The Sword and Japanese Culture

Paul Martin (Japanese Sword Specialist)

If I were to choose a single thread that continues throughout Japanese history and culture, I would choose the recognition of impermanence. Japanese literature is filled with observations dating back as far as Japan's earliest poetry collection, the *Manyoshu*.

Now I truly understand
The impermanence of this world
Seeing Nara, the Imperial City
Lie thus in ruins

The sentiment is echoed in the opening lines of Kamo no Chomei's 13th century classic, My Ten Foot Square Hut (*Hojoki),* where he states, "*The river flows constantly, but the water is ever changing".* Another piece of classic Japanese literature is *The Tale of the Heike* (13~14th C.), that tells the story of the rise and fall of the Taira clan. The opening lines of this too are an ode to impermanence, "*The sound of the Bells of the Gion Shoja echoes the impermanence of all things".*

Yoshida Kenko's book, *Essays in Idleness* (J. *Tsurezuregusa*), written in the early 14th C, not only affirms Japan's recognition of impermanence, but also illustrates Japan's long tradition of cherry blossom (sakura) viewing. Yoshida asks, "*Are we only to look at the cherry blossoms when they are in full bloom?"* What he means is, if the cherry blossoms did not bloom and fall in such a short period, would they be so beautiful?

Yoshida also speaks about the short life of the cicada. There is a long history of the appreciation of Japanese cicada, or *semi.* By western standards, the sound that they produce (particularly in large groups) would be considered rather noisy and invasive. However, the sound of their singing and the lack thereof, is regarded as the markers of the beginning and end of summer. Their extremely short life span is accepted in the overall acknowledgement of the transient world. Just like the cherry blossoms are the visual embodiment of impermanence, cicadas are the audible manifestation of it.

Cicada design decorative sword handle grips 14th C.

I also think that this recognition of impermanence has a role to play in the Japanese appreciation of swords. Swords have been regarded as objects of spiritual or sacred meaning since as far back as Japan's Yayoi period (3rd to 6th C.), with many being included in the Kofun or Mound Tombs Tumuli of important members of Japanese society.

Many objects survive from Japan's Jomon period (14,000~300 BCE). It is common for these objects, including stone magatama (jewels) and other objects, to have highly polished surfaces. Therefore, I think that it was not unusual for the Japanese to polish iron swords beyond the functional aspect of sharpening, and made the discovery of patterns resembling natural phenomena. Those iron swords, that had the ability to take human life in an instant, when polished would have first become bright just like sacred bronze mirrors, but a further refined level of polishing would have revealed the wood grain like pattern of the body of the blade, and the uncontrived crystalline structures of the hardened edge.

There is also a sense of impermanence in the owning of Japanese swords in the recognition that we are only the current caretakers of such objects. Many Japanese swords have been passed down through generations of owners with great care and reverence with an eye to passing them onto future generations in the best condition possible. There is also the notion of proximity to former owners. For example, when one views a sword that was owned by a famous historical figure, you are seeing the same abstract scenes and receiving the same experience as they did. Japanese sword polishers devote great time and energy to preserving swords for future generations, even though all their efforts will be erased on the next occasion that the sword is polished.

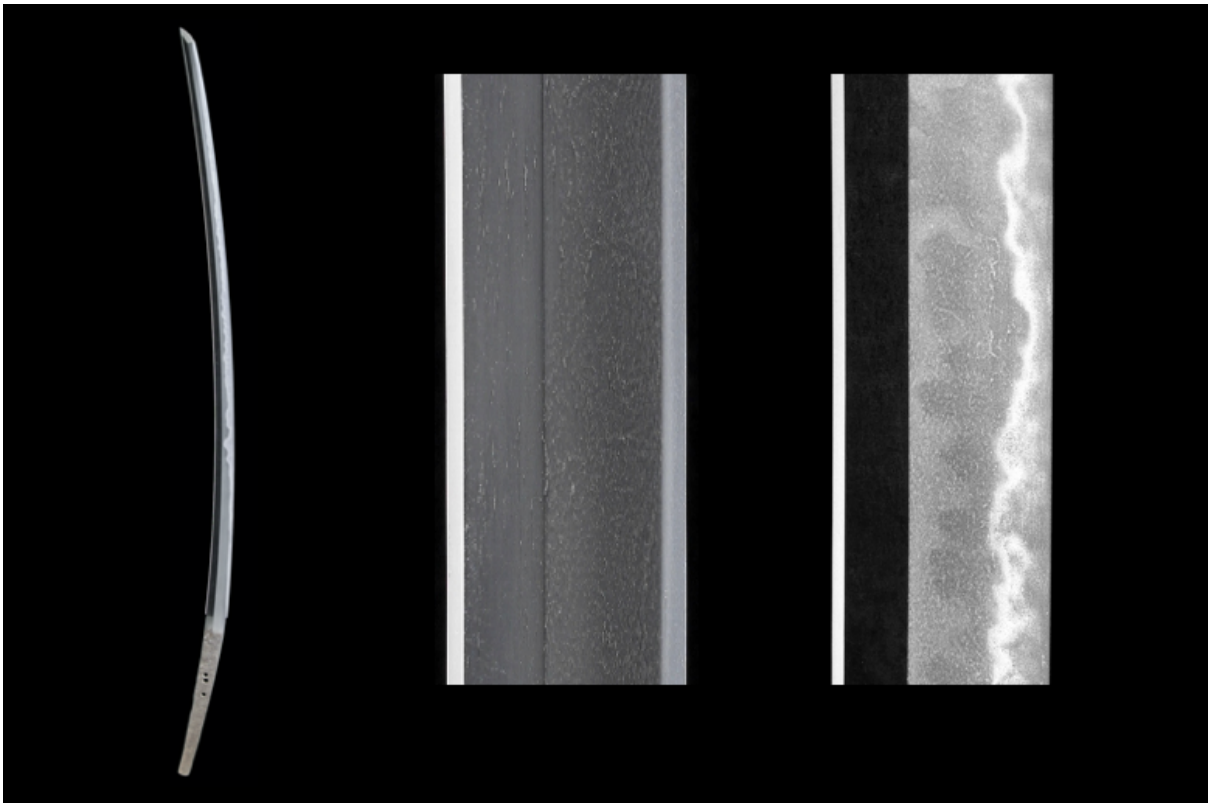
It is not uncommon for the fittings that adorn Japanese sword mountings to touch upon the themes of impermanence. Torn fans are quite a common theme for sword guards, and there are decorative hand grips that depict cicadas that date back until at least the 14th C. Another common theme is that of the warrior's skull laid open to the seasons in the place where he fell. This theme is called Nozarashi, and indicates the transience of life and a reminder to the warrior of his likely fate.

Sukashi tsuba. Attributed to the Shoami school, early 17th C.

Admiring the Beauty of Japanese Swords

The earliest evidence for the appreciation of the beauty of Japanese swords appears in the picture scroll, Matsuzaki Tenjin Engi (14th C.) of Hofu Tenmangu shrine (Yamaguchi pref.). It contains a scene of everyday life in the Kamakura period. There is a nobleman in a room with his wife and possibly children or servants. The man, Harima no Kami Aritada, is sitting admiring his sword. He is taking great care to not touch the blade with his bare hands by resting it on the sleeve of his kimono. This image tells us that there was some kind of refined polishing techniques employed enabling him to enjoy the beauty of the blade. It should be made clear that they were not the same as the refined art-polishing techniques of today. However, the level of polishing at that time would allow for specialists to appraise and record the different styles of workmanship of various smiths.

The beauty of Japanese swords is determined from the harmony of three main factors. The shape of the blade (sugata), the condition of the pattern of the surface steel (hada), and the pattern of the hardened edge (hamon). The Japanese sword was perfected around the mid tenth century. Apart from minor changes in shape and the condition of the raw materials there has been very little technological change. In fact, it is very difficult to meet the requirements of a Japanese sword without using Japanese steel produced utilizing archaic methods.



Shape (sugata) **Pattern of the surface steel (Hada)** **Pattern of the hardened edge (Hamon)**

Photo: Tom Kishida

The shape of the blade changed from period to period. There are also changes in geometry, but the most noticeable change in shape was the curvature. However, whichever period the blade is from, the curvature is very natural looking, almost organic. Much like the drooping branch of a willow tree. The curvature is more acute in some places and shallower in others, but overall a natural arc.

The surface of the steel (hada) has various patterns that generally resemble that of wood grain patterns, and displays hues and textures that can reveal the area, or school of manufacture. This pattern is a result of the fold-forging process that is used to make the raw steel more uniform in its composition. The raw steel used for Japanese swords is a type of bloom steel that is produced in a steady layering process using charcoal to heat sand iron to a high temperature in a clay furnace. The resulting bloom, although produces high quality steel at its core, is inconsistent in its composition. The fold-forging process is used to more evenly distribute the carbon and other elements throughout the billet.

The pattern of the hardened edge is a result of the differential hardening process that allows the blade to hold a very sharp edge, while the more ductile back of the blade acts as a shock absorber, so that the blade does not break or shatter on impact. The pattern of the hardened edge is called the hamon, and is a crystalline structure within the steel that runs along the cutting edge. The hamon is induced by the quenching process, and holds many clues to the smith's identity as it contains many characteristics of their workmanship. The way in which they apply the clay inhibitor in combination with the temperature at which

they quench the blade contributes to the types of crystalline activities within the hamon as well as the size and brightness of the crystals.

The recording of these three main factors of Japanese sword workmanship, in combination with many works being signed and dated, allows connoisseurs to be able to determine a smith's work from a range of thousands of smiths over a thousand-year period. This practice, including the recording of contemporary smiths' work, continues in Japan to this day.

For further information on Japanese swords, please see the links.
For further information on Japanese swords, please see the links.
The Japanese Sword (You-Tube Channel)
The Society for the Promotion of Japanese Sword Culture (NBSK)
The Japanese Sword Museum

Author:Paul Martin (Japanese Sword Specialist)

Paul Martin is a former curator in the Japanese section at the British Museum, London. He holds an M.A. in Asian Studies (Japan) from the University of Berkeley, California, and has resided in Japan working as a Japanese sword specialist for over fifteen years. A two-time winner of the sword appraisal contest in Tokyo, he is also a trustee of the Society for the Promotion of Japanese Sword Culture (NBSK), and a recognized specialist by the Ministry of Land Infrastructure, Tourism and Transport. He has his own column on Japan-Forward (Sankei Shinbun), and has published several books and DVDs on Japanese swords.