

# THE TANTÔ 短刀

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A *tantô* is traditionally described as being a Japanese sword of less than one *shaku* in length. This equates to 30.3 cm or a shade less than 12 inches. *Tantô* existed as early as the Heian Period. Most were utilitarian and made for practical use. Very few fine examples of these *tantô* remain today. *Tantô* came into widespread use after the two attempted invasions by the Mongol fleet in the latter part of the thirteenth century. *Tantô* production at that time was especially prolific in the Sôshû tradition of Sagami Province. This Middle Kamakura era marks the beginning of the production of high quality *tantô* being produced by top quality smiths. This shift by skilled smiths to the production of *tantô* occurred not only in the Sôshû tradition as mentioned; but also in other schools of sword production as will be explained later.

*Tantô* shapes varied greatly over the years from the Heian period to modern times. Prior to the Muromachi Period, we find *hira-zukuri* as the style of choice with the occasional exception of a *kanmuri-otoshi tantô* from Yamato or Yamashiro. Also, making their appearance in the late Kamakura Period was the *unokubi-zukuri* and *katakiriha-zukuri tantô*. Starting with the middle Muromachi Period we find new shapes of *tantô* such as *moroha-zukuri* and *shobu-zukuri* often produced. More rarely we find *osoraku-zukuri tantô*.

Prior to the Muromachi Period the word *katana* generally referred to a *tantô*. Long blades were called *tachi* or *uchikatana*. The *koshigatana* (waist-sword) was a sword worn at the waist. From the Kamakura Period on, it was used along with a *tachi* as a *sashizoe* when armor was worn and it had *aikuchi* mountings with no *tsuba*. This *koshigatana* was usually a *tantô*. From the beginning of the Nanbokuchô Period onward, a *wakizashi* was sometimes used in place of a *tantô*.

Small *tantô* that were carried concealed in the robes were called *futokoro katana* (breast swords). They also used *aikuchi* mountings with a round *kojiri* and no *kaeshitsuno* (small hook on the side of the *saya* to hold it in the sash).

*Tantô* changed in size, shape, and function over the many eras. While, as we stated, one *shaku* is considered the maximum length for a *tantô*; as with every subject in the field of Japanese swords, we find exceptions. Most common are the *sun-nobi* (extended) *tantô* of the early Muromachi Period.

The following is a rough breakdown of various *tanto* characteristics, shapes, and some of the better-known *tantô* makers over the various eras:

#### HEIAN PERIOD – EARLY KAMAKURA PERIOD (987-1231)

*Tantô* existed as early as the Heian Period. Most were utilitarian and made for practical use. Very few fine examples of these *tantô* remain today. Given the natural rate of consumption and everyday use of these *tantô*, this is not surprising. Those surviving tend to be *hira-zukuri* with a *ha-watari* of less than 24 cm. They were *uchi-zori* and, as stated, very few survived.

In the early Kamakura Period, the most common *tantô* type is *uchi-zori*, but on occasion we find some with a slight *sori*. Some of the well known makers of these early *tantô* were the Awataguchi School 粟田口 (i.e. Kunitomo 国友), Hisakuni 久友, and Bungo Yukihiro 豊後行平.

#### MID-KAMAKURA PERIOD (1232-1287)

Starting in the middle of the Kamakura Period we find a number of top quality smiths who specialized in the production of high quality *tantô*. Many of these *tantô* survive today. They still tended to be *hira-zukuri* like

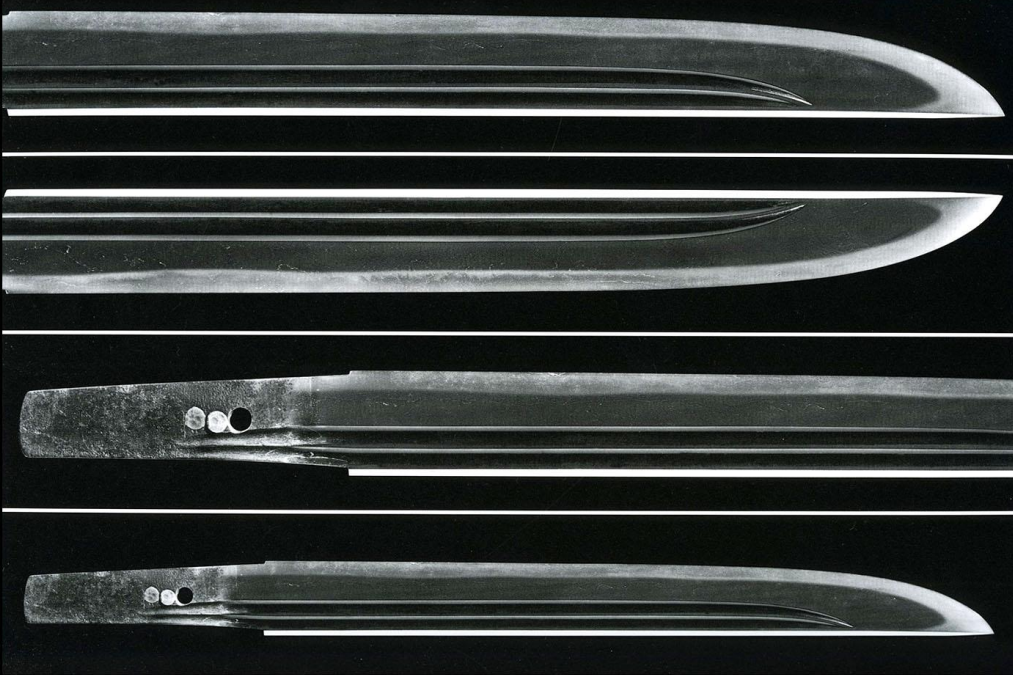
earlier *tantô* with a *ha-watari* of 21-26 cm. The average *nagasa* of these *tantô* tended to be on the high side of this scale at around 25-26 cm. Also during this time, *kanmuri-otoshi tantô* make their first appearance in the Yamato and Yamashiro Schools.

Some of the leading *tantô* smiths of this period were of the Awtaguchi School 粟田口 (Norikuni 則国, Kuniyoshi 国吉, Yoshimitsu 吉光), Rai Kunitoshi 来国寿俊, and the Shintogo school 新藤五 (Kunimitsu 国光 and Kunihiro 国弘). It should be noted that some of these smiths, particularly Awtaguchi Kuniyoshi 粟田口国吉, were known to have made *tantô* in many various sizes and shapes. Examples of his various shapes are attached as appendix A.

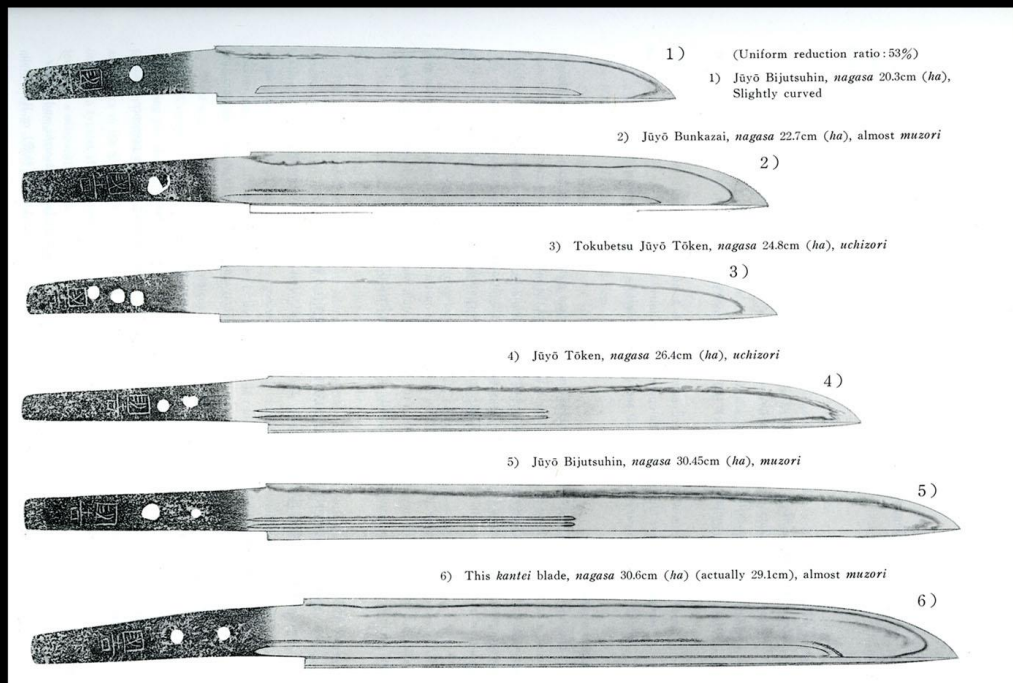


AWTAGUCHI KUNIYOSHI

栗田口国吉



APPENDIX A



### LATE KAMAKURA PERIOD (1288-1333)

*Tantô* during this period tended to be on the long side, say about 26 cm. For the most part these *tantô* had no *sori* or even slight *uchi-zori*. These slightly longer and stronger *tantô* reflected the martial spirit of the late Kamakura Period when martial skills and battle necessities started dictating changes in sword shapes.

The *hamon* of the *tantô* of this period is like that of *tachi* except they lacked the *chôji midare hamon*. The *gunome midare* and *suguha* of such smiths as Nagamitsu and Kagemitsu is representative of the types of *hamon* produced on Bizen *tantô*. Yamashiro blades continued to show the *suguha* of former times for the most part, but we find exceptions in the *midare hamon* of some of the Rai smiths.

The smiths of Yamato produced *tantô* with a *suguha* based *hamon* that also contained *gunome* and *hotsure*. The Sôshû smiths most often produced *tantô* with a *midare hamon*. One notable exception is the fantastic *suguha* produced by arguably the greatest *tantô* maker of these times, Shintôgo Kunimitsu 新藤五国光.

While *hira-zukuri* was still the norm, new shapes were appearing in the various schools and it might be best to breakdown the various prominent *tantô* sword smiths by school and styles of *tanto* produced.

1. *Hira-zukuri tantô* with a length of about 28cm, *mu-zori*, or very shallow *sori*. Width that is a little wider than the middle Kamakura Period: — The Rai 来 school (Kunimitsu 国光, Kunitsugu 国次, Sadamune 貞宗, e.g)
2. *Hira-zukuri tantô*, with a *mihaba* (width) that is wide in comparison to the length. Thin *kasane* and a shallow *sori*: — Yukimitsu 行光
3. *Kanmuri otoshi-zukuri* or *unokubi-zukuri tantô* with a thin *kasane* and *mu-zori*: — The Taima school 当麻, Ryokai 了戒, Shikkake Norinaga 尻懸則長, g.
4. *Katakiriha-zukuri* with *mu-zori* or very shallow *sori*: — Sadamune 貞宗, Osafune Kagemitsu 長船景光, Takagi Sadamune 高木貞宗, e.g.

BIZEN KAGEMITSU 備前景光



RAI KUNIMITSU 来国光



RAI KUNIMITSU 来国光



SÔSHÛ YUKIMITSU 相州行光







#### NANBOKUCHÔ PERIOD (1334-1389)

The period of war between the Northern and Southern Courts brought with it a new style in swords. While works of the previous periods tended to be elegant, we now find a movement toward a more exaggerated grandeur. This included the shapes of *tantô*. *Tantô* reached lengths of 30 cm and more. The line between what we call a *sun-nobi tantô* and a *ko-wakizashi* become somewhat blurred. *Wakizashi* came into being that tended to be broad and some exceed 40 cm in length. The *kasane* is thin and the *sori* is slight. This style is seen in the works of Akihiro 秋広 and Hiromitsu 広光 of the Sôshû tradition. The Sôshû tradition made famous by Masamune 正宗 became popular throughout the country.

Rarely we find small *tantô* of smiths such as Samonji 左文字, but they tended to be a miniature version of the typical *wakizashi* mentioned above.



Just as the shape of *tantô* in this period reflected the trend toward exaggerated grandeur, so did the temper of many of the leading smiths. Most notable was the *hitatsura* temper of the Sôshû smiths Hiromitsu 広光 and Akihiro 秋広. As a rule, we find many blades with a robust *notare-midare hamon* during this period.

Some of the leading sword smiths of the Nanbokuchô period:

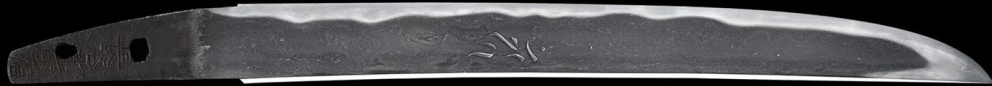
1. *Hira-zukuri ko-wakizashi* and *o-tantô* with a *ha-watari* of about 30 cm, rounded *fukura*, thin *kasane*, and *saki-zori*. – The Hasebe 長谷部 school (Kunishige 国重, Kuninobu 国信); Nobukuni 信国; the Masamune 正宗 school (Masamune 正宗, Sadamune 貞宗, Hiromitsu 広光, Akihiro 秋広); the Kanemitsu 兼光 school (Kanemitsu 兼光, Tomomitsu 倫光); the Omiya Bizen 大宮 school (Morikage 盛景, Morishige 盛重); and the Shizu 志津school ( Shizu 志津, Kanetomo 兼友, Kanetsugu 兼次).
2. Other major sword groups that had outstanding smiths – The Rai 来 group; the Heianjo 平安城 group; the Sa 左 group of Chikuzen; The Fujishima 藤島 Group of Kaga; and others.



BIZEN KANEMITSU 備前兼光



HASEBE KUNINOBU 長谷部国信



HASEBE KUNINOBU 長谷部国信



SADAMUNE 貞宗



## MUROMACHI PERIOD (1392-1572)

With the reconciliation of the Northern and Southern courts during the rule of the Ashikaga Shoguns, the Muromachi period began. This ushered in a golden age of culture and art, but is generally considered to be a low point in the history of quality sword production. While the court was unified, the country was torn by constant civil war particularly after the death of the third Ashikaga Shogun, Yoshimitsu.

Prior to the Muromachi Period the word *katana* generally referred to *tantô*. Long blades were called *tachi* or *uchikatana*. We find *tantô* surviving from this time that emulate the middle Kamakura style, i.e. blades of 21-24 cm with *uchizori* and others with the Nanbokucho *sun-nobi* length. After the middle of the Muromachi period, there appeared many rather broad, *saki-zori* blades of less than 36 cm.

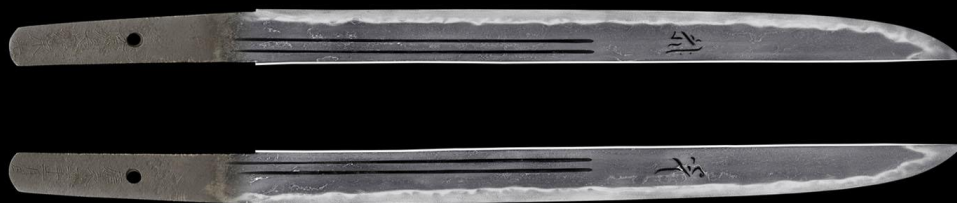
Some of the leading *tanto* smiths of the early Muromachi period (1392-1428):

1. *Hira-zukuri tantô, ha-watari* of less than 30 cm in length with *mu-sori*.  
– The Oei Bizen 応永備前 school (Yasumitsu 康光, Morimitsu 盛光); Nobukuni 信国.
2. Kanmuri-otoshi-zukuri with mihaba in proportion and mu-sori. – Tegai Kanezane 手搔包真; the Nio 二王 school (Kiyonaga 清永, Kiyokage 清景).

Some of the leading *tantô* smiths of the later Muromachi period (1467-1572):

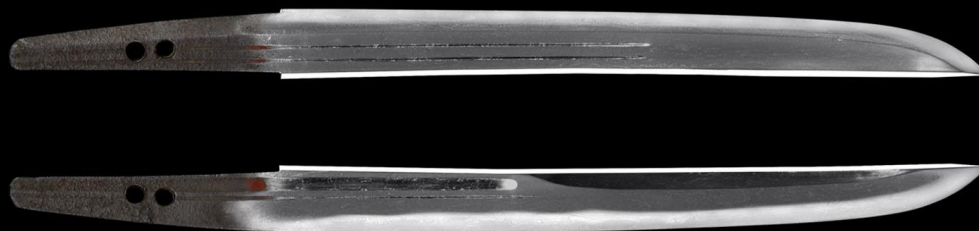
1. *Hira-zukuri, ha-watari* of about 23-26 cm, *uchi-zori*, similar to the *tantô* of the Kamakura period. – The Sue-Seki 末関 school (Kanesada 兼定, Kanetsune 兼常); Osafune Sukesada 長船祐定; Shimada Yoshisuke 島田義助; and Tegai Kanekiyo 手搔包清.
2. *Hira-zukuri, ha watari* of 20-23 cm, *uchi-zori*, extremely narrow *sakihaba*, very thick *motokasane*. – The Sue-Bizen 末備前 school (Sukesada 祐定, Norimitsu 則光, Tadimitsu 忠光).
3. *Moroha-zukuri, ha-watari* of 20-23 cm, shallow *sori*. – The Sue Bizen 末備前 school; the Sue-Seki 末関 school; The Sue Mihara 末三原

SHODAI BIZEN YASUMITSU 初代備前廉光

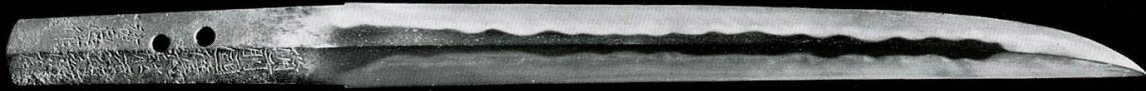


SUE-SÔSHÛ KATAKIRI BA KANMURI OTOSHI TANTÔ

末相州片切刃冠落短刀



BIZEN SUKESADA 備前祐定





### THE AZUCHI-MOMOYAMA PERIOD (1573-1643)

The final unification of Japan started with Oda Nobunaga when he entered Kyoto in 1568 on behalf of the final Ashikaga Shôgun, Yoshiaki. He first defeated the enemies of the Shogun and then wrested power from the Shôgunate for himself. Nobunaga's unification efforts were cut short by his assassination in 1582 by Akechi Mitsuhide. One of Nobunaga's generals, Toyotomi Hideyoshi took up the reins and continued with the unification. Tokugawa Ieyasu completed the final unification of Japan in 1615 with the summer campaign against Osaka castle.

The Momoyama period marks a major turning point in the history and development of Japanese swords. The end of the long period of civil wars also brought about the end of the need for vast quantities of mass-produced, low quality swords. There was a marked return to the development of artistic blades of beauty and strength reminiscent of the masterpieces of the Kamakura and Nanbokucho periods.

Along with the decrease in the required number of swords, the general style of fighting also changed. Gone were the mounted Samurai with their long *tachi* slung from the waist. Massive armies of Samurai fighting on foot were the norm, and these warriors wore their swords thrust edge upward through their sash. Accordingly, the longer,



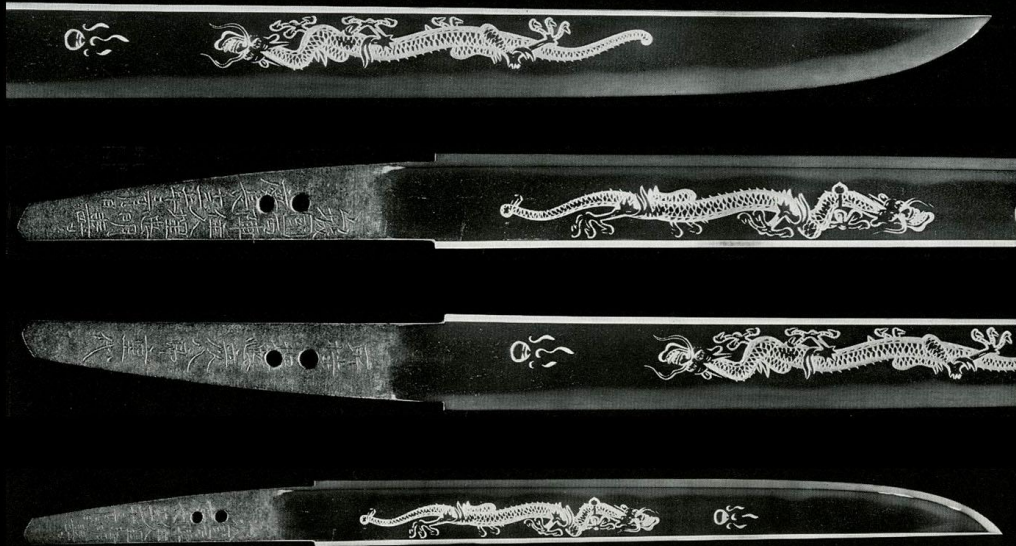
older *tachi* were shortened to accommodate this new style of wear. As the *daisho* of two swords became the style, the *wakizashi* pretty much replaced the *tantô* as the second sword of this daisho. Thus, the need for *tantô* greatly diminished and high-ranking Samurai probably used them primarily for wear around the home. The many existing high quality *tantô* from earlier periods filled this need and the production of new *tantô* was a low priority for sword smiths.

Another important social change occurring around this time was the shift of sword production from areas where quality ore was available to the castle towns that developed throughout the country. Thus, the five Koto schools died out or were diluted with smiths moving to the new economic centers of the Castle towns to do their production. *Tantô* were produced in limited numbers and some very skilled smiths ushered in the Shintô era of sword making. One of the most famous was Umetada Myoju (埋忠明寿) who is considered to be the founder of the Shintô sword making tradition.

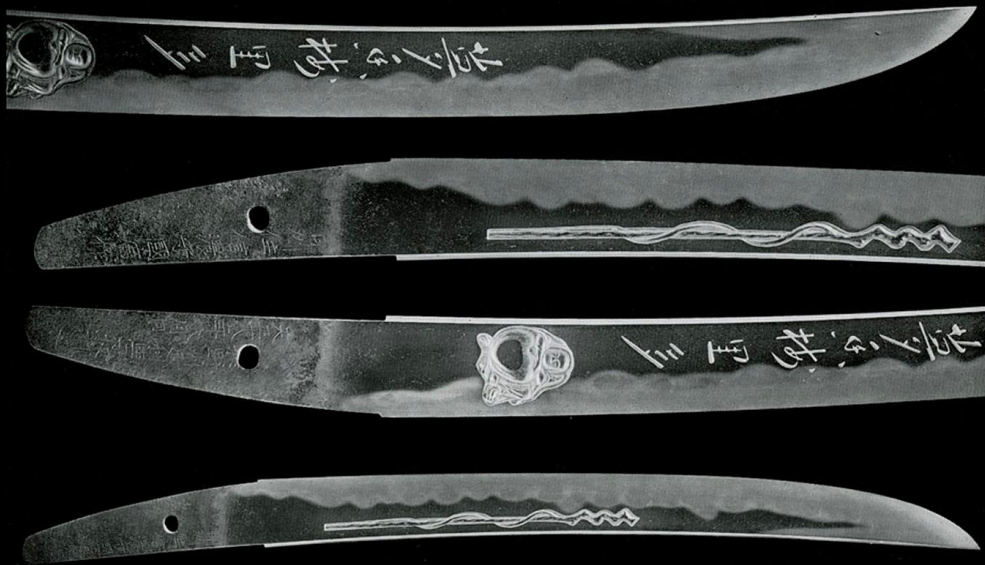
Some of the leading *ko-wakizashi* and *tanto* smiths of the Momoyama period:

1. *Hira-zukuri ko-wakizashi* and *tantô* with a wide *mihaba* and *saki-zori*.  
This type of blade was an imitation of the *sugata* of the Nanbokuchô period, but the *kasane* is thicker, the *saki-zori* is strong, and the *fukura* is much more rounded. – Umetada Myoju 埋忠明寿; the Horikawa 堀川 school (Kunihiro 国広, Kuniyasu 国安, Kunimichi 国路, and Kunisada 国貞); Etchu no Kami Masatoshi 越中守正俊; Tadayoshi I 忠吉; Yasutsugu I 康継; Higo Daijo Sadakuni 肥後大掾貞国; and Kanewaka 兼若.
2. *Katakiriha-zukuri tantô* with a *ha-watari* of about 30 cm, a wide *mihaba* and shallow *sori*. – Umetada Myoju 埋忠明寿; the Horikawa 堀川 school; Tadayoshi I 忠吉; Yasutsugu I 康継; and Higo Daijo Sadakuni 肥後大掾貞国.

UMETADA MYÔJU 埋忠明寿



KUNIHIRO 國廣



## EDO PERIOD (1644-1876)

The Edo period marks a timeline of approximately 250 years of peace under the Tokugawa Shogunate rule. The seat of government was moved to Edo (modern Tôkyo) giving this period its name. Just as the Momoyama period may be called “the age of revival” with swords harkening back to the great masterpieces of the Kamakura and Nanbokuchô eras; the Edo period marked an extended period of peace where swords were produced with hamon of a florid richness never seen before. This taste was reflected in many *tantô* also.

Also, as with the immediately prior period, *tantô* production was sparse as the demand was low. Unfortunately, the quality of swords started a steady slow decline as the period of peace reigned and military needs decreased. The desires of the rising merchant class created a need for *wakizashi* (they were not allowed to carry *katana*), thus producing an inordinate number of swords of this type.

There were exceptional smiths during this period, to be sure, but they did not exist in the great numbers that we found in the prior eras of top quality sword production.

Late in the Edo period a sort of sword revival got underway thanks to the smith, Suishinshi Masahide (水心子正秀). He advocated for a return to the quality swords of the past and was instrumental in fermenting a movement to that end. He was an outstanding smith who attracted other able smiths to his cause. Thus, in what we call the Shinshintô era of sword production we find many fine examples produced by some of the most talented smiths in history. *Tantô* are more numerous in this latter part of the Edo period and their style represents a revival of the Kamakura and Nanbokuchô eras.

Some of the leading *tanto* smiths of the Edo period:

1. Early Edo: The Yamashiro 山城 group ( Kinmichi 金道, Yoshimichi 吉道, Masatoshi 正俊, Kunikiyo 国清); the Mushashi 武蔵 group (Yasutsugu 康継, Kotetsu 虎徹); the Echizen 越前group (Yasutsugu 康継, Sadatsugu 貞継,); the Hizen 肥前 group (Tadahiro 忠広, Masahiro 正広, Tadakuni 忠国, Tadayoshi 忠吉 ); the Satsuma 薩摩 group (Masakiyo 正清, Yasuyo 安代, Masayoshi 正幸); and others.
3. Late Edo: *Hira zukuri tantô* with a *ha-watari* of 24-27 cm, proportional *mihaba*, and shallow *uchi-zori*. – The Musashi 武蔵 region smiths (Masahide 正秀, Naotane 直胤, Masayoshi 正義, Tsunatoshi 綱

俊, Munetsugu 宗次, Korekazu 是一, Nobuhide 信秀, and others); The Satsuma 薩摩 group (Motohira 元平, Masayuki 正幸, etc.).



ETCHÛ no KAMI MASATOSHI 越中守正俊



BIZEN MUNETSUGU 備前宗次



### THE MEIJI/TAISHO PERIOD (1876-1925)

In the ninth year of Meiji (1876) the government abolished the wearing of swords. This was the death knell for the true Samurai sword. Many *tantô* were produced during and after the start of the Meiji period but they are mere shadows of the great swords that came before.

*Tantô* production in the Meiji period continued the smallest of scales, primarily to create *tantô* for state ceremonies, gifts and dedications for the Imperial Household. These were blades that were never meant for public "consumption".

This was a time of the opening of Japan to the West and the demand for Japanese swords was not one of practical use. Rather it was a souvenir or oddity sought out by the Europeans. We find outstanding *koshirae* produced during these times for the export market and most of the *tantô* found in these high art fittings were little more than metal *tsunagi* used to hold the mounts together. The age of the making of great *tantô* was, for all intents and purposes, over.