

Did You Know ? Tsuka Hei By Robert L. Benson



Recently I was sent some koshirae to evaluate which was sold as Daimyo daisho presentation mountings. As we know the Daimyo were no longer after the Meiji Restoration in 1868 so the implication was that these mounts would have had to have been made prior to that. Upon inspection I was able to see that these mountings had no wear and were probably assembled in the past 50 years. When I examined the daito I was impressed to see how well the tsuka maki was done. Even though the same' was a put together and not of daimyo quality the wrap seemed to make you overlook the poor aspects of the menuki and same'. When I removed the fuchi to examine it I was extremely pleased to see the three stamped kanji that read "Tsuka Hei Maki". It was stamped into the wood at the bottom of the tsuka on the left side when viewing from the bottom. This was a great find because I had only seen one other stamped signature of the Master Tsukahei the 3rd.

About the mid 70's Tom Buttweiler had sent me a Gunto koshirae with an outstanding blade inside. When he called to discuss it, I thought he would want to talk about the sword but he kept up a constant chatter about the tsuka maki done on the gunto tsuka. He had me remove the fuchi so it would reveal the 3 kanji "Tsuka Hei Maki". I didn't know anything about this tsuka maki shi and his importance to the sword world. Tom said it was like having a national treasure so I thought I guess I should check it out. Some of the collectors who knew Tom would refer to him as "difficult" but he and I always exchanged ideas and knowledge on sword subjects. He always amazed me with the knowledge he possessed on subjects I could never find a thing about in English. So it was with this Tsukahei information. I had to do a bunch of research on my own and finally found out about this tsuka maki shi and his beginnings.

Shukichi Yamaguchi passed away Jan 24 of Showa 41(1966). He was famous and popularly known as Tsukahei San in the early half of the 20th century. His grandfather started the tsukamaki (handle wrapping) business and his name was Heikichi. There were three generations, grandfather, father and son Shukichi working as tsuka maki artists. They became popular as Tsukahei. Amongst them Shukichi the third generation tsukahei's works are the most outstanding and famous. His works were masterfully done

and amongst them some were so excellent that no other artist in the past could have emulated such quality. In November 1964 he was awarded the honor of Mukey Bunkazai (Intangible Cultural Property) and a special medal from the Japanese government.

He was a hard drinker since his youth which took its toll on his health at the end but he enjoyed his life in his own way. He and his family had just celebrated his Kiju (reaching 77 years of age) and shortly afterwards became seriously ill at the beginning of the New Year. Several years prior he had suffered a stroke and did not recover from it completely. Even after that illness he tried to continue working on doing tsukamaki but could not produce any completed works. He had lost the ability to control his damaged hands and became very frustrated.

The last work he did was for a Mr. Torahiko Ise that displays his excellent work and is being kept in the family. Shukichi's favorite type and actually examples of his best works are kawa (leather) tsukamaki. His Tensho koshirae and Higo koshirae were his favorite to make and he made many of them. He was a perfectionist that was evident in his work. He was a harsh critic of his work and others. Because of his strictness he could not train and develop good students to follow him. Then also he lived in the period that was not so popular for swords and his occupation. Possibly with the war years he was able to wrap many Gunto tsukas, which kept him busy.

The Ichinose family was also famous as tsukamaki shi and the elder Ichinose San was a student of Tsuka Hei. The son related a few weeks ago that that was trying times for the elder Ichinose because of the critical inspection done by Shukichi Tsukahei. Many older collectors in Japan never knew who Shukichi Yamaguchi San was but if you mention Tsukahei they all know of his special talents.

The next time you see a very special wrap check it out it. It could be by one of the greatest tsuka masters of all time – Tsukahei.

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