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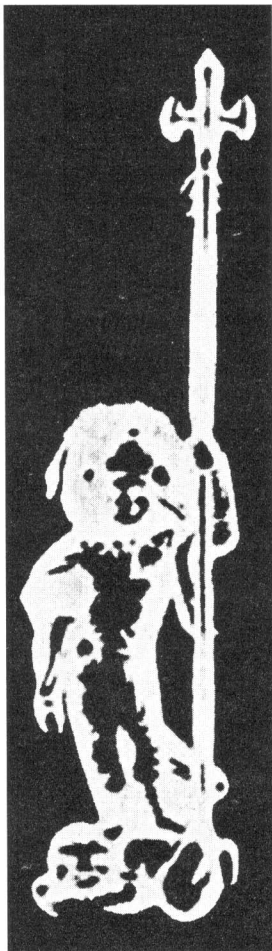
# samurai sword engravings

Elaborate Designs

Pay Homage to Japanese Deities

**A**lthough the number of Japanese sword collectors in the United States is increasing daily, the number of antique art swords has dwindled greatly. Japanese swords, or what are commonly known as “samurai” swords, have become an extremely rare commodity. About five years ago, there were only two major sword appreciation societies; today there are at least a dozen in the United States. During Japan’s economic boom of the 1980s, sword dealers swarmed to the United States, buying up all the swords they could find. *Satogaeri*—meaning “swords coming back home”—became a popular Japanese term. Roughly 300-400 swords were bought up and sent back to Japan each month during the period from 1980 through 1992. Conservatively speaking, this amounts to nearly 50,000 swords “returning home” to Japan from the United States over an 11-year period. The “march” home still continues, although it has slowed

*Bishamonten (pictured in an engraving at right) is one of the seven gods of good fortune and is said to protect the sword owner and help ensure his victory on the battlefield. Bishamonten is always engraved in a standing position and always carries a spear or halberd.*



somewhat due to Japan’s recent recession and a scarcity of swords. Unfortunately, the strength of the Japanese yen against the American dollar continues to make sword-buying a profitable venture and attracts many dealers from Japan each month. Another indica-

tion of the popularity of the “samurai” sword is the fact there is now a major Japanese sword convention in the United States almost every other month, attracting local and foreign collectors and dealers.

Japanese swords began arriving in America in the late 1800s when tourists brought them back after traveling abroad. There was another influx of swords in the mid-1940s when American military personnel brought the blades back as war souvenirs. It is estimated that there are at least 500,000 Japanese swords still remaining in the United States, mostly in the hands of collectors.

Because they are so rare, Japanese swords have become extremely expensive. An “average” sword, one of so-so quality, may

*Dragons, such as the one at right, are one of the most popular engravings found on Japanese swords and represent the magical qualities of the legendary serpents.*

sell for several thousand dollars. Some people don’t realize the value of the swords. One antique dealer in the Midwest purchased a Japanese sword for \$45 from an unwitting seller and later sold the weapon for \$125,000. Another collector found a sword at a swap meet for \$75 and sold it to a dealer for \$45,000. Such instances are rare, however.

Japanese swords have become a way to wealth for many treasure hunters, yet there are still individuals who revere and honor the sword for what it is: a great work of art, an ancient and miraculous weapon, and the soul and spirit of the samurai warrior. Such individuals are likely to be more interested in the engravings on the body of the sword than the market value of the weapon.

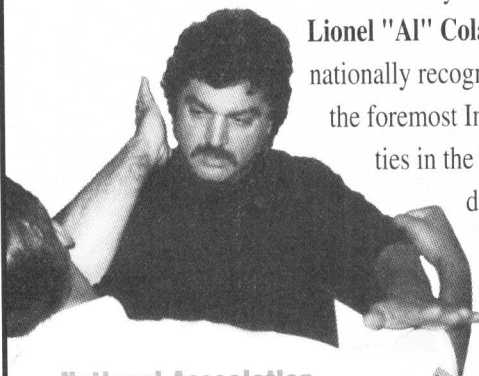


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*Horimono* is the Japanese term used for these sword engravings. The term does not include the engraved signatures found on the sword tang; these are called *kiritsuke-mei*, or simply *mei*.

The swordsmith almost never signed his engravings. From the 17th century on, however, it became a custom for some smiths, famous for their skill in engravings, to sign on the *nakago* or tang of the blade the words *hori do-saku*, meaning "also executed the engravings (as well as making this sword)." Several sword *ryu* (schools) engaged specialists to engrave their blades, and these are considered original engravings.

Engravings can be divided into two general categories: grooves and pictorial designs. Grooves are the so-called "blood grooves" which run up and down the blade. There are many standard types, but they have nothing to do with blood or the way a victim's blood runs down the blade. Grooves are decorative and enhance the value of the blade. They also lighten the weight of the blade and improve its overall balance. Grooves also increase the overall surface area of the blade, which helps prevent the blade from bending. Grooves are functional and beautiful.

The second category of engravings, pictorial designs, are what most people generally associate with *horimono*. These types include written inscriptions, such as poems or prayers, as well as designs.

A quick word of caution about *ato-bori*, or "later engravings," which have been added to the blade some time after its production. Generally, these engravings are of poor quality, are not considered to have any artistic value, and do not contribute to the enhancement of the blade. *Ato-bori* are usually added to the blade to increase the weapon's market value or hide flaws in the blade's construction. With a little training, it is not difficult to distinguish between original engravings and those added later. On close inspection, one can usually see the flaw which is hidden, but almost never completely concealed, by the additional engravings on the blade.

It is convenient to look at engravings from the standpoint of their evolution throughout the history of swordmaking. There are engravings on some of the earliest examples of Japanese swords—a period before the sword developed into the curved, single-edged blade commonly seen today. This period extends from prehistoric times up into the

*One of the most popular sword engravings is the kurikara-ken (left), which pictures a dragon entwined around a sacred sword.*

**This sword engraving (right) illustrates the sacred Sanskrit character representing Fudo Myo-O, the god of fire, and his sacred sword. It is one of the most popular Japanese sword engravings.**

ninth century. Engravings from this period include astrological signs, such as a constellation of seven stars, and inscriptions whose meanings have yet to be interpreted. In 1993, researchers uncovered an old sword during an archeological dig that featured engravings of animals such as a frog, heron, turtle, deer and salamander. It has been conjectured that these particular designs relate to agriculture, as in bountiful rains, water, fertile soil and plentiful crops.

What is unique to this early period of sword engravings is that many are filled with gold. This was not done in later periods. Grooves, or *bohi*, also commonly appear on these early examples. Although engravings of this period do not have the technical skill and sophistication of later designs, they do possess the beauty of age, history and taste.

Beginning with the Heian and Kamakura periods, which spanned the ninth through the 14th centuries, strange Chinese-like characters called *bonji* began to appear on Japanese swords. These are actually ancient Sanskrit characters which represent Buddha and various Buddhist deities. These inscriptions greatly contribute to the artistic and market values of the blades. In the age of the samurai warrior, however, these engravings had a specific and profound meaning. They were believed to protect the sword from evil, ensure the safety and welfare of the sword owner and,



most importantly, help secure victory on the battlefield for the warrior.

The most popular *bonji* engraving is that representing or invoking the deity Fudo Myo-O. Meaning "the immovable one," Fudo Myo-O is a reincarnation of Dainichi Nyorai, the "Universal Buddha." Fudo Myo-O has a fierce and ominous appearance. He is either standing or seated on a large rock surrounded by water. His body is surrounded by fire. In one hand, he holds a sacred sword, and in the other a lasso with which to bind evil and ignorance. One eye is closed, his crooked teeth show through his mouth, and his single garment is draped over one shoulder. This is a representation of the "servant" whose prime duty is to protect.

Fudo Myo-O became extremely popular in Japan, where many temples are devoted exclusively to him. That mountain ascetics and warriors revered Fudo is clearly evident by the fact his image is engraved on so many blades.

One of the most famous depictions of Fudo is on a short sword made by Goro Nyudo Masamune. The engraving is known as the "*Taki-Fudo*"—meaning "Fudo under a waterfall"—and the deity is not surrounded by flames as he is traditionally depicted. This is most likely an allusion to the mountain warriors who often meditated under waterfalls as part of their religious training.

Fudo is depicted in many ways—as a double-edged sword, sacred chopsticks, sacred rope or lasso, and the *kurikara-ken* or "dragon entangled sword." He has the most varied engraving representations of any figure or icon on Japanese blades.

Another popular engraving is of the deity Bish-

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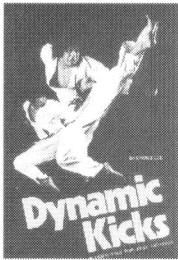
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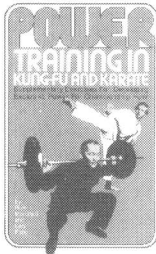
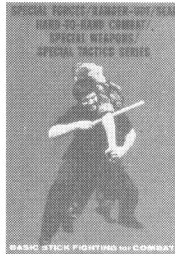
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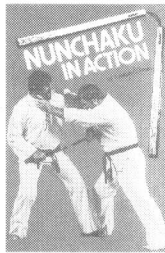
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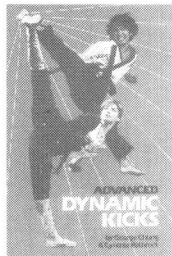
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amonten, who is best known as one of the seven gods of good fortune. He is always standing and always carries a halberd. He is dressed like an ancient Chinese warrior and serves to protect all warriors.

Other images engraved on Japanese swords include Jizo an Kannon and other popular Buddhas, *bodhisattvas* (enlightened beings) and gods who represent good fortune or protection. Other popular icons are the lotus flower, the *dokko* or sacred sword, and the halberd, all of which share the same religious significance of offering divine protection to the owner of the blade.

Japan entered into a period of relative peace in 1600 and, by the early 1700s, the warrior class was on the decline as the country experienced a rise in the merchant class and commercialism, and a blossoming of the arts among the common people. During this period, and up through the 1900s, Japanese sword engravings became increasingly decorative and elaborate. Less emphasis was placed on an engraving's religious significance and its meaning to a particular owner. In Osaka, one of the rising commercial centers during this time, many of the customers of local smiths were wealthy merchants who wore their short swords merely as a display of wealth and power, not for battle. Because less importance was placed on an engraving's religious significance during this period, a wider range of engravings emerged.

For sword dealers, the later, more elaborate and decorative engravings are of course preferred because they increase the blade's market value. The earlier, more esoteric engravings seem simple and naive in comparison. Yet, in these original engravings one can see the deep religious faith of the smith who created the blade, as well as the unswerving courage of the warrior who carried the weapon into battle. Nothing can compare to this kind of beauty, which only another warrior can understand.

*About the author: Reverend Kensho Furuya is an ordained Zen priest who teaches aikido and iaido at his Los Angeles dojo. His Ancient Ways column runs bimonthly in Black Belt's sister publication, Martial Arts Training magazine.*

**Ken•sei (Ken'say) n.** 1. literally "sword-saint"  
2. one who's deep practice of the martial ways enriches the world 3. read the book 4. live the life



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