

Introduction and Study of Antique Koshirae

By

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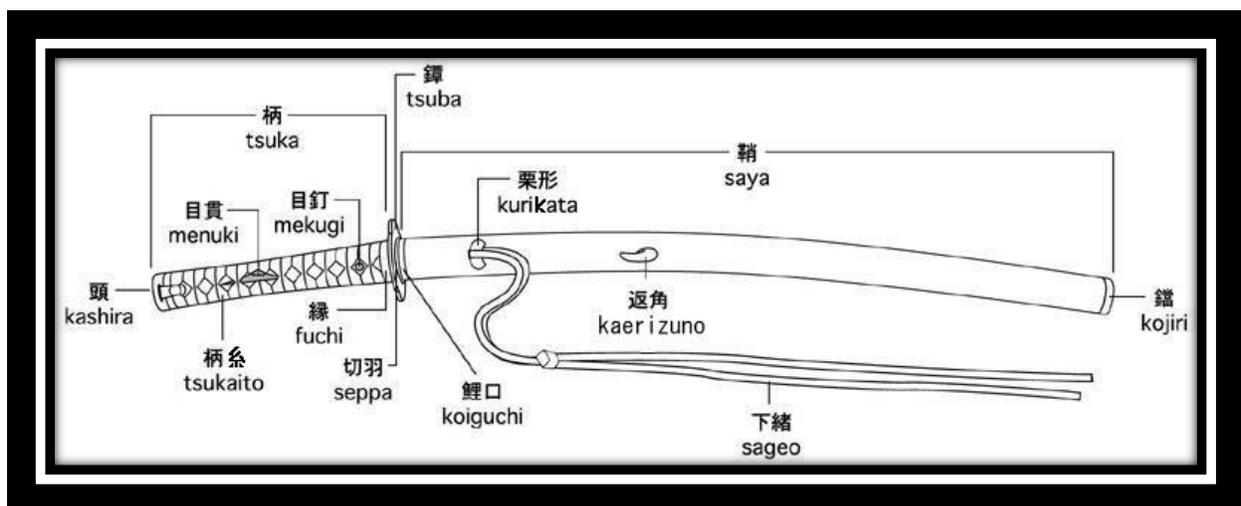
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Introduction

This article is an introduction and study of three antique fittings sets of the Japanese sword dating from the middle to late Edo Period circa early 18th and mid to late 19th centuries. It is my intention to help you expand your understanding and appreciation of pre-modern fittings of the Japanese sword. It is not a definitive guide on the subject but just an introduction and basic study of the topic.

Koshirae (拵) means the matching fitting of the Japanese sword, which is derived from the archaic Japanese verb (koshiraeru 拵える) meaning to make or prepare something (see diagram below).¹ Each set (of examples that I am going to show below) is original in terms of the overall composition with the normal replacement, repair, of different parts due to natural wear during the course of its functional life. The mounts are for swords of different sizes. Two of the sets (Koshirae #1 and #2) show a strong regional style, likely assembled in Owari and Hizen Province, respectively. The third set (Koshirae #3) is more of an eclectic mix, likely owned by a samurai living in a large city such as Edo or Kyōto during the late Edo Period. Below is a translated diagram of all a major part of an Edo Period katana koshirae.²

Katana Koshirae



Koshirae #1

Owari Goshirae (尾張拵)

Basic Measurements:

Full Length: 91.4 cm

Tsuka Length: 21.9 cm

Saya Length: 68.6 cm

Sunagi Nakago Length: 14.0 cm

Sunagi Nagasa Length: 60.3 cm

Tsuba: 6.4 cm X 6.8 cm, 5.2 mm at rim

Fuchi-Gashira: 3.5 cm, 2.6 cm

Saya: Polished Black Lacquer

Menuki: 4.3 cm

This is a complete set of matched fitting for a short sword (wakizashi 脇差). It is done in a style that was popular in Owari Province (尾張國). This tsuba and menuki are older than the rest of the koshirae. The set was assembled later during the late Edo Period when the handle (tsuka 柄) was made and wrapped with dark blue dyed silk. Owari style koshirae typically uses Owari-sukashi or Kanayama tsuba that has the design done positive open work (ji-sukashi 地透). The tsuba of the koshirae is made of iron (tetsu 鉄) and of an Owari-sukashi style and probably dates from the mid Edo Period.



The large diamond pattern handle warp showing much of underlining ray skin (samekawa 鮫皮) is characteristic of the Owari style. The end caps of the handle (fuchi-gashira 縁頭) are made of the copper-gold alloy (shakudō 赤銅) and are angular in shape characteristic of the Owari style. They were made during the late Edo Period by a goldsmith artist (Kinkō 金工) working in Owari province. Inlaid on the fuchi using gold (kin-zōgan 金象巖) is the statement “角丸” (kaku-maru) meaning rounded square.³ I am not sure what this statement directly refers to. The large peppercorn (sanshō 山椒) themed menuki is the oldest part of the koshirae and is likely to date from the late Muromachi Period (circa early to mid-16th century) and made by the K-Mino Kinko (古美濃金工) School. They are made of fine shakudō with design rendered in a delicate high relief carving (takabori 高彫). A near identical set of NBTHK papered menuki was discussed on Darcy Brockbank’s website here: <https://yuhindo.com/ko-mino-menuki/>.



The saya associated parts: koiguchi, kurigata, kojiri are completely plain in decoration and design. The body of the saya has a plain glossy black lacquered, which is also characteristic of the austere aesthetics of the Owari style koshirae.³





Koshirae #2

Hizen Goshirae (肥前拵)

Basic Measurements:

Full Length: 97.5 cm

Tsuka Length: 23.8 cm

Saya Length: 73.7 cm

Sunagi Nakago Length: 13.6 cm

Sunagi Nagasa Length: 56.5 cm

Tsuba: 7.1 cm X 7.5 cm, 5.0 mm at rim

Fuchi-Gashira: 1.2 cm X 3.5 cm, 1.2 cm X 3.5 cm

Saya: Polished Black Lacquer

Menuki: 1.2 cm X 4.5 cm

This complete set of Japanese sword fittings (koshirae 拵) with a full-length wooden blade (sunagi) is for a long sword (katana 刀). The theme of the koshirae is influenced by the Province of Hizen (肥前國). Forged iron (tetsu 鉄) hand guard (tsuba 鐔) while unsigned (mumei 無銘) is a work of the Jakushi (杓子) School based in the port city of Nagasaki (長崎) in Hizen Province. The artistic scene on both sides of the tsuba is that of a Chinese style painting made popular during the Ming Dynasty that was exported to southern Japan during the beginning of the Edo Period with the collapse of the Ming Dynasty (1644 CE). The design is rendered with the inlay of various soft metals on the iron plate which includes gold, silver, and copper.⁶



The handle (tsuka 柄) is warped in black silk over high quality sting ray skin leather, which has been blackened by the application of black lacquered (kuro-urushi 黒漆). The fuchi-gashira (縁頭) is made of forged iron with soft metal inlays of gold, silver, and copper. The fuchi is signed by Jakushi (杓子) on its face. The two-character signature style is consistent with what the Jakushi School used during the late Edo Period.^{5,6}



The hilt ornaments (menuki 目貫) are made of iron, which is done in high relief carving (takabori 高彫) style.⁴ The design itself dates from the Muromachi Period (室町時代) and it was first made popular by the Goto School (後藤). The design of menuki is a crawling male and female Japanese style dragon (hairyū 這龍). The male dragon can be distinguished from the female dragon by presence of a double-edged sword (ken 劍) at the end of its tail. The male dragon can also be identified by its reaching for the wish fulfilling jewel (hō-ju 宝珠). While the menuki is mumei due to the subject matter, quality of the carving, and use of iron as the base metal for the menuki, they are likely the work of the Tetsugendo (鉄元堂) School.



The end cap (kojiri こじり) of the polished black scabbard (saya 鞘) is made of silver and signed (Yoshiteru horu 義照彫). Yoshiteru lived in Kyōto (京都) from 1828 until 1902 CE and was a student of the artist Araki Tōmei (荒木東明). He favored working in silver and the copper-silver alloy of (shibuichi 四分一).⁵





Koshirae #3

Edo Kōki Goshirae (江戸後期拵)

Basic Measurements:

Full Length: 100.3 cm

Tsuka Length: 26.0 cm

Saya Length: 74.3 cm

Sunagi Nakago Length: N/A

Sunagi Nagasa Length: N/A

Tsuba: 8.0 cm X 8.6 cm, 4.5 mm at rim

Fuchi-Gashira: 1.5 cm X 3.9 cm, 1.3 cm X 3.5 cm

Saya: Polished Black Lacquer

Menuki: 6.0 cm

This set of matching fittings (koshirae 拵) for a long sword (katana 刀) with a partial wooden blade (han-sunagi 反すなぎ) was likely assembled during the late Edo Period. It does not reflect much or a regional style but more of an eclectic mixture of different styles popular during late Edo Period circa the late 18th and early to mid-19th centuries. The scabbard (saya 鞘) while plain with a polished black lacquer has brass soft metal fittings capping the ends. The opening of the saya lacks the pockets to hold the accessory tools of the sword needle (kōgai 笄) and small knife handle (kozuka 小柄) seen on earlier katana saya.



The handguard (tsuba 鐔) is a large and made forged iron (tetsu 鉄). The tsuba and the oversized handle ornaments (menuki 目貫) are the work the Mito Kinko (水戸金工) group made up of many schools of artist based around the castle town of Mito in Hitachi (常陸) Province.

The handle caps (fushi-gashira 縁頭) is the work of the Jakushi (杓子) School based in the port city of Nagasaki and show a similar dragon design. This was likely paired by the original feudal warrior (samurai 侍) owner because of the similar auspicious design.



Here is a closer look at the handle (tsuka 柄) that displays the quality of the oversized menuki popular during this period. The design is the rain dragon (unryū 雲龍) as similar design of a dragon obscured by clouds is found on the iron fuchi-gashira set.



The design of the large iron tsuba made by the Mito group is the Gama Sennin (蝦蟇仙人) highlighted nicely in gold inlays (kin-zōgan 金象嵌). A Chinese legendary alchemist also known as the toad immortal who obtained his powers of immortality from a magical three-legged toad. Toads in general were viewed as symbols of wealth and good fortune. In premodern Japanese art, Gama Sennin is pictured as a sage in wilderness with a toad carried on his head or shoulders.^{6,7}



Conclusion

I hope this article was of some help in expanding your understanding and appreciation of the pre-modern fitting sets of the Japanese sword, by allowing you to recognize some of the details and appreciate the different regional styles of Koshirae. Polite feedback and discussion are always welcome. Please feel free to contact me anytime directly at +1 (240) 477-9800 or via email at info@raindragonfinearts.com.

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