

CONNOISSEURS NOTEBOOK

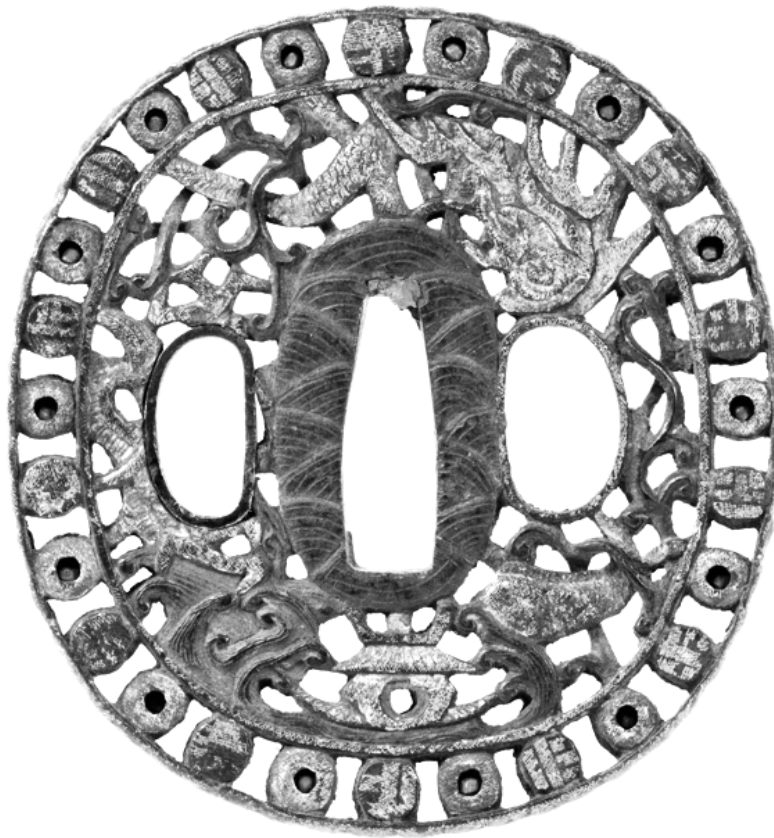
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DRAGON GATE TSUBA: 竜門鐔

The subject of these three sword-guards is the myth of a hundred-year-old *koi* (carp) passing upstream by the dragon-gate at the falls of the Yangtze River. Ascending the waterfall, he is transformed into a dragon. The tale originated in Chinese mythology, but was absorbed by folkloric tradition in Korea and Japan. The story was a popular metaphor for personal achievement, such as passing the rigorous imperial Chinese civil service examinations. Because the subject is not specifically military, it is possible that guards such as these might have been worn on personal weapons carried by court officials, bureaucrats and other professionals. During the Edo period, Nagasaki became a center of Rangaku (Dutch science) and the study of Chinese medicine. In 1931 Charles R. Boxer wrote that,

"...Namban tsuba were usually worn by doctors, and that there is every likelihood of this, as many physicians had a smattering of Dutch and liked it to be thought that they were proficient in medical science (Rangaku) as practised by the Hollanders..."

The subject of this sword-guard could thus have been made to order for those doctors whom Boxer described. The style of workmanship of these three guards is very different, but the design and iconography is fundamentally the same. The first two display the verso, for comparison because the second example (by Hattori Yoshitsugu) is signed on the reverse. Designs like this were formerly known as *Kannan*: 漢南 (South China) or *Kagonami* (a variant reading of 漢南). Now that the subject has been identified, the terminology can be refined even further.



1. Qing Chinese-Tibetan *Hushou* 護手 (sword guard). Iron Sukashi with gold damascening (nunome). The double rim frames twenty-eight hollow jewels, each of which contains a loose iron pellet. The design

within this frame represents the transformation of carp as it passes Dragon Gate. The guard was made with a Japanese-style seppa-dai and kozuka-hitsu, which may indicate that the piece was intended for the Nagasaki market. After this guard was imported it was adapted to Japanese use. Another hitsu-ana was added, in the form of a shakudo band. The surface carving on the seppa-dai is an archaic wave/diaper pattern that is found in Mesopotamian and Minoan art, as well as in Chinese antiquity. It may allude to maritime trade, or perhaps a whim of the carver.



2. Copy of Qing Chinese-Tibetan style sword guard by Hattori Yoshitsugu. Signed Tonshu Shinshichi. This is a very rare example of a signed Nanban tsuba. Hattori Taira Yoshitsugu was a student of Yagami School founder Noda Mitsuhiro, and the teacher of Onitake Toshiyoshi, who also specialized in Nanban designs. This piece appears to be a faithful reproduction of a Qing guard. It retains the rectangular seppa-dai and utterly impractical hitsu-ana. Signed on the ura, in the Chinese manner, in *Sosho* "grass" writing "Tonshu Shinshichi" was an alias of Yoshitsugu. (See Joly, *Soshankenshu*, # 189 and Haynes Index: H12231.0).

Comparing this piece with the preceding example, one immediately notices a very different manner of carving, in which there is less informality, a more linear style of drawing, and a higher degree of finish. This is a hallmark of Japanese workmanship. It is not a value judgment, but an esthetic distinction, like the stylistic differences between Venetian and Florentine painting in the 16th century. Chinese carvers seem to allow themselves greater liberty in some respects. Chisel-strokes remain visible. In some ways,

the forms are livelier and more expressive. Japanese carving seems to insist on tighter focus, higher finish and perhaps more forceful sense of design.



3. Dragon Gate tsuba. Iron with gold nunome. 7 x 7.4 x .5 cm. Identified at first as a Nagasaki copy of a Qing guard, recent research suggests that this piece might have been produced outside of Japan, perhaps in Vietnam, or elsewhere in Monsoon Asia. The reason for re-attribution is the informality of the carving, combined with the very eccentric seppa-dai.

The hitsu-ana appears to be original. Compare the carving of the waves with the preceding examples and the differences become obvious. Logically, the shape of the seppa-dai should correspond to the cross-section of the handle/grip. The elongated octagonal shape of this seppa-dai is not typically Chinese. If the Qing prototype had been produced for the Nagasaki market, it might have had a Japanese style seppa-dai, like specimen number 1, above. Vietnamese armorers were known to produce sword-grips in a variety of cross-sections. Octagonal handles were not uncommon. This seppa-dai tapers downward, suggesting that the guard was originally made to be mounted on a sword suspended from the waist, like a tachi. The width of the nakago-ana at the top suggests that this may once have been secured to a trapezoidal tang and later widened at the bottom to accommodate a Japanese nakago. These kinds of comparisons and observations are essential to understanding the circulation of designs along maritime routes, and in attempting to assign a specific object to its geographic place of origin.



4. Yet another variation. Imported Qing Sino-Tibetan style *Hushou* 護手 (sword guard).
7.0 x 6.4 x .4cm. Iron with gold highlights. The subject is dragon-koi swimming in turbulent water, rendered as *loukong* interlacing.

The *koi* represents the exercise of positive force. As previously stated, swimming upstream, when a hundred-year old *koi* overcomes the waterfall at Dragon-Gate, it becomes a dragon.

The creatures on this guard are rendered at the very moment of transformation, symbolizing perhaps a great achievement, or consolation for some recent loss, or just being in a state of transition. Rectangular seppa-dai are commonly found on discoid Chinese guards. The rounded corners we see here may be a clue that this guard was made after 1748, when the Qianlong emperor specified that the swords of his imperial guard be equipped with new handles, that in cross-section had rounded, rather than square corners. This change in the imperial regulations was widely imitated, as something of a fashion-trend. The surface-carving of the seppa-dai has no utilitarian function, only visual appeal. Likewise, the hitsu-ana are made without practical consideration, incorporated into the design as an exotic Japanese-style decorative element. Vietnamese sword-guard are found with piercings of this kind.

This *Hushou* was probably not made to be mounted on a Qing sword, but for export as an *objet-d'art*. The sekigane and cross-section of the nakago-opening indicate Japanese use. It may have been received as a gift, and then married to a blade at a later date.

(to be continued)