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SWORD ENGRAVING

Symbols of the
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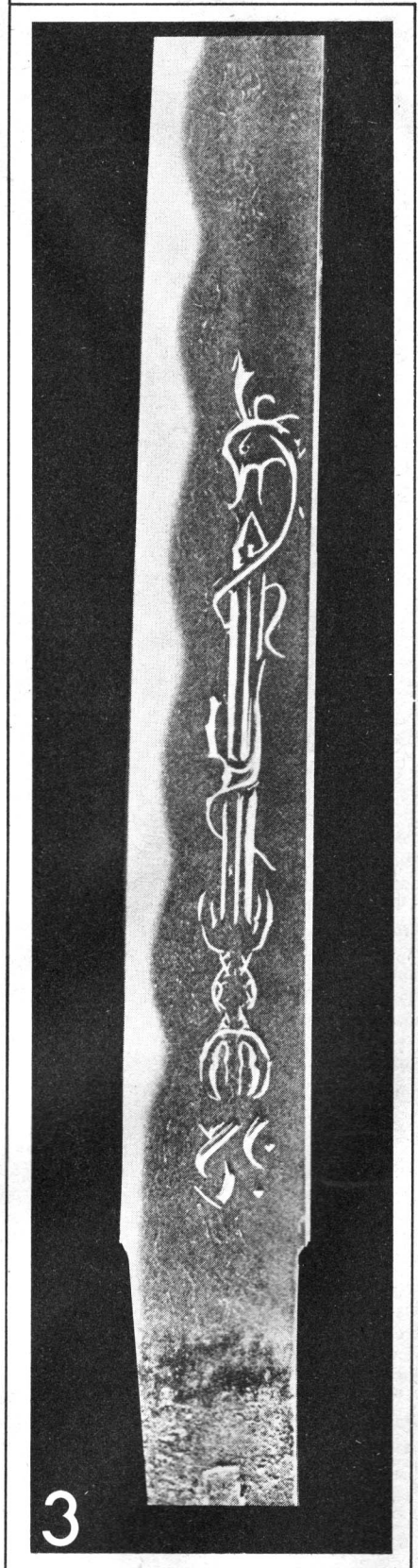
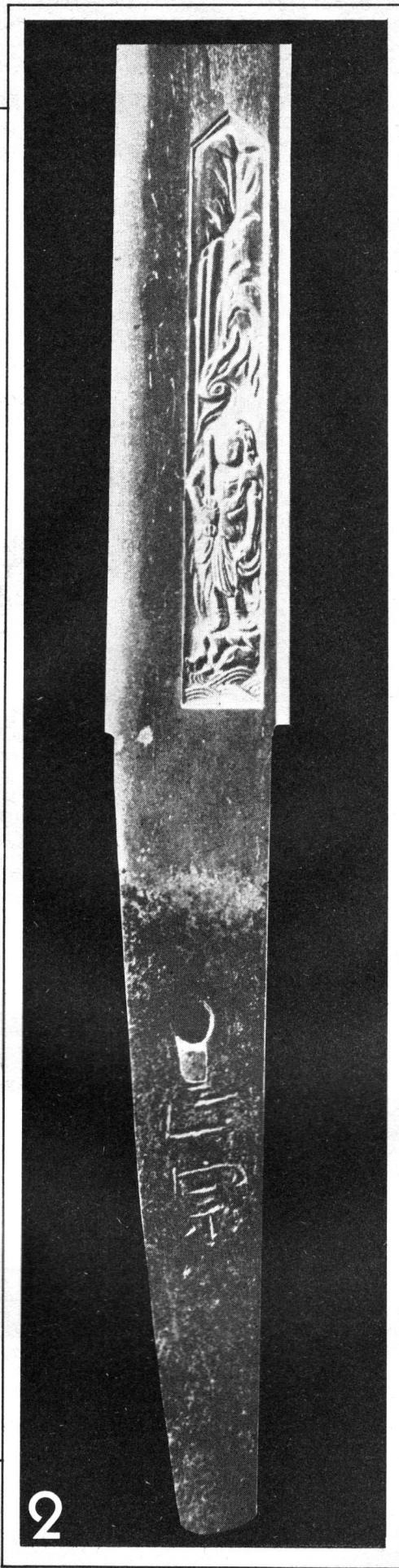
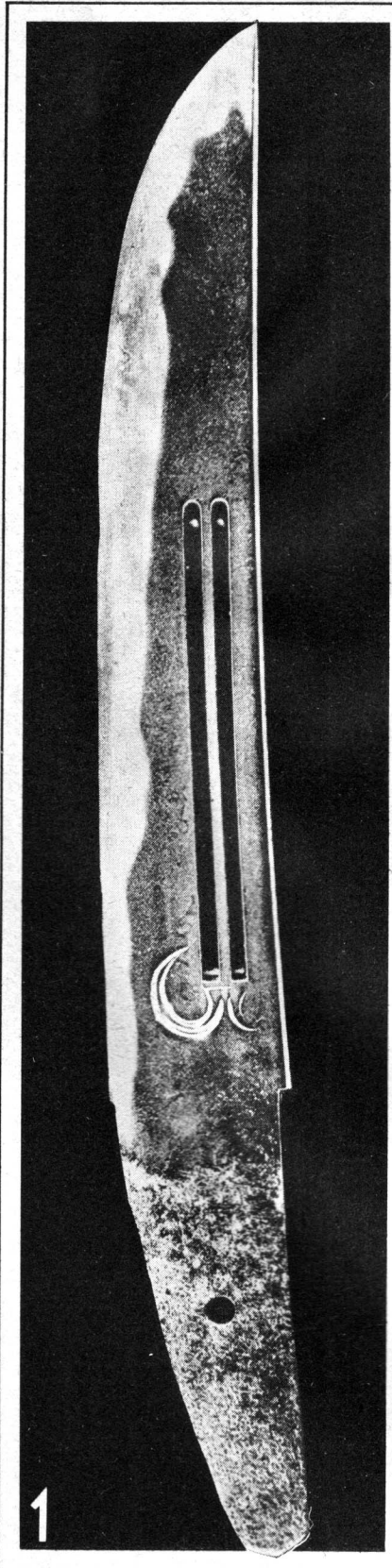
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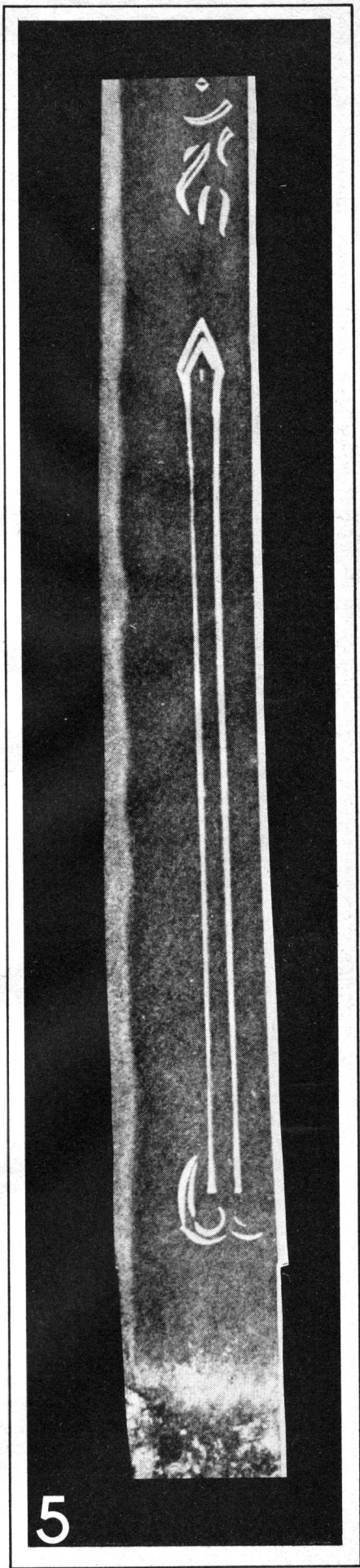
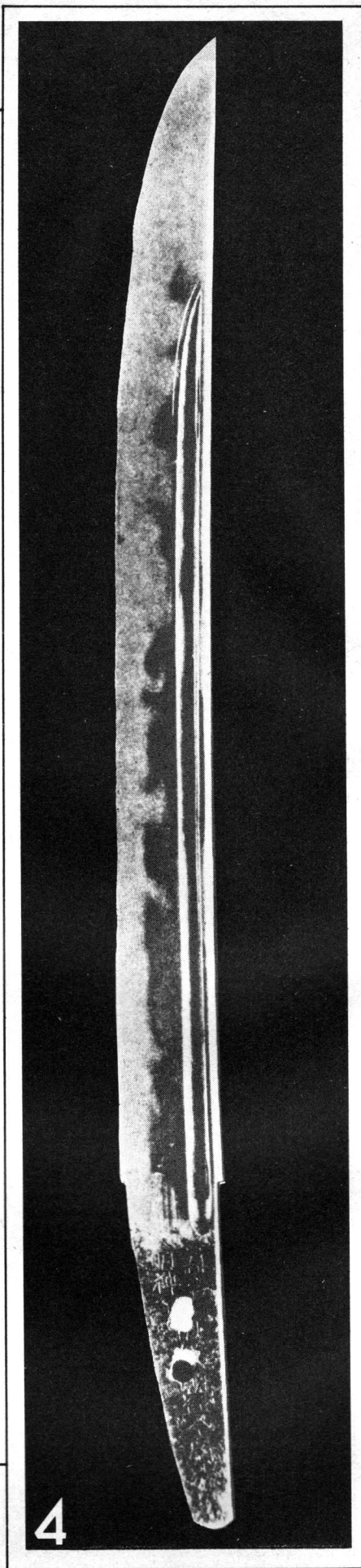


SWORD ENGRAVING— Symbols of the Samurai Soul

By Daniel Furuya

The Japanese sword, symbol and soul of the samurai warrior from time immemorial, is world famous as a peerless weapon superior in forging technique, cutting ability and artistic beauty. The Japanese sword was valued above human life by the samurai of feudal times and highly revered in a strict and rigid cult bordering on religious fanaticism. It has traditionally represented the "soul" of the samurai who was always on guard to protect his sovereign lord, family and personal honor. The samurai emulated his sword and honed his own character into similar qualities of "sharpness" and "true-ness." One of the most remarkable expressions of pride that the samurai took in his sword was the "horimono"—the engravings which embellished the blade.

1. *Tanto* (short sword) by Goro Nyudo Masamune, one of the greatest smiths of the Kamakura Period (1198-1333). An example of *ramma sukashi-bori* or open work engraving of a *gomabashi* (sacred chopsticks).
2. Fudo Myoo, the patron saint of warriors, engraved on another blade by Masamune. This sword is the famous *Taki-Fudo* or "Fudo Under a Waterfall."
3. *Kurikara-ken* (Dragon Embracing Sacred Sword) represents the Buddhist deity, Fudo Myoo. This is a popular motif on classical sword engraving.
4. *Hi* are grooves along the length of the blade which is also considered a form of engraving. They are popular in all periods of Japanese swordmaking.
5. *Suken and bonji*, the sacred sword and Sanskrit character both representing Fudo Myoo are popular motifs in early swords.

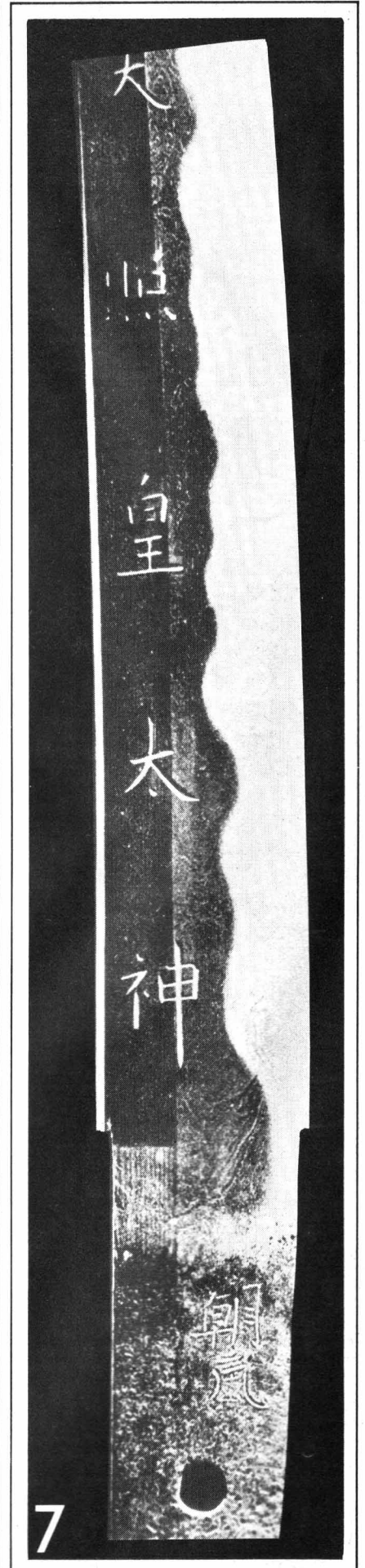
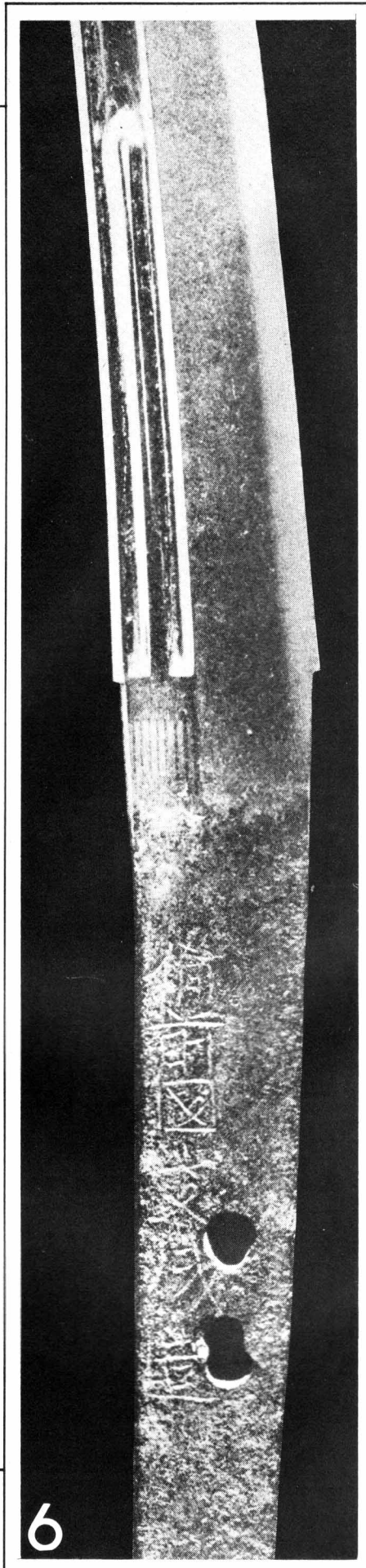


The samurai sword served a strictly functional purpose. The important qualities of the sword are summed up in a popular saying among the samurai warriors. "Magarazu, orezu, yoku kireru." (Doesn't bend, doesn't break and cuts well.) Horimono served no functional purpose but were important in expressing the owner's beliefs and sentiments.

Pitched in battle and facing death at every turn, the samurai became acutely aware of his fate and destiny. It was during these anxious times that samurai sought spiritual strength and liberation with Buddhism and the Zen masters. His desire for divine protection, spiritual strength, good fortune and the favors of the gods during battle all took expression in the horimono. Almost all horimono were originally religious. It was an act of faith by the maker to instill virtue into his swords, and it was a call for divine protection by the owner when he faced death. Due to this, the horimono are interesting in giving insight into the attitudes and beliefs of these early warriors. Later, the horimono became purely decorative and artistic in nature; these are not as esteemed by connoisseurs of the Japanese sword. Later horimono were primarily done to demonstrate the artistic skill of the smith or to increase the market value and selling price of the sword.

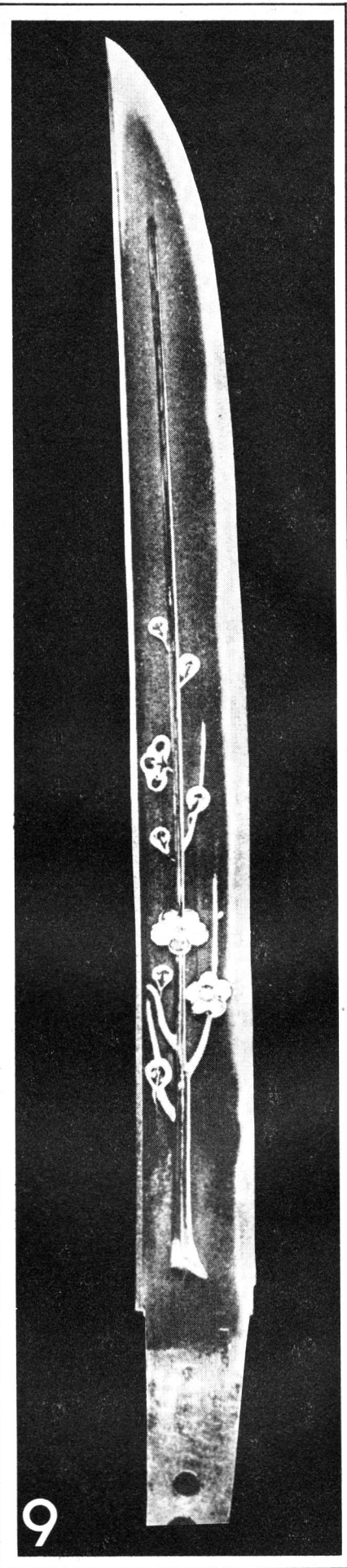
Horimono were usually executed during the process of forging the blade as part of the religious ceremony surrounding the act of sword making. There is a national treasure in Japan called "Dai Hannya Nagamitsu," a famous sword made by Nagamitsu of Osafune in Bizen province during the twelfth century. It got its name because Nagamitsu recited holy Buddhist scriptures (Hannya Shinkyo—Heart Sutra) each time he struck the metal. This was the spirit behind most horimono.

Early horimono from the eighth to twelfth centuries were simple and "noble" in nature. Later horimono, from the thirteenth century onwards, became more elaborate and decorative in technique and representation. It was during this time that the sword became more appreciated as "a work of art" than a life protecting weapon. These horimono were applied after the blade was forged, polished and deemed worthy of additional artistic embellishment. Some of these horimono were done by the smith himself, but many were sent out to professional engravers. During the seventeenth century, the famous school of Tadayoshi in Hizen province bear the engravings of the Umetada artists. Yasutsugu, who made swords exclusively for the ruling Tokugawa family, bear many famous horimono by the Kinai School of Echizen province. Ikkanshi Tadatsuna of Osaka, one





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of the great smiths during the Tokugawa period, often signed his blades, "hori do-saku," which meant that the engravings were done by himself.

Many horimono were added later by sword dealers to increase the selling price of the blades. Horimono called *atobori* (later engravings) were done to hide the flaws in mediocre swords that occurred during forging or excess polishing. These horimono are often of poor quality and actually decrease the value of the swords. Original horimono, especially those of the earlier blades, are highly treasured and sought after by collectors. Good horimono, naturally, are found on only very good blades.

Hi (pronounced hee) Grooves

Grooves carved along the length of the blade are considered a major type of horimono. They appear earliest in the development of the samurai sword from the eighth century onwards. During this time, swords were generally used by mounted warriors in armour. The swords were generally quite long but, at the same time, had to be light because they were used with one hand. The groove functioned to decrease the weight of the sword without effecting its length or thickness. However, from the thirteenth century, when the samurai were fighting the Mongols, and from the early seventeenth century, when the blades were made thicker and straighter, the grooves functioned to lighten and strengthen the sword's weight and iron.

These grooves are incorrectly called "blood grooves" in the misconception that they allow blood to flow along the length of the sword. The grooves serve to lighten weight, improve balance and strengthen the curve of a sword against bending or breaking upon impact. They have nothing to do with "blood flow." Their initial use was to improve the effectiveness and strength of the blade; later grooves served more artistic and decorative functions.

6. *Suken* represents the sacred sword held by Fudo Myoo. This is an example of a sacred sword engraving inside a *hi* or groove.

7. Prayers and invocations of various Shinto and Buddhist deities became popular from the 14th century onwards. This is an invocation of Amaterasu Kodaijin or the "Sun Goddess" who is a major deity in the Shinto pantheon.

8. Daruma (Bodhidharma) is the first patriarch of Zen Buddhism in China and became a popular motif on swords from the 16th century onwards. Engravings of Daruma were especially popular with samurai of the Zen Sect.

9. Ume (plum blossom) represents one of the three symbols of long life along with pine and bamboo. This decorative and overly ornate style of engraving became popular late in the development of the sword.

Types of Grooves

- Bo-hi* (regular type groove)
- Ryo-chiri* (double-edged groove)
- Bo-hi ni so-hi* (regular groove with additional smaller groove)
- Bo-hi ni tsure-hi* (regular groove with companion groove)
- Futasugi hi* (double grooves)

away of ignorance"—the sword which protects the Buddhist teachings. A simple depiction of the doubled edged straight sword is called a "suken" or simple sword. Kongo-sho was originally known as the vajra, an ancient weapon used in India which was gradually employed in many religious ceremonies. The

sacred sword and the vajra were combined to form a hybrid symbol which represents the "sacred sword." This is a popular horimono found on many swords of all periods and styles. Supposedly, it imbued the blade with the same powers and virtues of Buddha's sword.



Grooves usually found on short swords

- Koshi-bi* (hip groove)
- Gomabashi* (short double groove)
- Naginatahi* (groove for lance)
- Kuichigaihi* (crossing groove)

Bonji

Depictions of Sanskrit characters are the most popular type of sword engraving. They are found on both long and short swords from the earliest period up through the nineteenth century. The most popular bonji represents Fudo-Myoo, Marishiten, Aizen Myoc and Monju Bosatsu, all guardian saints or Bodhisattvas that were patronized and worshipped by the samurai. Fudoo was highly regarded in esoteric Buddhism in Japan and became the patron saint of warriors. His name is most often found on swords as a bonji.

Kongo-sho (Kongo-sha) or Ken

This sacred sword represents Fudo Myoo's own sword which symbolizes the "cutting

Various types of grooves found on swords. Grooves were important to lighten the weight and strengthen the cutting ability of the blade. Later, grooves became purely a decorative element.

