

Kano Natsuo

Kano Natsuo (加納夏雄) (1828-98), an engraver active during the *Bakumatsu* (1853-68) and Meiji (1868-1912) periods, is one of the most influential and renowned craftsmen in Japan. One of his biggest achievements was being appointed as an Imperial Households Artist; and he took on a professorship at the Tokyo Fine Arts School (now Tokyo University of the Arts) in his later life. Liang Yi Museum houses five *kiseru* (smoking pipe) created by Kano Natsuo.

Biography

Born in Kyoto in 1828, Kano Natsuo originally went by the name Fushimi Jisaburo (伏見治三郎). He was adopted by sword dealer Kano Jisuke (加納治助) at the age of seven and took his last name. He first started his training in metalwork by apprenticing with Okumura Shohachi (奥村庄八)¹. A few years later, in 1840, Kano Natsuo learnt from Ikeda Takatoshi (池田孝寿) from the Ōtsuki school, one of the most reputable schools in Kyoto during the late Edo period, and went by the name Toshiaki (寿朗) around this time in his career. Meanwhile, he also took painting classes from Nakajima Raisho (中島来章) as well as classical Chinese lessons from Tanimori Tanematsu (谷森種松), laying a solid foundation for his professional skills and aesthetic taste.

At 19 years old in 1846, Kano Natsuo became independent and opened his own studio in Kyoto. His signature remained Toshiaki at the beginning, but later changed it to Natsuo. Since military power was centralised in Edo (now Tokyo) instead of Kyoto where the emperor resided, there was comparatively less demand for swords and related accessories in Kyoto. Kano Natsuo moved to Edo in 1854 to seek more opportunities and a larger market.² His profile had gradually risen to a point in which Emperor Meiji commissioned him to carve the models for the new Japanese currency³ in 1869.

When the *Haitō* Edict (also known as ‘Sword Abolishment Edict’) was issued by the Meiji government in 1876, artisans like Kano Natsuo who previously produced sword accoutrements transferred their sword-making skills to the production of daily necessities, for example *tabakobon* (tobacco tray), *kiseru*, *netsuke* and vase. Kano Natsuo participated in the National Industrial Exhibition twice to present his works – a sword guard with carp design in 1881 and a vase decorated with a hundred cranes in 1890. In the same year he exhibited the vase at the National Industrial Exhibition, and was appointed an Imperial Households Artists (帝室技芸員, later renamed as ‘Living National Treasure’ 人間国宝)⁴, to create works of art for the Tokyo Imperial Palace and other imperial residences. Moreover, he also became a professor at the Tokyo Fine Arts School in the same year and taught Tsukada Shukyo (塚田秀鏡, 1848-1918) and Kagawa Katsuhiko (香川勝広, 1853-1917)⁵ who later themselves became famous artisans. One day before his death in 1898 at the age of 71, Kano Natsuo received the Order of merit of the sixth grade (勲六等)⁶.

¹ Sesko 2012, p. 268.

² 村田理如 2017, p. 42.

³ 村田理如 2017, p. 48.

⁴ Sesko 2012, p. 269.

⁵ 村田理如 2017, p. 49.

⁶ Sesko 2012, p. 269.

In the Collection

Inscriptions are always the biggest clue to identify an artist's work. Kano Natsuo's works are inscribed with his name 'Natsuo', however, there are different variations of his signature. Among the five *kiseru* made by Kano Natsuo in the Liang Yi collection, two styles of inscription are found. For example, LYMP-028 (fig. 1) is inscribed with '夏雄', the *kanji* (Han characters) of Natsuo (fig. 2); and the inscription of another *kiseru* LYMP-080 (fig.3) uses hiragana and katakana syllables of Natsuo in a cursive manner, written as 'なつを' (fig. 4). Sometimes, he would use 'なつを' instead of 'なつを'. The differences in styles of inscription reflect the punctiliousness of Kano Natsuo as a craftsman who would strike for the greatest harmony in every detail on his finished work.



Figure 1. *Rau-Kiseru*, Meiji period (1868-1912), Materials: spotted bamboo, iron and gold, Length 20cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.

Kano Natsuo 加納夏雄



Figure 2. Kano Natsuo's signature in *kanji*



Figure 3. *Rau-Kiseru*, Meiji period, Materials: silver and *shibuichi*, Length 20.9cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.



Figure 4. Kano Natsuo's signature in hiragana and katakana syllables.

The reign of the Tokugawa clan brought about a period of prosperity and peace, causing a decline in the manufacture of sword blades by the end of the 17th century. According to *Metal Plating and Patination: Cultural, technical and historical developments* (2013), 'people had become fashion conscious, and the demand for decorative sword mountings increased'. Affluent samurai and merchants who were entitled to wear a short sword started to look for innovative designs for their sword mountings. As a result, many independent commercial craftsmen known as *machibori* artists, as opposed to *iebori* artists, came into being⁷. Generally speaking, *machibori* artists had less restrictions in terms of themes and materials than *iebori* artists worked for the *bakufu*⁸ who had the responsibility to maintain the consistency of style and keep up the tradition.

Kano Natsuo was categorised as one of *machibori* artists and is regarded as 'the last great exponent of the *machibori* style'⁹. Therefore, not only did he make good and bold use of different materials, he also extensively applied alloy such as *shakudo* (an alloy of copper and gold) and *shibuichi* (another alloy made from one part silver and four parts copper) in his works. Made of bamboo, silver, gilt, *shibuichi* and gold, LYMP-034 (fig. 5) is one example. While the stem is made entirely of bamboo, the shank and the mouthpiece are made of *shibuichi*. The sombre colour of *shibuichi* makes it an ideal ground for highlighting the gold-painted frog and dragonfly. Applying a similar approach, the golden dragonfly on LYMF-121 (fig. 6) stands out on the charcoal grey background.

However, the composition of LYMP-088 (fig. 7) is the complete opposite. Made of darkish bamboo and gold, the strong contrast between the two colours exhibits a sense of elegance and luxurious. This *kiseru* is subtly decorated with a butterfly on the shank (fig. 8) and two insects on the mouthpiece (fig. 9). Kano Natsuo used *katakiri-bori* - a chiselling technique to imitate the calligraphic brushstrokes and popularised by *machibori* artists - to cut away the ground to form the outline of the motifs. Moreover, lines of varying depth and thickness are engraved to make the insects look more vivid and vigorous.

⁷ Le-Niece and Craddock 1993, p. 99.

⁸ Sesko 2014, p. 131.

⁹ Sato 1983, p. 166.



Figure 5. *Rau-Kiseru*, Meiji period, Materials: bamboo, silver, gilt and *shibuichi*, Length 22.7cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection



Figure 6. *Rau-Kiseru*, Late Edo to early Meiji period, Materials: silver, *shibuichi*, *shakudō* and gilt, Length 23.6cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.



Figure 7. *Rau-Kiseru*, Late Edo to early Meiji period, Materials: gold and bamboo, Length 21.2cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.



Figure 8. Butterfly decorated on the shank



Figure 9. Two insects decorated on the mouthpiece

Conclusion

Although Japan was experiencing internal challenges and external pressure during the late Edo to early Meiji period, many great artisans still got their chance to be seen and left the world with their outstanding works. Among them all, Kano Natsuo has been considered one of the best engravers and metalworkers. Not only did he create numerous works of arts, he also made great efforts in training his students as well as to preserve the traditional craftsmanship. As Shinkichi Hara wrote in *Die Meister der Japanischen Schwertzieraten (The Masters of Japanese Sword Fittings)* (1931), Kano Natsuo is ‘the last famous master of sword fittings who had transmitted this art from the old to the new Japan and saved it from Europeanisation’¹⁰.

Bibliography

Brockbank, Darcy. Nihonto Masterwork. Accessed Mar 2022.

<https://yuhindo.com/kano-natsuo/>

Hall-Whitney, John. ‘Terms and Concepts in Japanese Medieval History: An Inquiry into the Problems of Translation.’ *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, Winter: 1-32. 1983.

Le-Niece, Susan, and Paul Craddock. *Metal Plating and Patination: Cultural, technical and historical developments*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1993.

Sato, Kanzan. *The Japanese Sword*. Kodansha International, 1983.

Sesko, Markus. *Japanese Toso-Kinko Schools*. Lulu Com, 2012.

Sesko, Markus. *Kano Natsuo: His Life, His Aart and His Sketchbooks*. Lulu Enterprises, Inc, 2013.

Sesko, Markus. *Encyclopedia of Japanese Swords*. Lulu Enterprises, Inc, 2014.

村田理如（2017）。明治工芸入門。東京：古美術宝満堂。

¹⁰ Sesko 2013, p. 268.