- Look at the Art vs. Craft balance. The Japanese have a highly developed sense of aesthetic proportion and have an extensive vocabulary that dates back to at least the 16th century. Can you apply some of these judgments to the tsuba you study?

- Look at the overall impression of the tsuba. A useful Japanese word is haki, which can be translated as power, ambition, unbridled spirit, vitality, aliveness, vigor, and spirit of creativity. Does the tsuba reach this level of quality?

How Should Quality Observations be Applied?

Quality is not to be confused with market value, because that depends on its condition, size, rarity, type, the current collecting fads, and the presence of papers and provenance. Quality can however, be a factor in a value assessment. Quality is also not a kantei process, but could provide support for kantei, as knowing the “hand” (teguse) of the tsubako will help you to discriminate the genuine from the copy.

Although in qualitative analysis we look at various components of the tsuba, the total quality is experienced as a multidimensional whole, by how all the aspects work together and reinforce each other. Perception of quality in iron tsuba is an educated emotional response and is not intuitive. The best tsubako expressed great depth of feeling in their work in very subtle and complex ways, but you must learn to see it.

Notes

1. Dr. Kazutaro Torigoye discusses tsuba aesthetics and quality factors in Tsuba Geijutsu Ko (Kazutaro Torigoye, 1960). Tsuba Geijutsu Ko was translated into English and annotated by Robert Haynes and published as Tsuba: An Aesthetic Study (Northern California Japanese Sword Club, 2000). These comments can be found in the Preface, pp. iv-vi, and in the Introduction, pp. vii-xiii.

3. Dr. Torigoye’s insight on the fundamental qualities to be discovered in fine tsuba:

The fundamental point of the tsuba is to have a good base plate. To have a proper plate, choice of metal, tempering (heat treating), appropriate shape, and surface finish must be suitable to its function as a tsuba. The ability of the tsubako was great in the intrinsic value of the plate. In the finest masters can be seen the great feeling and depth of understanding in the media. This feeling goes far beyond the mere surface decoration. It is to be found deep in the metal itself; in the forging, hammering, and the ability of the artist as a smith. No amount of decoration will hide a poorly conceived plate.

(Haynes, *Tsuba: An Aesthetic Study*, p. vii)

4. Surface color is determined primarily by the chemical composition of the material. Although the color may be altered by chemical patination, the natural oxide color of the metal will often reassert itself in time if the surface receives proper care. For more discussion on iron oxide, see Sasano's, "Black Rust and Red Rust," in “Appendix C: Care and Preservation of Iron Sword Guards,” p. 284.

5. Walter Compton addresses the qualities of sword shaping in his article, “The Shape of Things,” in Thomas Buttweiler (ed.), *The Book of the Sword* (Nihonto Kemma, 1979), p. 49:

The curves are of various and changing radii, sections of parabolic lines and surfaces, and yet so harmoniously combined that no matter how one may examine them, at no point is there a break in the harmony of pattern or harsh deviation; yet all this has been accomplished by simple hand work of hammer, scraper and stone, guided by the eye, the hand and the instinct of the artist. Indeed, when one does see a breach of harmony, it is usually the surest indication that that the man who made it was of lesser competence.

6. One reason why analysis of the Craft and the Art are separated is that the plate maker and the decorator may not be the same person. On a decorated iron tsuba, you could be looking at the collaborative work of two or more people. Dr. Torigoye discusses the distinction between form and decoration:

The first essential of the tsuba is its artistic character; the shape, taste of the metal (appearance developed by the quality of the web, forging, and coloring during the years since its creation), variation of the web, structure of seppa-dai, hitsu-ana, and mimi. The artistic character indicates the true meaning of tsuba art, namely, it contains the first artistic value. The area of the second artistic value encompasses the design, inlay, carving, openwork, and other decoration. Even though the first value predominates, the tsuba must have harmony, contrast, and aesthetic composition when the second value is introduced.

(Haynes, p. vii)
7. Robert Haynes' article, “Masterpieces,” in the journal Toran (Northern California Japanese Sword Club, 1993) describes Akiyama's life-long effort to refine his vision for the qualities inherent in a masterpiece tsuba:

One solution to what is a masterpiece was formed by Akiyama Kyusaku (1843-1936). During his years of research and collecting he would study the tsuba in his small collection by hanging them on nails hammered into the post of his tokonoma. About ten or twelve at a time. As he wrote or worked near by he would observe and study these tsuba each for its own merits and as a group. When he found one wanting in aesthetics or any other quality he would remove it and put another in its place. By the time he died, at age 93, he still had about ten tsuba on the post. As far as he was concerned they represented the ten best tsuba he had owned in his many long years of collecting. These were not the only tsuba that Akiyama studied during his lifetime. When he died he had a collection of over four thousand rubbings of tsuba he had seen.

8. Tsuba observed as a stand-alone object of contemplation is different from tsuba viewed mounted on a sword, as an integrated weapon component. These are different experiences but equally valid. A great tsuba can excel at both functions, so a tsuba should be evaluated both ways, mounted and un-mounted. Care needs to be taken that the koshirae used to test the tsuba is an appropriate size.

9. “Too much art is decadence, too little art is barbarism.” - Shozo Sato, Tea Master. On the decadent end of the spectrum there are highly decorative tsuba that were never intended to be mounted on a sword; but only to be displayed in a box! On the other hand there are tsuba that, although functional, are only crude examples of the blacksmith's craft. As Mr. Sato alludes to, there is a balance point between these two extremes.

10. For a discussion of the Momoyama Period Japanese aesthetic discrimination as developed by the Tea Masters (or suki masters), see Michael Cooper's translation of Arta de Cha by Joao Rodrigues (in Japan from 1577 to 1610) in “Early Europeans and Tea”:

From the practice of observing the due relation and proportion of these things, the suki masters obtain a high degree of knowledge of these things. If this is lacking, they cannot discern the hidden quality of things, such as yowai, (feeble, weak); tsuyoi, (strong, stable); katai, too strong (this is a defect); nurui, (tepid, lifeless); kedakai, (distinguished, dignified).

(Paul Varley and Kumakura Isao (eds.), Tea in Japan, University of Hawaii Press, 1989, p129)

The development of taste requires both context and guidance. In regard to tsuba, knowledge of Japanese culture in general, and Buke values and history in particular
are essential to understanding their aesthetics and cultural expression. Commentary in books and literature can help, but feedback from more advanced collectors is invaluable in learning what is good taste in regard to what strength, clarity, elegance, dignity, vitality, etc., look like when expressed in tsuba.