

The Influence of the Yamashiro Tradition on the history of the Japanese Sword

Introduction:

When asked to name the greatest swordsmith or the best school of sword manufacture many students would opt for Masamune and Soshu or one of the Ichimonji groups of Bizen. However in many reference books the work of the Yamashiro tradition is very highly regarded. In fact there are some for whom the art of the Nihon-To reached its zenith in the 13th Century in the work of the Yamashiro Awataguchi School. Their work is elegant and refined, and alongside the work of the Ko-Bizen and Ichimonji Schools it represents a high point of technical innovation and artist design. This view appears to have been supported by the exiled, sword making Emperor, Gotoba who according to Robinson was instructed by perhaps the best Awataguchi smith, Kunihisa, together with Nobufusa of the Fukuoka Ichimonji School. He also had 2 other Awataguchi smiths amongst his 12 named companion smiths. It is also worth remembering that although the origin of the Soshu School is unclear one of the contenders for the title is Awataguchi Kunitsuna. Certainly the first recognised master of Soshu, Shintogo Kunimitsu, has origins firmly in the Awataguchi School.

However as you progress through the history of sword manufacture the Yamashiro tradition seems largely to disappear.

There can be a number of explanations for this happening. These include:

1. Working in the Yamashiro district of Kyoto the majority of the schools customers were courtiers and the nobility of the Kyoto court. They made slim elegantly shaped blades of very subtle form and with a quiet suguha hamon which reflected the supposedly refined taste of their target market.

As power moved from the imperial court to the Shogunate, and as the requirements for swords changed as a result of the attempted Mongol invasions, the gentle Yamashiro sugata gave way to the more robust sugata and flamboyant hamon of Soshu and later the Sue-Seki Mino and Sue-Bizen traditions.

2. At the end of the Koto period as the Empire became more peaceful, many smiths trained in the Mino tradition travelled throughout the country. There has been a theory recently put forward that Mino actually franchised their technology throughout the land sending representative smiths to teach and develop local knowledge in Mino methods. As a result there are few Shinto schools which do not exhibit at least some Mino influence.

3. As Samurai turned increasingly from war to the aesthetic so the shape and construction changed further with groups such as the Ishido School attempting to combine the gorgeous choji hamon of the Ichimonji with the preferred Kanbun- Shinto shape which

was better suited to the “fast draw ”individual combat which was a prevalent requirement of the time.

As can be seen from above in the changing fashion and physical requirements appear to leave little place for the quiet Yamashiro style.

However closer study shows that this is not the case. In the following I have tried to identify the progression of the Yamashiro tradition from the mid Kamakura period to the end of the shogunate. In doing this I have illustrated a number of sample blades from throughout this 550 year manufacturing period to attempt to illustrate the influence, consistency and the differences which occurred during this extensive timeframe. All of the examples used have been authenticated by the NBTHK.

The Progression of the Yamashiro tradition:

In most references the earliest Yamashiro School identified was that of Sanjo Munechika. Munechika’s swords are very highly regarded; one of them is listed amongst the 5 greatest swords of Japan. The Sanjo School was active from the 10th century in Yamashiro and exhibited some of the characteristics of what was to become the Yamashiro tradition.

In the Kamakura period the Awataguchi School came in to being and established what is recognised as the true Yamashiro tradition. They developed a beautiful tight hada described as nashiji-hada which is recognised as being of the finest quality. The tanto of Yoshimitsu are regarded as some of the finest ever made.

From the mid Kamakura the Rai School became active. Their work style is similar to that of the Awataguchi (although slightly inferior) but their hada included patches of dark featureless steel known as Rai hada. Rai Kunitoshi produced many excellent tanto and tachi and is representative of early Rai style. Later Rai smiths such as Kunitsugu show Soshu influence in their work, particularly sugata which becomes grander and the hamon which becomes more complex.

Also during the mid Kamakura a Yamato smith named Hiromura set up the Enju School in Higo.

Hiromura is said to be Rai Kuniyuki’s grandson. It was Hiromura’s son Kunimura who established the Enju style which is very close to that of the Rai-School. In fact there many examples of o-suriage blades which have at different times been attributed to both Rai and Enju work. The Enju School was active to the end of the Muromachi period.

In the latter part of the Kamakura through the Nambokucho period the Mihara School was also active. Although the schools origins are firmly based in the Yamato tradition there are many examples of ko-Mihara work that bear close resemblance to the work of Ryokai, Rai Kunitoshi’s son.

Moving forward to the Momayama and early Edo Period the work of Umetada Myoju and his school started to reproduce the tight ko-itame hada in an attempt to reproduce Koto Yamashiro hada. During his training with Myoju, Hizen Tadayoshi started to develop the now iconic konuka hada which epitomises Hizen work.

Throughout the Edo period the Hizen School were producing swords which emulated the Rai and Enju schools. Their konuka hada which is rich in ji-nie the nioi based suguha hamon sprinkled with ko-nie and the elegant and definitely unfashionable sugata all hark back to early Yamashiro influence. It has even been suggested that the notoriously thin skin of Hizen swords resulting in core steel appearing on the surface was an attempt to re-create Rai-hada. It has to be said there is an equally strong view that they were just very mean with their jigane!

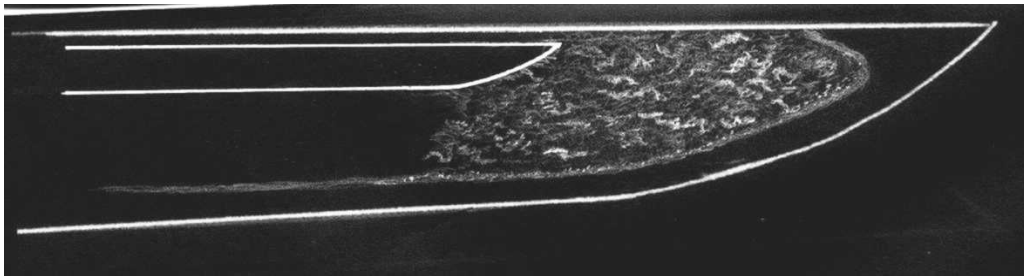
So although at first sight the Yamashiro tradition disappears in the Nambokucho period there is, according to most references, a continuous line of production spanning more than 500 years. The question is then how strong was this influence and how true was the later work to the tradition. Also how does the quality compare?

To conclude this paper I have detailed and illustrated a number of blades ranging from an Awataguchi Tanto (with thanks to Fred Weissberg for an excellent photograph and his permission to use it) through to an 8th generation Tadayoshi blade produced in the 19th century.

The blades illustrated are:

- 1 Awataguchi Tanto
2. O-Suriage Enju Wakazashi
3. Sue-Mihara Tanto
4. Nidai Tadahiro Wakazashi
5. 8th Generation Tadayoshi Wakazashi.

1. Awataguchi Tanto



Of the swords discussed here this is the only one where I did not have access to the blade. The following description is therefore based on a general outline of Awataguchi work combined with what was visible in Fred's photograph.

The Awataguchi School produced consistently high quality blades and as a result have been highly cherished by sword appraisers, collectors and students alike. The shape of their tachi is second to none, they are at the same time elegant and severe, serene but powerful to use the now over used term they are simply "Just Right".

To summarise Awataguchi work:

They produced tachi and tanto. There are many more tanto extant than tachi.

Sugata: Tachi from the early period were of standard form with koshi-zori. Later works have Ikubi kissaki. Tanto were narrow and of standard length with uchi-zori.

Mitsu-mune was common.

Ji-hada: Beautiful tight ko-itame possibly only second to the Sanjo School. The steel colour is bluish black and bright. Also known as nashiji hada, a literal translation is "granular" it is said to look like the granular texture of a pear's flesh. The Ji-hada is covered in bright and beautifully formed ko-nie, chikei and yubashiri.

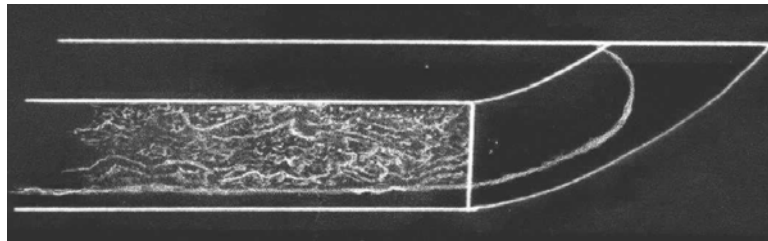
Hamon: Predominantly suguha but with ko-midare and ko-gunome. (Members may remember an early shoji kantei which was a tanto by Yoshimitsu and showed ko-gunome near the ha-machi).

The hamon is composed of a very clear white nioi interspersed with ko-nie. As with the sugata it demonstrates a refined elegance and exceptional control.

Awataguchi blades demonstrate the art of smiths who were in complete control of both material and process.

The remaining swords under discussion have been used to illustrate the presentation of this paper. As mentioned previously they all have certification from the NBTHK confirming the attributions I am using in the following.

2. An Enju blade from the mid Kamakura period.

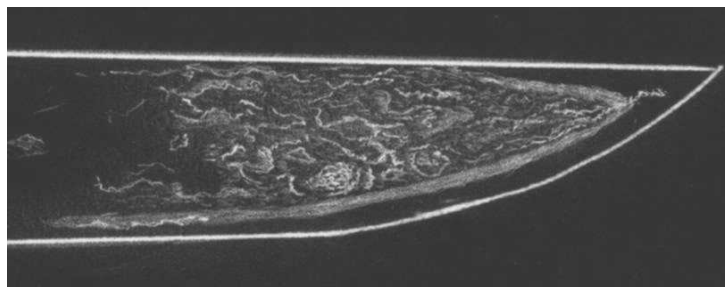
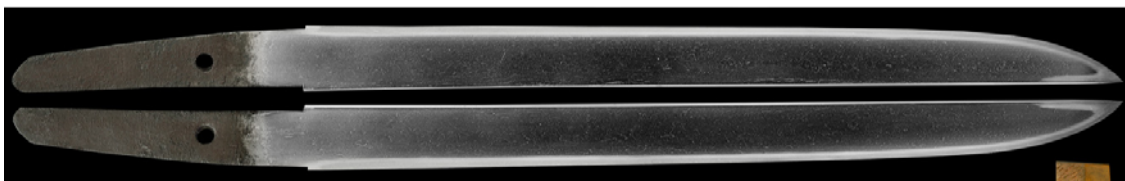


The example sword is an o-suriage tachi blade of wakazashi length. It retains the gentle proportion and sugata of a typical Yamashiro blade of the period. The hamon is suguha with a tight and bright nioi deki interspersed with very fine ko-nie. The boshi is o-maru. Most striking of all about this blade is the absolutely beautiful hada. Of all the swords I have had in my collection over the past 20 years I believe this one is without question the most beautiful. Were it not for the o-maru boshi I am reasonably confident that this would have been attributed to a Rai Smith. Interestingly this blade exhibits neither the dark clear Rai nor dark and less clear Enju hada which is said to characterize their work. What it does have is an extremely tight and beautiful ko-itame hada covered with ji-nie and chikei. The level of control required to produce such an even dispersion of nie is staggering. However this control has not resulted in a stilted or contrived look the whole gives the impression of organic growth rather than forced construction.

The combination of very tight hada and activity within the ji-hada gives the impression of great refinement and quality. The nioi-guchi has very slight undulations. There is considerable activity within the hamon which includes inazuma and kinsuji as well as prolific ko-nie.

This blade is over 600 years old and remains in extremely healthy condition. The fact that as an o-suriage wakazashi it has obtained Tokubetsu-Hozon papers is, I believe, testament to its quality. Having said that it is not typical of other Enju blades I have seen, the hada is tighter and lacks the telltale dark plain patches of Enju hada. I feel that it has more in common with the earlier illustrated Awataguchi Tanto than with either Rai or Enju blades illustrated in the most common references. The main pointer to Enju is, I think, the o-maru boshi which is far more common in Enju work than Rai and which I believe to be almost non-existent in Awataguchi blades.

3. Sue-Mihara Tanto



This blade is papered to the Sue-Mihara School which would date it from the mid to late Muromachi period. It is perhaps a slightly strange blade to include in a discussion about Yamashiro influence work. The Mihara School's foundations are firmly in the Yamato tradition. Their tachi exhibit the high shinogi, the combination of mokume and masame hada and the nie based suguha hamon typically associated with that tradition. However there are a number of examples illustrated on various commercial websites which compare the better work of the Mihara smiths (Including this one) to that of the Rai School and in particular the blades of Rai Kunitoshi's son Ryokai.

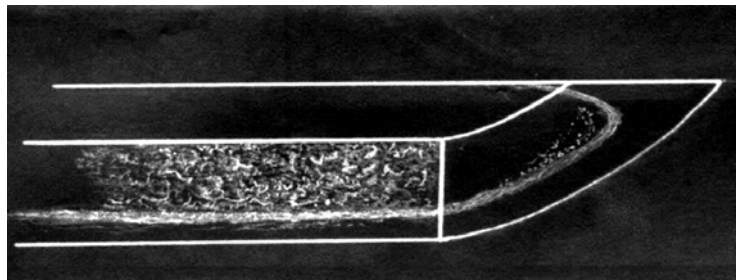
This blade combines a tight but clear fine itame hada with elements of masame and o-hada. There is a lot of activity in the ji-hada with clumps of ji-nie, chikei running throughout its length. The hamon is predominantly Nioi based but includes ko-nie and has inazuma and small lengths of sunagashi running through it. It gives the impression of the nie feathering or crumbling along the border of the hamon. Overall the metal appears harder than in the earlier examples there is a whiteness and some shirake utsuri.

Interestingly there are also small patches of clear dark steel which could well be considered as Rai-hada. Taking these factors in to account it is not difficult to see how this work might be considered as being by Ryokai who was noted for having more masame in his work than other Rai smiths.

I think this sword, while undoubtedly showing its Yamato heritage also exhibits strong Yamashiro influence. This suggests at some point in the schools history one or more of their leading smiths were exposed to smiths of the Rai School.

The first three blades span 300 years between the 13th and 16th century. The last two blades were made in the 17th and 19th century by smiths of the same school but 6 generations apart.

4. Wakazashi by Nidai Tadahiro.



The example blade is a long (53.6cm) wakazashi signed Omi Daijo Fujiwara Tadahiro. The style of mei dates the sword to around 1670. There is perhaps more written in English about the Hizen School than any other school of the Shinto Period. Their work is not uncommon and is of very consistent and of high quality. Where Nidai Tadahiro sits with regard to comparative quality is debatable. Certainly he would be regarded as within the top 4 of the 9 mainline Tadayoshi generations, possibly only being surpassed by the Shodai and the Sandai. What is commonly agreed on was that he excelled in producing suguha hamon.

This sword is a long (too long to be legal in this period) wakazashi. The wakazashi label has really been born out of the NBTHK categorization which classes everything over 1 and below 2 shaku in length as a wakazashi. My own feeling is that this blade might be more correctly described as a chisa-katana and intended as the main fighting sword of the bearer.

The blade exhibits many classical Hizen features (both good and bad). The shape is quiet, elegant but at the same time imposing and strong. The hada is a beautiful tight ko-itame which has become known as Konuka (rice bran) hada. It is rich in ji-nie which is evenly distributed throughout the jigane. The kissaki is very slightly extended chu-kissaki which is a feature of the Nidai. The boshi turns back in ko-maru and is sprinkled with ko-nie.

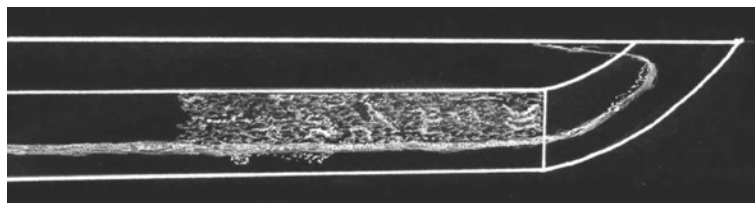
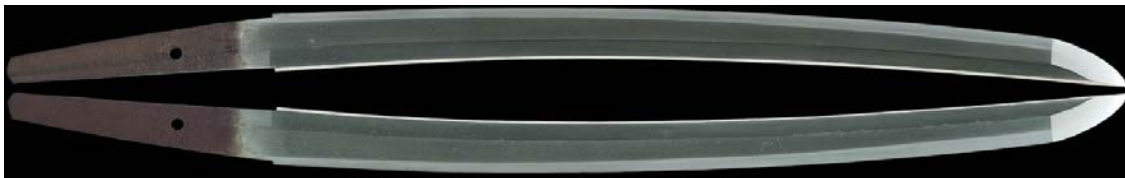
The hamon is suguha comprising of thick and bright nioi, interspersed with ko-nie which “cascades” through the nioi. nijuba is present in small areas. The overall feel of the blade is of quiet quality.

There are also patches of darker steel showing in the hada which again is a common feature of Hizen blades.

Comparing this blade with the Enju sword there are many similarities. Certainly looking at the two it is easy to accept the view that the Hizen masters were trying to reproduce the swords of Rai and Enju smiths. However there are also a number of differences which although subtle are significant. Firstly the overall appearance of the steel is different. The Tadahiro Steel looks harder and brighter. At first I wondered if this was a result of different polishing technique, but after many hours of study I am convinced the difference has more to do with the steel composition and colour than the polish. The Enju blade looks softer and has greater variation in the hues within the steel. As a result the nie and chikei look brighter against the main body of the sword. Also the hada pattern looks more subtle. The nioi-guchi is thicker in the Hizen blade. There has been some debate over the years as to the comparative benefits of thick versus tight nioi guchi. For many scholars a tight nioi-guchi is indicative of quality. So far I have been unable to find any science to substantiate the claim. It is noticeable however that in the sword under examination the nioi becomes thicker/wider in later swords.

Finally there are the dark patches. In Rai and Enju swords these patches appear to be made up of dark grain-less steel incorporated within the skin steel. In Hizen blades the dark patches seem to be more the result of core steel showing through the thin skin. As said before there has been much debate as to whether this was an intentional attempt to copy what they could see in earlier work, or was just because they were frugal with their most expensive raw material.

5. Wakazashi by the 8th Generation Tadayoshi.



This sword is a representative work of the last great Tadayoshi smith. The 8th generation was and is regarded in the top 4 of the mainline Tadayoshi smiths and it is a generally held view that his work compares favorably with both the second and third generation

Smiths. This is a classic Hizen sword. It has an elegant shape beautiful proportion and a very subtle and quiet beauty. The hada is text book konuka hada, it is beautifully controlled with chikei and ko-nie evenly distributed over its length. The hamon is suguha in thick and bright nioi liberally covered in ko-nie. There can be no doubt that this blade although made 180 years after the previous sword shares the same ancestry. When compared to the Omi Daijo Tadahiro the hada is more consistent in pattern and shows greater subtlety (subjective opinion) and the hamon looks stronger. As one might expect from a much younger blade the overall appearance is healthier and there is no evidence of shigane showing through into the surface.

When compared to the Enju work the steel looks harder and lacks some of the character exhibited by the earlier work. None the less it is a fine quality sword which at a time when other shin-shinto smiths were trying to re-create the flamboyant hamon and utsuri of the Ichimonji schools, held true to both the Hizen and Yamashiro style of tight ko-itame hada, Suguha hamon and a profusion of ko-nie.

Conclusion

If I am honest I am not sure what conclusion I hoped to draw from this exercise. At the start it would seem an almost “no brain” statement that Enju, Mihara and Hizen swords were influenced by the earlier Yamashiro schools. However by looking for the similarities one is automatically exposed to the differences as well. And studying blades through a timeframe in this manner can be a great aid to improving understanding. So what conclusion can I reach based on these example blades:

- 1 At risk of generalizing on too smaller sample one consistent feature was that the earlier swords tended to have narrower or tighter nioi-guchi.
2. Although the amount of nie present in both hada and hamon varied this was not age related. The 8th gen. Tadayoshi exhibited as much or more nie than the Mihara blade or the Nidai Tadahiro.
3. The most difficult point to justify was the apparent “softness” of the Koto blades. The metal looked less hard. As a result the hada was more subtle and refined and the bright granular features of nie and chikei are more apparent.

The final point I would come to is that I have just spent a lot of time talking to the group, or hopefully others have spent time reading about differences in activity and structure in swords that could all be described in an almost identical manner, subtle sugata, tight Ko-itame hada a lot of ji-nie and activity in a nioi based Suguha hamon.

However the four swords under examination span 550 years of manufacture. While they all share common ancestry they equally exhibit features that make them unique works of art. It is the study of the small differences that contribute most to our understanding of the subject.

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