

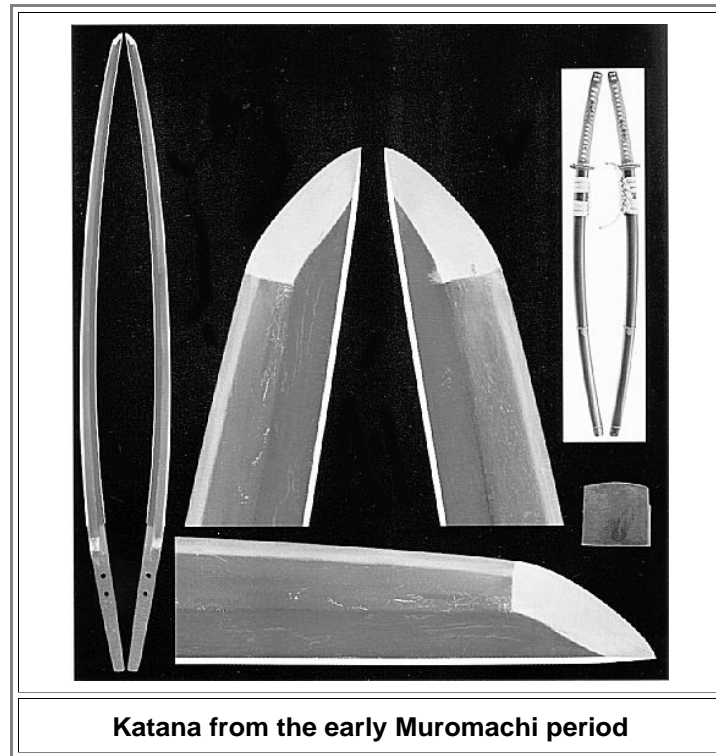
My Japanese Swords

The Swords

I claimed to be a bit bored with the metallurgy of the Japanese Sword - but I did get fascinated enough to become the proud owner of four remarkable specimens:

- A [katana](#) from 1394 (early "Muromachi period"); or possibly even older.
- A [daisho](#) from the "Edo period around Kanbun era" or 1671- 1673. A daisho (literally "long - short") obviously is the matched combination of a katana and a [wakizashi](#) that was worn by the Samurais of the Edo period.
- A **tanto** from the late Muromachi period; i.e. around 1550. A tanto is a dagger, essentially made in the same way as the bigger swords.

Here are pictures



Katana from the early Muromachi period



Daisho blades (different scale for Dai and Sho), wakizashi in koshirae, and detail of katana hamon.



Description of Katana

Just for the fun of it I give you the **text from the company** that sold the sword (slightly edited with respect to proper English) followed by my comments.

Katana in Koshirae (NBTHK Hozon paper)

- The katana comes with a **koshirae**, that special hilt and sheath that you and I always associate with Japanese swords. The picture above give an idea of what I mean. Koshirae consist of several parts, some of which are pieces of art in their own right (in particular the **tsuba**, the guard piece) that are collected by many people. A well preserved koshirae with good parts may easily set you back by \$ 1.000 or more. The alternative to the koshirae is the **shirasaya**; see below.
- A **NBTHK** Hozon paper is a certificate of the "Nihon Bijutsu Token Hozon Kyokai", the Society for the Preservation of the Japan Art. The society was founded in 1948 and remains a highly trusted organization responsible for screening and certifying judgement onto Japanese swords. When a sword is submitted to the NBTHK (known as "**shinsa**" or judging), the organization reviews and then places a judgement on the piece in question. These "certification papers" are called **origami**. The process is a serious one and never taken lightly. It can take anywhere from 3 months to a year in some cases to receive a verdict. There are two systems, an old (former) one and a new one that started in 1982. The [link](#) shows how it works. At present there are 4 grades:

- HOZON – Worthy of Preservation (yellow paper)
- TOKUBETSU HOZON – Especially Worthy of Preservation (brown paper)
- JUYO TOKEN – Important Work
- TOKUBETSU JUYO TOKEN – Especially Important Work

You may safely assume that a blade with the lowest grade ("hozon") will cost you a few 1000 Dollars; a juyo token blade goes for a few 10.000 Dollars.

The NBTHK also grades koshirae.

My katana thus has the lowest grade but that is already quite something.

Signature: Mumei (unsigned) attributed as Naminohira.

"Mume" mean anonymous or unsigned; i.e. there is no signature on the tang. This might be because the smith didn't sign his work or because the blade was shortened, cutting of that part of the tang that bore the signature. This is not so good because Japanese swords are primarily conceived as works of art. If your Picasso or Rembrandt isn't signed, it is not so good either.

However, art experts will recognize a Picasso or Rembrandt when they see one, and Japanese sword experts recognize the smith who made a good sword. My katana is attributed to "Naminohira", a school of sword smiths that existed for quite some time.

Now for a few data (see also this [link for terminology](#)):

- **Shape : The blade is slender with deep sori nice elegant shape.** Yes, it is elegantly curved and quite slender.
- **Habaki: Copper single habaki.** The **habaki** is the "collar" that holds the blade in the sheath.
- **Blade length : 70.3 cm or 27.67 inches.** Rather on the long side for a katana.
- **Mekugi: 1** A *mekugi* is a hole in the tang that allows to pin the hilt to the blade.
- **Width at the hamachi: 2.68 cm or 1.05 inches.** . The *hamachi* is the "notch" or step in the cutting edge that separates the edge from the tang.
- **Width at the Kissaki: 1.49 cm or 0.58 inches.** *Kissaki* = tip region
- **Sori: 2.6 cm or 1.02 inches.** *Sori* (or *Tsori*) denotes the curvature, see [this link](#).
- **Kasane: 0.6 cm or 0.23 inches.** *Kasane* denotes the blade thickness measured across the back edge ("mune")

Era: Early Muromachi period. 1394

The Japanese history starts roughly around 800 AD - before that there were only small warring entities on the island. The major periods are:

- Heian, 780 - 1180
- Kamakura, 1181 - 1330
- Nanbokucho, 1330 - 1389
- Muromachi, 1390 - 1570
- Nonoyama, 1571 - 1647
- Edo, 1648 - 1852
- Gendai-to (Modern times), 1853 -

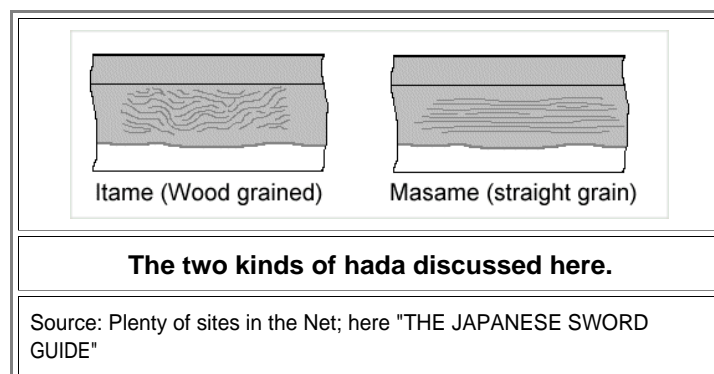
What the typical "period" swords looked like can be [seen here](#), and [here](#).

The Japanese Sword Shop Aoi-Art is offering a mid Heian period (1046-1053) sword right now (Feb. 2017), you can have it for about \$ 60.000.-. Of course it has a NBTHK Juyo token paper, and of course it looks like new. This is quite remarkable since you will not find a 1000 year old European sword that looks remotely like new.

My katana is "only" 600+ years old but also looks like new - but only to you and me, not to the expert as we shall see.

A few words to the blade:

- **Jitetsu: Itame hada and Masame hada mixed, the hada pattern is well seen..** *Jitetsu* refers to the characteristic color and texture of the steel. *Hada* describes the kind of "grain pattern" of the blade that is mostly obtained by the folding or [faggoting](#). *Itame* describes a "wood grained"; and *masame* a "straight grain" hada as shown below.
- **Hamon: Nie deki suguha with komidare hamon and boshi is round shape.** This sentence contains a lot of information as outlined below. The [hamon](#) describes the transition region between the martensite of the hardened edge and the ferrite / pearlite of the blade, see the picture below.



Nie is the term for small martensite inclusions that show up as bright "points" to the unaided eye. Inclusions so small that they can't be seen directly but, if present in large numbers, produce a kind of bright mistiness, are called **noie**. The *Hamon* (or "temper line") is essentially made up of these 2 types of structures. *Nie-deki* describes a hamon made up mostly by nie, and *suguha* refers to a straight line hamon. *Komidare* means the hamon is slightly irregular; it is one of the oldest hamon pattern. The Ko-Bizen school (12th - 13th century) is very famous for it **Boshi** is the hamon in the tip (called *kissaki*).

Special feature: The founder of the Naminohira was Heian period to late Edo period history. The blade has passed so many years so the blade is rather tired. Famous sword judge said the the blade is Ko-Naminohira. NBTHK judged Naminohira. The blade is really antique and elegant sword.

A blade is "tired" if it has been re-polished so often that the hard outer layer has been polished off in some parts. Ko-Naminohira means "before Naminohira". If that judge is right, the blade would be from well before 1394.

Koshirae: Tsuba: On the brass tsuba, some waves are engraved. Fuchikashira: On the iron plate, some plant design is engraved with silver zogan (inlay). Saya: Black ishimeji saya. Menuki: Squirrel is engraved like Ezo style.

Whatever that means; I leave it to you to figure it out.

Description of Daisho: The Dai (Katana)

Dai (Katana): in Shirasaya with Koshirae. [Here](#) is a picture with some details of the katana

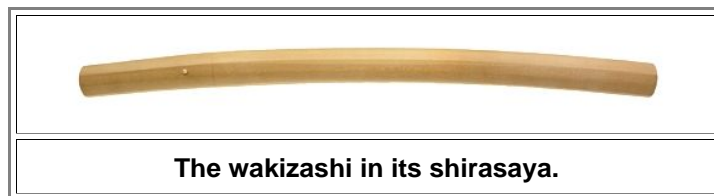
Signature: Motte Nanban Tetsu Echizen Ju Munetsugu (Mumemichi)

Shinto: Chusaku: Echizen province.

NBTHK Tokubetsu Kicho paper. ("Extraordinarily precious"; above "Hozon").

[Here](#) is a large-size picture of the katana.

Besides the Koshirae (see above) there is also a **shirasaya**, a plain sheath and handle optimized for protecting the blade. It is made from special wood and prevents rusting to some extent. Japanese swords or **nihonto** should always be stored in a shirasaya; the koshirae is only for festive days (and actual fighting, of course). The signature is rather involved, what exactly it means becomes obvious (sort of) farther down.



Once more a few data:

- Shape : Regular size Kanbun Shinto style Katana
- Blade length : 69.8 cm or 27.48 inches
- Sori : 0.8 cm or 0.31 inches. The **habaki**
- Width at the hamachi : 3.11 cm or 1.22 inches. Mekugi: 1
- Width at the Kissaki : 2.06 cm or 0.81 inches

Era: Edo period, around Kanbun era.

The Edo period extends from 1603 to 1868. Japanese society then was under the rule of the Tokugawa shogunate and the country's 300 regional *daimyo*. The period was characterized by economic growth, strict social order, isolationist foreign policies, a stable population and popular enjoyment of arts and culture. With no warfare since the early 17th century, *samurai* gradually lost their military function during the the Edo period. By the end of the Edo / Tokugawa era, samurai were aristocratic bureaucrats for the daimyos, with their *daisho* becoming more of a symbolic emblem of power rather than a weapon used in daily life.

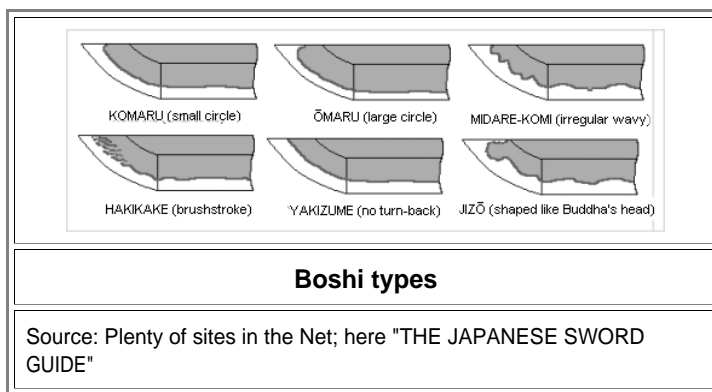
The *Kanbun era* within the Edo period extended from April 1661 to September 1673 if you look at history alone, or from 1658 -1683 if you look at the Kanbun-[Shinto](#) sword period. The daisho thus is about as old as my university, the Christian-Albrechts-University (CAU) in Kiel, founded in 1665. The "Mayflower" brought the first English settlers to America in 1620.

Jitetsu: Masame Hada well grained and Masame mix with Jinie attached. There are Chikei in Jigane.

Hamon: Nie Deki, Gunome Midare. In Ha, there are many Sunagashi. Boshi is Hakikake style..

We have a straight-grained ("*masame*") pattern of the blade once more. "*Chikei* in *Jigane*" denotes dark lines in the hamon; these *chikei* are made of *nie* assemblies, and *jigane* simply means "material of the blade, i.e. the steel. Then we have "*nie deki*" again, and an irregular ("*gunome*") kind of zig-zag ("*midare*") hamon line. The "*jinie*" are patches or islands of *nie* in the *ji*; and the *ji* is the blade area between the hamon line and the ridge of the blade. The "*ha*" is the tempered cutting edge of a blade; it contains "*sunagashi*" (literally "stream of sand") or marks in the temper line *hamon*) that resemble the pattern left behind by a broom sweeping over sand. Altogether we have what is known as an "active hamon", a good thing.

The *hamon* in the tip (the "*boshi*") is of the brushstroke or *hakikake* style, see below.



Special feature: **Echizen Ju Mumetsugu** is a swordsmith of Shimosaka school. He succeeded in Echizen province. His early name is Echizen Ju Munetsugu and Kazusa Daijo Fujiwara Munetsugu. He later changed his name to **Munemichi**. He is a son of Munefusa.

- OK. Now we know about the smith. What "Motte Nanban Tetsu" means I'll let you know as soon as I find out. The signature is engraved in the tang (or *nagako*), which is an extremely important part of the sword never to be tempered with in any form. That's what it looks like:



Koshirae: Nice Koshirae.
 Tsuba: Mokko shape Shakudo Tsuba, dragon and tiger is engraved. Signature: O Takahara Fusa Kimi ju Kikuchi Jokatsu saku.
 Fuchikashira: Shakudo, dragon and tiger is engraved.
 Saya: Black roiro Saya with Inro Kizami and family crest Makie.
 Menuki: Shakudo, dragon is engraved.
 Bashin: Iron, flower inlaid with silver.

- It is nice, indeed.

Description of Daisho: The Sho (Wakizashi)

Sho (Wakizashi): in Shirasaya with Koshirae (NBTHK Hozon Paper). [Here](#) is a picture with some details of the wakizashi

Signature: (Kikumon) Yamashiro Kami Fujiwara Kunikiyo

Shinto: Jyo saku: Wazamono: Echizen province.

The data:

- **Shape:** Wide and thick nice shape Wakizashi.
- **Blade length:** 44.8 cm or 17.63 inches
- **Sori:** 0.9 cm or 0.35 inches.
- **Mekugi:** 1 The
- **Width at the hamachi:** 3.03 cm or 1.19 inches.
- **Width at the Kissaki:** 0.58 cm or 0.22 inches.
- **Kasane:** 2.10 cm or 0.82 inches.

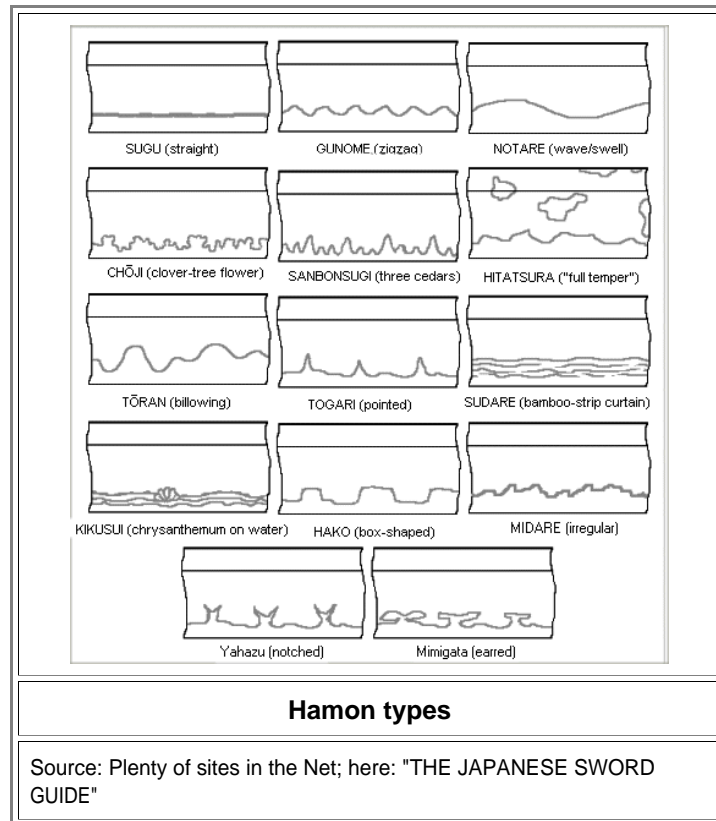
Era: Edo period, around Kanbun era; just as the katana

Jitetsu: Ko-Itame Hada well grained with Jinie attached. The Hada is beautiful.

Hamon: Nie Deki, Suguha. Boshi is round shape..

We have some kind of beautiful wood grained *hada* with the by now familiar *jinie* and a straight *hamon* with the by now equally familiar *nie deki*. The hamon of the tip is of a "round shape", referring to what is termed "circle" in the picture above.

It's time for giving a few hamon types:

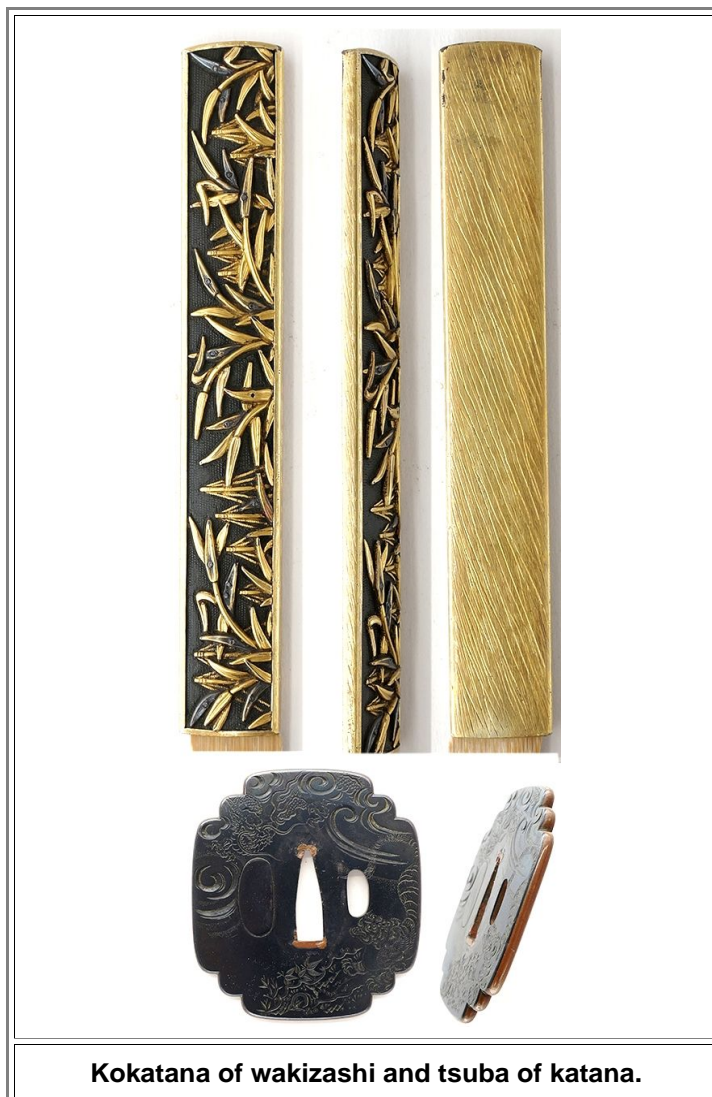


Special feature: Yamashiro kami Fujiwara Kunikiyo is famous as an expert at Suguha Hamon. First generation of Kunikiyo was started around Kanei era and lasted until the 4th generation. First generation of Kunikiyo was a student of Kunihiro. He worked in Shinano province and moved to Echizen. This blade was made by 2nd generation of Kunikiyo. The Jigane well grained and beautiful. The typical Kunikiyo Suguha blade.

Good to know.

Koshirae: Nice Koshirae. **Tsuba:** Mokko shape Shakudo Tsuba. **Signature:** Hachiman Taro, Fujii shi kore. **Fuchikashira:** Shibuichi, phoenix is engraved with gold color.

- Yes, it's nice - and perfectly matches the *koshirae* of the *dai*. There are also two *kogatana*, small utility knives carried in a pocket of the scabbards, and good for cleaning your finger nails etc. The hilt ("kozuka") of the *kogatana* belonging to the wakizashi is particularly nice; it is shown below together with the *tsuba* of the katana. On the other side of the scabbard is usually a place for the *kogai*, a kind of skewer for the owner's hair-do. If you had a daisho, you didn't need much else for toiletry. You could, of course, shave yourself with either blade of the daisho.



Kokatana of wakizashi and tsuba of katana.

Description of Tanto

▶ Tanto in Koshirae (NBTHK Hozon Paper)

Signature: Hiro (Den Hiromasa)

- **Habaki: copper single Habaki**
- **Blade length: 20.9 cm or 8.23 inches.**
- **Mekugi: 2**
- **Width at the Hamachi: 2.14 cm or 0.84 inches.**
- **Kasane: 0.55 cm or 0.22 inches**
- **Shape: The blade has been Suriage (cut shortened) and remained the signature 'Hiro'.**

▶ Late Muromachi period.

- That makes it about 1500 - 1521. Tantos can be every bit as involved as katanas. In fact, [Masamune](#), the most famous sword smith of Japan, who lived from c.1264–1343 AD, made famous tantos; about half of his work that still exists are tantos, in fact.

▶ Jigane: Koitame-hada well grained with Jinie attached. Nice Muji style texture.

Hamon: Nioideki Hitatsura Hamon.

- Wood grained hada once more - but a very lively hamon (see the hamon picture above). Unfortunately the hamon is fully expressed only on one side of the blade and that's why it was relatively cheap, I guess (but don't forget: it does have a NBTHK "Hozon" paper, so cheap starts above a 1000 \$).
- "*Muji style*" means "no distinct grain" so I'm not sure how that statement goes with the other one.

Special feature: **Hiromasa is a stream** (probably means offshoot) of the **Sosho Hiromitsu** who made **Hitatsura hamon** at **Nanbokucho** period. **Hiromasa was working at mid Muromachi to late Muromachi period** for several generations. **This Hiromasa is small size and good active Hamon.**

Koshirae: Aikuchi Koshirae. Saya: Unusual kawari nuri saya with a picture of bat. Menuki: A horse is engraved by Shakudo plate.

Well. The **menuki** (ornaments under handle wrapping to improve grip) is neither engraved nor is it a horse. It is a glued-on little sculpture of a bull; different on both sides, see below.



The two menuki of the tanto

If you have read this module all the way to here, you are now infected by the "Japanese sword bug". The only known cure is to get yourself one or many of these **art objects!** You may have to sell your car to raise sufficient money. It's worth it as long as it is not a German car.