

Early History of the *Hirata* School of *Higo* Province

By David Stiles

Introduction

In this article I will present Japanese names, places, and terms, for the first time in italics followed by the *kanji* (漢字) or *kana* (仮名) in brackets to aid the reader in understanding Japanese texts and notes. Reference to the same term later in the text it will only be italicized.

I will be discussing the origin and early history of the Japanese sword fittings artisans of the *Hirata* (平田) school, located in *Higo* (肥後) Province of the southernmost island *Kyūshū* (九州) of pre-modern Japan. I will start before the time of the school's first generation master *Hikoza* (彦三) to discuss the school's origin outside of *Higo* Province and the *Hosokawa* (細川) clan and continue until the third generation master who also used the name *Hikoza* and was only an appraiser of precious metals. More direct information is available in the Japanese book *Higo-Kinko Roku* (肥後金工録) by *Nagaya Shigena*.¹ *Masayuki Sasano* states in his book, *Early Japanese Sword Guards*, that after the third generation the *Hirata* school only supervised the making of sword fittings by others.² There are no works of the *Hirata* family known from the third generation onward, although the family lasted for a total of eight generations, until the *Meiji* (明治) Period.³

I will examine works produced by other groups of fitting makers before the time of the first generation *Hikoza* and discuss possible craftsmanship and stylistic, and artistic influences, either direct or indirect, that influenced the development of the *Hirata* School. This is an attempt to better understand the techniques used by the *Hirata* School and to put them in a broader, more historical and developmental context. My objective is to show that not only the *Kō-Shōami* (古正阿弥) and *Kyō-Shōami* (京正阿弥) schools based in *Kyōto* and *Buzen* (豊前) Province, but also the even earlier *Kō-Kinko* (古金工) group of a more indeterminate origin had a profound impact on the development of the *Hirata* School.

Early History before *Higo* Province

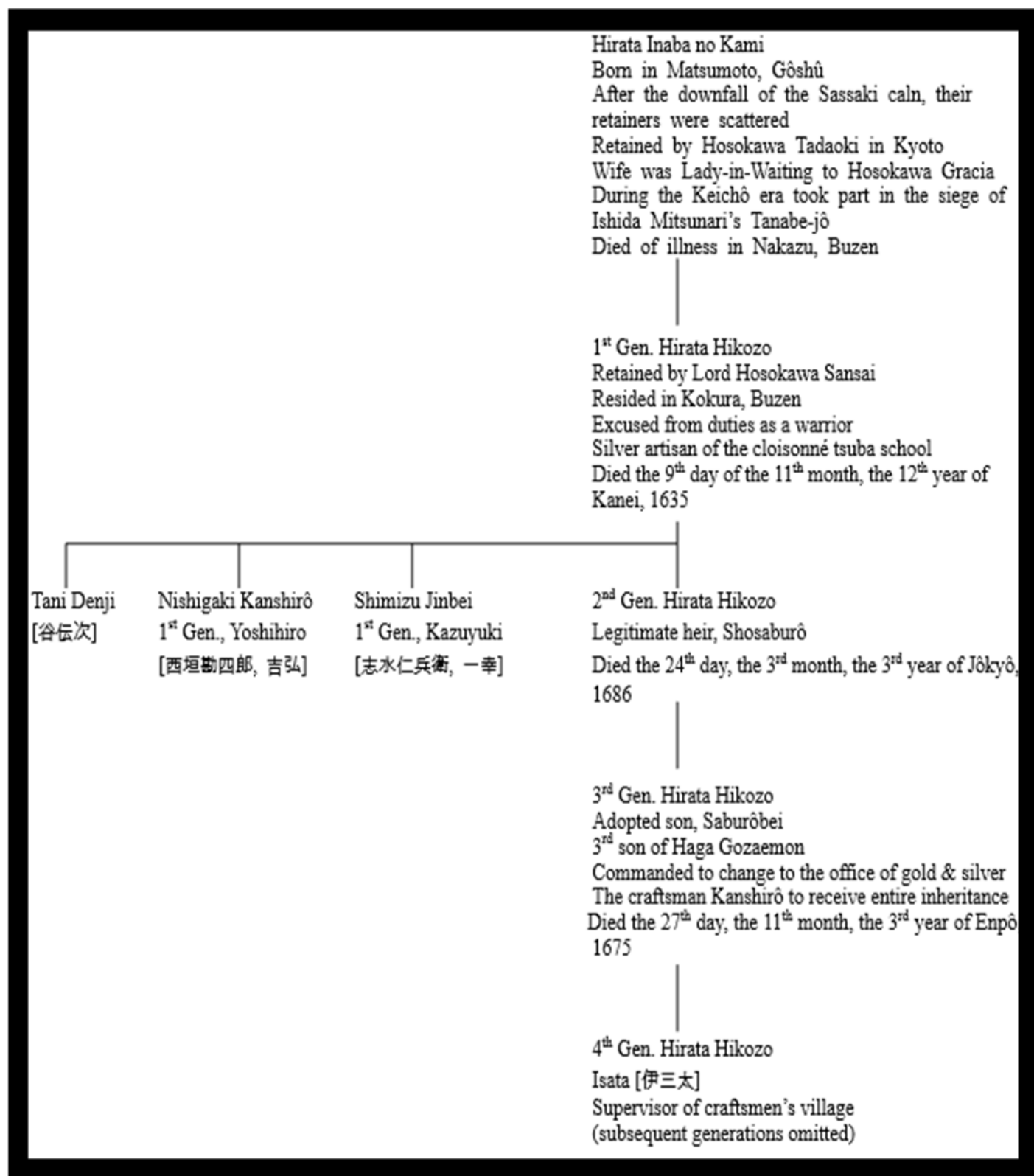
Hirata Hikoza's father *Matsumoto Inaba no Kami* (松本因幡守) belong to the *Samurai* (侍) *Sasaki* (佐々木) family of *Ōmi* (近江) Province.³ After the downfall of the *Sasaki* family his father was forced to flee and become a masterless Samurai. While seeking work in *Kyōto*, *Inaba* became employed by *Hosokawa Tadaoki* (細川忠興).³ *Inaba* and his family, including the young *Hikoza* who's birth date is not recorded but I have estimated to be about 1590, moved to *Tango* (丹後) Province. This province was given to the *Hosokawa* clan by the *Shogun Oda Nobunaga* (将軍織田信長) in 1580. Later, in 1600, the *Hosokawa* family transitioned to the Lordship (*Daimyo* 大名) of *Buzen* Province in northern *Kyūshū* (九州). After this transfer to *Buzen* Province, the *Inaba* stipend was raised to 350 *koku* (石高) of rice (One *koku* of rice was volume equivalent in dry rice of what an adult male would eat in one year). It was recorded that shortly after this time, *Inaba* passed away unexpectedly due disease and the leadership of the family passed to *Hikoza's* uncle *Matsumoto Sukenojō* (松本助之允) with a stipend of 250 *koku*, as *Hikoza*, *Inaba's* legitimate son, was yet a young child. The details of *Matsumoto Sukenojō's* fate were not recorded. Later, as *Hikoza* matured, he changed his family name

to *Hirata* and was awarded a special stipend of 100 *oku* as an appraiser of precious metals and a sword fittings maker.³ The period in *Buzen* Province from 1600 until 1632 was important for *Hiko*zo's development as he likely was instructed in basic techniques for soft metal and iron by members of the early *Shōami* and *Kyō-Shoami* schools already present in or recently moved to *Buzen* Province from *Kyoto*.⁵ Being recorded as a personal friend of *Hosokawa Tadaoki* allowed *Hiko*zo to study and have access to earlier *Ko-Kinko* and *Ko-Shōami* work. It was also recorded that *Hiko*zo, along with *Tadaoki*, was a student of the tea ceremony, which likely also had a profound influence on his artistic sensibilities.

Early History of the *Hirata* School in *Higo* Province

The *Shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu* (徳川家光) appointed the leadership of *Higo* Province to *Hosokawa Tadatoshi* (細川忠利) in 1632.^{5,6} *Hiko*zo, his son *Shōzaburō* (少三郎), and his nephew *Shimizu Jinbei* (志水仁兵衛) moved to *Yatushiro-jo* (八代城) (jo means castle) in northern *Higo* Province and stayed there for the remainder of *Hiko*zo's life, until his death at the age of 45 in 1635.^{3,7} Upon *Hiko*zo's death, *Shōzaburō* moved along with the *Hosokawa* family to *Kumamoto-jo* (熊本城). *Shimizu Jinbei* stayed in *Yatushiro* and later went on to establish himself as a silversmith and a sword fittings artist. *Shōzaburō* worked as a sword fittings artist in the style of his father. The profession of sword fittings artist was passed from *Hiko*zo to *Nishigaki Kanshirō* (西垣勘四郎) and *Shimizu Jinbei*, both of whom started their own schools. It is recorded that *Shōzaburō* received a stipend of 20 *oku* of rice from the *Hosokawa* family and died in 1686.^{3,4} The role of appraiser of precious metals was left to *Shōzaburō*'s adopted son *Saburōbei* (三郎兵衛) who later changed his name to *Hiko*zo. The fourth generation master *Hirata Isata* (平田尹三太) was recorded to have become the supervisor of a craftsman's village at *Kumamoto-jo*.

Genealogy of the Early *Hirata* School⁷



Early Influences of *Hirata Hiko*zo

In this section I would like to present some examples that, at the time, were antique *Ko-kinko tsuba* which used the same base metal, some of the same surface treatments, and show similar compositional aspects in terms of openwork as does the work of *Hiko*zo. These works could have had an indirect influence upon *Hiko*zo's artistic development. The first example *tsuba* is made of unrefined copper, *yamagane* (山銅), a soft metal often used by *Hiko*zo. The *tsuba* displays a textured lacquer surface, also a common feature of *Hiko*zo's when working with a copper based soft metal. The simple but elegant openwork design of a chrysanthemum flower was a common subject of *Hiko*zo masterpieces. The *tsuba* has a raised rim which also is characteristic of *Hiko*zo work. Overall, the piece lacks the high level of refinement and finish of *Hiko*zo work. The elongated oval shaped *kozuka hitsu-ana* (小柄櫃孔穴) and large *seppa-dai* (切羽台) indicate its antiquity and use on early *uchigatana koshirae* (打刀拵).

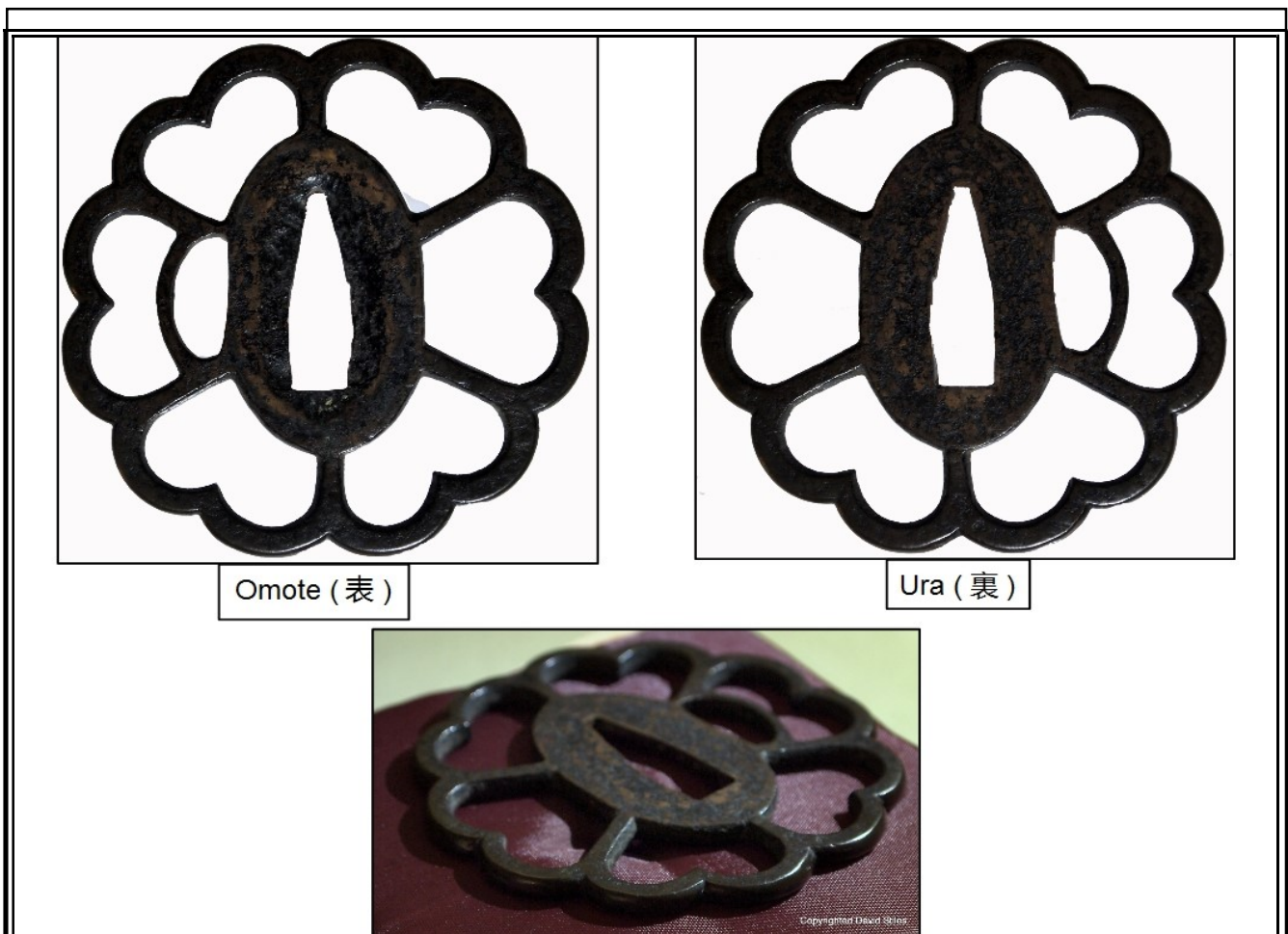
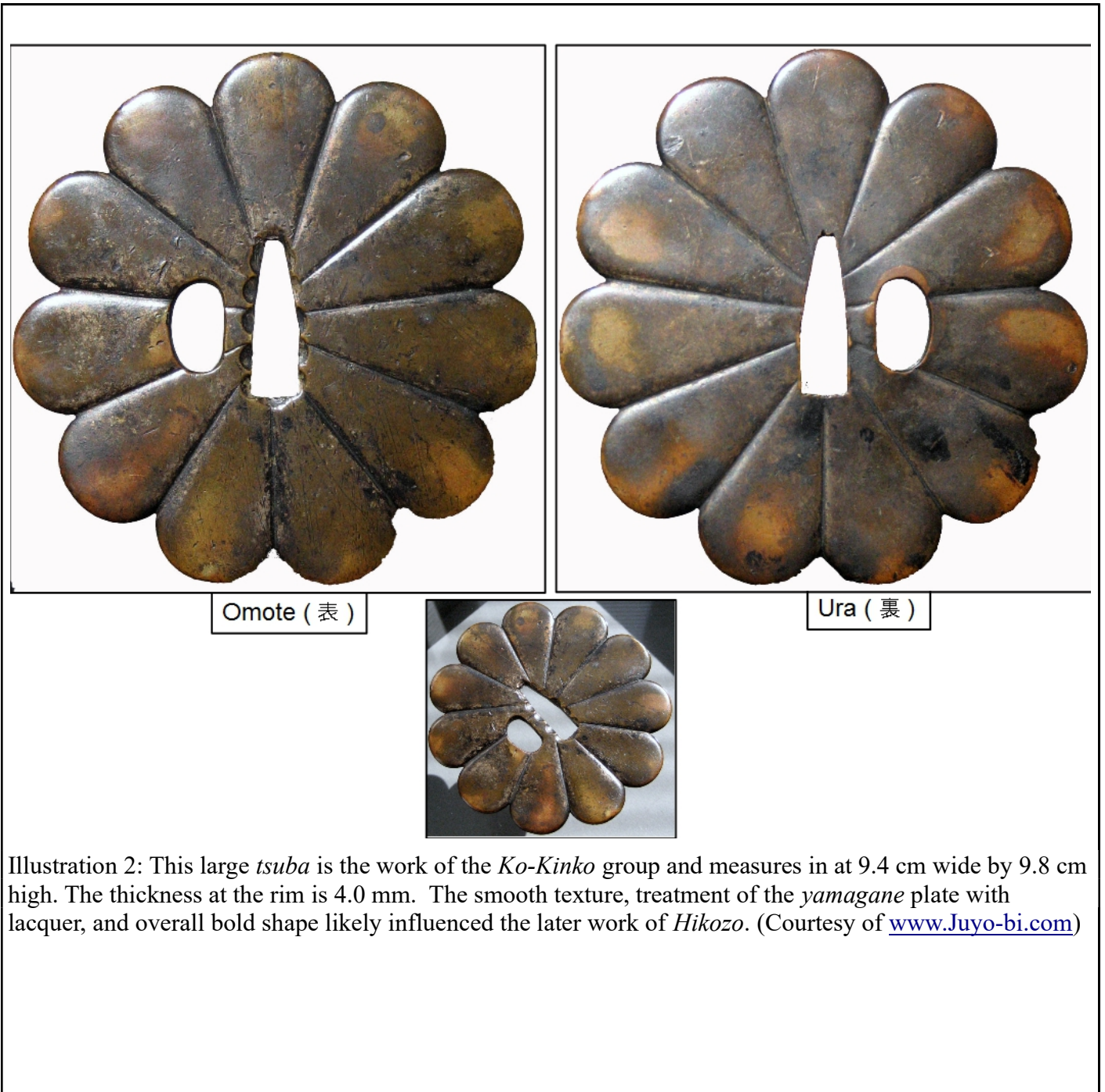


Illustration 1: This *tsuba* dates from the middle to late *Muromachi* Period (1400-1568). The surface, with a hammered texture, has been covered in thick black lacquer. Measurements are 6.8 cm wide by 6.8 cm high. The thickness at the turned up rim is 4.0 mm and thinner towards the center.

The next example of early work that likely had a influences on *Hikozo* is a large sized *tsuba*, possibly used in a *daisho koshirae* (大小拵) from the *Azuchi-Momoyama* Period (1568-1615) but more likely dated to the *Keicho* (慶長) era (1596-1615). The surface of the refined copper *tsuba* is polished smooth and displays the remnants of black lacquer that has been intentionally worn away for aesthetic purposes. This, along with the chrysanthemum shape, is often seen in a more refined level in the work of *Hikozo*. The rounded punch marks around the *nakago hitsu-ana* (中心櫃孔穴), done with a specialized chisel, are similar to examples from *Hikozo* discussed later in the next section.



The final early example is a soft metal *Ko-Shōami* (古正阿弥) tsuba, circa *Azuchi-Momoyama* Period, with a base metal of brass (*shinchū* 真鍮). Stylized devices are carved in high relief and highlighted nicely with the use of black lacquer, similar to what is observed on many pieces attributed to *Hikoza* and his *Hirata* School.



Illustration 3: This is a *Ko-Shoami* tsuba measuring 7.6 cm wide by 8.0 cm high. The raised rim at 5 mm and the thin center of 2.5 mm, in the context of the other techniques used, show striking similarity to *Hikoza* and works of the *Hirata* School.

These are just a few early examples of soft metal *tsuba* that display some remarkable similarities that could have had an influence on the later works of the *Hirata* school of *Higo* Province.

Examples of First and Second Generation *Hirata*

Following are a few soft metal examples of first and second generation *Hirata* School work. All of the examples were attributed at a minimum to the *Hirata* School by the Society for Preservation of Japanese Art Swords (*Nihon Bijutsu Token Hozon Kyokai* 日本美術刀剣保存協会) [NBTHK] at the



Illustration 4: This fine example, while unsigned, has been attributed directly to *Hirata Hikoza*. The measurements are 6.5 cm x 6.5 cm and 2.6 mm at the rim. (Images Courtesy of <http://tetsugendo.com/>)

Japanese Sword Museum located in *Shibuya-ku, Tokyo*.

The first very fine example, which I was able to examine in person at the Tampa Japanese sword show, was awarded a *tokubetsu hozon* (特別保存) certificate by the NBTHK, with a direct attribution to *Hirata Hikoza* even though it is unsigned. Notice the similarities to the previously

presented *Ko-Kinko* examples in terms of the thin plate as well as the use of black lacquer to give the refined copper a wonderful dark patina and depth to the surface texture. The rounded punch marks around the *nakago hitsu-ana*, described as hidden cold chisel (*kakushi-tagane* 隠し鑿) in Japanese, are done with a specialized chisel unique to the artist and very similar to the *Ko-Kinko* example in Illustration 2.⁸

This next example, the current owner and I also think, is the work of 1st generation *Hirata Hikoza*. However, the NBTHK has given it *Tokubetsu Hozon* to *Hirata* School only. The simple, bold, and elegant negative openwork is of a chrysanthemum. The work is done in a dark *shakudo* (赤銅) with a thick layering of black lacquer, giving the textured surface a very nice glossiness. The edge of the *tsuba* is fitted nicely with a soft metal rim cover (*fukurin* 覆輪).⁸ A rim cover of the same or different metal is a feature frequently found also on *Ko-kinko tsuba*. The rounded punch marks around the *nakago hitsu-ana* are unique to the artist and very similar to the *Ko-Kinko* example in Illustration 2 as well as to the first *Hirata* example in Illustration 4. The surface is nicely textured in a style similar to the first *Hirata* example.

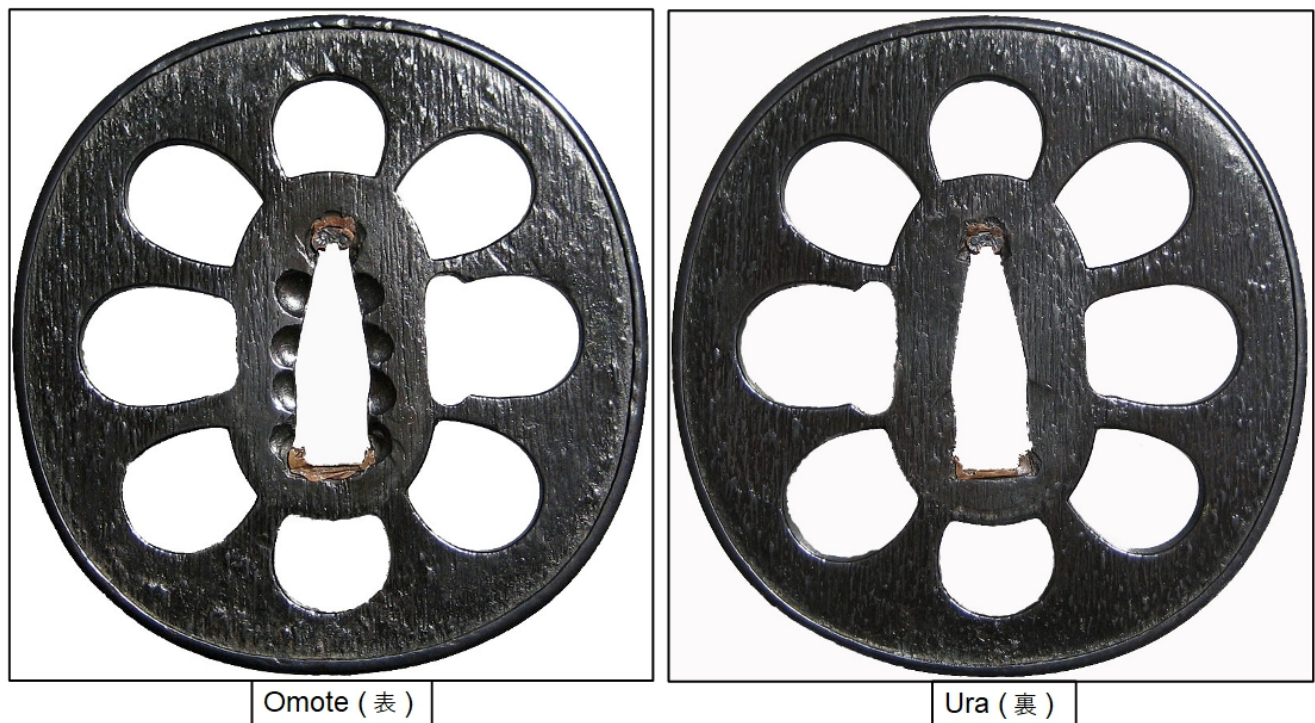


Illustration 5: This large *Hirata tsuba* is done in very fine *shakudo* with an applied surface texture and black lacquer. Measurements are 8.1 cm x 7.8 cm, 4.2 mm at the rim. (Courtesy of www.Juyo-bi.com)

The next example I will present seems to be in the style of the 2nd generation *Shōzaburō*; it has an NBTHK *hozon* judgment attributing it to the *Hirata* School. The design is of two folding fans with a centrally located pine bark styled family crest. It, like all the previous examples, is unsigned. The rounded punch marks around the *nakago hitsu-ana* are unique to the artist and very similar to the *Ko-Kinko* example in Illustration 2 as well as to the first and second *Hirata* examples in Illustrations 4 and 5. Unlike in the previous two examples, surface texture is a smooth, fine polished finish.



Illustration 6: The base metal of this *tsuba* is a bit hard to tell but I think it is likely some copper based Japanese alloy such as shibuichi (四分一) with a layer of clear lacquer and patina. The measurements are 7.4 cm x 7.3 cm x 4 mm and 3 mm at rim. (Courtesy of www.Juyo-bi.com)

The final example, Illustration 7, is in my opinion another work of the 2nd generation *Shōzaburō*. I was able to examine this *tsuba* in person at the Southeast Japanese Sword Show & Auction and found it both very refined and impressive. The attribution on the NBTHK *hōzon* paper is only to the *Hirata* School. This *tsuba* is constructed in 3 layers: a *yamagane* plate is sandwiched between two thinner layers of highly polished dark *shakudo*. The *yamagane*, visible only along the rim of the *tsuba*, is nicely polished along its outer edge. This style of “sandwich” construction using three layers of differing soft metals is sometime found also in earlier *Ko-Kinko* work of the *Azuchi-Momoyama* Period.



Illustration 7: The measurements of this *Hirata* work is 7.8 cm x 7.2 cm and 3 mm at the rim.
(Images Courtesy of <http://tetsugendo.com/>)

Summary and Conclusion

I have presented the *Samurai* origin and early history of the *Hirata* School before, during, and after their move to *Higo* Province. I have presented a few examples of *Ko-Kinko* (Illustrations 1 and 2) and *Ko-Shōami* (Illustration 3) School work that exhibit many techniques and design aesthetics that were later incorporated by the *Hirata* School.

My theory is that not only the early *Ko-Shōami* and *Kyō-Shōami* Schools based in *Kyoto* but also the even earlier *Ko-Kinko* group of a more indeterminate origin had a profound impact on the development of the *Hirata* School. This impact was carried over to the early *Shimizu* and *Nishigaki* Schools of *Higo* Province that evolved from the *Hirata* School.

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