
Reflections on 25 Years of Collecting Japanese Art

A collector's journey from Silver Spring to New York and beyond

By David Stiles

Tsuba Otaku

(<https://www.tsubaotaku.com/>)



Introduction to Japanese Art



- My interest in Japanese Art began at the bookstore while still in graduate school with me learning more about the Japanese Sword through reading of these three books:
 - Japanese Swordsmanship by Gordon Warner & Donn F. Draeger
 - The Craft of the Japanese Sword by Leon Kapp, Hiroko Kapp, Yoshindo Yoshihara
 - The Connoisseur's Book of Japanese Swords by Kokan Nagayama

Early Years of Collecting:

I became interested and actively collecting tsuba once I obtained my first real job as a biologist.

What drew me into collecting tsuba initially was I found them to be a bit more affordable and therefore much more approachable than collecting a complete Japanese sword.

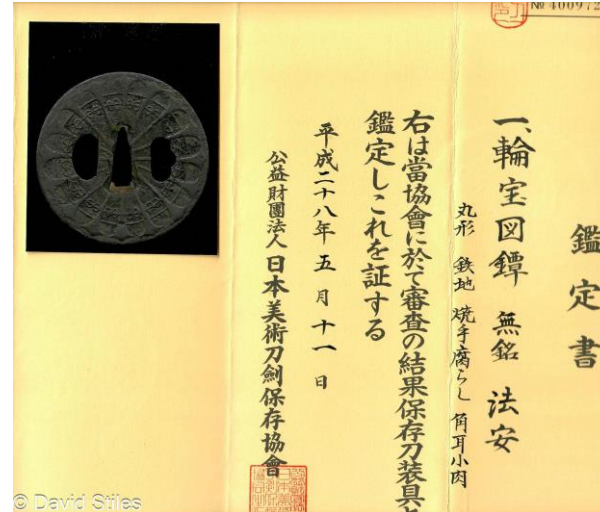
This led my Japanese wife to use the nickname “Tsuba Otaku”.



Tsuba Collection Showcase



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Hōan Tsuba (法安鐔) likely work of the 1st Generation.

- Age: Early Edo Period (江戸時代初期)
- Size: 7.4 cm X 7.4 cm, 3.0 mm at rim.
- Signature: Mumei (無銘)

Tsuba (鐔, 鐔): sword guard or hilt of Japanese sword.

“Is second only to the blade in beauty and first in expression of the owner's status, character, and values.”

Sandai Yamakichibei Tsuba (三代山吉兵鐔)

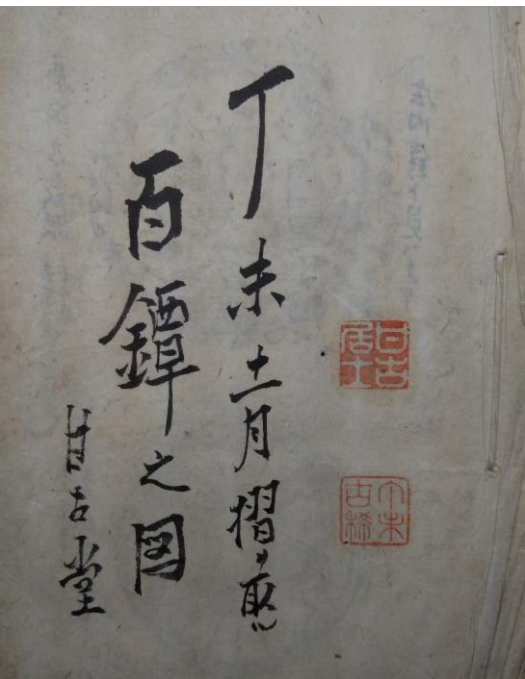
Age: Kanbun (寛文) Era - Genroku (元禄) Era (1661-1704)

Size: 7.6 cm X 7.7 cm

Signature: Yamakichibei (山吉兵)



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Sandai Shimizu Tsuba (三代志水鐔)
Age: Middle Edo Period (江戸時代中期)
Size: 7.7 cm X 8.2 cm, 5.0 mm at rim.
Signature: Jingo (甚吾)

Likely a work of the 3rd generation Shimizu of Higo Province. An example of the artist's work after his 75th birthday per previous owner Charlie Foos and Ito Mitsuru sensei private comments. The artist lived during the middle Edo Period from 1691 to 1777.



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Expanding to Kodōgu (小道具)

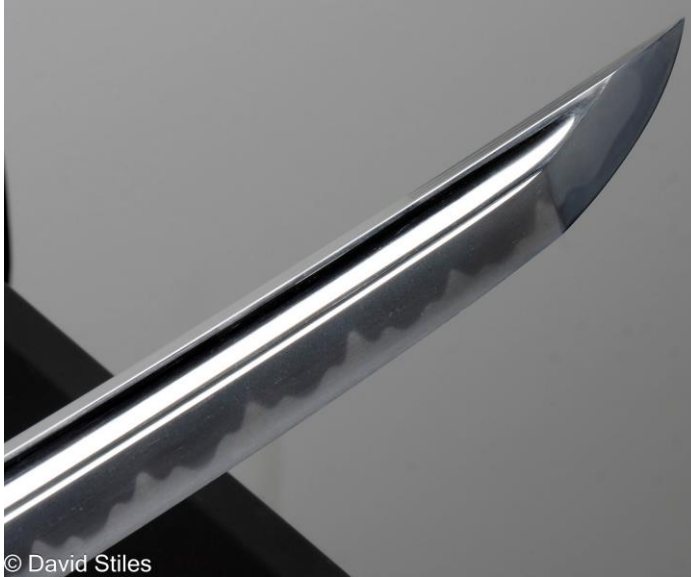
Ko-Kinkō Menuki (古金工目貫)

Age: Muromachi Period (室町時代) 1336-1573, Size: 4.5 cm, Signature: Mumei (無銘)

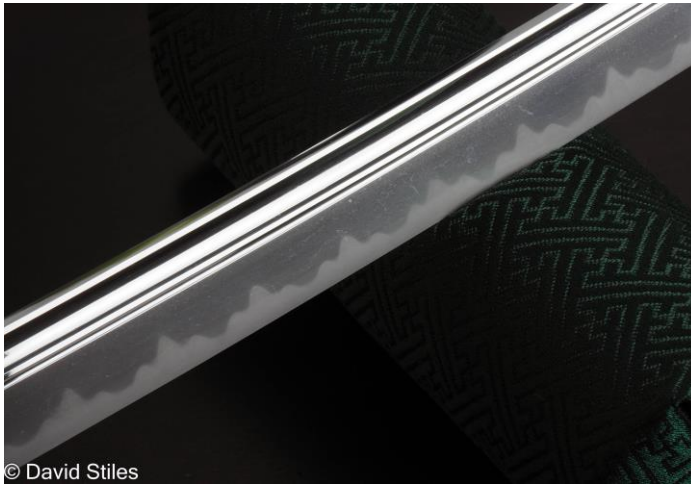


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Nihontō (日本刀) and Koshirae (拵)



Kanemoto Katana (兼元刀)

Jakushi (若芝) signed Hizen Goshirae (肥前掬)

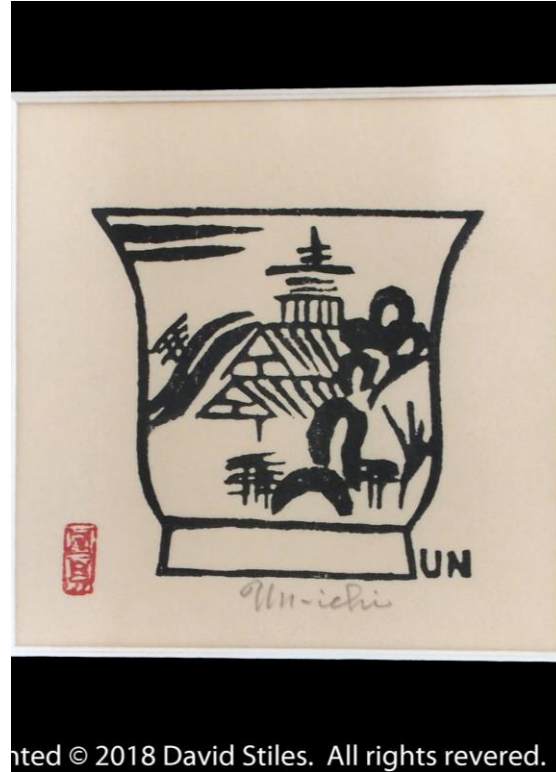
Other Types of Japanese Art

HIRATSUKA UN'ICHI (平塚運一)

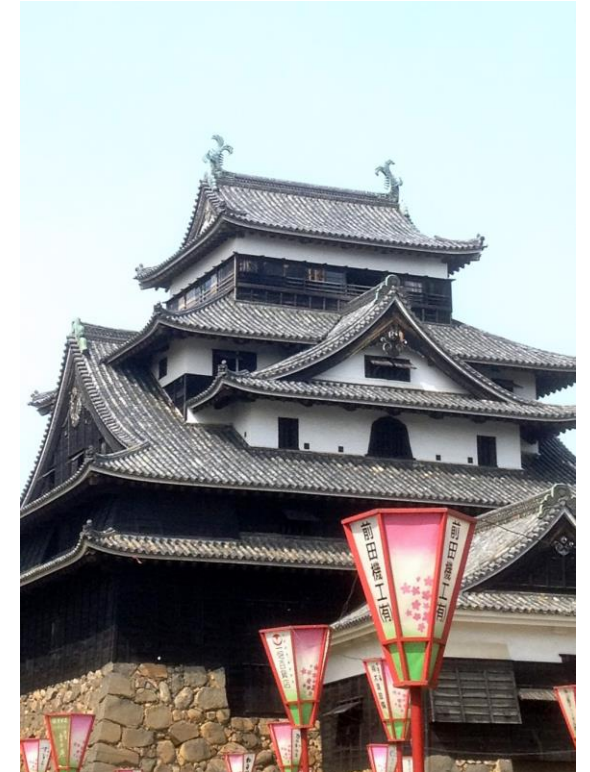
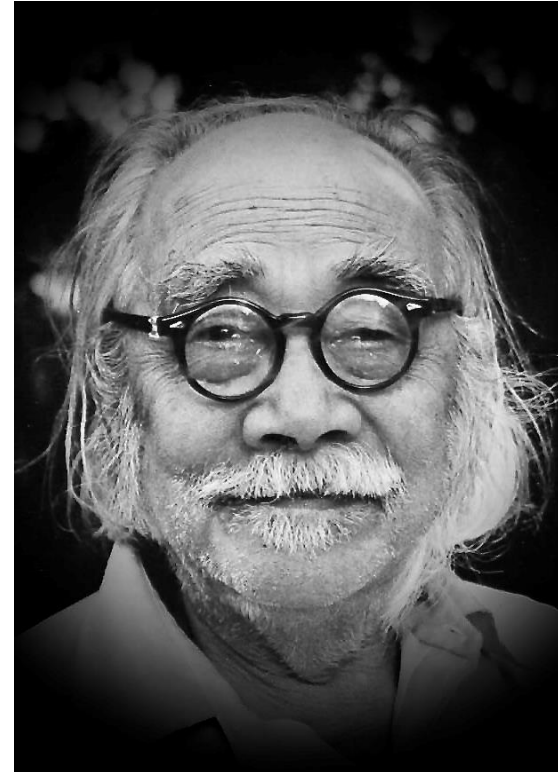
Lived from 1895-1997. Made wood-block prints with a vibrant color palette style before WWII and more subdued plain black-white palette style after WWII.



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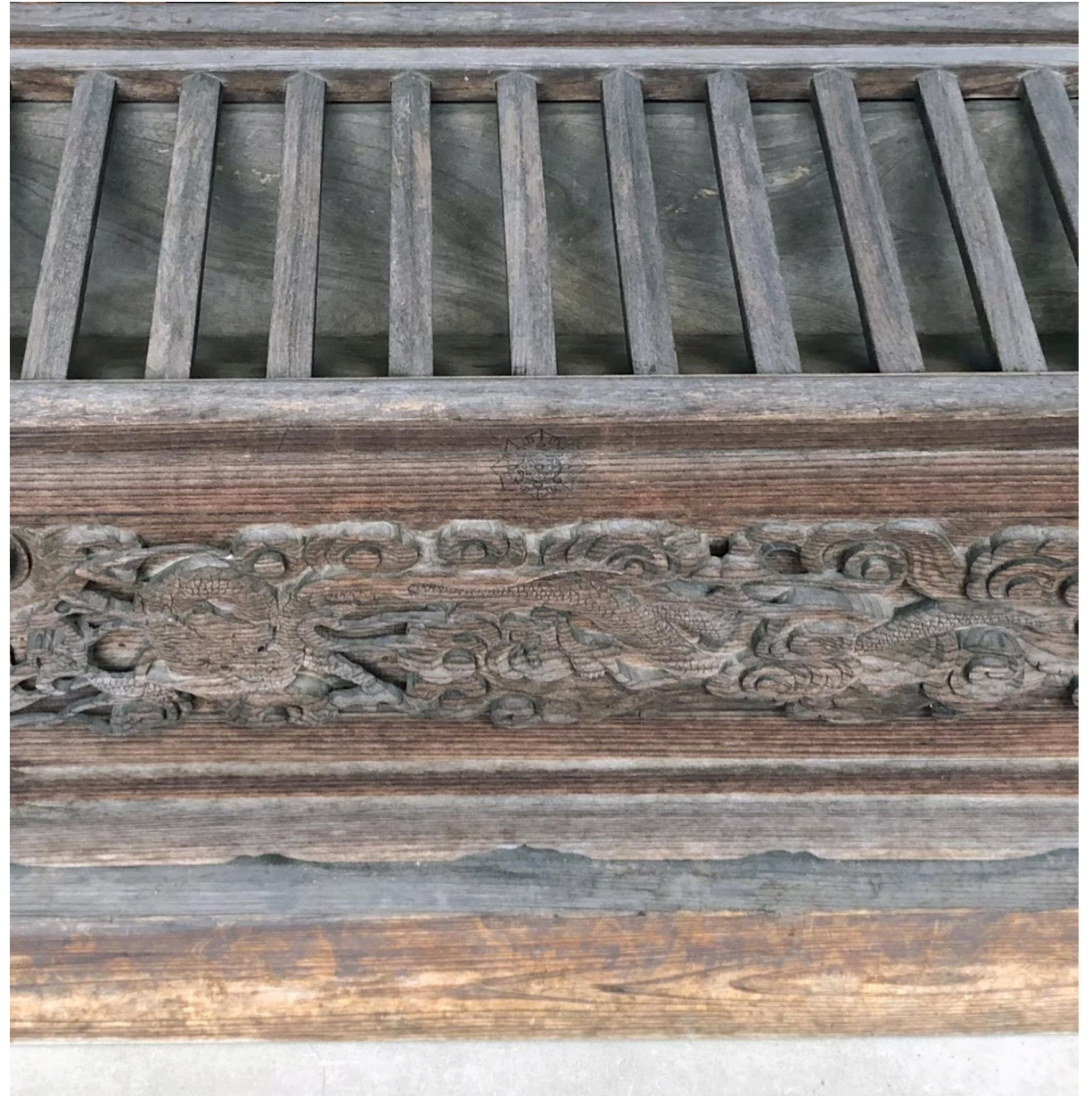


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Words of Wisdom and Suggestions to Fellow Collectors

- Find out what you want to collect by being actively engaged in the study and learning process.
- Seek unbiased educated opinions about pieces in your collection, before and after acquisition. An organized and structured way to do this is through written formal appraisal (shinsa 審査).
- Keep a focused collection that is of a manageable size based upon who are and the stage of life you are in.





Future Goals for my Collection:

1. Reduce, focusing, and upgrading the collection before my retirement and move to Japan.
 2. Deepening my research and sharing knowledge to foster a lively collecting community within the hobby.
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Q&A

Closing thought: **“Collecting is not just about objects—it’s about stories, connections, and historical appreciation.”**

