

Study of a SŌTEN Tsuba

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A study of a good Soten tsuba, signed Gōshū Hikone Jū Sōheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei [1], purchased from Seiydo, with a view of furthering knowledge of the School and this piece was undertaken. The study tsuba will be referred to by the reference number used by the seller i.e. TU-072713.



Figure 1: TU-072713 is papered by NTHK as genuine Sōten tsuba.

Some information about the tsuba follows:

- Height 75 mm, width 70 mm, thickness at mimi (rim) 5 mm.
- Nademaru gata (off round), kaku mimi (square rim) with gold fukurin (rim cover), ryohitsu (openings) plugged with gold.

The translation of the attached NTHK paper follows [2]:

- Kanteisho Tsuba
- Sōheishi Sōten Original piece
- 20th of January of the 25th year of Heisei Era (2013)
- Nihon Token Hozon Kai (NTHK), a non-profit organization.
- Miyano Teiji, director.
- Mei: **Gōshū Hikone Jū Sōheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei**
Made by Sōheishi Nyūdō Sōten, living in Hikone, Omi province.
- Construction: Nademaru gata, Tetsuji.
- Design: Gassen no zu (battle scene).
Uchiborisukashi no kingin iroe (perforated decoration painted in gold and silver).
- Dimensions: 7.5 cm height, 6.9 cm width.
- Additional information: Late Edo era.

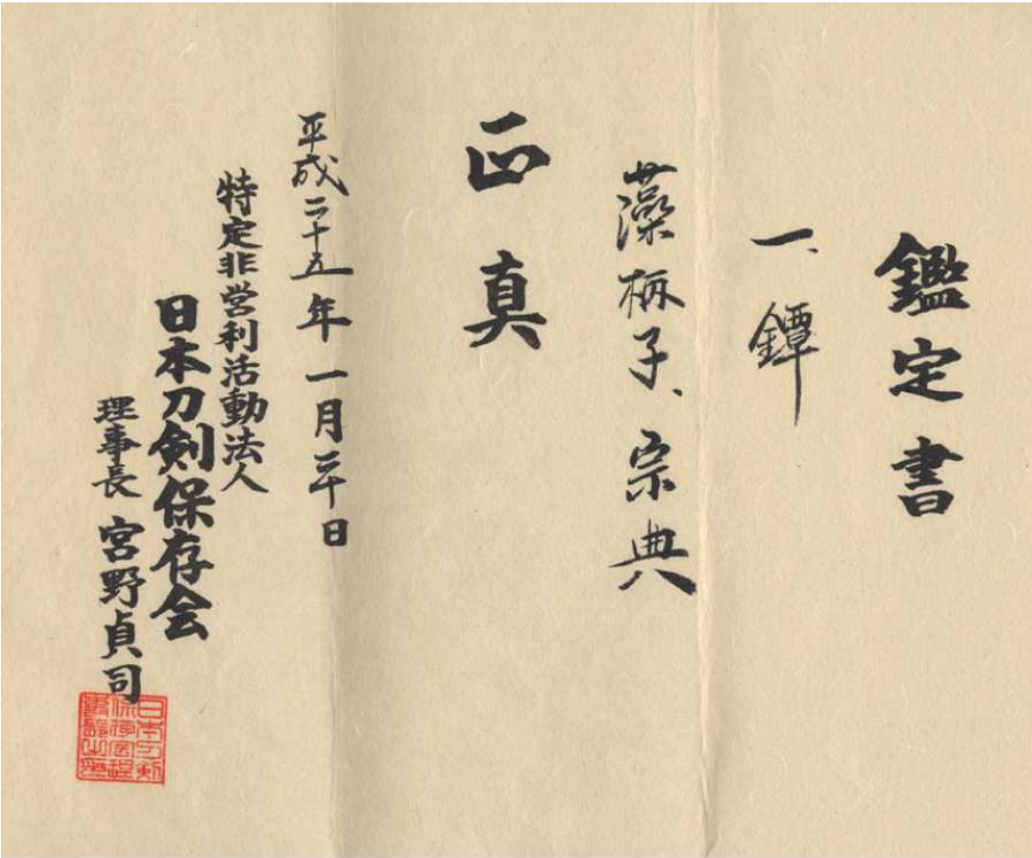


Figure 2: NTHK origami

Personal notes and observations

The comparison between TU-072713 and other Sōten work is quite complicated by the sheer number of gimei (false signature) and imitations. In fact, again according to Haynes [3]:

“The first Sōten had many students who helped him produce Sōten style tsuba. In fact, during his lifetime, the demand for this style of tsuba became so great that he and his school could not keep up with orders. In Kyoto the Hirahiya School and, in Aizu, the Shoami School made Sōten style tsuba to help fill the orders for the many requests received from all parts of the country.”

Among the large number of tsuba signed Gōshū Hikone Jū Sōheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei only a few that are comparable, of similar design have available high quality pictures that allow accurate details comparison. Of the few tsuba reported in Figures 3 to 9 only the tsuba of Figure 3 and the daisho of Figure 4 are papered.

Comparing TU-072713 with the previously reported tsuba for the workmanship, the way in which the samurai figures are realized and the level of detail, the closest match is with the tsuba of **Figure 8**.

This is readily apparent by the details comparison reported in **Figure 10**. The way in which the faces, the hands and even the hair of the samurai are rendered is practically the same. The armor outline, and ligatures rendering is identical between the two. This is also true for the way in which the weapons are represented with small round tsuba and decorations on the saya. The castle wall, made of hexagonal blocks, and the tiles at its top are rendered in the same way.



Figure 3: Marugata tetsuji tsuba with design of samurai battle scene, signed Gōshū Hikone Jū Sōheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei, dimensions 76.0 mm x 72.0 mm x 5.0 mm NBTHK Hozon certificate.



Figure 4: Nademarugata tetsuji daisho with design of samurai battle scene, signed Sōheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei, dimensions unknown, NBTHK Hozon certificate (http://www.nihonto.com.au/html/daisho_tsuba_2.htm).



Figure 5: Nademarugata shakudo tsuba with design of samurai battle scene signed, Gōshū Hikone Jū Sōheishi Sōten, dimensions 79.7 mm x 74.0 mm x 3.9 mm, (<http://www.nihonto.us/SOTEN%20KINKO%20TSUBA.htm>).



Figure 6: Marugata shakudo tsuba with design of samurai battle scene, signed Sōheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei, dimensions approximately 100 mm, (japanese-antiques.com).



Figure 7: Marugata tetsuji daisho with design of samurai battle scene, signed Sōheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei, dimensions; dai 85.0 mm, sho 80.0 mm, Christies lot 123 sale 5967.



Figure 8: Marugata tetsuji tsuba with design of samurai battle scene, signed Gōshū Hikone Jū Sōheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei, dimensions unknown (http://www.nihonto.com.au/html/tsu653_soten_tsuba.html).



Figure 9: Marugata tetsuji tsuba with design of samurai battle scene, signed Gōshū Hikone Jū Sōheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei, dimensions unknown, (japanese-antiques.com).

The image below allows for comparison between the subject tsuba (TU-072713) and the tsuba of **Figure 8**.



Figure 10: Comparison between particulars of TU-072713 (left column) and the tsuba of **Figure 8**.

Mei (signature) comparisons

As for the mei Lissenden and Haynes[4] note that:

“... the kanji for “shi”; in Sōheishi is rendered in such a way as to replace its initial horizontal stroke by a lozenge-shaped component; this is a feature said to be common to most, but not all, genuine Sōten work. On pages 62-63 and 64-65 of his Catalogue of the Dr. W. Fahrenheit Collection, Inami Tomihike illustrates two tsuba that are attributed to Sōten. The first of these is very similar, both in its design and its description, to the one being studied, while the second is almost identical. On both of these tsuba the character for “shi”; in Sōheishi is written in the conventional manner of the three-stroke kanji, with a horizontal first stroke. ”

The mei of the tsuba cited by Lissenden and Haynes [4] is reported in **Figure 12f**. The comparison between TU-072713 mei with Sōten signatures is quite complicated by two aspects; first the TU-072713 mei is partially unreadable due to wear and by the punch marks at the base of the nakago and second by the sheer number of gimei and imitations, one comes across.

For the above reasons mei comparison was limited to tsuba with certification (NBTHK, NTHK) or reported as legit Sōten tsuba by well-known and respected experts in publications or elsewhere. The mei collected so far are reported in Figures 11 to 14. An exception, due to the similarity in workmanship, is the mei reported in **Figure 14c** from the tsuba of **Figure 8**.



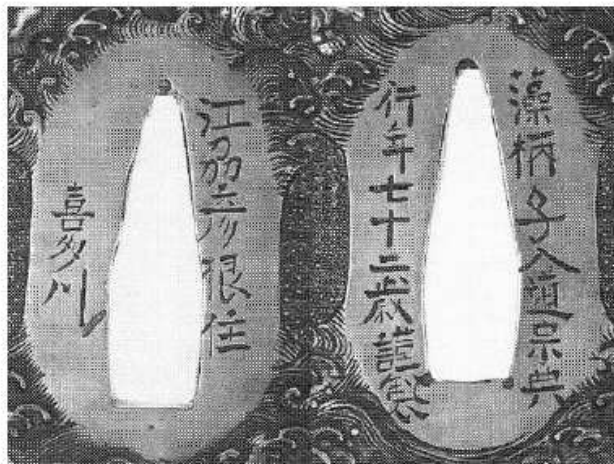
(a) Sōheiishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei 藻柄子入道宗典製



(b) Gōshū Hikone Jū Sōheiishi Sōten Sei 江羽彦根住・藻柄子宗典製



(c) Gōshū Hikone Jūnin Nyūdō Sōten Sei 江州彦根住人・入道宗典製



(d) Gōshū Hikone Jū Kitagawa Nyūdō Sōten age 72 江羽彦根住喜多川・藻柄子入道宗典製



(e) Gōshū Hikone Jū Sōheiishi Sōten Sei 江羽彦根住・入道宗典製

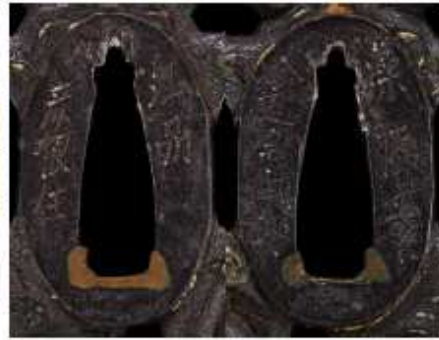


(f) Gōshū Hikone Jū Sōheiishi Sōten Sei 江羽彦根住・入道宗典製

Figure 11: Sōten mid to late Edo mei, Ōmi – Sōheiishi School signatures from Sesko [5].



(a) Goshū Hikone Ju Soheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei



(b) Goshū Hikone Ju Soheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei



(c) Goshū Hikone Ju Soheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei



(d) Goshū Hikone Ju Soheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei



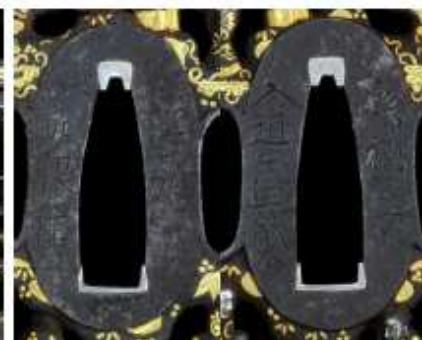
(e) Goshū Hikone Ju Soheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei



(f) Goshū Hikone Ju Soheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei



(g) Goshū Hikone Ju Soheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei



(h) Goshū Hikone Ju Soheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei

Figure 1: Sōten School signatures. (a) Tsuba NBTHK Hozon certificate. (b) Tsuba NBTHK Hozon certificate. (c) Tsuba NBTHK Hozon certificate. (d) Tsuba NBTHK Hozon certificate. (e) Tsuba NBTHK Hozon certificate. (f) Tsuba classified as “WAY 43 6 1933” by Lissenden and Haynes [4]. (g) Tsuba NBTHK Hozon certificate. (h) Tsuba NBTHK Hozon certificate



(a) Gōshū Hikone Ju Soheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei



(b) Gōshū Hikone Ju Kitagawa Nyūdō Sōten Sei



(c) Soheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei



(d) Soheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei



(e) Soheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei



(f) Gōshū Hikone Ju



(g) Gōshū Hikone Ju Soheishi Sōten Sei

Figure 13: Sōten School signatures. (a) Tsuba NBTHK Hozon certificate, see Figure 1. (b) Tsuba NBTHK Hozon certificate. (c) Tsuba NBTHK Hozon certificate. (d) Fuchi Kashira NBTHK Hozon certificate. (e) Daisho NBTHK Hozon certificate. (f) Tsuba NBTHK Hozon certificate attributed to Souheishi Munenori. (g) Tsuba NBTHK Hozon certificate.



Figure 14: Sōten School signatures. (a) and (b) Daisho NTHK certificate. (c) Mei from the tsuba of **Figure 8** (not papered).

As expected the mei analysis does not give any clear indication. The best, but still partial, matches are for three mei as reported in **Figures 15 to 17**.

In all the three figures, TU-072713 mei is sketched in center with highlighted in green, blue and black the strokes with decreasing degree of similarity with those of the mei under analysis.

The green strokes show a higher degree of similarity while blue ones a lower likeness. The parts left black do not match at all. The mei of **Figure 15** shows a good match only for a few strokes. The degree of similarity is stronger for the mei of **Figures 16 and 17**. The best match is, surprisingly (or not), for the last one, i.e. the mei from the tsuba of **Figure 8**, that is also showing the stronger similarity in terms of workmanship and design.



六八振位
江品
宗典制衣
品柄子入道



Figure 2: TU-072713 mei comparison with the mei of **Figure 13a**. Green good match, blue weak match and black no match.



江品

宗典

子入道

宗典



Figure 36: TU-072713 mei comparison with the mei of **Figure 13g**. Green good match, blue weak match and black no match.



彦根住

江島

宗典製衣

宗柄子八道



Figure 47: TU-072713 mei comparison with the mei of **Figure 14c**. Green good match, blue weak match and black no match.

All considered the attempt to find an attribution more precise than a generic “Sōten school” was doomed to fail from the beginning given the degree of uncertainty surrounding this School. The additional information provided by NTHK. i.e. late Edo period, is not compatible with either the 1st and 2nd generation Sōten masters (According to Sesko [10] the first master year of birth is around Enpo (1769) while the 2nd generation is traditionally dated after the Kanen era, i.e. around Horeki (1751-1764) and Meiwa (1764-1772)).

After discarding the first two masters one can get lost in the sea of Hikone Bori tsuba signed Gōshū Hikone Jū Sōheishi Nyūdō Sōten Sei. The level of workmanship shown by tsuba TU-072713 set it well above the average Hikone Bori. Perhaps this is a high quality Kyoto Hirahiya or Aizu Shoami “Sōten”. That were excluded from the analysis in virtue of the attribution given by NTHK.

The two tsuba could be from the same artisan or from the same group of artisans, like two sisters or cousins meeting at last.

Bibliography

- [1] Seyudo (<http://www.seiyudo.com/tu-072713.htm>)
- [2] INTK Tsuba Scuola Sōten (<http://www.intk-token.it/forum/index.php?showtopic=8630&hl=Sōten>)
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- [5] Markus Sesko, Signatures of Japanese Sword Fittings Artists, Lulu Inc., 2014