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KANO NATSUO

**HIS LIFE, HIS ART
AND HIS SKETCHBOOKS**

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Preface

Even though the *kin*kō artist Kanō Natsuo is on everyone's lips when it comes to conversations about late Edo period sword fittings surprisingly little material is available outside of Japan, in neither a comprehensive or in a published form. With this publication I try to provide a remedy by introducing an outline of his career, his personality, his art, his students and his works. And, as a reference, I have republished all four of Natsuo's sketchbooks on sword fittings (*Kengu-shitazu-sōkō*, 剣具下図草稿) at the end of the publication. Many collectors say that, after being able to acquire works by him, they are the pinnacle of their collections and already Shinkichi Hara wrote in his *Die Meister der japanischen Schwertzieraten* (*The Masters of Japanese Sword Fittings*) published in 1931, i.e. just 33 years after Natsuo's death: "The last famous master of sword fittings was Natsuo who had transmitted this art from the old to the new Japan and saved it from Europeanization." I can only agree with their sentiment and Hara's statement, and we cannot thank Natsuo enough for his zeal and his teachings to preserve this wonderful art of metalwork on a scholastic but first and foremost on a practical basis. It is also exciting to see how he permanently made efforts to refine his art. Even at an advanced age and after falling sick two or three months before he died, he reassessed his art and tried to perfect it in terms of elegance. Thus I hope that with this publication I can contribute to the understanding and appreciation of this great artist in the West and that the reader enjoys browsing through Natsuo's sketches, comparing them with known artworks.

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His life

Natsuo was born on the 14th day of the fourth month of Bunsei eleven (文政, 1828) as the son of the Kyōto rice trader Fushimi Jisuke (伏見 治助) in their house at the Yanagibaba-Ōike-dōri (柳馬場御池通) junction in Kyōto. Back then the area belonged to the northern Atagi district (愛宕群) of Kyōto but today it belongs to the central Nakagyō ward (中京区). His youth name was “Jisaburō” (治三郎) and he was adopted in Tenpō five (天保, 1834) at the age of seven by the sword dealer Kanō Jisuke (加納 治助, ?-1838) whereupon he bore the name “Kanō Jisaburō” (加納 治三郎). Incidentally, the name of the shop of his adoptive father was *Harimaya* (播磨屋). Kanō Jisuke died when Natsuo was eleven years old and so he was raised by the now single mother. Well, some sources say that his adoptive father died in Tenpō eleven (1840) when Natsuo was thirteen years old but in the curriculum vitae he submitted in the course of his application to the coin mint he wrote explicitly that his adoptive father died on the 21st day of the third month of Tenpō nine (1838), year of the dog, at the age of 43. Anyway, one year later, i.e. in Tenpō ten (1839), he started an apprenticeship with the *kinkō* artist Okumura Shōhachi (奥村 庄八). Okumura was a Gotō-trained (後藤) artist and so he learnt from him first and foremost the proper application of *nanako*, the making of *menuki*, the carving of multi-layered waves, gilding and silvering via techniques like *kingise*, *ginsise*, *iroe* or *okigane*, and the production of ground plates for *kozuka*. This quasi restriction to *iebori* techniques due to the apprenticeship with a Gotō-trained artist was pointed out by Natsuo himself, namely in his *Tsuisō-roku* (追想録, “Records of Recollection”) published in Meiji 15 (明治, 1882), and in his lectures at the *Tōkyō School of Fine Arts*. As comparison, a *machibori*-related*¹ apprenticeship would have also earned him initial lessons in the production of *fuchigashira* and *tsuba* for example, just to point out some of the differences. Training under Okamoto was not enough because after just about one year of learning, it was in Tenpō eleven (1840), he left his workshop and entered an apprenticeship with Ikeda Takatoshi (池田 孝寿) from the Ōtsuki school (大月).

*¹ *Iebori* (家彫) is a term used to differentiate the Gotō from other *kinkō* works, which are called *machibori* (町彫). The term *iebori* itself is quite old and means literally “house carvings”, i.e. several styles related to artists working for the *bakufu* are named with the prefix *ie* (家) or *oie* (御家). Regarding the Gotō family, their relationship with the *bakufu* started at the time of the eighth Ashikaga-shōgun (足利義政, 1436-1490, r. 1449-1473). From that time on, the family worked for the who’s who of Japanese rulers, like Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi and the Tokugawa family. So the term *iebori* was clearly meant to differentiate them from other contemporary *kinkō* artists who were not officially employed by the *bakufu*. The independent artists, who managed to make a living, by the very nature of the matter, only in the big towns, were called *machibori*. So the easiest way to define these terms would be “governmental” and “private”.



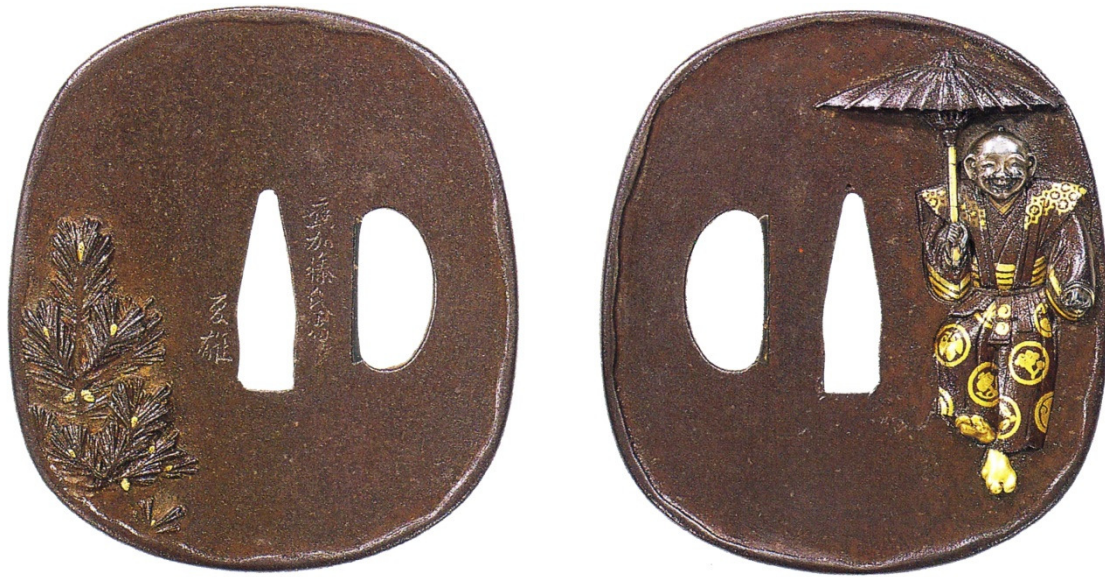
Picture 10: A pair of monkey *menuki* by Ichinomiya Nagatsune and below the sketches from his sketchbook *Horimono-echō*.

Confirming Natsuo's early influence of Ichinomiya Nagatsune and his style in *katakiribori* combined with gold and silver *hira-zōgan* is an extant *kozuka* showing a pair of hares which bears his early signature "Toshiaki". The piece is of polished *shakudō*, one hare is worked in *katakiribori* with the eyes highlighted in gold, and the other hare is entirely in silver *hira-zōgan*. Although Nagatsune is mostly quoted as Natsuo's greatest source of inspiration, we must not forget the influence of Ōtsuki Mitsuki, the great master of Natsuo's very own lineage. As mentioned earlier, Natsuo did not cite Nagatsune but Mitsuki in explaining his artistic approach to his students at the *Tōkyō School of Fine Arts*. Mitsuki's influence on Natsuo might be grasped through the works shown on the next page. Mitsuki explicitly states in his signature that he used a painting by Hanabusa Itchō as motif, the artist by whom already Yokoya Sōmin had been inspired. The *kozuka* from the later years of Mitsuki shows a man surprised by a sudden evening shower (*yūdachi*, 夕立), worked out in *katakiribori* and *hira-zōgan*. The entire interpretation looks just like a painting by Itchō and the person is perfectly grasped trying to take shelter from the lightning and has already lost one of his precious straw sandals (seen on the *ura* side). And the motif of the polished brass *tsuba* is Mt. Kurama (鞍馬山) to the northwest of Kyōto which is said to be the home of Sōjōbō (僧正坊), king of the *tengu*, who taught swordsmanship to Minamoto no Yoshitsune (源義経, 1159-1189).



Picture 15: Painting by Natsuo showing Awaji Island (*Awajishima no zu*, 淡路島図) in the distance, between the islands of Honshū and Shikoku. It was made when he was 70 years old, just a few months before his death. Seeing the coast of Awaji Island in the distance is an old subject found in the *Genji-monogatari* (源氏物語) when Prince Genji catches, away in Akashi (明石), a glimpse of the island in the moonlight. So he wrote the poem:

| | | |
|---------------------------|--------|--------------------------------|
| <i>A wa to miru</i> | あはと見る | Seeing over there |
| <i>Awaji no shima no</i> | 淡路の島の | the island of Awaji |
| <i>aware sae ni</i> | あはれさに | sad and abandoned |
| <i>nokoru kuma naku</i> | 残るくまなく | in a forsaken corner |
| <i>sumeru yo no tsuki</i> | 澄める夜の月 | at night under the clear moon. |



8. *suebirogari no zu tsuba* (末広がり 図鐔) – The play *Suebirogari*

mei. Katō-shi no motome ni kotae – Natsuo (応加藤氏需・夏雄, “made by Natsuo according to an order from the Katō family”)

aori-gata, iron, polished finish, *takabori*, *zōgan*, *iroe*, *sukinokoshi uchikaeshi-mimi*, one *hit-su-ana*

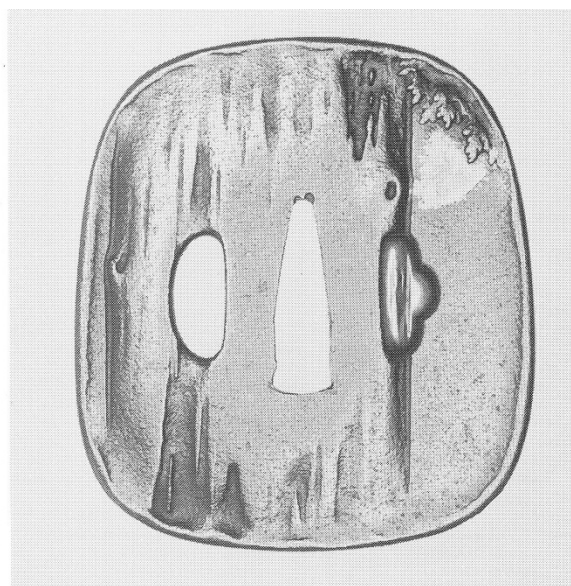
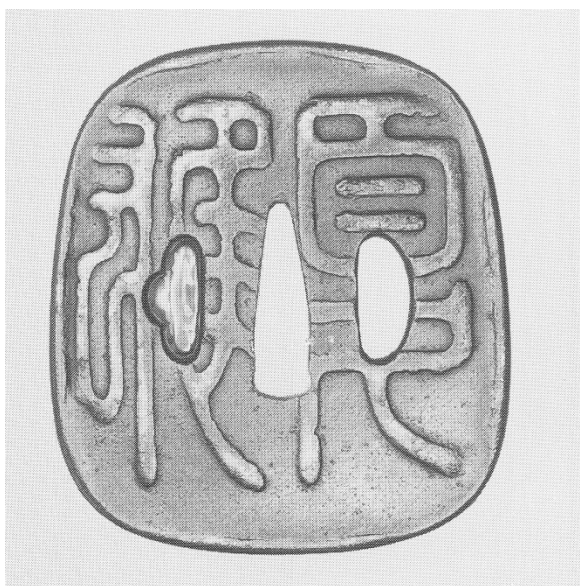
As mentioned in the chapter *His Life*, we learn from a *hakogaki* by Natsuo’s third son Akio that this *tsuba* was finished and delivered to the Katō family in the first year of Man’en (万延, 1860). Apart from the info given in this chapter, *Suebirogari* was also the title of a short and humorous *waki-kyōgen* play by an unknown author. The first stage adaption was called *Wakamidori Suebirogari* (稚美鳥末広) and was premièred in Ansei one (安政, 1854) at the *kabuki* theatre Nakamuraza (中村座) in Edo. The composer was Kineya Rokuzaemon (杵屋六左衛門), the lyricist Sakurada Jisuke (桜田治助) and the choreographer Tōma Kanjūrō (藤間勘十郎).

The play is about an errand boy who makes a mistake but manages to have a happy ending. A certain lord called “Kahōmono” (果報者) is in the middle of preparations for a banquet and needs some presents for his guests. The present for his elder should be a folding fan, a *suehiro*, whose name goes back to the aforementioned literal meaning “something that opens”. Thus a folding fan is a symbol for the growing and prosperity of a family. So he calls for his errand boy Tarōkaja (太郎冠者) and tells him to go downtown and buy “a *suehiro* with a paper of decent quality and a playful painting”. Well, Tarōkaja sets out for the shopping streets but is actually not aware what a *suehiro* is. Downtown he asks about but comes to the wrong person, a slicker called “Suppa” (すっぱ) who tells him that the old umbrella he sells is a *suehiro*. Well, the thing with the “opening” makes sense for Tarōkaja and the „friendly hawker“ teaches him a song to sing with such an umbrella. During Suppa’s persuasion scene a pun on what Kahōmono said is made. Kahōmono told him “with a playful painting”, in Japanese *zare’e* (戯れ絵), but when Tarōkaja asks Suppa if the *suehiro* has a *zare’e*, the slicker replies “yes, it has”, but refers to a “playful handle”, also pronounced *zare’e* (戯れ柄).

Back in the residence of his lord, Tarōkaja proudly hands over the umbrella as he was sure that he had got the right thing but Kahōmono becomes very angry and tells him off. And now Tarōkaja's talent comes into play. He namely starts to sing the song Suppa had taught him, which goes: “*Kasa o sasunaru Kasugayama, kore mo kami no chikai tote, hito ga kasa o sasunara, waga mo kasa o sasō yo, geni mo saari, yayo gari mo sō yo no!*” (傘をさすなる春日山、これとかみのちかいとて、人が傘をさすなら、我も傘をさそうよ、げにもさあり、やよがりもそうよの!) “The divine Mt. Kasuga opens like an umbrella, the people open their umbrella all the time, but when I open an umbrella, I get scolded!” And here we have another pun. Tarōkaja is now aware of the difference between a *suehiro* folding fan and an umbrella, a *kasa* (傘), and ostentatiously emphasizes the latter word in this song. By the way, it was said that the Kasuga mountain range in Nara has the shape of an umbrella, that's why it occurs in this song. Kahōmono cheers up and joins his errand singing and dancing. So the moral of this short and humorous play is that it is the thought that counts. Such *waki-kyōgen* often have a lord or master who has to organize stuff and everything ends in a mess. Sometimes the arrogance of the lord is the reason for the mess and also sometimes the incompetence of his servants, but there is always a happy end.

The entire right side of the *omote* is occupied with the joyfully dancing Tarōkaja wearing a loud stage outfit. The *ura* side is calm and shows a young pine, a New Year's decoration, as the banquet in question was a New Year's banquet. Below, the sketches to this *tsuba* from Natsuo's second sketchbook, the front view of Tarōkaja was obviously the best choice.





14. *gekka-koboku no zu tsuba* (月下枯木の図鐔) – Old tree in the moonlight

mei: Natsuo (夏雄)

aori-gata, iron, polished finish, *sukidashi-takabori*, *nunome-zōgan*, *iroe*, *sukinokoshi uchikaeshi-mimi*, two *hitsu-ana* (one plugged)

There exists two *tsuba* with this motif. The *omote* side shows a large and impressive single cedar taking up most of the ground plate, at the top right area the faint glimpse of the moon. The interpretations of the cedar are a bit different and the shape and the working of the rim are also not identical. The *ura* side is fully taken by the seal script characters for “Natsuo” which are accentuated with silver *nunome-zōgan*, a way of ornamentation which goes back to the old Shōami school (正阿弥) and which can be traced back to the Muromachi period. The actual model for these two pieces was a *tsuba* by Tsuchiya Yasuchika where he also filled the entire *ura* side with the seal script characters of his name. Also we find a rubbing of Yasuchika’s *tsuba* in his second sketchbook and several pages later his own approach to this design, presented on the next page. The separated picture to the bottom left is a rubbing of his own *tsuba* found in the fourth sketchbook.





His sketchbooks

