

Yoshindo Yoshihara

The Ancient Art of Steel-Making Is Preserved Only in Japanese Swords

There is a man dubbed “the best swordsmith of the day.” Yoshindo Yoshihara, now 76, was born into a family of swordsmiths, and his career took off early in life. He is the only Japanese swordsmith whose works are included in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The World's Only Craft in which Molecular Structural Change Is Sublimated into Beauty

Japanese sword-making is the sole iron craft in the world that uses ancient steel-making techniques. Because its material, *tamahagane* (lit. “gem steel,” steel made from iron-sand), is forged without being liquefied, the result is a wood-grain-like pattern (*hada*). This textural quality is the most distinctive feature of Japanese swords, allowing viewers to appreciate “the very essence of iron.”

Yoshihara comments, “*Tamahagane* takes the form of austenite when heated to around 800 degrees Celsius, and when it is quenched, the austenite transforms into a hard structural form called martensite. This heat treatment hardens the blade, but hardening is not the goal of the treatment. You need to know that, in Japanese sword-smithing, this change in molecular structural is sublimated (refined) into the *hamon* (blade pattern): beauty in the form of a ‘line of light.’”

Yoshihara’s grandfather Kuniie, the first swordsmith of the family, began teaching sword-smithing to Yoshihara when he was a child. In his 20s, Yoshihara became a recipient of the *Takamatsu-no-Miya Sho* (Prince Takamatsu Award*) and in his 30s, acquired the top-ranking title of “*Mukansa***.” Since the earliest stages in his career, Yoshihara has conducted scientific analyses of traditional sword-smithing. He has also been expanding globally, with a *tanrenjo* (workshop) established in the United States.



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Born in Tokyo in 1943. At age 23, Yoshihara became a *Tosho* (swordsmith) certified by the Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan. He received a *Takamatsu-no-Miya Sho* (Prince Takamatsu Award) when he was 29, and at age 39, was awarded the top-ranking title of “*Mukansa***.” He was chosen three times to forge a sword to be offered to the Ise Grand Shrine. He is the only Japanese swordsmith whose works are included in the collections of American museums. He is the head of the *Nihonto Tanren Dojo* (a swordsmith workshop), and is also a holder of the Tokyo Intangible Cultural Property designation.

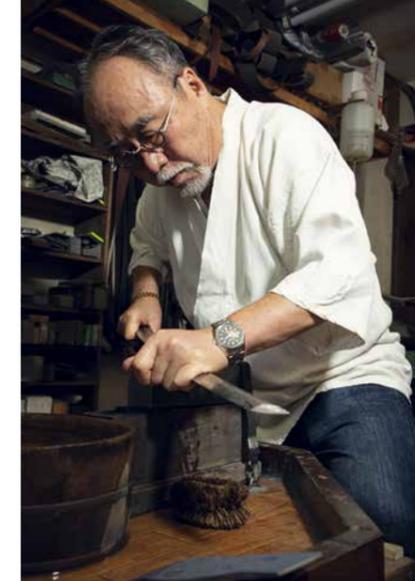
Yoshihara says that he perceives the Japanese sword as “a treasure to be passed down to future generations, not a weapon of war.” Japanese swords, however, conjure up an image of a blade so sharp that it can cut in half a bullet fired from a gun. “Because Japanese swords are crafted items meant to be used, they need to function well, so when I was young, I tested their sharpness by cutting up many steel helmets. Believe me, our swords cut very well,” says Yoshihara, laughingly. He adds, “But the swords really are something special and they need — in addition to functionality — the sort of beauty which treasures possess. In the case of swords, it’s *hamon*, which resembles exquisitely falling flower petals or gently swaying waves.”

Leaving Authentic Work for Future Generations Is the Most Important Thing

When a sword is poorly forged, no blade will be formed because it will break easily during the process of honing it into a thin blade. When this is likely to happen, swordsmiths hone the blade into a convex shape to make it appear as if a blade has been formed.

Yoshihara explains, “But this undermines the sword’s functional beauty, because its rounded look makes it appear less sharp. Japanese swords are edged tools; they must embody sharpness.”

In order to forge strong iron that can really cut, an ancient Japanese method called “*wakashi-gitae*” (lit. boil forging) is used. Iron



is heated to near-melting temperatures and repeatedly hammered to eliminate impurities, resulting in high-quality steel.

Yoshihara says, “*Wakashi-gitae* is a technique that swordsmiths must learn from their predecessors and pass on to the next generation. There was a time when a compromised forging technique was rampant, but it failed to achieve a sword that could really cut. The beauty of a Japanese sword lies in its functionality. With good-quality steel, a beautiful blade can be formed, and the result is an easy to use and durable sword. It’s beauty combined with full functionality. I think that’s the true beauty of a Japanese sword.”

Yoshihara has published four books on Japanese swords, all written in English. He explains, “There isn’t too much written that tells the truth about Japanese swords. I thought I should share with the world the true story while I’m still vividly aware of it. The books were written in English so Japanese people wouldn’t read them,” Yoshihara laughs.

“We swordsmiths can tell if a work is made in a compromised manner even when such faults are not noticeable to non-professionals. That’s why we have to work hard and leave authentic work to future generations. That’s the most important thing to do.”

Yoshihara’s 18-year-old grandson has joined his workshop this year. Traditional techniques and Yoshihara’s ingenious skills are sure to be handed down to future generations.

* The present-day Praemium Imperiale in Honour of Prince Takamatsu.

** A swordsmith whose works do not need to be judged in order to enter the Contemporary Swords and Artworks exhibition organized by the Society for Preservation of Japanese Art Swords.