

SŌTEN TSUBA:

The first Sōten 宗典 lived in Kyōto in his early life. Later, he moved to Hikone in Ōmi Province and worked there about the Kyōhō era (1716-36).¹ He received many orders from Kyōto and was obliged to travel back and forth between the two cities. No matter which city he worked in, he would sign as a resident of Hikone.

The first Sōten had many students who helped him produce Sōten style tsuba. In fact, during his lifetime, the demand for his style of tsuba became so great that he and his school could not keep up with the orders. In Kyōto, the Hiragiya 終屋 school and, in Aizu, the Shōami 正阿彌 school, made Sōten style tsuba to help fill the orders for the many requests received from all parts of the country.

There are several opinions concerning the number of generations of the main line Sōten masters. Some say there were two, or that there were three, or even more. The most logical number would seem to be two.

The first Sōten signed his early work Shūten 秀典. The second generation used only the name Sōten. In addition to these two artists there are at least twenty-five well-known students who signed their work with their own names, and innumerable students who signed with the name Sōten, or did not sign their work at all. A student of note is Sōshū 宗秀, an above average worker, but the most famous student is Nomura Kanenori 野村包教: his best work is about equal to that of the second Sōten.

There are slight differences between the signatures of the first and second Sōten. The first signed with kanji of about average size. The second used kanji slightly smaller than the size of the first. There are other differences in their work, such as the designs of the second being more picturesque and detailed. The surface of his plate is very busy and brilliant; the design covering the major portion of the web area. The first also used small figures in the designs but he did not cover as much of the web area with

his decoration. He did not use as much inlay of gold and silver. From the style of carving used mainly by the second Sōten this school has come to be called the Hikonebori school.²

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FIRST AND SECOND SŌTEN:

SHAPE: round or oval in most cases.

PLATE METAL: the first used iron plate. The second used iron, and in some cases shakudō plate.

THICKNESS: average thickness but sometimes a little thicker than average.

CARVING: nikubori, shishiai, and kebori.

DESIGNS: human figures, landscapes, flowers and birds, historical subjects of either Chinese or Japanese derivation. The inlay is usually gold, copper, silver, and shakudō. Human faces will be either silver or copper inlay. Both masters used pure silver for their inlay.

SIGNATURE: Gōshū 江州 Hikone 彦根 (no) Jū 住 Sōheishi 藻柄子 Niudō 入道 Sōten 宗典 sei 製. He also signed with a very long signature; Goshu Hikone Nakayabu (no) Jū Sōheishi Niudō Kitagawa Sōten Sei. 江州彦根中教住藻柄子入道喜多川宗典製

SUMMARY:

The first and second Sōten were splendid at their chosen style. The iron is of good quality but the tempering is quite common. The nikubori is inferior. He tried to cover this fault in the iron quality by making a good edge and using fine decoration. Although their work is usually on iron plate, the plate is subordinate to the decoration. Their work should be judged on the quality of the carving, inlay and designs.

LATER SŌTEN TSUBA:

The majority of the work in the style of this school is but a poor imitation made by shiiremono makers in the late Edo age at the docks of Yokohama. These imitations account for more than ninety-five percent of all Sōten tsuba extant. Even the best work of the students, though not common, is usually only slightly better than the shiiremono examples. The work of this school was so corrupted that a true idea of the real Sōten tsuba is almost impossible to obtain. It is unfortunate that the best work of this school has come under the same pale of suspicion that surrounds the common

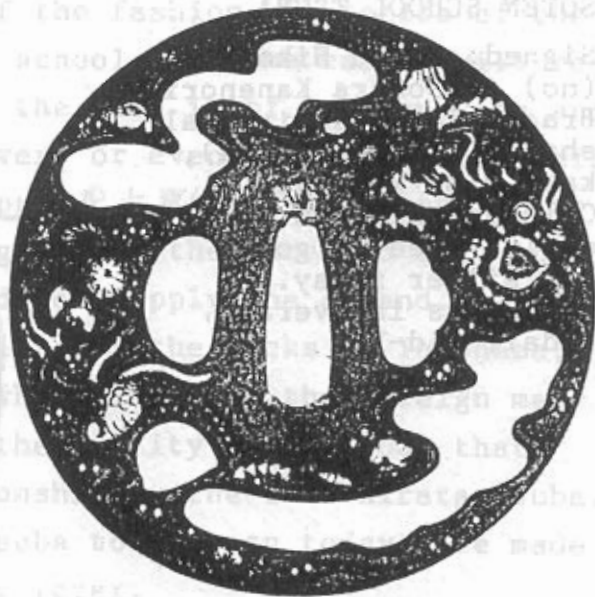
work of the imitators. Had the work of this school been less popular, the true work of the first and second Sōten might be regarded with more respect than it now receives.

¹ Shibata, Mitsuo and Kazuo Kobayashi, Tsuba: Aigan Meihin Shu (Tokyo, Shibata Bijutsu Tōken Ten Tosho Bu, 1961) p. 114. A signed piece dated Kan-en 3 (1750).

² The term Hikonebori means the original style of carving of the Sōten school. It is a combination of low relief, line carving, some shishiai, detailed iroye inlay and elaborate openwork. In reality it is but one type of ubu-zukashi, and is found rarely in the early work of the first and second Sōten.

SŌTEN I

Signature: Kitagawa Shūten Sei
 Iron plate, round shape,
 kaku mimi ko niku, shells
 displayed on beach with
 gold and silver dot inlay,
 water in sukashi. Thick-
 ness 3.94mm.
 Jidai: mid-Edo



SŌTEN II

Signed: Sōheishi Nyūdō
 Sōten Sei
 Iron plate, round shape,
 kaku mimi ko niku,
 clouds and dragon with
 bridge section in gold
 and silver inlay.
 Thickness 4.24mm
 Jidai: mid-Edo



SŌTEN SCHOOL TSUBA

Signed: Gōshū Hikone
 (no) Ju Nomura Kanenori
 Brass plate, elliptical
 shape (tatemaru gata),
 kaku mimi ko niku,
 Chinese children under
 a pine tree in gold
 and silver inlay.
 Thickness is average.
 Jidai: mid-Edo

