

Selections from NDL collections

Kyoho Meibutsucho—Legendary Japanese swords

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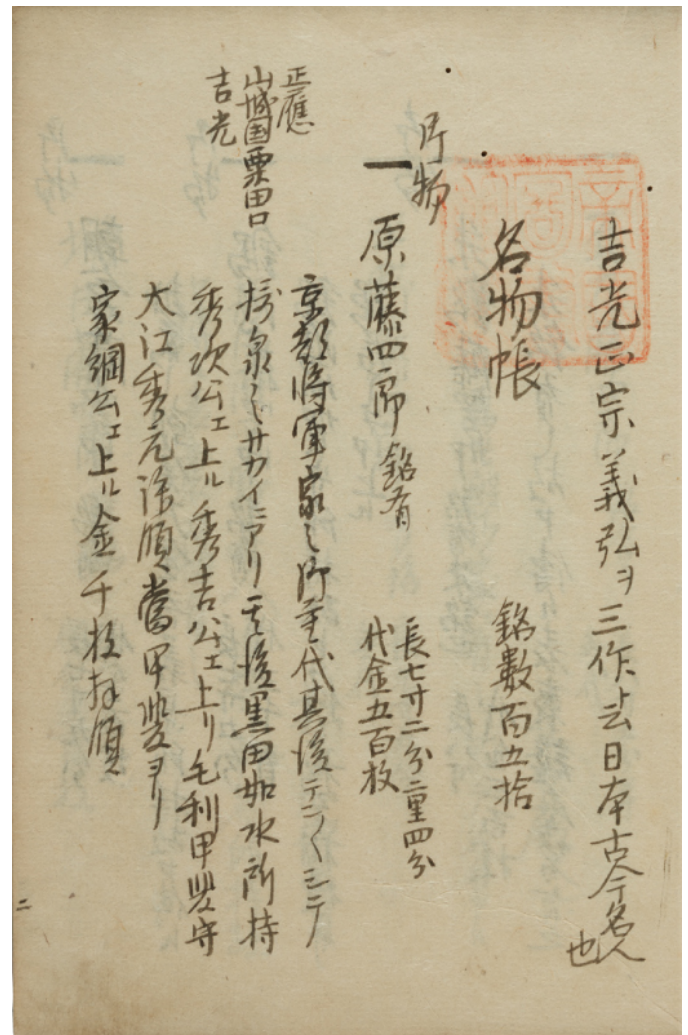
This article is a partial translation of the article in Japanese of the same title in the *NDL Monthly Bulletin No. 694* (February 2019).

For the past several years, public interest in Japanese swords has been on the rise, and there has been an unprecedented increase in the number of exhibitions held in Japan. In the autumn of 2018, the Kyoto National Museum held an exhibition entitled *Swords of Kyoto: Master Craftsmanship from an Elegant Culture*, which attracted more than 250,000 visitors. One reason for this increase in interest is the popularity of a browser game called *Touken Ranbu (Wild Dance of Swords)*, in which legendary Japanese swords play a major role. In the game, these legendary swords are magically animated into handsome men, who grow in strength and in charm as they fight and defeat evil enemies. The game is so popular that it has spawned a number of spinoffs, including a musical that was staged both within and outside Japan as well as several anime series and a movie.

Anyone who has ever seen an exhibition of Japanese swords has likely also seen the caption *meibutsu*, which literally means "famous thing" and is often used in reference to swords of the highest quality and historical importance. This article is an introduction to the *Kyoho Meibutsucho*¹, a catalog of famous swords that was published in the early eighteenth century. The swords included in this publication are particularly well known as masterpieces of swordsmithing, and many of them have been designated national treasures, important cultural properties, or important art object.

The Kyoho period lasted from 1716 to 1736, during which the Tokugawa Shogunate introduced a series of economic measures now known as the Kyoho Reforms. Around this same time, Tokugawa Yoshimune (1684-1751), the 8th Tokugawa Shogun, ordered the compilation and submission of a catalog of famous swords, and this work was entrusted to the Hon'ami family, who were well known for their expertise in the business of polishing, cleaning, and authenticating Japanese swords. Little is known about the actual compilation of the catalog, but the work that resulted is now known as the *Kyoho Meibutsucho*. And although the original has long been lost, the content of the catalog is known through a number of extant copies, which generally fall into either of two types: Copies that start with a sword named Atsushi Toshiro are called Type 1 copies, while those that start

with a sword named Hirano Toshiro are called Type 2 copies. The National Diet Library owns a copy of Type 1 entitled simply *Meibutsucho* and a copy of Type 2 entitled *Touken-Meibutsucho*.

Type 1: *Meibutsucho*

Edited by Hon'ami Ichirobe. NDL Call No. 197-273

First, let's take a look at *Meibutsucho*, which is a Type 1 copy. The first entry on the first page reads:

Owned by the family of the Tokugawa Shogun
Atsushi Toshiro, with sword maker's name, 21.8 cm long,

¹ The use of the name *Kyoho Meibutsucho* for this catalog dates from the Meiji period, which began in 1868. Prior to that, each copy had an individual title, such as *Meibutsu-kan* (Models of Masterpieces), *Meibutsucho* (Catalog of Masterpieces), or *Token Meibutsucho*, (Catalog of Famous Blades).

1.2 cm wide, valued at 500 pieces of gold

The entry lists the owner's name, the sword's name, the presence of a swordsmith's name, the length and width of the blade, and the estimated value. Following this entry is an explanation of the sword's background, which says that this blade was handed down from the family of the Ashikaga Shogun to military commanders and feudal lords such as Kuroda Yoshitaka (also known as Kuroda Kanbe), and then later to Toyotomi Hidetsugu, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, Mori Hidemoto, and finally the family of the Tokugawa Shogun. At present, this blade is owned by the Tokyo National Museum².

The preface to this copy was written by Sakakibara Kozan (1734-1798), a noted scholar of Confucianism as well as ancient court and military practices, and dated August 1779. According to this preface, this copy was based on one owned by Takada Hidemichi, which is said to be one originally submitted to the Shogunate by the Hon'ami family at the order of the Shogun during the Kyoho period. The swords are listed in the following order: First come swords made by the three master swordsmiths: Toshiro Yoshimitsu, Okazaki Masamune, and Go Yoshihiro. Next come notable swords made by other swordsmiths. Finally come famous swords that were known to have been destroyed. Of the swords made by other swordsmiths, those in possession of the family of the Tokugawa Shogun

are listed first.

Next, let's take a look at Token meibutsucho, which is a Type 2 copy.

Just like Type 1 copy, the entry lists the owner's name, the sword's name, the presence of the swordsmith's name, the length and width of the blade, and the estimated value though the first sword listed in Type 2 copies is Hirano Toshiro.

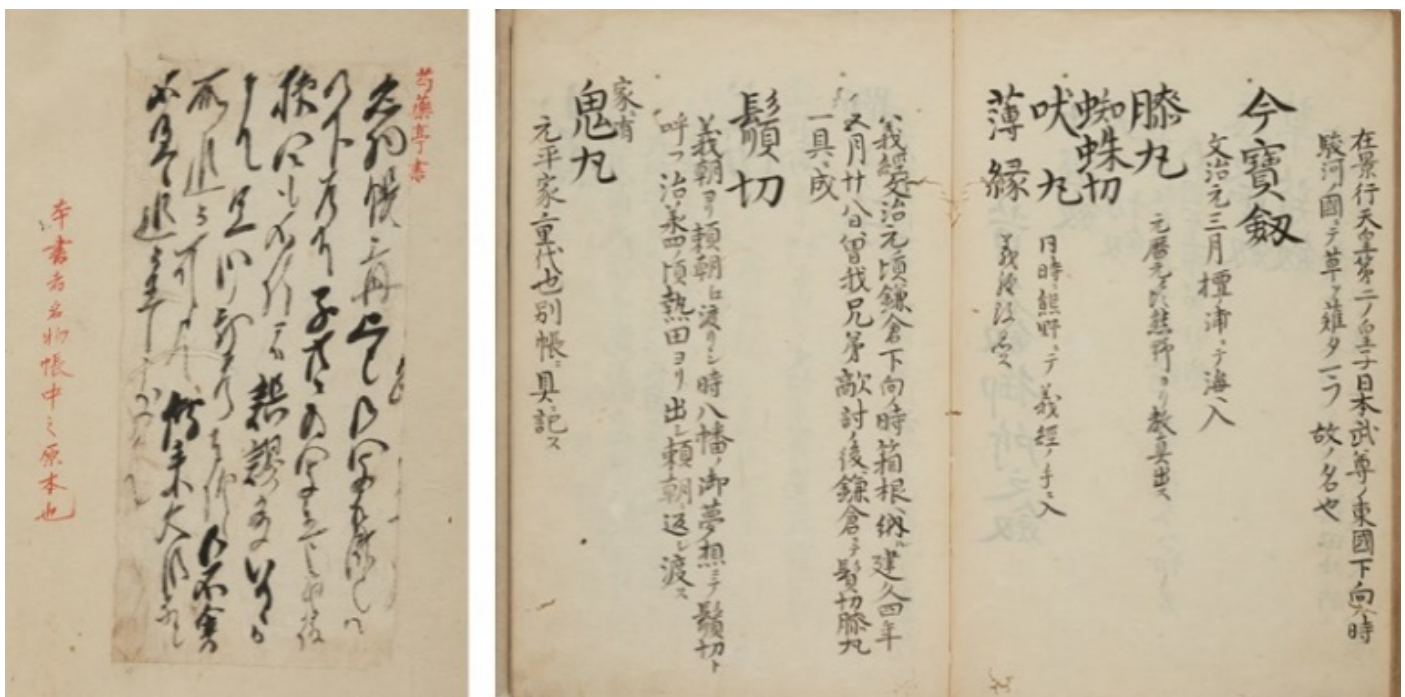
The recto of the first page contains the following description next to the names and the signatures of successive heads of the Hon'ami family.

Meibutsukenshu

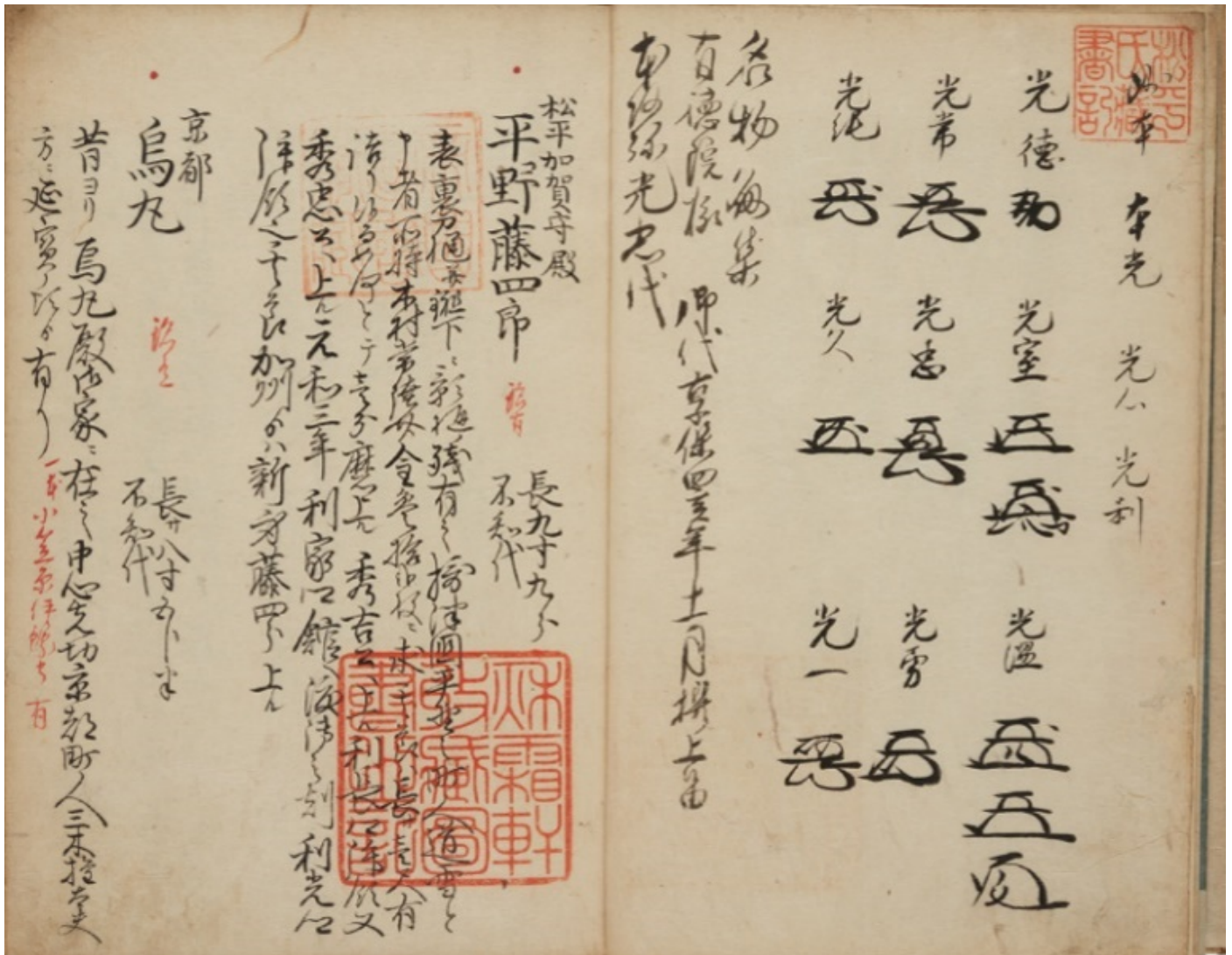
Presented to Yutokuin by Hon'ami Kochu in November 1719

Yutokuin is an honorary name that refers to Tokugawa Yoshimune, the 8th Tokugawa Shogun, and Hon'ami Kochu was the head of the Hon'ami family at the time this catalog was submitted.

This copy consists of three volumes, the first being swords by the three master swordsmiths, the second being notable swords by other swordsmiths, and the third being famous swords known to have been destroyed. There are also some appendices that were added by Hon'ami Kojo (1767-1845).



²https://colbase.nich.go.jp/collection_items/tnm/F-19547?locale=en



Type 2. *Token meibutsucho*. NDL Call No. わ 756-5

Top left: A slip of paper with *Shakuyakuteisho* written on the inside cover

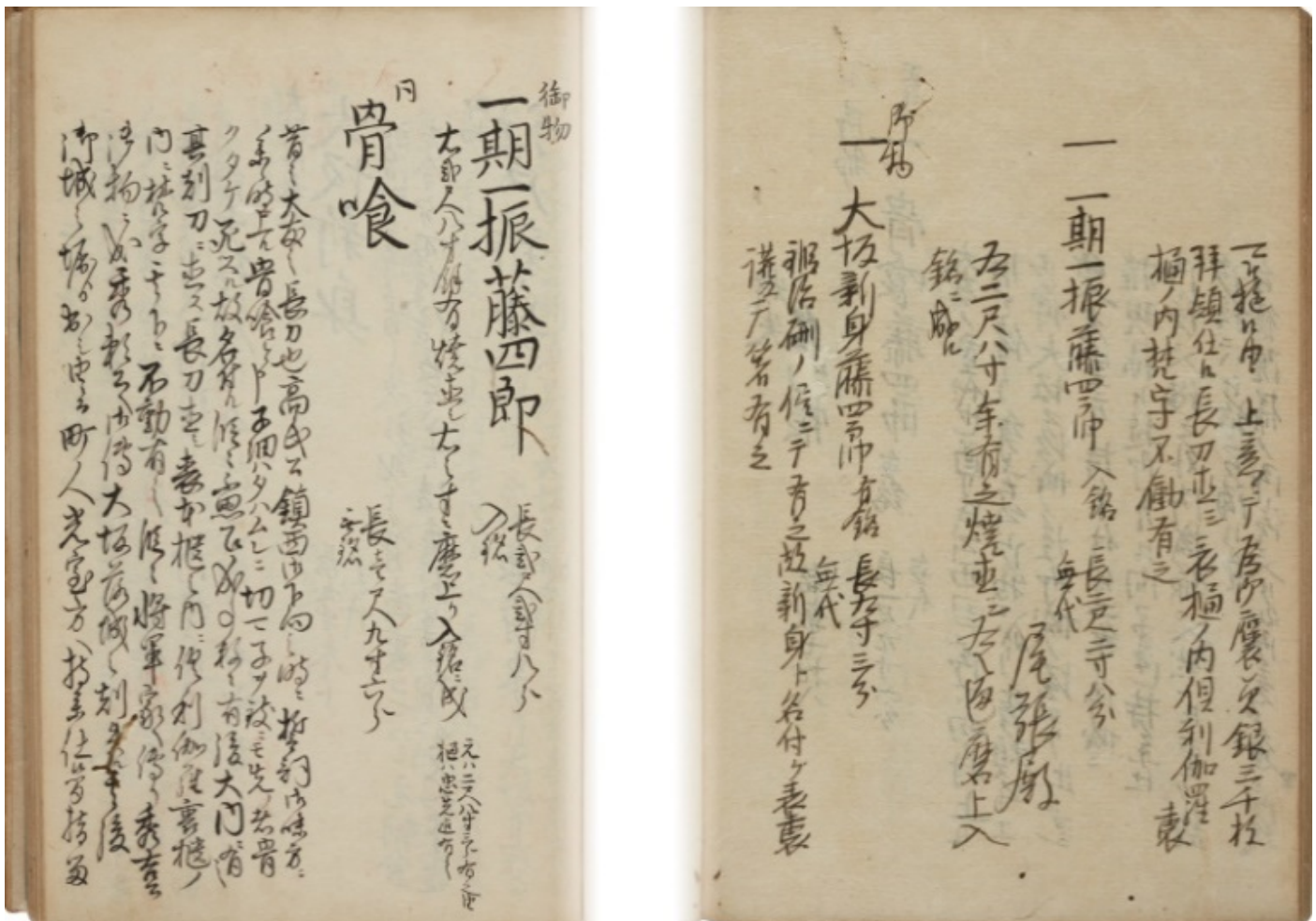
The name *Shakuyakutei* refers to Hon'ami Kojo, the editor of this manuscript

Top right: From *Mukashinomeikengoshonoken*

Bottom: The stamp at the bottom left reads *Shusoken shuzo tosho no ki*, which means that this manuscript was previously owned by Matsudaira Yorihiro (1851-1929), a noted expert on Japanese swords.

Comparing the content of Type 1 copies with that of Type 2 copies reveals that there are some swords that appear only in Type 2. Additionally, there are differences in the descriptions of the owners. The descriptions in Type 1 are decidedly simpler. Therefore, some researchers say that

although both came from the Hon'ami family, Type 1 is a copy of the document originally submitted to the Shogun, while Type 2 was expanded on by Hon'ami Kojo.



Right: from Type 1 *Meibutsucho*

Left: from Type 2 *Token meibutsucho*

The *Meibutsucho* (right) describes a sword named *Ichigo hitohuri Toshiro* and says that it was owned by the Owari branch of the Tokugawa family, whereas the *Token meibutsucho* (left) says that it was in the possession of the family of the Tokugawa Shogun.

What is clear, however, is that the *Kyoho Meibutsucho* was compiled in the middle of the Edo period and was originally a highly confidential document. Copies were later made, however, and circulated among scholars of ancient court and military practices as well as swordsmiths and others with expert knowledge of swords. Even the copyists who transcribed the work were likely excited by knowledge of these valuable items that were only rarely seen. As time went on, this content became the foundation of a common understanding of what was meant by a masterpiece, which was shared through further reprints and republication³.

The browser game *Touken Ranbu* mentioned at the beginning of this article features many characters who are personifications of historical Japanese swords and have personalities based on the legends surrounding the swords and their historical owners. For example,

according to the *Kyoho Meibutsucho*, the sword Honebami⁴ Toshiro was remade after being worn out. Thus, the character based on this sword suffers from loss of memory in the game. This kind of personification has helped to stimulate interest not just in the game but in its historical antecedents.

Of course, all things considered, the recent upswing in interest in Japanese swords is undoubtedly the result of a number of different factors, but it is fun to think that *Kyoho Meibutsucho* was the work that established a common understanding of the concept of "masterpiece" in Japanese swordsmithing.

(Translated by Tomoaki Hyuga and Rie Watanabe)

³ A 1913 reprint entitled *Shochu token meibutsucho Fu meibutsu token oshigata* is available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).

⁴ The word honebami literally means "bone eating" and is a simile indicating the sword is sharp enough to cut through human bones merely by swinging it through the air.