

JAPANESE SWORD SAFES: GOOD, BETTER, BEST

By Neil Shapiro

A while ago I wrote an article about Japanese sword match safes for the IMSA Newsletter. In that article I explained that sword safes were created, in part, because the Meiji Emperor outlawed the wearing of swords by the samurai in 1873 and the makers of sword paraphernalia repurposed some of their skills to create other items for commercial purposes. In effect, sword match safes carry portions of the samurai ethos into the 20th century, as all sections of the Japanese samurai sword embody the samurai code of behavior and conduct.

In this article I want to use a technique pioneered by a famous antiques dealer, I. Sack. He famously used the “good, better, best” comparisons to distinguish among pieces of American period furniture. I want to try this with Japanese sword safes.

Pictured below are the fronts of three ray skin (*sami*) bodied safes.



Looking left to right, the first safe has a slip-on lid, no ornamentation on the body of the safe and rather crude stylized wave patterns on the lid and the *kashira* (the bottom portion of the safe or what would have been the bottom butt cap on a Japanese sword).

The middle safe has a bronze *menuki* (the ornament that is positioned under the wrappings on the handle of the sword (scabbard)) in the form of a seated, back-facing, samurai. It is possible this this samurai is practicing meditation alone to help develop the concentration required for martial arts and military discipline. Or, symbolically, the samurai is turning his back on the world. Whichever speculation is correct, the *menuki* is composed of *shakudo*, copper, and gold.

The *kashira* displays gold and silver plants and a basket against a stippled background.

If there is an intentional relationship between the parts of this safe the plants may represent the battlefields where the samurai fights his battles or the basket may represent the hope for domesticity after the warfare is ended.

The lid (*fuchi*- collar) follows the same patterns of gold and silver plants in a basket as the *kashira*.



An example of the *fuchi* and *kashira* when not integrated into a match safe

The third safe has a complicated *menuki* of three children holding a scroll and a *kashira* of insects, plants and grasses. The *menuki* is made of shakudo, gold, and silver. The *fuchi* continues the theme with raised images of insects and flora.

This *menuki* may symbolize the need for children to study, gain wisdom, and relate to the world as a Buddhist.

In my opinion the third safe is the best of this type of safe as the ornamentation is more complex, better executed and the *menuki* more interesting.

Another type of sword safe is the one that resembles an *inro* (a small compartmented and usually ornamented container hung from an *obi* (sash) to hold small object). Below are two examples:



The aquatic-themed safe on the left has alternating bands iron and bronze set with chased examples of sea creatures in bronze, gold, and copper. The *kashira* is a roiled sea of stylized waves with gold and silver accents. The *fuchi* has what appears to be a chased Koi fish in gold.

Koi fish are usually emblematic of good fortune or luck and are also associated with perseverance in adversity and strength of purpose. Gold Koi, particularly, represent wealth and prosperity. The other sea creatures depicted on the safe surely represent the love of the Japanese for the sea and the creatures in it since many of those creatures provide a large part of the Japanese diet.

The multi-banded safe on the right is made up of totally patinated bronze with, from the bottom up, birds, monkeys, water buffalo, and scampering mice. The *fuchi* depicts a scholar writing a scroll against a granulated (*nashiji*) background. It would be stretching my imagination to try to find some coherence between the various bands on this safe. Although extremely interesting, with superb castings, there is no overall integrity between the parts of this safe.

In my opinion the safe on the left because of its continuity of motif, elegance of appearance, and ease of holding in one's hand, is the superior product.

The last group of safes all have a whole body and only a *kashira* and a *fuchi*.

The large safe on the right has a leather body with patinated brass *kashira* and *fuchi*. The lid is a slide-on friction lid as compared to a hinged lid. The brass portions may be cast as compared to the hand chased *kashira* and *fuchi* on the other safes in this essay. On the *kashira* is a water dragon facing down. The *fuchi* has another dragon also facing down. Both the *fuchi* and *kashira* are composed of silver, copper and bronze patinas or metals, it is difficult to tell.

The middle safe is an elegant patinated bronze with applied gold, silver, and copper plants, insects, and trees on both sides of the *kashira* and the body of the safe. The lid has an exquisitely rendered rearing horse with a rider. On one side of the *fuchi* is another rider astride a running horse. The detail is superb, with wind-blown mane, trailing reins, and a delineated quiver of arrows.





Left-Right: *Fuchi* matching the above safes

The last safe on the far right, is scenic, and has an iron *shakudo* (a unique Japanese alloy of copper and gold) body with inlaid design of a horse and rider on one side and a roaring sea over which a flying bird is outstretched on the wing. It is signed by the maker O. Komai.

The Komai (see below) artisan that created this match safe has managed to capture the subject matter - the horse rider and the horse - in a fleeting moment of time; the horse, with an extended tail, is in full gallop, the rider's hat flaps, driven by the wind, are floating behind him, and beneath him is a churning sea. There is a subtle shading between the horse's head and the *shakudo* background as well as the *shibuichi* (another alloy of silver and copper) coloration of the rider's face and hands to contrast with the darker background. There is attention paid to the patterns of the garments, and the use of gold on the rider's sumptuous clothing. To create dynamic movement the waves rise and crash in the opposite direction of the horse and rider.

The care with which the *fuchi* and *kashira* have been chosen continue to illustrate the artisan's aesthetic. The obverse of the body has a single crane in flight over the even more roaring waves and the *kashira* has stylized waves with gold granulation on the obverse as well as silver and gold cranes in flight on the front side of the case. The *fuchi* continues this attention to detail with a raised samurai figure holding a riding crop again poised over a watery, wavy background.

To draw any meaning from the horseman riding joyfully and with such brio over the sea may be stretching the meaning of the artisan's work but it seems to me that the Japanese, surrounded by the sea, with all its bounty must still be vigilant to the dangers held by a storm-lashed sea and the concomitant waves that might bring destruction to the homes and residents. On this match safe the message seems to be one of triumph for the man as he rides above the churning sea. The sea is inlaid with almost identical claw-like extensions of waves, made of gold, suspended over the lower waves losing sprayed droplets made of silver. If closely examined it almost looks as if the artisan simultaneously executed the wave extensions to create parallel lines giving the waves a vibrant, kinetic energy that is matched by the power and life of the rider and his animal.

Despite all this attention to detail the images are created against an almost black background that is absent any other decoration or embellishment. The simplicity and

imbalance of the descendant horse and rider and the ascendant crane are all that occupy the body of the match safe.

Japanese sword scenic safes usually employ at least two basic Japanese design theories:

FUKINSEI (imbalance): Characterized by asymmetry, imbalance, odd numbers, irregularity, and unevenness.

KANSO (simplicity): An attempt to eliminate the ornate and feature things of simplicity. *Kanso* emphasizes open space, and dynamic composition.

This safe does both.

So which one of the above safes is good? Which better? And which is best? Based upon all that I wrote about the last safe it is easy to assume that I think the last one is the best of the bunch. And, yes, that is true. I also think the fish-motif safe is the better than the intro-shaped safe, and the elegant bronze safe with the plants, insects, and trees, but not by much. The others are all good, and to own any sword safes is a delight.