

Special Exhibition

# The Art of the Japanese Swords

— Tracing Connections in Kyoto/Nara and Kyushu —

Swords have been made throughout Japan since ancient times, but sword production flourished particularly well in close proximity to the ancient capitals of Nara and Kyoto in the Yamashiro (Kyoto Prefecture) and Yamato (Nara Prefecture) areas, where large numbers of swords were produced in response to demand from temples and the nobility. The style of sword craftsmen from Yamato had a considerable influence on sword craftsmen in Kyushu. This exhibition presents the work of sword craftsmen from the Kinai region (the five provinces surrounding the ancient capitals), especially those of Yamashiro and Yamato, alongside works by craftsmen from Kyushu.

The Tokugawa Art Museum  
Exhibition Rooms 7-9

From June 5 (Sat) to July 11 (Sun), 2021

## 1. SWORDS OF YAMASHIRO PROVINCE

## 山城

Japan has a number of famous sword-producing regions, including the pre-modern provinces of Yamashiro (Kyoto Prefecture), Sagami (Kanagawa Prefecture), and Bizen (Okayama Prefecture), but Yamashiro is often listed first, not solely for its long history as the ancient capital of Japan, but additionally for the numerous famed bladesmiths and exceptional swords it brought to the world. Having been the center of Japan and the location of its capital ever since the Heian period (8th –12th centuries), Yamashiro was a place where people, goods, and information gathered from all over the country. The central government produced weapons such as spears and bows and arrows to maintain security in the capital and to prepare for warfare in the outlying regions. Swords were also produced in the region since the early Heian period. The oldest extant example was made by the famed swordsmith Sanjō Kokaji Munechika in the late Heian period, and the craft rose and declined over the years, enduring until the end of the Edo period (19th century). Yamashiro swords are characterized by straight blade patterns (*suguha*), fine speckled ground surface (*nashiji-hada*), and slender blades with deeper curvature closer to the handle (*koshizori*).



National Treasure


Length 27.6 / tang 11:5

No. 9  
Tantō Short Sword, known as “Gotō Tōshirō”  
Inscription: Yoshimitsu  
Kamakura period, 13th c.  
Owned by Gotō Shōzaburō and others

## 2. SWORDS OF YAMATO PROVINCE

## 大和

Although the production of swords in Yamato is said to date back to the Nara period (8th century) or earlier, most of the surviving swords from Yamato date to the Kamakura period (13th century) or later. These blades are said to have been commissioned by the warrior monks who were affiliated with major temples such as Tōdaiji and Kohfukuji, and fewer examples survive than from Yamashiro and Bizen provinces. It is typical for many of these swords to be unmarked with no inscription on the tang since they were delivered from the swordsmith directly to the patron. In addition, many of the swords have straight blade patterns (*suguha*) with straight surface grain (*masame jigane*) and somewhat thick blades, showing an emphasis on practicality. After the Kamakura period (1185–1333), swordsmiths from Yamato dispersed to other parts of Japan, making swords in the various regions where they settled and passing on the Yamato style of sword making.



Length 25.3 / tang 9.0

No. 28  
Tantō Short Sword Attributed to Hōshō  
Kamakura period, 13th c.  
Owned by Tokugawa Ieyasu

### 3. SWORDS OF THE KINAI REGION

畿内

Swordsmiths were also active in Settsu (northern Osaka Prefecture) and Izumi (southern Osaka Prefecture) provinces, which formed the Kinai Region along with Yamashiro and Yamato. This section presents works by swordsmiths of these other nearby areas. Sword production began in Settsu in the Momoyama period (16th century) and in Izumi in the early Muromachi period (14th century), both later than in Yamato and Yamashiro provinces. Sukehiro of Settsu Province and Sukemasa of Izumi Province were well-known swordsmiths of these areas and the billowing wave-inspired blade pattern known as *tōranba*, first created by Sukehiro, was widely copied by other craftsmen.



No. 40  
*Katana* Long Sword  
Inscription: Echizen-no-kami Sukehiro  
Edo period, 17th c.  
Owned by Hiroshima Asano 12th Yoshiteru

Length 69.5 / tang 20.0

### 4. SWORDS OF KYUSHU

九州

Swords were also produced in Kyushu, far from the capital. Production there began in the Kamakura period (1185–1333), when swordsmiths from Yamato moved to the area and introduced the craft, so the influence of Yamato-area swordsmithing can be seen in early works from this region. In the Nanbokuchō period (1336–1392), Sano Kunihiro, who is said to have studied under the master bladesmith Masamune from Sagami Province, produced swords that were strongly influenced by Masamune. In the Momoyama period (1573–1603), a diversity of styles developed with craftsmen such as Tadayoshi, who traveled from Hizen Province to Yamashiro, where he apprenticed with Umetada Myōju then returned home, carrying on the tradition of the characteristic Yamashiro smithing style upon his return.



No. 44  
*Tachi* Long Sword, known as “Oo- Samonji”  
Inscription: Sa  
Nanbokuchō period, 14th c.  
Owned by Tokugawa Ieyasu,  
the 3rd Tokugawa Shogun Iemitsu and  
the 1st Owari Tokugawa Yoshinao

Length 80.0 / tang 22.4



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