Yamashiro (Kyoto prefecture), Yamato (Nara prefecture), Bizen (Okayama prefecture), Sagami (Kanagawa prefecture), and Mino (Gifu prefecture) were the five great regions of sword production in Japan. The styles shared by the master swordsmiths active in each of these five regions were known as the five traditions (gokaden) (literally, “the five traditions”). The rise of each of the traditions was different depending on the unique geographical conditions of each region as well as differences between the areas of production versus consumption, but they all share the fact that they turned out many famous swordsmiths and strongly influenced sword smithing in other regions of the same period, as well as swordsmithing traditions in later periods. This exhibition will focus on swords made in the regions that have been passed down in the Owari Tokugawa family and will home in on the distinctive appeal of these famous swords that fascinated the Warring States generals and daimyō.

1. The Yamashiro Tradition

In Yamashiro Province (today’s southern Kyoto), production of swords began in the Heian period and reached its golden age in the Kamakura period. Characteristics of Yamashiro tradition swords were the graceful blade shape and strongly influenced swordsmithing in other regions of the same period as well as swordsmithing traditions in later periods. This exhibition will focus on swords made in the regions that have been passed down in the Owari Tokugawa family and will home in on the distinctive appeal of these famous swords that fascinated the Warring States generals and daimyō. The origins of sword production in Yamato Province (today’s Nara Pref.) can be traced back to the Nara period. Smiths affiliated with large temples such as Tōdaiji and Kōfukuji produced blades for the warrior monks, who emerged from the late Heian period onward, and swordsmithing here reached the height of its prosperity in the Kamakura period. Yamato tradition swords are characterized by their straight blades (suguha) and plentiful blade patterns (hamon) and the blades are thick with a high side ridge (shinogi), which makes for exceptional functional practicality. This tradition is made up of the Senjun School, Tegai School, Tama School, and others, with representative craftsmen including Kanegahe of the Tegai School, Kuniyuki of the Tama School.

2. The Sōshū Tradition

Sword making in Sagami Province (today’s Kanagawa Pref.) began when the Kamakura shogunate invited Kunimune and Sukezane from Bizen Province (eastern & southern Okayama Pref.) and Awataguchi Kunitsuna from Yamashiro Province (southern Kyoto) to make swords there. It is said that Masamune, disciple of Shintōgo Kunimitsu, brought the Sōshū tradition to its greatest heights. The Sōshū tradition projected the tastes of the Kamakura warriors, with its characteristic large wood grain patterns (dita-me) on the surface and intensively indented blade pattern dominated by coarse granular temper patterns (nie). Masamune’s followers included Sadamune, who is said to have been his adopted son, and Hitoshi. The Great Master Masamune Masamune, whose name is virtually synonymous with the idea of the master swordsmith, studied with Shintōgo Kunimitsu, brought out of the Awataguchi School in Yamashiro Province and moved to Sagami. It was Masamune who fully established the Sōshū tradition as a unique style for the swords of Sagami Province. The intense and wild blade patterns were widely appreciated by the rising Kamakura samurai class. Many of Masamune’s works are unsigned, but a few do bear engraved inscriptions.

Masamune’s Followers

The great master of the Sōshū tradition, Masamune, had ten top disciples, known as the “Masamune jittetsu”—Sadamune is said to have been Masamune’s son, Kunishige and Kunisugu of Yamashiro Province, Kinjū and Kanejū of Mino Province (today’s Gifu Pref.), Yoshihiro and Norishige of Etchū Province, Yoshinari of the Bizen tradition, Yasuuki of the Gojō School (eastern and southern Okayama Pref.), and Samonji of Chikuzen Province (Fukuoka Pref.). After learning from Masamune, they all returned to their respective provinces, where they continued their sword making careers.

3. The Bizen Tradition

Bizen Province (eastern & southern Okayama Pref.) was rich in natural iron sand deposits in the Chūgoku Mountains, which supported lively sword production. From the late Heian period onward, this region was fulfilling requests from warriors all over Japan and became the largest sword-producing region in the country. Characteristics of swords in the Bizen tradition were showy blade patterns with irregular clove–shaped patterns (chōji miare), blade patterns that are dominated by a fine-grained “mist line” (mizu), and the apparent reflection (utsuri) of the shadow of the blade patterns. Representative swordsmiths were the Ko-Bizen swordsmith Masatsune, Norimune of the Ichimonji School, Mitsuta and his son Nagayoshi of the Osafune School.

Ko-Bizen

Of the master swordsmiths of Bizen Province, Tomonari, Masatsune, Kanesōri, and others who were active from the early Heian period to the Kamakura period were later known as Ko-Bizen (“old Bizen”) smiths. The characteristic brilliant irregular clove–shaped blade patterns seen in later Bizen swords are not seen in the Ko-Bizen blades and many of them present a gently waving pattern with slight irregularity on what at first appearance seems to be a straight blade.

Ichimonji School

This group of swordsmiths was formed in the Kamakura period and established itself in Fukuoka (Setouchi City, Okayama). This school is also known as the Fukuoka Ichimonji School. The name comes from the character “ichi” that the smiths carved onto their blades to identify themselves. Norimune was the founder of this school, which produced many famous craftsmen, such as Taneume, Sukeyoshi, Yoshimichi, and others. Kanahe moved to nearby Katayama and founded the Katayama Ichimonji School; Morie moved to Hatakeda, where he founded the Hatakeda smithy; and Sukeyoshi moved to Yoshikawa, where he founded the Yoshikawa Ichimonji School.

Osafune School

This group of swordsmiths established itself in the region of Osafune (in Setouchi city, Okayama) in the late Kamakura period. It produced many great master craftsmen, including Mitsutada’s son Nagamitsu, his grandson Kagemitsu, and his great-grandson Kanemitsu. In the Nanbokucho period, the lineage continued with Nagayoshi; in the early Muromachi period with Yasumitsu and Morimitsu; and in the late Muromachi period Suikessai and Kiyo Mitsutada. However, with the great deluge of the Yoshii River in 1590 (Tenshō 18), the school suffered devastating damage and met its demise.

Kumo School

This is the common name for the Ukai School, a group of swordsmiths living in the city of Ukai in the mid- to late Kamakura period to the Nanbokucho period. Unshō, Unji, and Unji were the principal swordsmiths. Unlike other schools of the same period, they produced swords following in the Yamashiro tradition that are close in style to the Rai School as well as the Aoe School of Bitchū Province.

The Bitchū Tradition

As in Bizen Province, in Bitchū Province (western Okayama Pref.) swordsmithing prospered due to the accessibility of the iron sand that was plentiful in the Chūgoku Mountains. The Bitchū craftsmen lived in Aoe (Kurashiki city, Okayama). Yasutsugu, Noritaka, and others of the early Kamakura period are known as Ko-Aoe (old Aoe); Yoshibatsu and Tsusugou of the mid- to late Kamakura period are known as Chū-Aoe (middle Aoe); and Tsuguysu of the early Muromachi period is known as Sue-Aoe (late Aoe).

4. The Yamato Tradition

The origins of sword production in Yamato Province (today’s Nara Pref.) can be traced back to the Nara period. Smiths affiliated with large temples such as Tōdaiji and Kōfukuji produced blades for the warrior monks, who emerged from the early Heian period onward, and swordsmithing here reached the height of its prosperity in the Kamakura period. Yamato tradition swords are characterized by their straight blades (suguha) and plentiful blade patterns (hamon) and the blades are thick with a high side ridge (shinogi), which makes for exceptional functional practicality. This tradition is made up of the Senjun School, Tegai School, Tama School, and others, with representative craftsmen including Kanegahe of the Tegai School, and Kuniyuki of the Tama School.

5. The Mino Tradition

Sword making in Mino Province (today’s Gifu Pref.) can be traced back to the late Heian period, but it began in earnest in the Nanbokucho period. The Yamato swordsmith Kanejū moved to Shizu in Tagi-gun (southwest Gifu Pref.) and established a school there and sword production flourished. Mino blades were in demand from Warring States generals from all over Japan and are characterized by their flat straight blade (kissaki) and sharp pointed blades. In addition to Kanahe, representative swordsmiths include Kanasada, who established a base in Seki, Kanemoto, and the generations of Kanemoto who took the name Magoroku, among others.

Dispersal of the Mino Masters

From the Warring States period onward, the master swordsmiths of Mino Province were scattered and produced swords in various other regions. Sword makers came and went between Mino and the neighboring province of Owari (today’s Aichi Pref.) and in the Warring States period Masatsune and other swordsmiths moved and established themselves permanently in Owari Province. In addition, Masatsugu of the Mino lineage moved from Ōmi Province to Ezchizen Province (Fuku Pref.), and master swordsmiths of the Mino lineage also moved to Ise Province (Mie Pref.).
Types of Swords

Swords are subdivided according to their formal features and shape. The main types include tachi, katana, wakizashi, and tantō. The tachi, or long sword, was used primarily from the Heian to the Muromachi period and worn hanging from the hip with the blade facing downwards. In the 17th century, during the Edo period, its function became mainly ceremonial. The tachi blade usually measures about 65 to 70 cm in length. The katana, or sword, took the place of the tachi from the mid-Muromachi to the Edo period. For actual combat, the pre-Muromachi tachi was sometimes shortened to a katana format. In contrast to the tachi, the katana was worn tucked into the kimono sash with blade facing upwards. Its blade generally measures about 60 cm in length. The shorter wakizashi, or "side-inserted" sword, worn together with the katana, has blades measuring from 30 to 60 cm in length, while the tantō (short sword) blades are about 30 cm long.

Sword fittings

The wide variety of outer mounting equipment that accompanies the sword for carrying it is referred to as the koshirae (mounting). Of the sword fittings that are used in the koshirae, the representative ones are the pommel guard (tsuba) and the mitokoromono—comprised of a set of three items, the menuki (hilt ornaments), kōgai (small knife handle), and kozuka (hair dressing ornament). A distinction was drawn between those fittings that were made by the Goto family of metalsmiths who served the Edo shogunate, which were considered formal fittings, known as oie-bori (carved by "the family"), and anything made by any other metal craftsman, which were called machi-bori (carved by townsmen).