

## **Changes in the Shape of the Japanese Sword (part 2)**

### **The Momoyama period**

The Momoyama period is a transitional period between the Koto era (old swords) and the Shinto era (new swords). They are not referred to as new-swords simply because of their manufacture in the new historical era. At this time a new generation of smiths appeared creating major changes in swordmaking.

After Hideyoshi's unification of Japan, and under the protection of the warring states' daimyo, good quality iron and charcoal was easily available. Many daimyo had lost their right to territories in the new unified Japan. This resulted in many smiths gathering in the castle towns of the newly promoted daimyo. It was a very prosperous time. The advances made in transportation had made the procurement of materials easy. It was also at this time that nanbantetsu was introduced into swordmaking. This was an era of innovation. New techniques were employed, and the resulting difference in the old sword manufacture and the new sword manufacture can be seen in the quality of the blades' surface steel (jitetsu).

First, a new shape referred to as Keicho Shinto appeared based upon the shape of the late Kamakura, Nanbokuchō period swords. However, they had lost their familiar tachi shape with a wider blade area and a shallower curvature over the whole length. The formal wearing of two swords (by the addition of a short sword also fitted with a tsuba) became the standard for Edo period samurai. Kenjutsu also gained in popularity during this time.

During Hideyoshi's reign, as there was no longer any land to distribute, giving swords as gifts to vassals became popular. As a result, the value of swords rose greatly and at the request of Hideyoshi, the Hon'ami school of sword appraisers published an appraisal book which in turn gave birth to the Masamune legend.

### **The Edo Period—The contrasting styles East of Edo, West of Kyoto and Osaka**

The Edo period lasted 270 years. This was from Keicho 8 (1603) to Keio 3 (1868) in the Bakamatsu era.

The Shinto era of sword manufacture lasts from the Azuchi-Momoyama period to the Kan'ei era of the Edo period (Shoho 1644- to around An'ei -1781). Following the Shinto era comes the Shin-shinto era (new-new sword) of sword manufacture. Swords made after this era are referred to as Gendai-to (swords classed as modern blades).

The swords of this period still retain the Edo period shallow curvature, but the width of the upper part of the blade becomes narrower. Hamon of this period become more flamboyant and stylized hamon patterns such as Juzu-ba (rosary beads) and toran-ba (waves) appear. Around the Genroku era the average sword length extends a little and the curvature becomes a little deeper.

There are characteristics that allow us to determine if the blade was made in East or West Japan. The hamon of blades made in Edo are typically conservative, reflecting the simplistic, austere feeling of the new Edo Bakufu. However, blades made in Imperial Kyoto and the prosperous town of Osaka are generally flamboyant and eye-catching.

After the Genroku era, in both the East and West of Japan, the demand for swords decreased. Swordsmiths also decreased in numbers, many leaving the employ of daimyo and taking orders from wealthy merchants. It was a sign that the end of the samurai era was near.

### **The Late Edo Period to The Early Meiji Period—Muzori Chokuto and Imperial swords.**

The samurai era was over. During the tense Bakamatsu era, chokuto (Straight blades made in the shinogi-zukuri construction) called kinouto appeared, and were used as a symbol by activists for Imperial restoration. As the west deteriorated, Edo became the center, and the effect was seen across the nation. Additionally, around this time the original five traditions gave way to the individual styles of the smiths themselves. This can be said to be a characteristic of Shin-shinto blades.

Lastly, modern swords from the early Meiji period to present day are referred to as gendai-to. As there is no longer any need for swords as weapons, and the samurai era of power over, the evolution of the Japanese sword shape ends here.

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