

A Brief Introduction to Yagyū Tsuba

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Aikido is connected to the Yagyū Shinkage Ryū of swordsmanship. O-Sensei studied the Yagyū School (*Gotoha*) under Nakai Masakatsu in the early 1900's. And Aiki-ken — the Aikido method of swordsmanship — is similar to the Yagyū Shinkage Ryū of swordsmanship, especially in the methods of moving in (*irimi*) against the opponent and of moving away from the opponent's sword (*tenkan* and *tenshin*). In both schools, an opponent's sword is deflected, rather than blocked or stopped, and much of the deflection is accomplished with the movement of the whole body, not the sword alone.

There also appears to be a similarity in the philosophy of the Yagyū school and Aikido. One of the inner teachings of the Yagyū school is the Zen koan "*Katsujin-ken, satsujin-to*," which loosely translates as "The sword of life, the sword of death." As Aikido proposes harmony over violence, the Yagyū school emphasizes "the sword of life," which protects people, over "the sword of death," which takes life away. O-Sensei created a martial art of "life" and harmony and, several hundreds of years earlier, the Yagyū had proposed a martial art inclined toward "preserving" life, not ending it.

Of the many well-known Yagyū swordsmen, Yagyū Renyasai stands out as one of the most interesting figures. A genius in the martial arts from childhood, he never married and continued to polish his skill throughout his life. He was also adept in many other arts such as poetry, calligraphy, and the tea ceremony.

Yagyū Renyasai is also the creator of the Yagyū *tsuba*, or sword guard, which many experts agree to be one of the rarest and most sought-after of all Japanese sword fittings.

Renyasai designed and made guards for his own usage, and presented a few to his students and friends or to acquaintances of high standing in the feudal hierarchy, such as *daimyo* warlords. He made these guards in iron in the traditional manner of his home country of Owari, but his unique designs are said to express the inner teachings of the Yagyū School of swordsmanship. The rarity of these guards and their relationship to the ideals of Japanese swordsmanship have captured the interest and imagination of many collectors around the world.

Although the designs themselves do not express the technical intricacy or refinement of other guards, their bold, strong feeling and mysterious designs seem to express the ideals of Japanese swordsmanship. Somehow there is the hint that exploring them may lead one into the inner teachings of swordsmanship itself.



Maru-nami: *Breaking Waves Design*



Sui-getsu: *Moon Water Design*

Among the best known of Renyasai's designs are the breaking waves design (*maru-nami* and *tachi-nami*), the single bamboo design (*ippon take*), and the wooden well design (*ki-igeta*). Although we know that these designs express the inner teachings of the Yagyu School of swordsmanship, their meanings remain unclear.

Another of the most familiar designs is the water-moon design (*sui-getsu*), which most characterizes Yagyu *tsuba*. This design most likely comes from the Zen lesson of the moon reflected in water: "Which is reality — the moon in the sky or the reflection in the water?" The motif is popularly used in Zen teachings or *koan*, and it is often borrowed by great sword masters. The Yagyu *tsuba* shown above illustrates the moon hidden among the waves.

The "standing wave" and "round waves" may also be an extension of the water-moon design. The waves suggest the forceful power of Yagyu sword technique, and the way waves crash down on the surf, recede back in the ocean, and repeatedly return may provide some hint into the secret nature of Yagyu sword technique.

Water is a recurring image in Yagyu designs. Of the few Yagyu sword guards in existence, variations of the water-moon and wave guards are the most numerous.



Ki-igeta: Wooden Well Design

One of the rarest of the rare Yagyu guards is the water-well or "*igeta*" design. There are actually two types: the bamboo well and the wooden well.

This design is unique to Yagyu guards and, for the most part, the design is a complete mystery. From my own studies, I believe that it is related to Renyasai's own sword, which was named "*Kago-tsurube*" or "woven well bucket."

The name "*Kago-tsurube*" refers to an early Kabuki play. After the hero of the play has killed many of his enemies with

his sword, the comment is, "Bodies fell left and right, just as water would pour out of a 'well bucket' made like a woven basket." In my opinion, the well design is probably a subtle reference to the basket-like "well bucket."

Another well-known design is the *Sankaku-San-boshi* (or *Sansei*) or "Triangle with three stars." It is sometimes thought that the triangle represents form and that three stars represent the three basic teachings of the Yagyu School. It has also been suggested that the three stars may represent "heaven, earth, and man."



Sankaku Sansei: Triangle with three stars

Most Yagyu guards are small compared to normal-sized guards for long swords. Their rims are squared, and straight forging lines generally appear on them. Without exception, they are made of forged iron. All but a few are made in an openwork design. The metal is roughly grained but well hammered and forged. The quality and color of the metal are excellent, indicative of exceptional quality and strength. The designs seem unsophisticated compared to most other guards, yet they show an inner strength and Renyasai's bold spirit is clearly communicated through them — thus, their great attraction and interest.

Published work on the Yagyu guards is not always reliable. Although it is sometimes said that Yagyu guards are thick, some are on the thin side. Although it is sometimes said they all have straight forging marks in the rim, some do not. Also, the color and luster of the metal differs from one guard to the next. One can only study Yagyu guards by holding them in one's hands.

There are three very general categories of Yagyu guards. *First*, there are guards made by Yagyu Renyasai himself — the rarest and most difficult to find because so few were made. *Second*, there are guards made in Renyasai's lifetime (or shortly thereafter) by other guard making schools commissioned by

Renyasai or the Yagyū family. (Such schools include the Owari, Yamakichibei, Akasaka, Bushu Kotetsu, and Toda or Fukui Jirozaemon.) *Third*, there are guards manufactured much later but made in the Yagyū tradition with the Yagyū design. The first and second generation Iwata Norisuke made many Yagyū "style" guards in the late 19th century.

This last category borders on guards which, though made in the Yagyū "style" and based on Yagyū designs, are sometimes viewed as imitations or fakes. Still, some later guards may be considered Yagyū because their manufacture and design stay very close to the Yagyū tradition.



Nami-guruma: Wave Wheel. *Actually, waves moving between the rays of the sun. Another Yagyū mystery or secret teaching?*

There are several sources of information on Yagyū guards. The best known one, a collection of illustrations of Yagyū guards, is called the *San-ju Rokkasen* or *Thirty Six Poets (Collection)*. For a time, the name of this collection led many people to believe that there were only 36 Yagyū designs. Actually, the collection illustrates several hundred designs. Why this collection was named as it was is still a mystery.

There are several other such collections of illustrations. Some note to whom many of the guards were presented. In almost all cases, the meanings of the guards are not explained and, in some instances, the actual names of the guards are not consistently used. For example, The "Single Bamboo" guard is referred to by three other names. The names of the designs assigned by Renyasai are very important, because they are our only real clues to what the designs might mean.

There are many legends regarding Yagyū guards. According to one story, Renyasai put all the guards that he had in a mortar and pounded them with a heavy wooden mallet. When none

could withstand the test, he decided that, if his guards were to be strong enough for his requirements, he would have to make them himself.

There are several variations on this story. According to one, when someone asked Renyasai's cousin, Yagyū Jubei Mitsuyoshi (who was another famous swordsman) about using strong "iron guards," Jubei replied that his skill had gone beyond the use of a guard to protect his hands and that he only needed a soft-metal copper guard.

A full-time professional Aikido teacher since 1972, Rev. Kensho Furuya (Aikido 6th dan) is Chief Instructor of the Aikido Center of Los Angeles. He is student of the late Aiki Doshu Kisshomaru Ueshiba, he was ordained a Soto Zen priest in 1988, and he is also President of the Los Angeles Sword & Swordsmanship Society. He holds 6th dan Kyoshi rank in Iaido and Battojutsu.

Among Furuya Sensei's published works are Kodo, Ancient Ways: Spiritual Lessons in the Life of the Warrior (Ohara Publications) and Aikido Shoshinshu: The Art of Aikido (Rainbow Publications), an instructional video series in nine volumes.

Furuya Sensei plans to publish a more complete study of Yagyū guards in the near future.

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