

CONNOISSEUR'S NOTEBOOK

*Painting in Iron and Gold: 肥前菅家*

James L. McElhinney © 2019



Iron tsuba. 8.6 x 8.5 x 0.6 cm. The subject of a cloud-dragon is modeled with aquaforte etching, chisel-work, and false damascening in silver and gold. Signed: "Hizen no Kuni ju Sugaie saku". (肥前住菅家作).

According to an entry by Robert Haynes, there was a group of carvers (H.08957.0) using the name "Sugawara" (菅原), living in Nagasaki, working in the Jakushi style. The family name is famously associated with Heian-period diplomat and poet Sugawara no Michizane: 菅原 道真 (845-903), but there is no reason to suspect that a group of artisans might claim such lofty lineage. This guard surely must be by one of the carvers belonging to that group. It is interesting to note the signature reads

"Hizen no Kuni no ju." (肥前住), because the Jakushi atelier usually signed "Kiyou" (崎陽), the Chinese name for Nagasaki. Perhaps the Sugawara group was less closely associated with Nagasaki's Chinese community. The thick, well-hammered, laminated plate has been manipulated by corrosion, using a process known to the Japanese as yakite-kusarakashi (焼手腐し

The outside surface of the rim has been etched to reveal a layer-cake of laminations, which has a more geological feeling than Jakushi guards, in which such corrosion is given the appearance of worm-holes.



Some sources state that Shodai Jakushi (初代 若芝) learned *aquaforte* (acid-etching) from the Dutch stationed at Dejima. This is extremely unlikely for several reasons. Residents of the V.O.C. factory at Dejima did not include European craftsmen who could have instructed Jakushi. However, there were Chinese artisans living and working in Nagasaki's *Toujin-Yashiki* (唐人屋敷) (Chinatown) district. It has been shown that Jakushi I (1638-1707) had close ties to the Chinese community. He studied painting under the Chinese abbot of Kofuku-ji temple, through whom he met Ingen Ruyki (1592-1673), the Chinese founder of Obaku Zen Buddhism (黄檗). European body-armor and edged weapons were commonly decorated with designs applied in this way. The technique was also well-known to metalworkers and armorers in India, the Islamic world, Monsoon Asia and China. The tale about Jakushi learning etching from the Dutch was probably concocted near the end of the Meiji period, a period of intense desinification. Its forceful design and expressive execution demand that we regard this as a dynamic painting in iron, gold and silver.



Design on the reverse of the Hizen Sugaie tsuba. Billowing clouds created by repeated etching. Signature below



Signed: "Hizen no Kuni ju Sugaie saku". 肥前住菅家作

(To be continued)