

THE ANNUAL SWORD FORGING COMPETITION

by

C.U. Guido Schiller

The annual Japanese sword forging competition is held since 1955, and is open to all licensed sword smiths; its name changed twice over the years:

1955 - Sakutō Gijutsu Happyōkai 作刀技術発表会 (public presentation of the art of sword making)

1965 - Shinsaku Meitō Ten 新作名刀展 (exhibition of newly made fine swords)

1991 - Shinsakutō Tenrankai 新作刀展覧会 (newly made sword exhibition)

Although it's called Shinsakutō exhibition, it includes Horimono and Kodōgu as well; however, there's a separate competition for Koshirae 拵, Shirasaya 白鞘, Habaki and Seppa (Shirogane 白金) and Tsukamaki 柄巻.

When the results of the competition are publicised in English, the awards are sometimes called 1'st prize, 2'nd prize, etc. This is done for the sake of convenience – the actual names of the awards are rather lengthy, and would need quite some explanations – but can be a little misleading, particularly in regard to the “Nyūsen award”. This isn't a reward or prize at all, although it's considered a great honor to be “rewarded” acceptance.

Let me explain in more detail:

A panel of judges examines the swords submitted, and decides which ones will be accepted; this is called Nyūsen 入選 (accepted for competition). The Nyūshō 入賞 (award winners) are then chosen from the Nyūsen entries during two rounds of scoring:

In the first round of scoring the blade only is judged. In the second round, the judges examine the Nakago and its finish in relation and proportion to the blade. The scores are added and divided by two.

There are the following awards:

1. Swordmaking Division (Sakutō no Bu 作刀の部)

Tachi - Katana - Wakizashi - Naginata - Yari 太刀・刀・脇指・薙刀・槍

Tokushō 特賞 (special awards)

Masamune Shō 正宗賞 (Masamune Award [producing Nie of the most outstanding quality])

Takamatsu no Miya Shō 高松宮賞 (Prince Takamatsu Award)

Bunkachō Chōkan Shō 文化庁長官賞 (General Director of the Agency for Cultural Affairs Award)

Mainichi Shimbunsha Shō 毎日新聞社賞 (Mainichi Newspaper, Co. Award [now defunct])

Nihon Bijutsu Tōken Hozon Kyōkai Meiyo Kaichō Shō

日本美術刀剣保存協会名誉会長賞

(Honorary Chairman of the Society for the Preservation of the Japanese Art Sword Award)

Nihon Bijutsu Tōken Hozon Kyōkai Kaichō Shō 日本美術刀剣保存協会会長賞 (Chairman of the Society for the Preservation of the Japanese Art Sword Award)

Kunzan Shō 薫山賞 (Kunzan Award [named after the late Dr. Satō Kanichi])

Kanzan Shō 寒山賞 (Kanzan Award [named after the late Dr. Homma Junji])

Zen-Nihon Tōshōkai Kaichō Shō 全日本刀匠会会長賞 (All Japan Swordsmiths Association Director's Award [suspended in 2007])

Other Awards

Yūshū Shō 優秀賞 (Excellence Award, formerly Shōrei Shō 奨励賞 [award to encourage further efforts])

Doryoku Shō 努力賞 (Effort Award, award to recognize remarkable efforts)

Ko-Wakizashi ▪ Tantō ▪ Ken 小脇指・短刀・剣

Yūshū Shō 優秀賞 (Excellence Award)

Doryoku Shō 努力賞 (Effort Award)

2. Sword Engraving Division (Tōshinbori no Bu 刀身彫の部)

Doryoku Shō 努力賞 (Effort Award)

3. Sword Fittings Division (Chōkin no Bu 彫金の部)

Nihon Bijutsu Tōken Hozon Kyōkai Kaichō Shō 日本美術刀剣保存協会会長賞 (Chairman of the Society for the Preservation of the Japanese Art Sword Award)

Yūshū Shō 優秀賞 (Excellence Award)

Doryoku Shō 努力賞 (Effort Award)

Swords made by smiths with Mukansa ranking are exhibited without the examination process – that’s what Mukansa 無鑑査 means, “exempt from examination”. To the Mukansa group belong the Jūyō Mukei Bunkazai Hojisha 重要無形文化財保持者 (important intangible cultural property holder), commonly called Ningen Kokuhō 人間国宝 (living national treasure); the Mukansa 無鑑査 proper; and the Mukansa-Taigū 無鑑査待遇 (treated as Mukansa). Since the level of Mukansa work is above competition, no awards will be granted to this group.

To become a Mukansa, a smith has to win a Tokushō at least eight times, and usually among those the Takamatsu no Miya award three times. The rank of living national treasure is usually given to Mukansa towards the end of their career. They then receive a modest stipend from the government, and are in turn expected to teach their craft to the younger smiths.

The Masamune Award is seldomly granted, and even Mukansa (but not Ningen Kokuhō) are eligible for this most distinguished prize.

August 2008