

Goro Nyudo Masamune (written for a Kendo Dojo)

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A dojo with the name of Masamune, or even Nagamitsu, has much to live up to. The names are synonymous with two of the greatest swordsmiths in Japan's long history of excellence in this field. Of the thousands of swordsmiths produced in Japan over the last thousand years or so, Masamune is the most famous and epitomises the zenith of Japanese sword making. His name is known by every school child in Japan, kabuki plays have been written about him and premium brand sake is named Kiku Masamune – no greater approbation is possible! Blades by Masamune are generally rated as National Treasures or Important Art or Cultural Objects by the Japanese government's Cultural Agency. As a collector of Japanese swords, I feel privileged to have seen a number of Masamune blades and indeed have been able to handle several.

Up to the late 13th century, 3 distinct traditions or styles of swordmaking existed in Japan. Named after their regional centres, they are known as Yamato-den, Yamashiro-den and Bizen-den. Those swordsmiths of Yamato-den were exclusively employed by the powerful Buddhist monasteries in the Yamato region (Nara prefecture) where they armed the militant warrior monks of these organisations. Yamashiro-den produced elegant and beautiful blades which reflected the refined taste of the Imperial capital in Kyoto whilst Bizen-den (Okayama-ken) catered mostly for the warrior class.

In 1274 and again in 1281, the ruling shogunate, based in Kamakura in Soshu (also called Sagami Province– present day Kanagawa-ken) was rocked to its roots by the invasion of Kublai Khan's Mongol hordes. Both the battle tactics and the weaponry of the samurai defenders, was found to be wanting. Their beautiful swords were broken and irreparably damaged on the Mongol armour and, but for the intervention of the Gods in the form of the Kamikaze, a divine wind that wrecked the Mongol fleet, the Japanese would almost certainly have lost the day.

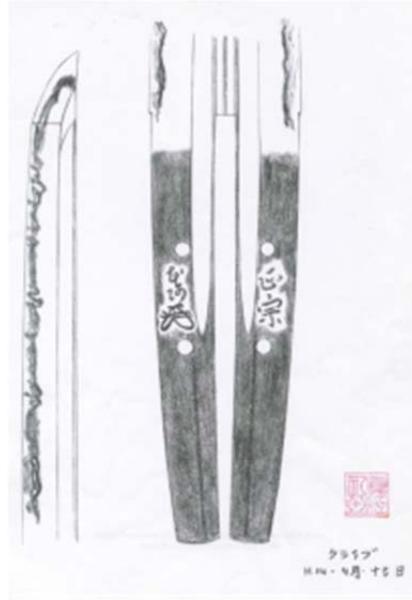
Assessing the situation back in Kamakura, and being in a state of high alert for a third invasion, the shogunate or military government, determined that their swords should be improved for practical reasons in future combat. Swords became wider and longer and other technical changes in the forging began to produce more robust blades. Pioneered by one Awataguchi Yoshimitsu together with Shintogo Kunimitsu, the new style was perfected in around 1320, by Kunimitsu's pupil and son, Masamune. The new style formed the 4th distinctive tradition in swordmaking and is known as Soshu-den.

Masamune's fame was such that he attracted students from all over Japan, who also became skilled at Soshu-den. Together with ten of his finest students, collectively known as the Masamune Jutetsu, Masamune produced some of the finest blades in history as Soshu-den gained popularity throughout the length and breadth of the land.

Very few of Masamune's blades bear his signature or mei. It was popularly thought that this was because his work was so distinctive, a signature was unnecessary. However this is considered to be a myth by most modern sword people. In fact, as Masamune was a full time employee of the Kamakura military government, he was not entitled to put his personal name onto a blade (this was the same as the swordsmiths of Yamato who were employees of the Buddhist temples). As so many Masamune blades are mumei (unsigned), this has led to many fakes and false attributions being made to unsigned blades, mostly for reasons of profit.

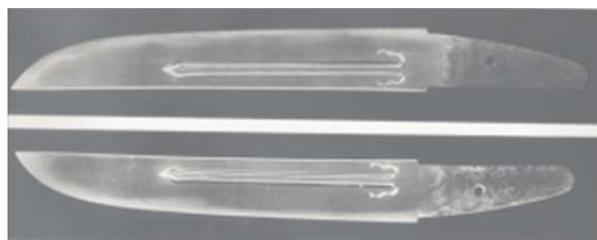


**Three masters of Soshu-den, Yoshimitsu in the blue,
Go Yoshihiro in the green and Masamune in the centre.
(from a kakemono or hanging scroll in the author's collection)**



This is an oshigata (a kind of technical drawing) of the unauthenticated Masamune in the Victoria and Albert Museum collection. The blade has been cut down and appraised by an official appraiser of the Honami family who has written Masamune on the ura and his own name and seal on the omote. This is in kinzogan or gold inlay. Oshigata by the author.

Masamune was active around the end of the so-called Kamakura period (1185-1333) and one book states that he died in 1343. His long swords come in two main forms, a slender katana shape and a broader blade with a long kissaki. This latter was the later sugata (form) and some of the examples may be attributed to Masamune's best pupil and son, Sadamune. Masamune's tanto are usually hira-zukuri (flat, with no shinogi) and invariably have uichi-zori, a reverse-curve, curving inward towards the cutting edge or ha-saki. An exception to this is the so-called Hocho (kitchen-knife) Masamune which is very broad and stubby and often reproduced by later swordsmiths right up to modern times.



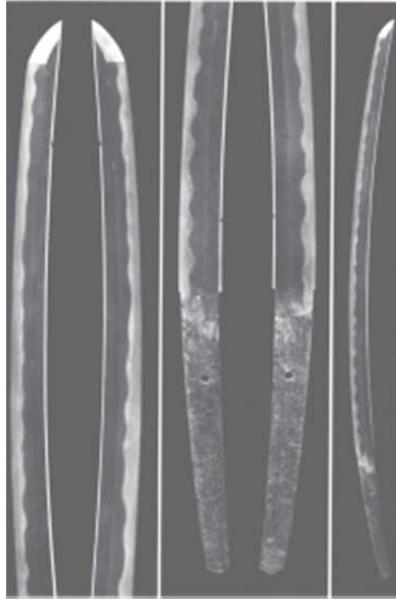
The Hocho (kitchen knife) Masamune tanto, which is registered as a National Treasure by the Bunka-cho.

Masamune's blades have a unique and brilliant forging pattern and hamon. Some have horimono (carvings) on their surfaces. Amongst these, bo-hi are most common on long swords where they have practical benefits, whilst often religious symbols, including bonji and gombashi-hi (small tongs used in the Buddhist rites of exorcism) are found on tanto. A full figure of Fudo (the "patron-saint" of swordsmen) is depicted on one tanto known as Fudo Masamune, but this was added by Honami Koji at the end of the 16th century.

Of course, Masamune's blades were highly esteemed by the daimyo of the Muromachi and Edo periods. One such sword is known as the Ishida Masamune and it was in the UK a few years ago, for the "Swords of the Samurai" exhibition held at the British Museum. This sword, which has a number of battle scars, has an interesting history attached to it. It was given to Ishida Mitsunari by Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Ishida was part of Hideyoshi's invasion force to Korea in the late 16th century, when Hideyoshi, back home in Japan, died rather suddenly of natural causes. Ishida hastily concluded a treaty, without informing any of his colleagues, and brought all the troops home. His disgruntled colleagues, probably with the connivance of Tokugawa Ieyasu, plotted to kill Ishida. However, Ishida appealed directly to Ieyasu who instructed a certain Yuki Hideyasu (the adopted son of Hideyoshi) to escort Ishida to his estate.



2 portraits of Ishida Mitsunari, the one on the left being a modern interpretation gained from examination of his exhumed skull.



**The Ishida Masamune, note the kiri-komi (battle scars)
which are much prized by collectors today.**

In gratitude, Ishida entrusted one of the Yuki retainers with the Masamune as a gift to Hideyasu. This action expressed Ishida's overriding concern for the future safety of the sword, even whilst his own life was held in the balance. This story admirably demonstrates the value and respect shown to Masamune's blades as well as invoking the spirit of the warriors of the Sengoku period.