

Thoughts on the Japanese Sword

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Clive Sinclair lives near London in the UK, where he worked in the advertising business until his retirement. His long term experience as a serious student of Kendo and Iai-do has influenced his views on Japanese swords. He sees the practise of these arts, as the practical and reverse side of the same coin that is the artistic appreciation of Nihonto. Clive is the chairman of the To-ken Society of Great Britain, one of the first Western study and appreciation groups focusing on the Japanese sword and has written two books on the subject. His special interest is in Hizen-to, swords made in Hizen province (present day Saga Prefecture) in the Edo period.

Of course, there are many reasons to enjoy and appreciate the Japanese sword. An understanding of jigane and jihada, as well as the intricacies of the hamon's hataraki and form, is visually perceived. Even if some education and explanations are needed and desirable, provided that you have the eyes to see, the sword should hold no secrets. It takes only a sensitive nature and relaxed mind to fully appreciate such things. For some, this may be where it ends, but a fuller study of the culture of the Japanese sword will add a further dimension. To me, this is an integral and important part of Japanese sword appreciation.

Ogasawara sensei (ex curator of Japanese swords and Tokyo National Museum, Ueno Park, Tokyo) once said to me, "The trouble with you, Clive, is that you look at swords from a kendo man's point of view." Whilst I may not completely agree with this assessment, I have no problem with it. Even modern swords, far removed from the life-and-death struggles of bygone times, acknowledge the importance of a sword's Practical properties That is to say, to maintain their integrity as a weapon, they must not bend or break and must be capable of cutting well. It is such considerations that make today's shinsaku-to so satisfying to view and handle.

How can one not be moved, therefore, when the historical context of a sword's life is considered on top of all this? To own a sword that may have seen the Mongol invaders or had fifty generations of previous owners who cared for and preserved it, places weighty obligations on our shoulders. There can also be no doubt that there is a "way" in the Zen sense of the word, and a spiritual aspect, associated with the study and appreciation of fine Japanese swords. Such study as this was the province of the gentlemen of rank in old Japan.

Personally, I think an even greater appreciation of swords may be gained from adding an active study of Kendo and Iai-do, the martial arts of the sword. This helps give a very practical understanding of what a sword was made to do and is capable of. I consider this to be the other side of the coin to a purely academic study of swords. Of course, it may not be suitable for everyone, but both Kendo and Iai-do may be practised to a fine old age! For a sword collector, this may be a great experience as well as a way to gain a fuller understanding of the sword.

Beyond the aspects described above, I have not touched on the other great benefits of Japanese sword study in today's international market. I owe a debt of gratitude to the Japanese sword for bringing me to many places and introducing me to friends that I have made all over the world. This is the culture of the Japanese sword as I see it today, and it is the culture that I enjoy so much. If this means that I look at swords from a Kendo practitioner's perspective, then I suppose that Ogasawara sensei was right.

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