

Iwamoto Konkan Tsuba “The Ataka Barrier” and some copies

Graham Curtis ex Chairman Token Society of GB
and Trustee of the NTHK



Figure 1. Authenticated Iwamoto Konkan tsuba showing the crossing at the Ataka Barrier in Kaga province (NBTHK “Token Bijutsu” English Edition, No. 5, Summer 1980 and Japanese edition number 527)

Iwamoto Konkan was one of the first tosogu artists who came to my notice, because of the pure chance of finding a set of fuchi-gashira bearing his signature. I started collecting in the mid sixties. Tsuba were then, as now, expensive compared to small fittings such as fuchi-gashira, kozuka etc.

One of the endearing features of Japanese art is how artists have adapted designs to fit the rather limited and odd shapes of tosogu. Also, the design is limited by how the items present to a viewer when mounted on a sword and worn in the wearer’s belt. In the case of a tsuba the outward edge is clear to see and takes precedence in location for an image of some kind. The artist has the opportunity to show just enough of a design to get the story behind it recognisable to a passer-by. In the tsuba shown in [Figure 1](#), Konkan has cleverly decided to represent a crowded group of travellers, at a busy crossing point, by just the heads and shoulders of three individuals poking above the bottom edge of the tsuba!

The subject¹ of the tsuba stems from the historical event when Minamoto no Yoshitsune escaped from Kyoto to Hiraizumi in Oshu, and which became the subject of a Noh play in 1465. Yoshitsune’s brother (the Shogun) wanted to kill him, so Yoshitsune and his followers were escaping to the North disguised as Yamabushi (Mountain Priests). When they were trying to pass through the Gate at the Ataka border crossing, they were captured and threatened with death. Benkei (one of Yoshitsune’s followers) was anauthentic Yamabushi and a famous strongman. He gallantly and cleverly pretended to read from a blank scroll to prove that the group were simple Yamabushi. Ultimately, Benkei had to beat his Lord Yoshitsune with a stick (an unpardonable sin...) to try to prove that Yoshitsune was just a

¹ Thanks are due to George Miller for this cameo

lowly porter. The Lord of the Ataka Gate recognized Yoshitsune, but he was so impressed with Benkei's bravery and devotion to his Master that he allowed the group to pass knowing that he himself would probably be put to death for his leniency. On this tsuba, the man on the left is Benkei wearing mountain priest gear, and the other wearing a hat is Yoshitsune, disguising himself as Benkei's porter.

Konkan was the 6th head of the Iwamoto School, which derived from the Yokoya School, but also adopted some of the Nara School's traits. His work was unique in that it was often non representational and seemed to draw the viewer into his atmospheric world. He was born in 1744 and after an eventful life in the Naito Shinjuku 'pleasure' district died at the comparatively young age of 58.

I've found several pieces attributed to him, two of which are particularly unlikely. The first of these appeared at an arms fair in London. As can be seen in [Figure 2](#) it is an unsigned, version of Konkan's "Ataka Barrier" tsuba. The second of these is yet another copy of the same subject, but this time it is signed, see [Figure 3](#). To find one copy is unlikely, however to find a second one seems impossible!



Figure 2. An unsigned version of the Konkan "Ataka Barrier" tsuba



Figure 3. A 'signed,' 5 person, version of the Konkan "Ataka Barrier" tsuba

The immediate question is, “Might they be genuine Konkan pieces?” The design is so well known that it is a candidate for reproduction, e.g. by the Mito School in the latter stages of the 19th Century. They were particularly skilled. There may be some clues in the signature on the second version of the tsuba.

As can be seen in Figure 4, there are a number of features in the signature, accented by red arrows, which draw doubt on its authenticity: especially considering that Konkan was a master calligrapher, the differences in the mei between Figures 4a and 4c are very evident.



Figure 4a. The signature on the second copy



Figure 4b. Dissimilar strokes in the signature of the features in the genuine signature shown in Figure 4c

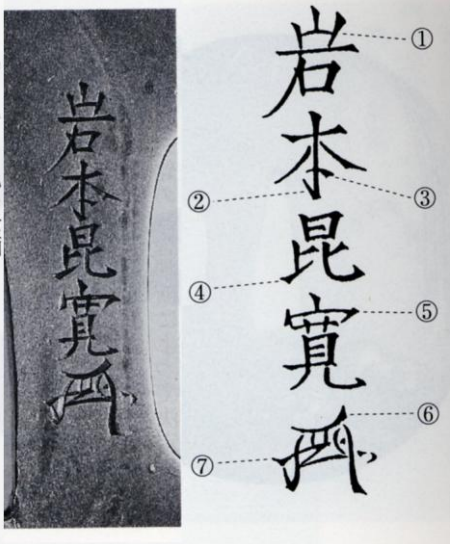


Figure 4c A genuine signature and salient features (see NBTHK Token Bijutsu vol. 511, p 15 (1976))

Figure 5 shows a comparison of the different layout of figures chosen by Konkan and that by the copyist. Konkan achieves tension minimally via a massive fence post towering over the figures of Yoshitsune and Benkei. The copyist, on the other hand chooses to include more of the throng of people present. Both show Benkei looking anxiously around. Konkan, cleverly, hides Yoshitsune’s face under a very wide, beautifully coloured, straw rain hat. The Konkan version is so immediately successful, I can’t believe he would need to ‘market’ an alternative. Benkei’s posture, however, is such a common denominator that the copyist must have had access to the Konkan original, so might it be a pupils’ work?

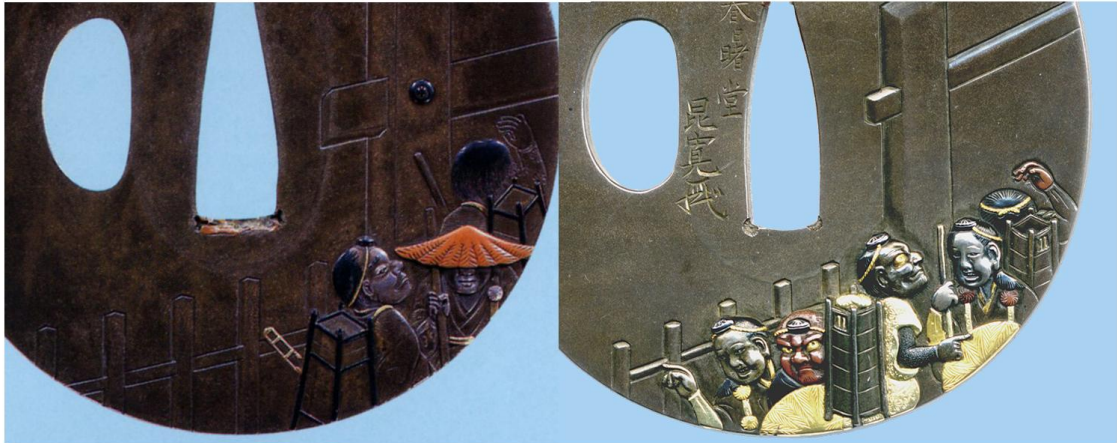


Figure 5. Comparison between the layout of figures in the authentic Konkan and the copy

Another feature which I find odd is the choice of the five ‘extras’; who are they, what are they looking at and pointing to? A possible guess is that the copyist was prompted by one of the many drawings illustrating the scene, which were generally available.

Most of what goes before in this article is to do with fakes or copies of some works by the great Iwamoto Konkan, so it is nice to be able to restore a happy balance by looking at one of his genuine works. [Figure 6](#) shows an iron fuchi-gashira which portrays an egret fishing in the rain.



Figure 6. A genuine Konkan fuchi-gashira portraying egrets fishing in the rain

It is a common sight in the UK to see a solitary heron fishing. Mostly, it stands for long periods peering intently into the water, hunched up, ready to strike. Thanks to climate change it is becoming more common to see egrets in the UK doing the same thing. Konkan must have seen many and perhaps pondered on what they might be thinking during the long periods of inactivity. One of the great skills in Japanese art is the extent to which artists catch the essence of the natural world. Birds, animals, flowers seem more natural because a lot of time had been spent in observation. What the tosoyu collector has to do is try to pick up the signals from nuanced portrayal. Atmosphere is important to the Japanese.

I suggest this kashira is a lovely example of creating atmosphere. Its basic shape is carefully modelled to focus ambient light. The base metal is iron patinated to a cold, deep brown colour. Driving rain is simulated by four, deeply cut, angled, lines. The wind and rain flatten plants lightly chiselled in the water. The focus of the composition is the bird's eye. The shoulder, head and beak catch the light. Secondary highlight emphasises the raised foot. All this is achieved by the bulk of the silver used to mould the bird's body and wing.

One of the features which seem to distinguish copies from the real thing is the tendency of the copyist to be too frugal with materials. In this Konkan work much of its success is created by the bulk of silver used.



I finished writing this article some time ago and in the fullness of time I discovered a Japanese publication which contained an illustration of a supposedly genuine, alternative, version of the Asaka Crossing Tsuba by Konkan, see [Figure. 7](#) below. If it is compared to the copy-tsuba shown in [Figure 3](#), it will be seen to have remarkably similar design features, which graphically demonstrates the nightmare that collecting Japanese tosogu can be! Yet again CAVEAT EMPTOR



Figure 7. A supposedly genuine, signed, 5 person, version of the “Konkan Ataka Crossing Tsuba” as pictured in “Tosogu Meihin Ten” published by The Sword Fittings Museum.