

JAPANESE SWORDS

YAMANAKA & CO.

127, New Bond Street, London.

April, 1913.

[Pg 1]

JAPANESE SWORDS

AMONGST the numberless articles of Japanese attire, works of art or mere household objects which the Restoration of 1868 compelled the Japanese to cast upon the market, none has met with such wide fame and yet with such a limited study as the Sword. When, in 1877, the Government prohibited the Samurai from wearing any longer the two swords which had been the privilege and distinctive mark of their martial caste, the Imperial wish was obeyed, notwithstanding the feeling that something was snapping in the life of the nation. Blades had been treasured for centuries, handed from father to son, looked upon as the soul of the owner for the sake of which he would refrain from any deed unbecoming a gentleman; some possessed histories going far back into the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when the country was at war within itself, around others were entwined romances, and above all, the sword was the faithful friend with which the Samurai might honourably end his life, either in the field or on the mats. A blade given by a father to his daughter on her wedding day was the emblem of that purity of life which the woman was expected

to keep, and it was also the weapon with which she might seek repose in death, should occasion arise. The Restoration breaking up the old feudal system compelled the Samurai to part with their worldly goods to secure the necessities of life, the rich became poor, the poor lost all support, hence anything which might tempt the foreign buyer went swiftly out of the country; the circumstances had become rather more straitened for the Samurai class when the edict of 1877 compelled them to put aside their swords, and blades followed the lacquer, the paintings, the carvings which eager curio buyers snapped at inadequate prices. Many swords of first quality crossed the waters, besides thousands of poor blades which could be bought in dozens in the stores and bazaars of the old world. Hardly any attempt was made at keeping in the country any blades except those which were, so to speak, entailed heirlooms or those whose owners refused to part with at any price. Later, a few earnest people banded themselves into a Society for the

[Pg 2]

preservation and study of the National weapon: the Sword Society of Tokyo, which has published, during the last twelve years, a mass of information about swords. Collecting swords has become a national propensity, and the modern sword lover may have more blades, carefully kept and oft admired, than his ancestor of a century ago who could only wear two at a time. Magazines have sprung into existence dealing only with the sword and its accessories. Both in Europe and in America articles on the sword have been published, most of which, based upon the paper of Hutterott and nearly all inadequate. It is to be hoped that some more comprehensive work will soon appear to give the Western public a better knowledge of the ancient swords. In Japan, there are hundreds of books dealing with their makers, from ancient books now rare and costly to modern works crammed with information and obtainable for a few pence. What then is there about the Japanese blade which compels admiration? Far back in the Sung Dynasty a Chinese Poet sang its praises, later the Mediæval European writers spoke in wonderment of the Katana, of its keenness of edge, of its swift stroke, of the respect paid to it; later still, folks were awed by the form of suicide we call seppuku, some saw in it only a barbarous disembowelment, few, perhaps, grasped that other important feature—the test of the truest friendship—that confidence in the bosom friend one entrusted with the cutting of one's head.

Romance alone would not have made the blade an object of interest to the positive mind, attracted by the efficiency of the weapon, by its qualities *qua* sword, by the marvellous skill evinced in its forging, in the shaping of its harmonious curves. Further, the blade presented a characteristic temper; unlike the European swords evenly tempered throughout, it had a mere edge of great hardness backed by enough softer metal to ensure toughness, and to allow bending in preference to snapping when the sword blow met an unexpected resistance. Then it was realised that all those characteristic peculiarities required study, for they presented variations of appearance intimately associated with the various swordsmiths, with the periods, the schools. How numerous those smiths were may be guessed, but it may come as a surprise to some, that over 11,000 names are recorded in one book alone.

To study a blade and appreciate its points is a matter of considerable interest, the various portions of the blade have their names and their peculiarities; one must pay attention to every part of the body, of its edge, of the handle, etc., and with practice an expert may become able to recognise the technique and style of a smith by the peculiarities of the blade, silent witnesses left in the metal itself. Thus, in Japan, the Honami

[Pg 3]

family of sword experts were professionally engaged for over 350 years in examining and certifying blades.

In feudal days a man's life was at his lord's call, and he might never feel sure that the following day would not be his last, either in fight or by self infliction under orders of the death penalty for some breach, however slight, of the stiff code of Samurai etiquette. Hence his sword was selected and cared for, its edge must be keen enough to cut a man's head at a blow, leaving, if skilfully done, a shred of skin on the throat for the head to hang on the breast.

His sword was tested, sometimes officially by cutting up corpses, and thus we come across blades on the tang of which is inscribed a statement that it cut one or two or even three bodies at a blow. No sword in Europe ever came through such an ordeal; indeed, it is doubtful whether its shape and constitution would have allowed a

similar test to be successful. Looked upon as a cutting weapon, the Japanese blade has been pronounced perfect by all experts; that perfection is the result of thorough work undertaken with only one aim in view: to turn out a sword which was not only reliable, but a credit to the maker as well; and, indeed, the names of the smiths are as well known as those of the foremost painters, they rank with the expert calligraphers, with the poets, with the writers and the statesmen, with those who made history, Masamune, Muramasa, are names which have found their way even amongst the novels of the West; not a dozen names of Japanese sculptors can be mentioned, although their works are to be found in any and every temple, but 11,000 names of swordsmiths remain.... Where the carver could repair a faulty chisel stroke the smith has no such resource, a slight flaw in welding his metal, a little dirt remaining between two layers of steel, and

[Pg 4]

where in a smithy can one exclude dirt? Overhaste in heating the metal resulting in a wrong temper, or in spots on the blade, and, lo, a fortnight's patient work was wasted, a patron offended, a reputation marred.

No less important than the smith's skill was that of the polisher grinding away the blade to its final shape, settling the planes and the curves, whose intersections are geometrically true on every side of the blade. A volume rather than a preface is required to do the scantiest justice to the Japanese blade, but space is limited, and the blades exhibited here speak for themselves.

H. L. J.

[Pg 5]

CATALOGUE.

KATANA. 2 *shaku*, 2 *sun*, 6 *bu*. 890, 685, 17 mm.^[A] Ko Gunomé midare yakiba, deep Kaeri bōshi, signed Sasaki Niudo Ippo of Gōshū. Kwanyei period (1624-1643).

KATANA. 855, 650, 11 mm. Narrow yakiba, engraved on one side with Ono no Tofu, the frog and willow, on the other with characters, *Yanagi amé Kan Ki*. [Plate.

- KATANA. 2 *shaku*, 1 *sun*. 795, 645, 13 mm. Very fine wave yakiba with deep niyé, signed Kagekuni of Settsu. (Manji period.)
- KATANA. 2 *shaku*, 2 *sun*, 8 *bu*. 880, 695, 11 mm. Midare yakiba Bōshi majiri, signed Kaneuji, in gold inlay, attributed to Kaneuji of Mino.
- KATANA. Large heavy blade. 2 *shaku*, 4 *sun*, 4 *bu*. 932, 710, 6. With long bōshi kaeri, midare yakiba, wave form with tsuyu, signed Korekazu, attributed to Fujiwara Korekazu of Yedo, Bushu. Circa Kwanbun (1661-1672).
- KATANA. 825, 645, 17. With Ogunomé yakiba, signed Tsuta Omi no Kami Sukenao, dated Tenwa 3, second month (1683).
- KATANA. 2 *shaku*, 3 *sun*, 5 *bu*. 917, 718, 18. Large Choji yakiba, bōshi kaeri, signed Awataguchi Ikkanshi Tadatsuna. Circa Kwanbun (1661-1672). [*Plate*].
- KATANA. 2 *shaku*, 2 *sun*, 5 *bu*. 892, 685, 10. With nokogiri yakiba, [Pg 6] double yasurime, signed Mutsu no Kami Daido, (Omichi of Mino). [*Plate*].
- KATANA. 2 *shaku*, 2 *sun*, 8 *bu*. 880, 695, 17 mm. With long wave yakiba and deep groove, signed Harumitsu of Osafuné, Bizen. [*Plate*].
- KATANA. 2 *shaku*, 2 *sun*, 4 *bu*. 885, 680, 19 mm. Narrow yakiba, maru bōshi, signed Kunimura, attributed to Kunimura of Kikuji Higo.
- KATANA. 2 *shaku*, 3 *sun*. 860, 70, 21. Hitatsura on all jigané but not on shinogi, signed Akihiro of Sōshu, dated second year of Teiji. [*Plate*].
- KATANA. 2 *shaku*, 1 *sun*, 5 *bu*. 840, 650, 33. Ogunomé midare yakiba with Rio no me tsuyu imitating splashing waves, signed Made at Toto (Yedo) by Kato (chounsai) Tsunatoshi, dated Bunsei 10, first month. [*Plate*].
- KATANA. 2 *shaku*, 5 *sun*, 3 *bu*. 1,010 mm., 755 mm., 8 mm. sori, 75 mm. bōshi, shinogi tapering from 10 to 8 mm. Very fine double yakiba, ko gunomé midare and hitatsura, signed Muramasa. [*Plate*].

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

