

TSUBA. The Mark of the Knights of Japan

The *Tsuba* Collection at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum



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**BILBOKO ARTE
EDERREN MUSEOA
MUSEO DE BELLAS
ARTES DE BILBAO**

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Japanese knights and their world

C*husei*, as the Japanese Middle Ages are known, occurred between the 12th and the 16th centuries, covering the Kamakura (1185-1333) and Muromachi (1333-1573) periods. Part of the historiography stresses the fact that the mediaeval age, which coincides with the development of the feudal system, lasted longer, and postpones the beginning of the Modern Age to the 17th century. According to this view, the term mediaeval would also apply to the Momoyama period (1573-1615), and would be defined as the late feudal period. This clearly implies the existence of an earlier period called the early feudal period, falling into three stages: Kamakura, Nambokucho, in the first part of the Muromachi period (1336-1392) and Muromachi¹.

This is the time when what some authors call the “*samurai* culture”² flourished. The Gempei civil war from 1180 to 1185 marks the transition from a period of relative calm in earlier times to the seemingly interminable age of strife and conflict that was to follow. Most of this long period (early feudal period: 1185-1573) was marked by pessimism and often desperation, as the country became the setting for rivalries between feudal lords, who fought each other for land and power. With the *samurai*, the military class dominated this early feudal period, fighting ceaselessly to protect huge domains of territory. Religion also underwent profound

1 P. Muñoz Cascajón in García Vega... [et al.] 1999, vol. 2 (Japón), p. 119.

2 Mason 1993, p. 147.

change at this time, as the lower classes accepted the Buddhist sects of the Pure Earth (*Jodo*, *Jodo-shin* and *Ji*); the Buddhist *zen* sect also arrived in Japan and found widespread acceptance amongst the military classes.

Fierce feuds between the Taira and the Minamoto clans ended with the definitive triumph of Minamoto Yoritomo (1147-1199) over his enemies. Yoritomo's victory marked a new age in the history of Japan, as he established the headquarters of a military dictatorship (*bakufu*) in Kamakura, which he headed as the first *shogun* or dictator-general. In theory, the military movement was the Emperor's official army, but the *shogun* was in fact the supreme head, with the Emperor and the court following his orders. This was the beginning of the feudal period, which marks the Middle Ages in Japan. Kyoto, a peaceful city and the art capital of Japan, residence of the imperial court, increasingly sophisticated in cultural terms, enjoyed a sort of splendid isolation. On the other side was Kamakura, the seat of military power, home of Minamoto Yoritomo and his military power.

Unable to maintain their father's hegemony, Minamoto Yoritomo's sons were both murdered in the early 13th century. There followed a new period of turbulence and uncertainty, during which the Mongols attempted to invade the Japanese isles, but when all seemed lost, a "wind of the gods" (*kamikaze*) sank the enemy fleet. This confirmed the widespread belief that the country was invincible because the gods were on its side, and from then on the national spirit of Shintoism once again became remarkably popular.

The spirit of the Japanese *samurai*

The climate of war in this phase of the Middle Ages in Japan to a great extent accounts for the emergence of the *samurai* [fig. 1] movement with all its mystical power. The *samurai* is the prototype of the Japanese military knight, who embodies all the qualities of the climate that produced him. Literally, *samurai* means "one who is at the service of another". He also went by the name of *bushi*, a military person. In general, the word *samurai* was used to designate the select warriors of pre-modern Japan, who emerged in the country's most populated provinces in the early 10th century, and who evolved into a class that governed the country from the 12th century until the Restoration of the Emperor Meiji in 1868. The main reason for the emergence of the *samurai* was the collapse of central government in Kyoto, controlled by the courtiers in the Emperor's service, and the need to maintain suitable administration in the provinces. The *samurai* were very active as second-order officials, delegates in charge of provincial government, and also as functionaries in the *shoen*, the courtiers' private estates, and in religious institutions.

The first *bushidan*, or warrior groups, were clan-based organizations, military units formed by men from their family ranks. But before the 11th century, the *bushidan* had evolved into more permanent units held together by links between the chiefs and warrior vassals, not necessarily linked by family ties, which remained over generations between lords and subjects. The reins of the *samurai* class were held mostly by descendants of the Imperial family.

In a society similar to feudal Europe, the peasants who cultivated the land had to pay tithes to the *samurai*, who were almost like the heads of their family clans. The *samurai* thus became increasingly powerful, with the peasants in their areas of influence at their service. This situation lasted, in the midst of countless civil feuds, for a remarkably long time, until a new class emerged within the *samurai* in the early 16th century, the *daimyo*, who dominated enormous areas of Japan, and who fought amongst themselves to achieve the unification of the whole country under a single command³. Japan was actually unified under the authority of

3 For an exhaustive description of this point, see Shimizu 1988.



1. Jidama (?)
The Legend of Raikō the Hero, 1851
 Ink on paper, 28.2 x 636.6 cm (*emaki*)
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 Inv. no. 82/740
 Detail

several *daimyo*, including Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu. In the late 16th century, the *samurai* were obliged to live in castle-homes, and the peasants were prohibited from settling outside their territory.

In the Tokugawa period (1603-1867) peace was finally established throughout the country. But by then it seemed that the *samurai* were facing their end as a class, under the absolute authority of the *shogun*. As a relatively idealistic reaction, the *Bushido*, or code of the military, was composed to establish the way of thinking and living of the Japanese *samurai*⁴.

The Japanese *Bushido*

Bushido means “the way of the *samurai*”. It is a code of honour, which ruled the conduct of every *samurai* knight through his life. The main virtues or qualities required from a *samurai* knight were loyalty, courage, truthfulness, sincerity and a willingness to die to safeguard honour. For most Japanese, *Bushido* became a guiding principle and a moral education, substituting other religious principles and eventually becoming part of the “soul of Japan”⁵.

Professor Nitobe Inazo was the first to publish the Japanese *Bushido* for a Western audience in the early 20th century⁶. A list of chapter titles of his book gives us a good idea of the content of this code, the soul of all *samurai*:

4 In 1941 General Millán Astray translated the book *El Bushido. El alma del Japón* (Nitobe, 1941) into Spanish, from the French.

5 Nitobe 1969, p. XI.

6 Ibid, p. VII and VIII.

Bushido, an ethical system.

Origins of *Bushido*.

Rectitude or justice.

Courage, the spirit of bravery and the ability to bear with obstacles and setbacks.

Benevolence, feeling in the presence of pain.

Education.

Truthfulness and sincerity.

Honour.

The duty to be loyal.

Education and training of a samurai.

Self-command

The institution of suicide and reparation.

The sword, the soul of the samurai.

The preparation and place of woman.

The influence of *Bushido*.

Does *Bushido* live on?

The future of *Bushido*⁷.

These chapter headings make it clear that *Bushido* is a genuine code of conduct affecting anyone who follows it faithfully and constantly. There is no doubt that that is exactly what the *samurai* did. Even Japanese who did not belong to the *samurai* class found this way of life or conduct hugely influential. I believe *Bushido* actually transcended class barriers to leave a peculiar mark on virtually all Japanese people. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that *Bushido* is a manifestation of the Japanese being, one that may have gelled into a code of conduct at a particular point in time but which in many ways was in fact a faithful reflection of their age-long idiosyncrasies. St. Francis Xavier, who found some rather special qualities in the Japanese that he hadn't come across in other nations he had evangelized, bears witness to this point. The qualities he found in the 16th century Japanese people with whom he came into personal contact and which he described in his *Carta Magna* on Japan (5 November 1549), were the same as the ones set down in *Bushido* a long time after⁸.

The Japanese sword

To begin with, it's worth taking a good look at the sword, possibly the most significant symbol of the knightly spirit in Japan. From ancient times, the sword had been closely linked to the military classes, the *samurai* in particular [fig. 2]. Furthermore, it is a regular feature of Japanese mythology, the most famous allusion being the story of how the goddess Sun, Amaterasu Oomikami, gave a sword to her grandson, Nishi-no-Mikoto, one of the three gifts she presented him with: *Yata-no-Kagami* (the sacred mirror), *Murakumo-no-Tsurugi* (the sacred sword) and *Yasakani-no-Magatana* (the sacred jewel). These three treasures have been passed down from Emperor to Emperor to the present day⁹.

7 Ibid, p. 134.

8 Moreno 1952, pp. 287-290.

9 For a more extensive study of the subject, see Picken 1980. And, in particular, Obayashi 1977.



2. *Suzuribako* (writing box) with Japanese armour
Late 19th century-early 20th century
Lacquered wood, 4.3 x 16.9 x 21.1 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 82/1022

Swords have been made in Japan since the remotest times, a fact confirmed by the unearthed sepulchres of the great lords and by the *haniwa* figures representing soldiers with swords found in the ancient tombs of the Kofun period (c. 250-522). They were similar in shape to the European or Egyptian swords of the time. But the finest swords were made in the Kamakura period (1185-1333). As Japanologist G. Sanson says:

The technical process produced swords of such strength and blade that Japanese swords of the 13th century, and even earlier, far surpassed the quality of swords in other parts of the world¹⁰.

Masamune Nyudo, Japan's greatest ever sword-maker, lived in the Kamakura period. Making swords was one of the noblest trades in Japan, and the mysteries of the technique were passed on from father to son. The actual creation of a sword had something of a sacred rite about it, and before physically making one the artist had to go through a sort of purification rite. The sword-making artist had to be irreproachable; he had to put his whole soul into his work, and it was thought that, if during the process of making a sword he harboured evil thoughts, the blade of the sword would never be of use to the man who wielded it. So the sword was a symbol of purity and justice. In the Middle Ages, nobody of a rank lower than the *samurai* could wear a sword: it was the sign of knighthood and nobility.

The *katana*, or Japanese sword [fig. 3], comes in a range of sizes, although occasionally it is not much more than 30 cm long: this is the sword used in *seppuku* or *harakiri*. The longest sword is the *tachi*, usually 60 cm long but sometimes up to 90. In feudal times, ladies had recourse to a small dagger called the *kaiken*.

For a Japanese in mediaeval times, the sword was the most revered object, and for a *samurai* to promise something on his sword signified an oath that only death could break. Essential for conquering enemies, the sword was also an emblem of justice and a means of self-command. Swords were amongst the most valuable objects exported from Japan to China and other countries in the 14th and 15th centuries, Japanese swords being held in high esteem by knights throughout the Far East.

¹⁰ Quoted by Bush 1965, pp. 345-346.

¹¹ Nitobe 1969, p. 134.



3. Japanese sword

In the *Bushido* moral code, the sword is a symbol of power and courage and the *samurai* learnt to handle it properly from an early age. A particularly important moment in the young *samurai* knight's life came at the age of five, when, dressed in the warrior's robes of the *samurai*, he was initiated into the rights of the military profession, with a real sword replacing the toy sword he had possessed until then. After this first ceremony of the *adoptio per arma*, he could not leave his father's house without the insignias of his status, although a gilded wooden dagger replaced the sword. A few years later, the lad would wear the real thing, banging it with pieces of wood and stone. At 15 he could handle his sword freely. The fact of being in possession of that dangerous instrument gave him a sense of self-esteem and responsibility: what as fixed to his belt was a symbol of what he had fixed in his heart, a sense of loyalty and honour. The two swords, the long (*katana*) and the short (*wakizashi*), were always with him. At home they were given pride of place in his room; at night they rested near his pillow. The swords were the *samurai's* closest companions.

So, from the earliest years of the *samurai*, the revered object became his constant, trusted companion. That is why in Japan the sword came to be seen as a cult object. The artists that made them prepared themselves for their work with prayer and a rite of purification:

"The craftsman entrusted his soul and his spirit to the forge and the steel"¹¹, says Nitobe Inazo. The result was more than a work of art or refined technique: it was a piece of his soul

The *tsuba* on the Japanese sword

The *tsuba* is the hand-guard, the part closest to the sword-handle, separating it from the blade; it is the "defence placed on swords and cold steel next the handle"¹². It is the most decorated part of the Japanese sword, usually bearing engravings of the clan coats of arms or crests, and occasionally purely ornamental motifs that often elevate the *tsuba* to the condition of genuine works of art.

Although *tsuba* were usually rounded, there were other varieties, especially the ones made from the 18th century onwards. The form known as *aoitsuba* was the most frequent: this had a rounded surface, with piercing on both sides of the central orifice that received the blade of the sword. The surface was usually highly polished, so much so as to resemble a precious stone, an effect known as *ishime*. Other *tsuba* surfaces were hammer engraved (*tsuchime*); still others were completely burnished, to serve as the backdrop for other metal inlays (*zogan*). Particularly in the oldest *tsuba*, decoration was metal fretwork (*sukashibori*), displaying perhaps animal or tree or flower shapes in a highly skilled piece of work. Decorative forms in *tsuba* evidence different schools and the styles of the specific artists that made them. Although originally made in the Japanese Middle Ages, the most artistically valuable *tsuba* were produced between the 17th and the 19th centuries¹³.

¹² See *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*, under "guarnición".

¹³ Japan : an illustrated encyclopedia... 1993, p. 1.627.

In some private notes on the Bilbao Fine Arts museum collection of Japanese art, professor Federico Torralba wrote:

The crafting of “*tsuba*” is a very Japanese art, in which many artists in metal became “*kinko*”, or specialists: royal gold and silversmiths specializing in delicate metalwork who, proud of their skills, often signed their work. Other times the artists were also amateurs, incapable of matching the quality of the great masters. Signed and documented “*tsuba*” from the Kamakura period onward have been preserved, and even if the majority of the pieces in today’s collections are from the 18th and 19th centuries, or even the 20th century, the “*tsuba*” has become, thanks to the collectors, a work of art¹⁴.

Decorative themes for *tsuba* were many and varied, as were the types of more or less pierced or openwork metal. Metals of all kinds were pierced using diverse forms of hammering. Motifs had symbolic value, often associated with the owner of the sword for which the *tsuba* was made, like the *mon*, or family crest. Christian *samurai* tended to use Christian symbols to demonstrate their faith: the cross was the most usual choice¹⁵.

Different alloys of the metals used for the *tsuba* often produced a variety of tones, giving them a particularly distinctive attractiveness:

Bronze, steel, copper, silver and gold were the metals most used, although never in a pure state, with different alloys being preferred: “*shakudo*”, copper and gold, with tones varying between velvety blue and velvety black; “*shibuichi*”, copper and silver, giving grey tones, and yellow-tinged “*sentoku*”, a mixture of copper, zinc and brass¹⁶.

The collection of Oriental art at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, known as the Palacio Collection, after the donor, has a superb selection of 37 *tsuba*, perhaps the most complete of any in Spain and certainly one of the best in Europe. The only collection I know comparable to the Bilbao collection is the one in Geneva, Switzerland, in the Baur Collection, which also possesses a series of richly decorated *tsuba* with an extraordinary variety of motifs¹⁷.

In one of his works, professor Luis Caeiro, a specialist in all aspects of the world of Japanese knights, gives a detailed description of the parts of the *tsuba*:

The constituent elements of this already small part are perfectly distinguishable. “*Mimi*”: edge. “*Nakago hitsu ana*”: central orifice. “*Kogai hitsu ana*”: a trefoiled orifice for the small ‘*kogai*’ knife. “*Kozuka hitsu ana*”: semicircular orifice for the small “*kozuka*” knife. On the edges of these orifices, two metal pieces, called “*seki gama*”, are fitted to provide extra support. “*Ji*”: surface between the central orifice, “*nagako hitsu ana*”, and “*mimi*”, the edge¹⁸.

What follows is a review of all the *tsuba* in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum Collection, starting with the oldest, from the 17th century, to the ones from the 19th century¹⁹.

14 Torralba 1985.

15 *Tsuba* with Christian motifs are to be found in the collections of the Museum of the 26 Holy Martyrs of Nagasaki and at the Sophia University, Tokyo. All *tsuba* in these collections must have been made in the late 16th or early 17th century, because after Hideyoshi issued an edict prohibiting Christianity in 1614, Christian *samurai* stopped using or hid the Christian symbols in their sword handles.

16 Bilbao 1998, p. 42.

17 Dunand 1977, pp. 83-95.

18 Caeiro 1992, pp. 505-506.

19 A revised edition of this inventory of the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum *tsuba* collection was published recently in the catalogue for *Arte japonés y japonismo. Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao* exhibition held at the museum from 10 June to 15 September 2014. See Bilbao 2014, pp. 148-185. [Editor’s Note]

17th century *tsuba*



Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/994). An iron *tsuba*, 7 cm in diameter. Decoration is by piercing and shows two cranes, with body and wings more stylized, less realistic than the heads, which face each other. Being the symbol of longevity, the crane is frequently depicted in Japanese art. The abstract sense of Japanese art comes through in this *tsuba*, where form is barely insinuated, forcing a high decorative sense to the maximum. This is surely the representation of a *mon*, or family crest. According to professor Torralba, it is the Hirohashi coat of arms, and the crest of the noble Takeya, Toyama and Toyooka clans²⁰.

²⁰ Torralba 1985.



Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/1035). Another iron *tsuba*, 9 cm in diameter. Once again, the decoration is pierced radially, with an abstract-looking chrysanthemum flower. When shown with sixteen petals, the chrysanthemum symbolized the Imperial House of Japan. Otherwise it was a symbol of serenity. The Emperor Gotoba (1185-1198), a great admirer of this flower, had it reproduced on his *kimono*, on his litters, and even on his swords. Logically, the chrysanthemum was adopted as the symbol of the imperial family and its coat of arms²¹. The same abstract tendency shown on 17th-century *tsuba* appears in this example, as a typically Japanese abstract form of expression. Gold-ornamented sea waves enliven the edges.

²¹ Okada 1941, p. 63.



Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/1010). Roughly the same size as the previous two, this iron *tsuba* with gold embellishments is 8 cm in diameter. It is a work of no little interest, the bamboo and pine symbols suggesting the artist wished to represent the decorations typical of *Oshogatsu*, the New Year. Despite not continuing the abstract tendency in Japanese art found in the previous two *tsuba*, the adornments are insinuated in an harmonious distribution.



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Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/1050). This iron *tsuba* has an unusual form: the corners are folded back, turning the quadrilateral into an octagonal shape measuring 8.7 x 8.3 cm. On the reverse is a dragon flying through the clouds in relief, with a gold and silver foxglove tree (pawlonia tomentosa) flower on the upper part. This flower (*kiri* in Japanese) was taken as a sign of prosperity and good omens for many centuries, so much so that flower and petals were chosen, together with the chrysanthemum, for the imperial coat of arms. In the Muromachi period (1333-1573), the arms with the pawlonia were granted by the Emperor to the Ashikaga family, the clan of the *shogun*, who in turn awarded it as a sign of honour to the nobles who distinguished themselves by their courage in battle. Later, this *mon* was used by the Oda and Toyotomi clans, particularly by Toyotomi Hideyoshi²². In view of the importance of this noble coat of arms, this *tsuba* may well have belonged to some noble Japanese family.

²² Ibid., pp. 63-64.



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Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/1003). Made of brass, copper and iron, this almost square *tsuba* with slightly rounded corners measuring 7.4 x 7 cm may be from the late 17th century or early 18th century. Both reverse and obverse bear rather simplified adornments, with almost parallel and concentric lines. It belongs to a type of decorative design known as the "centipede".



Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/988). Iron *tsuba* 8.7 cm in diameter, which, most unusually, has several *mon* possibly representing the unification of various clans, or simply used as decorative elements with no further significance. From the style, it may be the work of one Kaga Yoshiro, from the province of Kaga, and is characteristic of the *mon-zukashi* type²³.

23 Torralba 1985.



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Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/997). Circular iron *tsuba* measuring 7.3 cm in diameter, with rippling at the edges. Gilt plant forms are used as embellishments. It has several orifices, giving it an openwork, weightless look. Probably from the late 17th or early 18th century.

18th century *tsuba*



Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/993). This oval-shaped iron *tsuba* (8.6 x 8 cm) with decoration in gold, silver and copper is one of the most elaborate in the collection. A mythical story is presented in relief on both sides, involving a beautiful landscape in the moonlight, against which some mythical beings known as *tengu*, easily identifiable by their huge noses and red wings, are seen dressed as *samurai*, and are watched by another character (Minamoto Yoshitsune) who flies above in the upper part. On both sides the landscape is depicted with amazing delicacy; the plants, done in brighter colours, shine out in the muted, ubiquitous moonlit atmosphere. It is impossible to describe more in such a small space so decoratively.



Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/989). Iron *tsuba* measuring 7.5 cm in diameter, with gold decorations on both sides showing cherry-tree flowers, butterflies and branches of shrubs and plants that cover the entire surface. The decoration manages to be at once sober and elegant.



Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/1089). An almost circular iron *tsuba* measuring 8.7 x 8.5 cm in diameter with decorations in gold and other metal alloys. Some of the plant motifs have butterfly-like forms. A rim in relief gives the tsuba a plate-like aspect.



Masahisa (inv. no. 82/1002). This 7.2 cm-diameter iron *tsuba* bears the name of the artist who made it: "Masahisa, living in Musashi". As time went on, artworks and *tsuba* alike were signed and identified. This particular example has gold decoration on the iron, re-presenting crisscrossing eggplants. The decoration reaches out to the slightly wavy forms at the edge and the holes in the surface.



Shigenobu (inv. no. 82/996). The decoration on some *tsuba* is also done in irregular openwork piercing, this being one of them. Made in iron, the adornments in gold, copper and other metals portray a small lizard, plants and mushrooms. In this completely original 7.5 x 7 cm-diameter *tsuba*, the artist has tried to emphasize the decoration using irregular openwork and deformations on the edge. It measures 7.5 x 7 cm-diameter.



Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/1071). An original iron *tsuba* measuring 8.3 cm in diameter, with just five Chinese characters on the obverse side, and a long-handled fan, a mark of authority, on the reverse. All of this is done in relief in copper and silver on the iron.



Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/1001). This 18th century *tsuba* (6.4 x 5.8 cm) is made from an alloy of several metals, the gold relief decoration portraying flowers and a butterfly. The simplicity of the decoration points to the early 18th century.



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Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/1028). From the late 18th century, this circular *tsuba* (7.9 cm in diameter) has plenty of openwork, over which are herons with branches and leaves. The lateral orifice has been plugged with a metal alloy, being a completely pierced openwork piece with the decoration placed on it. Some authors believe these more elaborate *tsuba* were produced as collectors' pieces rather than for use on swords.



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Joi (Norimoto) (inv. no. 82/400). Few *tsuba* have human figures as the basis of their decoration. This is one that does. It is almost circular (7 x 6.5 cm), done in copper and gold, with engraved figures of *zen* monks Kanzan and his companion Shin-te. A landscape is merely insinuated, with branches of trees in the upper part. The artist's signature and seal are difficult to read. From Matsumoto, Joi lived from 1701 to 1761 and worked in the Matsudaira clan. A disciple of Nara Toshinaga, Joi invented new metal alloying methods and techniques for metalwork²⁴. From the 18th or 19th century, this *tsuba* is admirable for the expression on the monk Kanzan's face, something really difficult to do well in metal. The emptiness of the landscape is a direct influence from *zen* art.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 90.



Kaneye (inv. no. 1066). A round iron *tsuba* (8.3 cm in diameter) with gold motifs. A high relief portrays a pilgrim taking a rest from his journey, in a simplified landscape with a tree. The landscape continues on the reverse, with a barely hinted-at lake, a cabin and some birds in flight. The artist's signature is clear: "Kaneye, when he lived in Fushimi, province of Yamashiro". Although Kaneye lived in the 16th and 17th centuries, his style of landscape remained in vogue until the 19th century, with the same signature being added to the works. From the style and technique, this *tsuba* would appear to be a later work.



Kunihiro (inv. no. 82/1042). This *tsuba*, in my view at least, is one of the finest in the collection: done on iron with no further metals for decoration, it is completely round (8 cm in diameter) and has pierced openwork decoration in the metal with eight very stylized pine trees. Although there is nothing else, the forms of the pines, their asymmetrical distribution over the *tsuba* surface, and the abstract sense with which they have been made gives us a typically Japanese creation. From the signature of "Kunihiro, when he lived in Musashi", we can be sure that this is a work from the early 18th century.



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Kinai (inv. no. 82/1004). The piercing or openwork is the most important feature of the decoration of this 8.2 cm-diameter *tsuba*. Made entirely from iron, the only motif is a radish with leaves. Forming a perfect circumference, plant and leaves make a particularly telling decorative detail. The signature says: "Made by Kinai, living in Echizen". Kinai indicates a group of *tsuba* artists in Fukui, province of Echizen. The first of these artists was called Ishikawa, who died in 1681, and his followers continued producing *tsuba* until 1850.

19th century *tsuba*



Yanagawa Naohara (inv. no. 82/1053). This is an entirely decorative *tsuba*, probably made for a collector rather than for use on a sword. It's made of brass and measures 5.5 x 5.4 cm. The motif is a dragon that flies around the orifices, the artist's signature being quite clear: "Yanagawa Naohara", from the 19th century. Blessed with a marvellous decorative touch, the openwork of the orifices gives the work an airy, almost lightweight feel.



Nyudo Soten (inv. no. 82/1070). Near-circular iron *tsuba* (8.5 x 8.2 cm), with gold decoration, done in quite prominent relief on both sides, showing a phoenix in flight and with a series of plant features in gold. The signature says: "Made by Nyudo Soten, when he was living in Hikone". Born in Kyoto, Nyudo Soten was a protégé of the Kawakita Clan from Hikone, where his style became very popular. He often took mythical figures as his themes for decorative purposes.



Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/1052). A pierced iron *tsuba* with a very fine decorative sense and several details in gold, featuring a large pine branch that adjusts to the circumference (diameter 8.3 cm). A symbol of longevity, the pine featured frequently in Japanese art.



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Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/1054). The originality of this *tsuba* is the way the dragon forms the almost perfect circumference (7.8 x 7.5 cm). Around the two *tsuba* orifices, the metal has been hammered perfectly, with several pierced openwork parts. There is a virtually illegible small gold seal. A frequent theme in Japanese art, although clearly imported from China, the dragon is a positive feature, being the symbol of strength and power. Used in China as a motif for more than 4,000 years, no animal has accumulated more meanings. It is one of four mythical animals, together with the qilin, the tortoise and the phoenix²⁵. This symbolic richness spilled over very early on into Japanese art and occasionally appears as decoration on *tsuba*.

²⁵ Cervera 1997, p. 66.



Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/1072). A round iron *tsuba* (diameter 7.2 cm), wavy in parts. A stylized phoenix with gold-inlay eyes is the central theme of an object that has all the hallmarks of a collector's item rather than a piece of a sword.



Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/990). An almost circular (7 x 6.5 cm) iron *tsuba* with gold adornments, showing a snail and an orchid on the obverse, and the curb or parapet of a small well for purifications on the reverse. A bamboo ladle for drawing water hangs over the parapet, a standard feature of tea-house gardens. It is a remarkable achievement to have insinuated so much with so few decorative ingredients: this is the suggestive power of Japanese art transferred to the minimal surface of a *tsuba*.



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Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/1065). We find this ability to use a limited number of features to suggest a great deal again in this iron, silver and copper *tsuba* (8 x 7.5 cm). A Chinese wise man is shown with a companion engraved on the obverse, as he plays a *sho* (bamboo flute); the two are beside a lake, next to a pine tree and branches of other plants, while a crane flies over the miniature landscape. Another miniature landscape is shown on the reverse, featuring a temple by a lake with plants done in silver and gold. The concision with which the theme is developed, often by mere insinuation, in such a small space, is a characteristic of Japanese art, beautifully resolved in this particular case.



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Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/987). This smaller oval-shaped brass *tsuba* (5.5 x 4.5 cm) with copper and gold inlays is highly original. The theme of the upper part is *zen*, the monks Kanzan and Shin-te, in a number of activities. Very popular with this Buddhist sect, the pair point up the possibility of uniting intellectual and manual work. Once again, this *tsuba* would seem to be more a collector's item than for use in a sword.



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Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/1005). Another prodigy of description in miniature: on the obverse of this *tsuba* is a dragon between waves of water and clouds. The reverse shows a seascape, with a boat floating beneath a tree that stands on a rock. Waves are insinuated to the right and seagulls fly overhead. All this on a surface measuring 7 x 6.6 cm. The suggestive capacity of Japanese art is quite admirable, more so bearing in mind the limited number of decorative features.



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Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/986). A very simple 7 x 6.5 cm slightly oval metal alloy *tsuba* with cuts at the corners forming four large lobules. The only decoration is a plant-like feature in gold.



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Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/1011). An oval-shaped iron *tsuba* (7.5 x 5.7 cm) with wavy outline. The obverse features gold chrysanthemum flowers and a butterfly in flight, all done in slight relief; the reverse has some mushrooms by a stream. Once again, the landscape is little more than hinted at.



Iwamoto Yasuhiro (inv. no. 82/991). A small (7.5 x 6.5 cm) but original *tsuba* with several human figures as decoration, including a Buddhist master surrounded by some disciples, the whole group being done in high relief. Each face wears a different expression. An extra figure appears on the reverse, next to the Tree of Illumination. Decorative features in gold surround the figures.



Kakiemon (inv. no. 82/1067). This *tsuba* is another marvel of concision: the obverse features a high relief rural landscape next to a lake up amidst the mountains; the reverse shows a fisherman in a boat on a lake, with a moonlit landscape. All of which is fitted elegantly into an 8 x 7.5 cm surface. L.R.H. Smith, former keeper of Oriental Antiques at the British Museum wrote the following about this *tsuba*:

The artists responsible for these marvellous metal miniatures transferred their talents to the production of highly decorated vases, large ornamental plaques, inlays of animals and people and many other objects for exportation to the West that Señor Palacio had the good taste not to acquire. He did, however, concentrate on the much rarer sword adornments from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. A typically elegant “tsuba” (hand guard) is shown in this figure. It is made from an alloy of copper and gold, called Shakudo, treated for a blue-black finish. On it is engraved a moonlit scene of mountains and a lake with details inlaid in small gold, silver and copper points. Only a Japanese could decorate a piece destined for a warrior with a classic scene of peace! This tsuba was made by Kajiemon, who belonged to the fifth generation of masters in the line of Umetada. It was executed in the mid-19th century²⁶.

²⁶ Smith 1985, p. 25.



Kan-ishi Nomura Kanemobu (inv. no. 82/1069). A *tsuba* in a multi-metal alloy, with gold, silver and copper (7.2 x 6.8 cm). The obverse features two Chinese wise men in high relief against a mountainous landscape; the reverse shows a landscape only. Parts of the piece are pierced, while others bear gold, silver and copper inlays. The signature says: "Kan-ishi Nomura Kanemobu, living in Hikone". Such an elaborate *tsuba*, with its very fine work in combined metals, was probably intended for a collection rather than for military use.



Koken (inv. no. 82/1026). An almost square (8.3 x 7.7 cm) brass *tsuba* with decoration in high relief: the obverse shows a monkey hanging from a tree; the tree continues on the reverse side, underneath which is a crab. The signature is "Koken". As no artist of that name was working in metals at the time, professor Torralba suggests that it may in fact refer to the painter Koken (1835-1883), whose work was very influential then, and that his signature figures on the *tsuba* because it copied one of his paintings²⁷.

27 Torralba 1985, p. 92.



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Yanagawa Mitsumasa (school of) (inv. no. 82/995). The outline of this almost circular brass *tsuba* (9 x 8.5 cm) is divided into four large lobules. Both obverse and reverse sides have decoration in relief, the obverse featuring a bird, perched on a lotus branch, watching the ripples on the lake water; on the reverse the lotus leaves fall onto the lake. Design, background colouring and the decoration combine to make this a most attractive *tsuba*.



Malachi (N° 82/992). A circular iron *tsuba* (diameter 7.5 cm), with piercing and gold maple leaves. The signature says: "Made by Malachi, living in Musashi". Although identifying the artist is by no means an easy task, the *tsuba* itself is an outstanding piece from the late 19th century.



Anonymous, Japanese (inv. no. 82/1079). A copper *tsuba* with four not very prominent lobules (8.4 x 8.2 cm) from the late 19th century. Both obverse and reverse sides feature the same open and budding peonies, and the edges are also decorated with flowers. Lacquer has been used for decoration, the colouring gold and red.

An overview of the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum collection shows that, with a few exceptions, 17th century *tsuba* feature more abstract decoration, 18th century *tsuba* are more elaborate, often bearing the names of the artists responsible, with 19th century *tsuba* becoming more refined and almost always signed. It is possible that from the 18th century on *tsuba* were made directly for collections, and not just for use on swords. What is perhaps most impressive about all of them is the capacity for concision in developing a theme in such a small space, and the genuinely abstract sense at work in the decoration most of them display. This fully appreciable decorative sense may be due to the influence of the Rimpa School of Decorative Art, which flourished in Japan in these centuries. Indeed, it is fair to say that the essential characteristics of Japanese art as a whole can be found in this collection of *tsuba*.

To end, I repeat my earlier assertion that the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum *tsuba* collection is one of the best in Europe, and I would go so far as to suggest that it is comparable to the best collections of these objets d'art in Japan itself.

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