



# **Artistic Inspiration and Legends of Japan as Translated into Tosogu**

Personal sketch work of tosogu smiths, fables and legends, contemporary art inspiration rendered in the medium of metal

*Jeremiah Lilly March 2023*

# Tosogu as an Art Form

- **Art defined:**

- *“Art is a diverse range of human activity, and resulting product, that involves creative or imaginative talent expressive of technical proficiency, beauty, emotional power, or conceptual ideas.” - Wikipedia*

- **When thinking of “Art” we often cast a mind to paintings (Mona Lisa) or sculpture (“The Thinker” in bronze)**



- **Tosogu is in itself a powerful expression of art**

- When considering tosogu we often consider technique of manufacture, metal substrate, or degree of mastery by the maker
  - Appreciation of works can be on a deeper level
  - Often an endeavor over weeks or months, the metal smith’s motivation to translate the picture in his mind into existence is a work of art that inspires appreciation to this day
  - Preservation of oral or written history, legends, fables, or hidden lessons often are subjects of the metal crafter
- **Rich stories rendered in iron, shakudo, shibuichi, copper and gold survive to exhibit that these works had meaning in their time, and still do**

# Personal Sketches Translated into Metal

- ▶ Sketches or practice drawings by metal smiths are a direct line to tosogu works if they survive to modern times
- ▶ Best known example is Kano Natsuo (1828-1898) whose sketch books depict many of his creations
- ▶ His surviving sketches provide a provenance for the creations that we see today



Wiki commons



# Selected Natsuo Sketch Work and Tosogu



Example provided by collection of Fred Weissberg



Examples provided via private collection. Photographs by Ted Tenold.

# Fables, History and Legends Applied to Metal

- ▶ Folklore, myths, and legends have a prominent place in Japanese culture
- ▶ Historical events are also retained through artistic expression
- ▶ Riddles and clever lessons are often depicted in Japanese mediums
- ▶ Of course, we see examples make their way into tosogu



This six-panel Japanese folding screen depicts tigers crossing a river, inspired by an ancient Chinese legend: if a mother tiger gives birth to three cubs, it was believed that one is always a leopard (hyō).

She has to be careful when crossing a river not to leave the ferocious hyō alone with the other cubs. Okyo was the most influential Japanese painter of his generation, and it is likely that he was assisted by his pupils, including his leading pupil Gen Ki.

Tigers Crossing a River

Maruyama Okyo  
1733-1795



Furukawa Harumitsu

Yahoo Auctions



# Fables, History and Legends Applied to Metal



Utagawa Kuniyoshi  
(1797-1861)  
Ataka Barrier in Kaga  
Province  
Benkei Strikes  
Yoshitsune, 1856



Isshin-Masatatsu  
1814-1882

private collection



Private  
collection

Hamano Noriyuki  
1736-1787

Hamano Naoyuki  
1754-1827

Tomioka Tessai  
1837 - 1924

Fukurokuju: He carries a wooden staff with a long scroll tied to it. While some say the staff contains magical writings of scripture, others claim that it is a book of fate that lists the lifespan of every person who will ever live.



# Fables, History and Legends Applied to Metal



"Iris at Yatsuhashi" by Ogata Korin (1658-1716)



Eight Bridges Motif - Higo Iron Tsuba

Inspired by an episode in [\*The Tales of Ise\*](#), where the unnamed protagonist of the story (most likely [\*Ariwara no Narihira\*](#)) encounters the flowers near a rustic eight-plank bridge over a river. He was inspired to compose a romantic poem, a form of [\*acrostic\*](#) where the first syllable of each line spells out the Japanese word for iris.

‘Thinking of my wife [in the capital] accustomed to wearing Chinese robes, I have come so far away on this trip.’

- *Wikipedia*

# Contemporary Art Influences

- ▶ Japan has always featured a body of rich artistic works and birthed many famous artists
- ▶ Contemporary artists and their works overlapped tosogu makers as we would expect
- ▶ As of late, I have been drawn to the idea that artwork of the era was perhaps seen, and then emulated by metal smiths
  - ▶ Only way for certain is a written record
  - ▶ Common work styles (Kano art school, others) can often accentuate similar style
  - ▶ We can speculate and wonder (fun!)





# Hanabusa Itcho and Yokoya Somin - Shishi

Hanabusa Itcho Kyoto and Tokyo  
~1709



Yokoya Somin



Green line = artist life

Red line = metal smith life



= artwork dated time when known

Hanabusa Itcho 1652-1724



Yokoya Somin 1670-1733

Courtesy of George M

# Maruyama Okyo and Hamano Naoyuki - Ghost

Maruyama Ōkyo  
Ghost of Oyuki ~1750



According to an inscription on the painting, Okyo had a mistress in the Tominaga Geisha house. She died young and Okyo mourned her death. One night her spirit came to him in a dream. Unable to get her image out of his head, he painted this portrait. This is one of the earliest paintings of a yūrei with the basic late-Edo period ghost characteristics:  
disheveled hair, white kimono, limp hands, nearly transparent, lack of lower body (*Wikipedia*)

Hamano Naoyuki



Noted theme is "Willow Ghost"  
Collection of Bob M NMB

Maruyama Okyo 1733-1795



Hamano Naoyuki 1754-1827



# Katsushika Hokusai and Hamano Naoyuki – Collecting Rock Tripe

Katsushika Hokusai – 'Gathering Rock Tripe' ~1812



Katsushika Hokusai 1760-1849

Hamano Naoyuki



Private collection



Hamano Naoyuki 1754-1827



# Toda Tadanaka (1761-1823)

## Nanpin school and Kano Natsuo - Deer



Deer under Peach and Pine, Symbols of Longevity, by Toda Tadanaka, 1801

Set of works by Kano Natsuo



Discord group and Google