

Study of Excellence: *Misumi Menuki*

Introduction

In this article I would like to introduce to the readers of the JSSUS newsletter these wonderful large hilt ornaments for the Japanese sword (*menuki* 目貫). This set is an important cornerstone of my collection of Japanese sword fittings. To begin with in this article I will introduce the construction details including the techniques used to construct this *menuki* set, followed with information about the subject matter and its cultural significance. I will then conclude the article with some historical and biographical information about the maker of this fine set of *menuki*. The results of their almost yearlong examination and appraisal in Japan by a panel of knowledgeable expert will also be discussed.

Construction Details

They are made of a dark rich purplish-black copper and gold alloy unique to Japan called (*shakudo* 赤銅). The rich color alone indicates that the set is made of the high rank of *shakudo* with a gold percentage upwards of 6-7%.¹ The surface of each *menuki* is highly polished (*migaki-ji* 磨地) in such a way to replicate the wet leather like skin of a real tadpole. This was a very labor intensive process during the *Edo* Period (1615-1868) before the invention of modern power tools. The tadpole itself is shaped and carved in high relief without a base (*katachi-bori* 容彫) from a single large flat piece of *shakudo*. The eyeballs of each tadpole are nicely colored with a subdued bit of gold accent (*kin-iroe* 金色繪).



Illustration 1: Large 4.9 mm *menuki* made of dark rich *shakudo*.

The back side of the *menuki* shows the great amount of *shakudo* that was used to make each large *menuki*. Strangely each *menuki* is finished with a tall triangle shaped support post on the backside. These support posts are added to the back side once the *menuki* set is completed and are either rectangular or round in shape.



Illustration 2: This photos shows the back side of the *menuki* notice the strange triangle shaped posts.

Subject Matter

The design of the *menuki* is of tadpoles or polliwogs. The term (*kaeru-go* 蛙子) is used in Japanese with the literal meaning “child of frog”. The design is rendered in a very naturalistic style that clearly conveys the subject's spirit. The considerable motion displayed by long tail of the tadpole is required to convey this spirit.

The cultural significance of the tadpole in Japan is as a symbol of change, metamorphosis, and the Spring season. They are often encountered in springtime in puddles, pounds, or other small bodies of slow moving water.



Illustration 3: Considerable motion and life is displayed by the tadpoles long tails.

Historical and Biographical Information

On June 14, 2015 these *menuki* were directly attributed to be the work of the artist (*Misumi* 三角) and awarded a written expert appraisal (*kanteisho* 鑑定書) certificate by the Japanese educational non-profit organization *Nihon Token Hozon Kai* (日本刀剣保存会) [NTHK-NPO].

The artist worked in *Higo* Province (肥後國) more specifically near *Kumamoto* (熊本) Castle

for the *Matsui* (松井) family who were retainers of the province ruled by the *Hosokawa* (細川) family. Some earlier references cite *Misumi* as being contemporary with *Hosokawa Sansai* (細川三齋) making his working period between 1620 and 1646 of the early *Edo* Period and located at *Yatsushiro* Castle before 1632 when the *Hosokawa* family moved to *Kumamoto* Castle to rule the entire province of *Higo*. There is little to no evidence that there was more than one generation of artist using the *Misumi* name according to research conducted by *Itō Mitsuru* who put his working period clearly after the time *Hosokawa Sansai*.ⁱⁱ According to The Index of Japanese Sword Fittings and Associated Artists (ID# H03438.0) the approximate working period for this artist is between 1650 and 1700.ⁱⁱⁱ The NTHK-NPO agree with this later dating of *Misumi* working period during the middle *Edo* Period. Other names used by the artist *Misumi* are *Kōji* (幸次), *Harunobu* (春信), *Masaharu* (正春), and *Okitsugu* (興次).

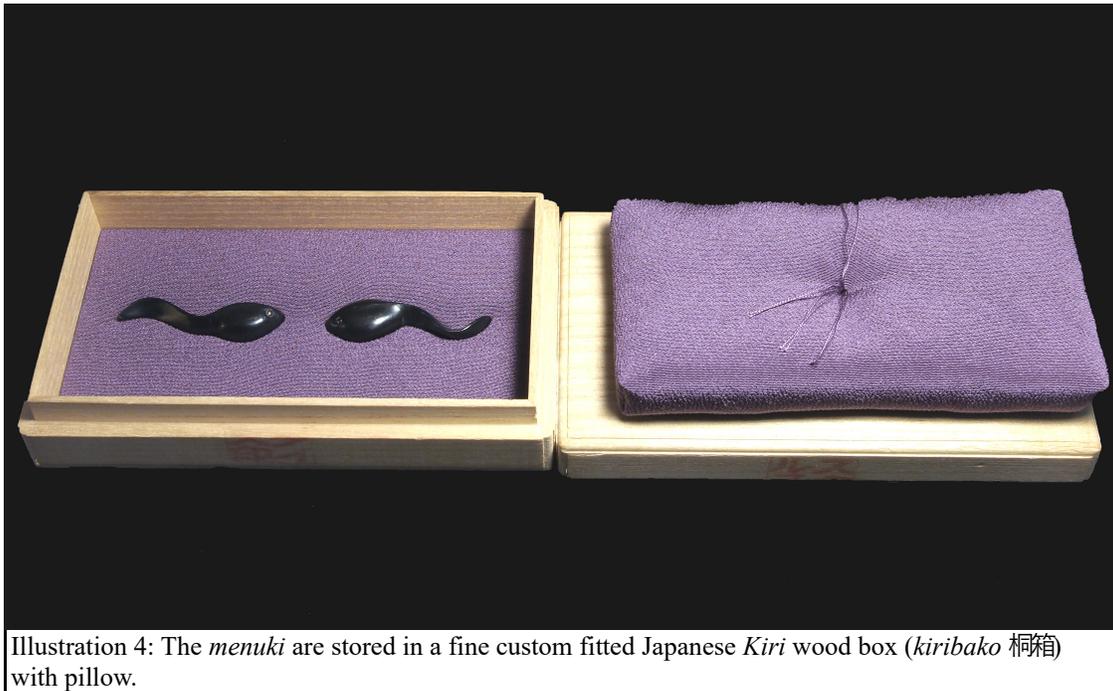


Illustration 4: The *menuki* are stored in a fine custom fitted Japanese *Kiri* wood box (*kiribako* 桐箱) with pillow.

Illustrations 5 and 6 show scans of the *kantei-sho* certificate issued by the NTHK-NPO. The *menuki* scored 85 points at the regular monthly *shinsa* allowing them to be eligible for the year end (*yūshu shinsa* 優秀審査) held in December.

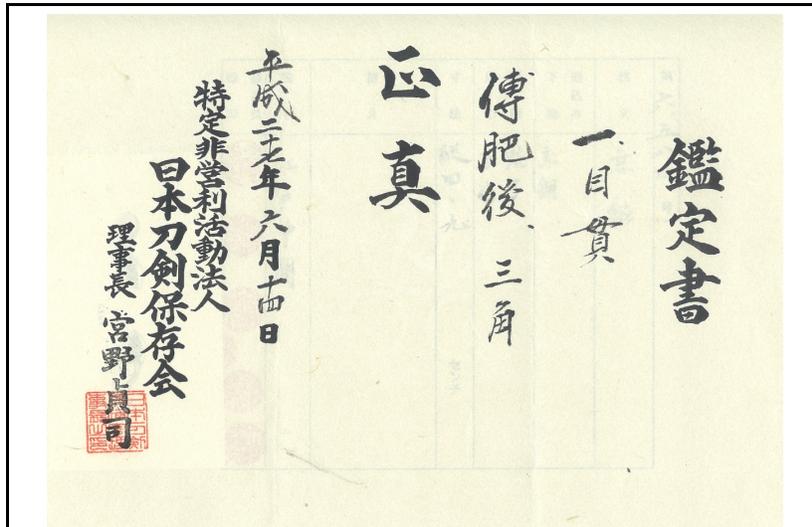


Illustration 5: Front cover of the NTHK-NPO *Kantesho* certificate issued on June 14, 2015 showing the direct attribution to *Misumi* of *Higo* Province.

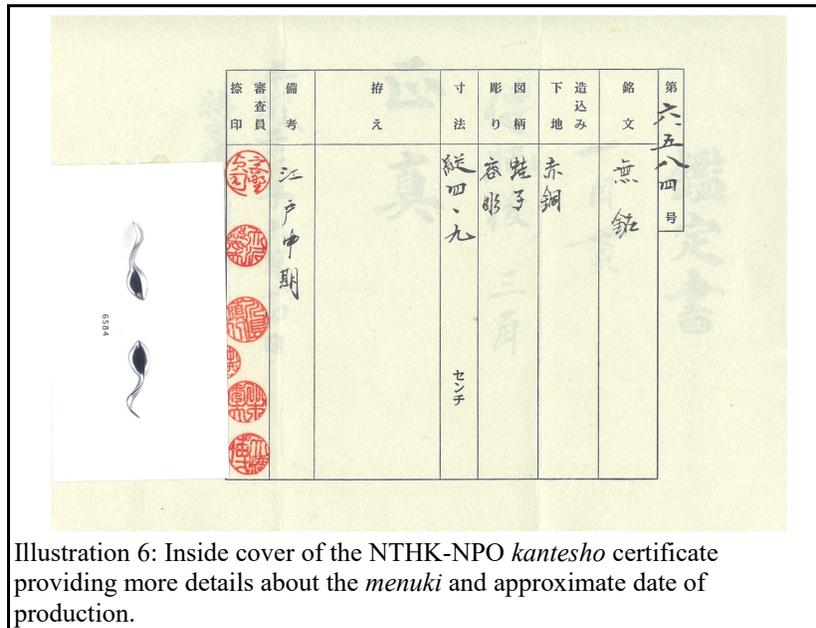


Illustration 6: Inside cover of the NTHK-NPO *kantesho* certificate providing more details about the *menuki* and approximate date of production.

The *menuki* passed the *yūshu shinsa* with a direct attribution to *Misumi* of *Higo* Province circa the middle *Edo* Period. Upon entering this highest level of *shinsa* the *kanteisho* certificate was collected and a new *yūshu-saku* certificate was issued. Later the *kanteisho* was returned after the completion of the *yūshu shinsa*. The *yūshu-saku* certificate of the NTHK-NPO is equivalent to the NBTHK (*jūyo tōsōgu* 重要刀装具) certificate. It is only issued to Japanese sword fittings that are of exceptionally fine quality and that are historically important. In regards to the historical importance of this set *Itō Mitsuru* at the time of publication of his book *Works of Hirata & Shimizu* there was a total of 26 sets of *menuki* extant made by *Misumi*.ⁱⁱ Including this very fine set the total has now increased by one to 27 assuming this set was not included to his original tally. Illustrations 7 and 8 are the outside and inside covers of the NTHK-NPO *yūshu-saku* paper issued for the *menuki*.



Illustration 7: The outside cover of the NTHK-NPO *yūshu-saku* paper issued for these exceptional *Higo Misumi menuki*.

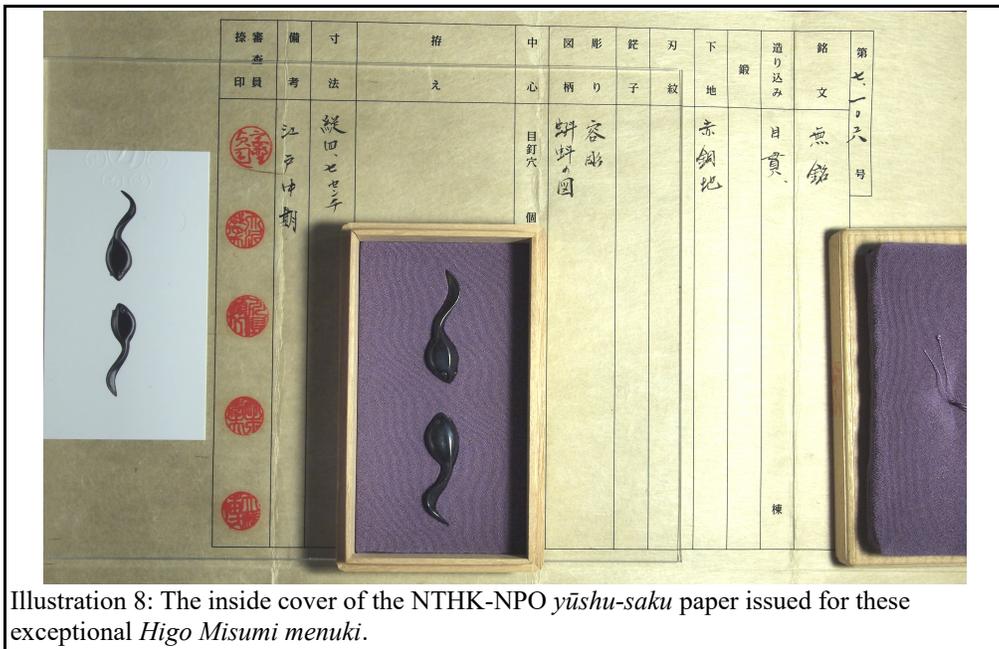


Illustration 8: The inside cover of the NTHK-NPO *yūshu-saku* paper issued for these exceptional *Higo Misumi menuki*.

- i “Japanese *Shakudo* Its History, Properties, and Production from Gold-Containing Alloys” by Hachiro Oguchi, *Gold Bull.*, 1983, 16, (4).
- ii Works of Hirata & Shimizu by Itō Mitsuru, translated by Markus Sesko, Copyrighted 2007.
- iii The Index of Japanese Sword Fittings and Associated Artists by Robert E. Haynes, Nihon Art Publishers, Copyrighted 2001.