

# The Yamakichibei Group of Tsubako

## Part 1

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The classical understanding of the Yamakichibei group of *tsubako* (iron tsuba smith) is that they worked in Owari Province in the Momoyama and early-Edo Periods, that they made only iron/steel tsuba (no other fittings) of great power and originality, and that there were either two or three generations, depending on whether one or two “*shodai*” (first generation) are recognized. The place and period of work for the group does not seem subject to much debate, though small disagreements concerning the likely working dates for the 2-3 men comprising the early Yamakichibei smiths exist. Yamakichibei sword guards are among the earliest signed tsuba, as there were very few tsubako signing their works, especially as a regular practice, before the Edo period.

The purpose of this article is to raise questions about and pose problems for this classical understanding of this group of tsuba smiths. It will be argued here that there were likely five early smiths in this group, that the work of two of these five is often confused by scholars as being that of one man who “changed or varied the way he inscribed his *mei* [signature],” and that many genuine works from the early Yamakichibei atelier have thus been dismissed as copies/fakes as a result of this classical (mis)understanding.

## The Classical Understanding

The majority of the literature on Yamakichibei tsuba has the first smith as a man named Yamasaka Kichibei. According to Okamoto Yasukazu in *Owari To Mikawa no Tanko*, translated by Markus Sesko, “[t]he first generation was called ‘Yamasaka Kichibei Shigenori’...and it is said that he was an armour smith working for Oda Nobunaga” (Okamoto, 69). Okamoto states further that Yamasaka Kichibei was active in the Genki Era (1570-1573) and lived in the castle town of Kiyosu in Owari Province, the site of Oda’s Kiyosu Castle (69). Yamasaka Kichibei is known to have made only iron tsuba. His sword guards are celebrated for their rustic strength and boldness, utilizing powerful *tsuchime* (hammer work), *tekkotsu* (“iron bones,” the projections of small lumps of steel on the plate or rim of the tsuba), and *yakite shitate* (a surface treatment leaving a melted effect). His tsuba are quite rare, there being only a tiny handful of published examples.

Yamasaka Kichibei employed the full name, “Yamasaka Kichibei,” on some or most of his tsuba, signing on the left side of the *Omote* (front/face) *seppa-dai* (flat oval area surrounding the *nakago-ana*, the central hole in the plate), but the classical understanding of this artist is that he also sometimes signed “Yamakichibei,” only, and that he did so in the latter part of his working life. This assertion—that he signed both ways—has given rise to some confusion over the matter of whether there was only this one *Shodai* smith, or whether, in fact, there was another “*Shodai*” whose work is very similar to that of Yamasaka’s, and who signed his work with the “Yamakichibei” *mei*, solely. Okamoto notes that certain scholars from the Owari region “defined a differentiation where they called one assumed artist ‘*O-Shodai*’ [...lit. ‘the Great First Generation’], and the other one ‘*Meijin-Shodai*’ [...lit. ‘the Famous First Generation’],” where Yamasaka Kichibei is the *O-Shodai* (70). Okamoto goes on to say that, “[o]ther authors agree with this differentiation between the *Shodai* Yamakichibei” (70). This understanding of Yamasaka Kichibei as the first artist of the Yamakichibei group appears to be generally accepted by many, if not most scholars, though there does remain doubt among some as to whether there was actually just the one man—Yamasaka Kichibei—who was the one and only *Shodai*.

The classical understanding of this group of tsubako also recognizes a *Nidai* (second generation), whose active working period is broadly considered to be late-Momoyama to early-Edo, though Okamoto has him active a little later, specifically in the Kan’ei Era of 1624-1644 (72). Some have the *Nidai* working as early as the 1590s, however, so there is some disagreement over what his dates actually are.

Finally, there was a “*Sandai*” (third generation) who is known as “*Sakura* Yamakichibei,” an appellation given to him for his habit of utilizing a cherry blossom stamp just below his signature. He is understood to have worked from the

Kanbun Era (1661-1673) into the Genroku Era (1688-1704). This author is not considering Sakura Yamakichibei to be an artist belonging to the early Yamakichibei atelier, however, because his working period is too late for this, and because it is unlikely that he would have learned directly from the *Nidai*, given a sizable gap between the end of the *Nidai*'s working period and the beginning of the *Sandai*'s. Further, the "*Sandai* Yamakichibei" produced sword guards much more in keeping with the trends of Genroku culture and tastes, and when he did make tsuba in the Yamakichibei style, he almost invariably copied *Nidai* designs and motifs. For these reasons, and because this article is focused on the early/original Yamakichibei atelier, the work of *Sakura* Yamakichibei will not be considered here.

So the classical understanding thus leaves two or three artists comprising the early (Momoyama and early-Edo) Yamakichibei atelier, with the active years between approximately 1570 and the 1620s/1630s.



Figure 1. *Kuruma-sukashi* tsuba. *Nade-mokko-gata*. *Mei*: Yamasaka Kichibei. This tsuba, a masterpiece of expressive strength, exhibits well the artist's bold use of *tsuchime*, *tekkotsu*, and *yakite shitate*. Yamasaka Kichibei was unmatched in the rendering of the *kuruma-sukashi nade-mokko-gata* form.



Figure 2. *Kuruma-sukashi* tsuba. *Nade-mokko-gata*. *Mei*: Yamasaka Kichibei. Another master work by the *O-Shodai*. Note the breadth of the rim as well as of the "spokes" of the wheel. This treatment of the form reinforces the tsuba's powerful, no-nonsense martial quality.

## Workmanship

Tsuba with a Yamasaka Kichibei *mei* often present in *nade-mokko-gata* (diamond-shape) or *nagamaru-gata* (oval) form, usually employing what is described as a *kuruma-* (wheel) or *kiku-sukashi* (chrysanthemum) openwork motif. His *nade-mokko-gata kuruma-sukashi* tsuba are thought by many to be unequaled by any other *tsubako*. The material is always iron, and the guards are mostly of a larger (8cm +) dimension. As noted, they frequently feature a well-hammered plate, with *tekkotsu* of varying sizes and a strong *yakite shitate* treatment. Okamoto describes their appearance as having a "blackish-violet, glassiness and smooth appearance," despite the surface being "uneven and irregular" (71). He goes on to say that Yamasaka Kichibei guards "have many highlights and are brimful with a magnificent and dynamic rusticity" (71). No confirmed Yamasaka Kichibei tsuba are known to the author with *uchikaeshi-* or *sukinokoshi-mimi* (rims raised above and then hammered down onto the plate), the rim usually finished in more of a *kaku-mimi ko-niku* (squared rim with gentle rounding) manner, though because of the effects of hammering, *tekkotsu*, and *yakite shitate*, the rim may present as an irregular, even rather twisted form. The rims on his *kuruma-sukashi* guards are quite broad, underscoring the strength of the overall design and expression. (Figures 1 and 2)



Figure 3. *Rogan no zu* (wild goose in reeds) sukashi tsuba. *Mutsumokko-gata* (six-lobed shape). *Mei*: Yamakichibei (*Meijin Shodai*). A famous work. This subject is iconic for the Yamakichibei atelier, though some perceive the *sukashi* on the right to represent a type of cutting implement, such as a saw or a sickle. Note the prominent fold in the plate below the *nakago-ana*.



Figure 4. *Miminaga Usagi* (long-eared rabbit) or *Tombo* (dragonfly) sukashi tsuba. *Nagamaru-gata*. *Mei*: Yamakichibei (*Meijin Shodai*). This tsuba features a combination of strong *tekkotsu* and finely-done *amida-yasuri*, together with mild *yakite-shitate*. The sword guards of the *Meijin Shodai* often present as more gentle or delicate than those of the *O-Shodai*, as is seen here.

Tsuba understood by most to have been made by the *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei are generally quite similar in workmanship to those made by the *O-Shodai*. However, Yamasaka Kichibei guards are often larger, bolder, and more powerful in their expression. Works by the *Meijin Shodai* tend to be quieter, softer, gentler in their presentation, such that the *tekkotsu* are more subdued, the *yakite shitate* less pronounced, and the *tsuchime* more subtle. Of course, this is a generalization, and there are some *Meijin-Shodai* pieces that are bolder and more powerful than others, but as a rule, they do not reach the level of expressive strength found in Yamasaka Kichibei tsuba.

*Meijin-Shodai* sword guards, though few in number, are not as rare as *O-Shodai* works. Extant *Meijin-Shodai* works also employ a much wider range of motifs and designs than extant *O-Shodai* works do. While the *Meijin-Shodai*, too, used the *kuruma-sukashi nade-mokko-gata* and *nagamaru-gata* form, where the influence of the *O-Shodai* is most readily apparent, he also used other shapes, including *maru-gata* (round) and *mokko-gata* (lobed shapes). As with Yamasaka Kichibei, he worked only in iron. (Figures 3 and 4)

*Nidai* Yamakichibei tsuba can show clear influence of the *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei in some pieces, but the majority display his own unique understanding of the Yamakichibei aesthetic. Some of his guards, presumably those that were made earlier in his working period, are scarcely distinguishable from *Meijin-Shodai* tsuba. Only the *mei* firmly give these away as works from his hand. As noted above, though, most extant *Nidai* Yamakichibei sword guards express his own idiosyncratic vision. His tsuba differ from those of the *O-Shodai* and the *Meijin Shodai* in several ways.

First, he often employs a *marugata* or six-lobed *mokko-gata* form; he does utilize *nade-mokko-gata* and the more common four-lobed *mokko-gata* forms on occasion, too, but unlike the *O-Shodai* and the *Meijin-Shodai*, he does not rely so much on *nagamaru-gata* or *nade-mokko-gata*, favoring instead *marugata* or six-lobed *mokko-gata* in shaping his pieces, as noted. (Figures 5 and 6)



Figure 5. *Hiashi-yasuri no zu* (sun's rays) plate tsuba. *Marugata*. Mei: Yamakichibei (*Nidai*). This guard is a tour-de-force, boasting several classic elements of *Nidai* workmanship. Besides the round shape (unusual in the work of the Yamakichibei atelier), this tsuba features *hiashi-yasurime* (broad, deeply-incised lines radiating from the *seppa-dai*), deep *tuchime*, and a prominent *uchikaeshi-mimi*, all of which accentuate the expressive power of the tsuba.



Figure 6. *Katabami* (oxalis flower) *sukashi* tsuba. *Mutsumokko-gata*. Mei: Yamakichibei (*Nidai*). The use of the six-lobed *mokko* form is particularly associated with the *Nidai*. This tsuba employs a *sukashi* of an oxalis flower in the upper-right quadrant of the plate, and another of uncertain meaning in the lower-left quadrant. Just below and to the right of this *sukashi*, two holes (thought by some to represent the sun and the moon) form the *udenuki-ana*, used for accommodating a cord (*udenuki*) which could secure the sword to the wielder's wrist. Again, we see the potent *tuchime* and *uchikaeshi-mimi* that are the *Nidai*'s signature features. A sword guard of exhilarating strength.

Next, unlike his predecessors, the *Nidai* usually produced tsuba with an *uchikaeshi* or *sukinokoshi mimi*. His rim construction is one of the highlights to be found in his tsuba, being at once an expression of delicacy and power. He then accentuates this balance with the inclusion of fine, blister-like *tekkotsu*, shining brightly black against the surrounding metal. The *Nidai*'s mastery of the raised-rim form is thought by some to be unequalled among all *tsubako* in Japanese history, even including the great Nobuie and ko-katchushi works.

The *Nidai* is celebrated as well for his superb *amida-yasuri* (file marks radiating outward from the *seppa-dai*) technique, at which he was unsurpassed, far exceeding the *amida-yasuri* seen in *Meijin-Shodai* sword guards. The *Nidai* executed especially bold lines here, employing a sort of "two-fold" carving of the lines which offers terrific variety to the depth and breadth of the "rays," giving the expression great strength. (Figure 7)

Yet another departure in *Nidai* tsuba from those of both the *O-Shodai* and the *Meijin-Shodai* is in his relatively infrequent use of *yakite shitate*. Instead, he favored a more boldly-hammered plate for his guards. His hammer-work, too, is distinctively his, and really cannot be confused with the finish on the surfaces of tsuba made by the other Yamakichibei smiths. (Figure 8)



Figure 7. *Katabami* silhouette *sukashi* tsuba. *Nade-mokko-gata*. Mei: Yamakichibei (*Nidai*). A famous work of the *Nidai*, this sword guard is masterful in its virtuosic use of *amida-yasuri*. No other *tsubako* of any time or place equaled the *Nidai* Yamakichibei in this aspect of plate treatment. The tsuba's brilliant *uchikaeshi-mimi* combines with the superb *amida-yasuri* to at once exude quiet strength and exquisite delicacy.



Figure 8. *Matsukawabishi* (pine-bark pattern) *sukashi* tsuba. *Muttsu-mokko-gata*. Mei: Yamakichibei (*Nidai*). Also employed here is a stylized flower *sukashi* diagonally opposite of the *matsukawabishi* *sukashi*. This photo well illustrates the *Nidai*'s mastery of *tsumime* in the finishing of his plate. (Photo courtesy of Richard George)

Finally, though the *Nidai* did use the motifs found in *O-Shodai* and *Meijin-Shodai* guards on occasion (e.g. *kuruma-sukashi*, dragonflies, birds), for the most part, he seemed to prefer motifs that were his own; that is, these are motifs we do not find in the work of his predecessors. Some of these include various flowers (*katabami*, or oxalis, is particularly favored), abstract *ko-sukashi* (perforations of small size in the plate) of uncertain meaning, and *matsukawabishi* (a form said to resemble a type of pine-bark pattern), often in combination.

In his use of tsuba shapes, rim forms, plate treatment, and preferred motifs, then, the *Nidai* Yamakichibei does stand as distinct from the *O-Shodai* and *Meijin-Shodai* as an artisan within the early Yamakichibei group. In short, there appears to be a somewhat closer relationship between Yamasaka Kichibei and the *Meijin-Shodai* than between the *Meijin-Shodai* and the *Nidai*. Nevertheless, the “Yamakichibei sensibility” is potently evident in the work of all three of these smiths.

The above represents the essential classical understanding of the Yamakichibei group of *tsubako* as evidenced via a review of the majority of the scholarly publications on this subject. There are aspects of this classical understanding, however, that are open to question and doubt.

## Problems for the Classical Understanding

There are several interrelated problem areas to be seen in the classical understanding of the Yamakichibei group of *tsubako*. One of these concerns the true number of smiths working in the Yamakichibei atelier in the Momoyama and early-Edo Periods. Linked to this is the question of which of these smiths is actually the *Shodai*, which the *Nidai*, and so forth. When each of these smiths may actually have worked, too, is a topic to consider. Finally, differentiating

the tsuba made by each smith, which of these works are recognized as authentic, and which are seen as *gimei* (falsely-signed, or a forgery), are important knots to unravel.

While it is understood that there were a *Shodai* and *Nidai* Yamakichibei, it is actually less certain whose work should be recognized as *Shodai* or *Nidai*. After all, there are no period documents which positively identify a given work as coming from the hand of the *Shodai* or the *Nidai*. Most “knowledge” involving which smith made which tsuba arrives in the form of classical/traditional understandings of a “*Shodai mei*” and a “*Nidai mei*” and the workmanship associated with these, but these understandings are not, as far as this author knows, based on any objective, proven identification of a specific work having been made by a specific individual *known* to be the *Shodai* or *Nidai*. Instead, they are the product of various publications presenting and repeating such understandings over the last many decades of tsuba scholarship and study. This issue becomes much muddier when the prior one is considered: how many smiths actually comprised the Yamakichibei atelier in those years? This question then leads to others: assuming, as this author does, that there were as many as five smiths working in the Yamakichibei atelier during the Momoyama and/or early-Edo Periods, how should we understand their chronology? That is, which of these smiths was the true *Shodai*, which the *Nidai*, and so on?

## How Many Smiths?

When considering the question of Yamakichibei forgeries, Okamoto Yasukazu states that, “...production of fake Yamakichibei-*tsuba* already started very early in Owari province. Among them there are works which have a magnificent iron and an excellent *deki* [workmanship]. Such pieces are hard to distinguish from original works...” (74). Okamoto goes on to say that, “...in most cases, such pieces with an excellent *deki*, where you can hardly tell the difference from an original [genuine] work, can...be judged correctly after a close examination of the signature,” and adds that, “[w]hen one understands the...essential points of the signature style, it is easy to spot irregularities and make out forgeries” (74). What Okamoto is ultimately saying here is that the primary, if not only way to tell the difference from genuine Yamakichibei works and those which are superbly-made forgeries is via the (differences in the) signatures in the respective tsuba. Note that Okamoto is speaking of those sword guards which are of very high quality, being of such excellence that they could be taken for genuine Yamakichibei work were it not for the differences in the *mei*.

It is true enough that there do exist tsuba with a Yamakichibei *mei* that are very well made and which do not differ greatly in terms of aesthetic sensibility and expression, design, construction methods, material, and finish from tsuba which are understood to be the works of the (two) *Shodai* and the *Nidai*, respectively. Though subtle differences in some or all of these aspects do exist among the Yamakichibei smiths, Okamoto would have us understand that the way to judge with confidence the difference between these “fake” Yamakichibei and the real thing is via signature differences. These signature differences are clearly apparent when comparing the *mei* of the *Shodai* and *Nidai*, on the one hand, and those present on the “fake” pieces, on the other.

However, Okamoto appears to be working off of a questionable assumption, namely, that the classical understanding of there having been only two/three genuine early (Momoyama to earliest-Edo) Yamakichibei smiths has been established as factual. But has it? Where is the evidence that there were not more than the two or three the classical understanding recognizes? Are there period documents that confirm that there were *only* these few? Okamoto does note that there exist “...handed-down transmissions regarding the *Shodai* and *Nidai*, [which are] now in the Tokugawa Museum...,” and goes on to observe that “...these transmissions [however] do not contain any information on a Yamasaka-*mei*” (70). Okamoto makes these statements in the context of considering the working periods of the *Shodai* and *Nidai*, where it is noted that these transmissions appear to document the move from Kiyosu to Nagoya of both the [*Meijin*] *Shodai* and the *Nidai* between 1610 and 1613 (70). But his comments that the “transmissions do not contain any information on a Yamasaka-*mei*” stand out: since there is no question that Yamasaka Kichibei tsuba exist (that is, tsuba with a Yamasaka *mei*), and since the transmissions Okamoto references do not mention Yamasaka-*mei* guards, we are left to conclude that these documents do not present a complete picture of the actual Yamakichibei group in those years. It is more than possible that the reason the transmissions do not mention a Yamasaka *mei* is that Yamasaka Kichibei (may have) worked some 30-40 years prior to the time the documents in question were written, and that therefore, he wouldn’t be mentioned in materials that had to do with the move of Owari Province headquarters from Kiyosu to Nagoya. Nevertheless, his not being included in these transmissions allows for significant doubt to exist as to the notion that these documents record the *only* two Yamakichibei smiths working in Momoyama and early Edo.

If then, there is no concrete evidence that there were only two or three smiths comprising the Momoyama to early-Edo Yamakichibei atelier, this leaves open the possibility that there were more. Okamoto's recognizing that there were tsuba being made "very early in Owari Province" with a Yamakichibei *mei*, that some have "a magnificent iron and an excellent *deki*," and whose only (or main) feature differentiating them from *Shodai* or *Nidai* work is the *mei*, really should be seen as casting serious doubt on the classical understanding that there were only two or three early Yamakichibei smiths.

With the above in mind, we must consider how many smiths might actually compose the Yamakichibei atelier in the Momoyama and early-Edo Periods. A careful examination of hundreds of tsuba carrying a Yamakichibei *mei* points to there having been four, and probably five smiths working within these periods. It is likely that the work of one or both of these other men is what Okamoto is referencing when he speaks of the "magnificent iron" and "excellent *deki*" seen in the best Yamakichibei "forgeries."

The conclusion that these two smiths were part of the early atelier, and were not later artists making copies of or *homages* to early Yamakichibei works, is based on a few factors. One of these is Okamoto's comments on there having been such excellent pieces being made very early in Owari Province. While "very early" is a relative term, it is hard to imagine this language being applied to a later time than the early Kan'ei Era (1625 - 1644), and probably not later than Genna (1615 - 1624).

Another factor is that there is a sharp and stark demarcation in quality between much of the work of these two smiths and that of all other (non-*Shodai* or *Nidai*) tsuba with a Yamakichibei inscription. This latter includes the tsuba of the two Norisuke *tsubako* working in 19th-century Owari, who were famous for their *homages* to Yamakichibei sword guards, among other *utsushi* (inspired emulation of master works). The Norisuke "Yamakichibei" pieces are occasionally confused for genuine early Yamakichibei works by some, but scrupulous study will reveal clear differences between their tsuba and genuine early Yamakichibei guards in terms of workmanship and sensitivity to the details of Yamakichibei aesthetics. Besides the tsuba made by the Norisuke *tsubako*, there exist hundreds (or more) of Yamakichibei copies, pieces whose overall quality, derivative nature, and misapprehension of true Yamakichibei sensibilities and techniques make them easily and immediately recognizable as forgeries. One might imagine that Okamoto's comments emerge out of his seeing and acknowledging this sharp qualitative difference.

A third consideration giving rise to the conclusion that these two smiths were part of the early Yamakichibei atelier is the sheer number of pieces extant which are distinctively theirs. That is, the many tsuba which carry their respective *mei* are consistent in their conception, form, design, execution, finish, and the rendering of their *mei*. This is in addition to their elevated quality level. Those later workers who would "try their hand" at copying a Yamakichibei tsuba would never be able to achieve the consistency seen in the work of these two men. Such consistency is much more in keeping with a deep devotion to, practice in, and understanding of true Yamakichibei sensibilities.

Finally, there are observable influences in the workmanship of one of these smiths on that of the other. While the argument being made here is that these men were part of the early Yamakichibei atelier, there is a tighter connection between them than between the other Yamakichibei smiths (the classically understood *Shodai* and *Nidai*), on the one hand, and these two, on the other. This suggests that there may have been some sort of gap between the working periods of one group (*O-Shodai*, *Meijin-Shodai*, *Nidai*) and those of these other two artists. Another possibility is that these two branched off from the others in some capacity, perhaps forming a "secondary" Yamakichibei workshop. In any event, the similarities seen in the tsuba of these two men, strongly suggestive of direct influence of one on the other, when taken together with the number of pieces extant by each, contribute to the conclusion that theirs was a relatively long and deeply invested working period. Their tsuba cannot, therefore, be convincingly dismissed as later forgeries.



Figure 9. *Dango* and *inome* (dumplings and boar's eyes) *sukashi* tsuba. *Nagamaru-gata*. *Mei*: Yamakichibei ("Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei"). A very fine tsuba featuring outstanding *yakite-shitate* and *tekkotsu*. Note the placement of the horizontal strokes of the *kichi ji* (the central character) of the Yamakichibei *mei*. These two strokes are located very close together relative to the placement of the same strokes by the other Yamakichibei smiths. Most often, too, these strokes will be of very similar length in the signature of "Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei, as can be seen in the photo here. The effect something akin to parallel lines, and is a distinctive feature of the signature of this smith.



Figure 10. *Miminaga Usagi* or *Tombo sukashi* tsuba. *Muttsu-mokko-gata*. *Mei*: Yamakichibei ("Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei"). Once again, a beautiful effect is realized via the combination of *tekkotsu* on the plate and a *yakite-shitate* treatment. Note the "parallel strokes" of the *kichi ji* in the signature.



Figure 11. Bird in Fight *sukashi* tsuba. *Naga-mokko-gata* (tall lobed shape). *Mei*: Yamakichibei (“Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei”). This sword guard employs strong hammer-work together with light *yakite-shitate*, which offers a striking contrast with the grace of the bird in flight. The signature of this Yamakichibei artist is usually not as well-formed and consistent in its rendering as are the *mei* of the other Yamakichibei smiths, presenting here in a rather “hurried” scrawl. This has led me to refer to him as “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei.” One interesting note about this Yamakichibei is that his sword guards are often larger than those of the other artists in the atelier, and present as a bit more “rustic” as well.

Figure 12. *O-Sanshouo* (Japanese Giant Salamander)? *sukashi* tsuba. *Naga-mokko-gata*. *Mei*: Yamakichibei (“Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei”). The motif here is uncertain, but the rendering of the *sukashi* is reminiscent of the form of the Japanese Giant Salamander. The plate treatment of this guard is very similar to the preceding example, as is the shape, though this one also has very faint inter-cardinal lines radiating from the *seppa-dai* toward the *mimi*. In addition to the relatively “scrawled” quality of the signature, the tsuba is also noteworthy for another tell-tale sign of this artist’s work: the round punch marks at various points around the *nakago-ana*.

## Who is Who, and When?

For ease of reference, I will refer to these two other artists as “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” and “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei.” The reasons for these appellations are as follows:

One smith employs a very low upper horizontal stroke in his rendering of the *kichi ji* (middle character in the Yamakichibei name) in the *mei*; that is, unlike all of the other Yamakichibei artists, this one locates the upper horizontal stroke in the *kichi ji* very near the lower horizontal stroke. The gap between them is thus narrow, and amplifies the visual effect that the two strokes appear as parallel lines. This habit is not only quite distinct from that of each of the other Yamakichibei smiths in the inscribing of their signatures, but is quite consistent in the *mei* of this one smith. “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” thus would seem to be a suitable way to reference this artist. (Figures 9 and 10)

The other of these two men employs a *mei* that presents on the plate as a loose, relatively inconsistent rendering of the *ji* (characters) comprising the Yamakichibei name. The effect is one of scrawl, rather than a tight and consistent forming and placing of the *ji*. His inconsistency, however, is distinct for that, and thus allows his *mei* to stand out from those of the others, hence the use of “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” to refer to this man and his work. Additionally, the tsuba of this Yamakichibei smith very frequently include round punch marks at various places on the *seppa-dai* around the *nakago-ana*; this feature, too, sets his guards apart from the rest. (Figures 11 and 12)

As mentioned earlier, since there are no documents extant (to the knowledge of the author) which positively identify the work of a specific Yamakichibei smith as that of the *Shodai* or *Nidai*, we cannot know for certain which man is being referenced in the classical understanding when the terms *Shodai* and *Nidai* are used. There is of course a “tradition” wherein this understanding recognizes the work/*mei* of one man as that of the *O-Shodai*, the *Meijin-Shodai*, or the *Nidai*, respectively, but again, this is merely the tradition: no hard and fast concrete evidence exists to prove these understandings to be factual. So how do we go about pursuing the truth of the matter? The most promising path lies in combining a close analysis of the tsuba themselves with an in-depth appreciation of relevant socio-cultural and political contexts present in Momoyama and early-Edo Japan. Applying this approach, while also questioning and challenging certain assumptions informing the classical understanding, may allow us to gain greater clarity and confidence in arriving at more reliable conclusions. Doing so, then, two different theories emerge as compelling alternatives to the classical understanding.

\*Part 2 of this article will present two alternative theories to the classical understanding of the Yamakichibei group of *tsubako*. Certain specifics in the workmanship, motifs used, and details in the *mei* of each of the five early artists will be examined toward supporting one of these alternative theories as the most plausible understanding of the Yamakichibei atelier. The Conclusion will focus on recognizing the lofty standing of Yamakichibei tsuba in the world of Japanese sword fittings.

## Alternative Theories of The Lineage.

Part 1 of this article provided an overview of the classical understanding of the Yamakichibei group of tsubako working in the Momoyama and early-Edo Periods. Featured here was an examination of the traditional beliefs about who these smiths were, how many of them composed the early Yamakichibei atelier, when they lived and worked, and where. Part 1 also introduced problems for the classical understanding concerning particularly the number and sequence of Yamakichibei smiths. Now the article presents two theories offering alternative viewpoints and aimed at challenging the classical understanding.

### Alternative Theory 1

One tsuba scholar, Bruce Kirkpatrick, who has some fifty years in the field of tsuba study and connoisseurship, has posited not only that there are (at least) these five Yamakichibei smiths working in the Momoyama Period, but also that “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” and “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei,” respectively, are the actual *Shodai* and *Nidai* of the atelier. He has their beginnings in the early 1590s, basing this contention both on key political and cultural circumstances present in those years and on the workmanship evident in the tsuba made by these two men.

The early 1590s saw Toyotomi Hidetsugu, Hideyoshi’s nephew, appointed as the castellan at Owari’s Kiyosu Castle. For over 100 years prior to Hidetsugu’s lordship of the castle, various members of the Oda clan had been in place there, and from this seat of power, they controlled key areas of the province as well. Kiyosu was a major castle town of the Sengoku Period, having been developed as such by Oda Nobunaga. Some of the greatest *tsubako* in Japanese history are associated with Kiyosu in the late-Muromachi and Momoyama Periods, including the two great Nobuie smiths, Kawaguchi Hoan, and of course, the Yamakichibei group. As Nobunaga is recognized as having created the practice of presenting art works (in addition to or instead of the traditional lands, horses, gold, etc...) as gifts or rewards to vassals, allies, and others, and given the broad importance of the sword culturally and semiotically, we may tentatively surmise that Kiyosu was something of a hotbed for the practice of high-level sword guards being made for high-level individuals. So, by the time Hidetsugu assumed power at Kiyosu Castle, this practice may have been in place for a full twenty years.

In 1591, one year after Hidetsugu was appointed castellan at Kiyosu, Hideyoshi lost his legitimate heir, Tsurumatsu, who died in childhood, and subsequently appointed Hidetsugu *kampaku* (Imperial Regent), in order that Hidetsugu be in charge of domestic matters while Hideyoshi pursued his plans for invading Korea. Hidetsugu thus occupied both posts simultaneously until his death by *seppuku* (ritual suicide) in 1595.

Another significant event occurred in 1591 as well: Hideyoshi commanded that the famous Tea Master Sen no Rikyu



Figure 13. Iga ceramic *mizusashi* (water container). Momoyama Period. The Daimyo Tea Master Furuta Oribe is supposed to have appreciated this vessel highly. It is thought to express his aesthetic sensibilities particularly well.

Figure 14. *Oribeguro chawan*. Momoyama Period. Developed around the year 1600, this form of Oribe ware illustrates the distortion or “warping” Furuta Oribe favored in Tea aesthetics

Figure 15. *Kuro Oribe chawan*. Momoyama Period. Again, the warped shape of the bowl may be seen to express Oribe ideals concerning Tea aesthetics. The fresh, bold use of the motif enhances and complements the overall design.

(known, too, as Sen Soeki) commit *seppuku*. The reasons for this are outside the scope of this article to pursue in depth, but it is commonly understood that they had to do with personality conflicts and differences of opinion concerning a number of issues, both personal and philosophical, including matters of propriety as regards Tea Practice and aesthetic tastes. After Rikyu’s demise, the role of primary Tea Master was taken by the daimyo Furuta Oribe, whose Tea sensibilities were strikingly different from those of his teacher, Rikyu. Unlike Rikyu’s *wabi-suki* (later called *wabi-cha*) Tea, which emphasized a simple, quiet, rustic expression, that of Oribe prized a bolder and more direct Way of Tea, one which featured distorted, exaggerated, powerful forms. The Iga *mizusashi* (water container) known as “Burst Pouch” is supposed to have been a piece he especially favored (Figure 13). Two related types of *chawan* (tea bowl) are referred to as *Oribeguro* (Oribe Black) and *Kuro-Oribe* (Black Oribe), as they are thought to have been developed from Oribe’s influence (Figures 14 and 15, respectively). From 1591 until his own death by *seppuku* in 1615, Oribe’s aesthetic sensibilities were to have a profound influence on Tea culture in Japan.

The importance of Tea for the upper classes during the Momoyama Period can hardly be overstated. Essentially, Tea was seen as integral to *Buke* life in this time; a number of famous daimyo were known to have been obsessed with the practice of *cha-no-yu*, its philosophical and aesthetic concerns, and the material forms thought to embody and/or express key associated principles, such as *wabi*, *sabi*, *yugen*, and *mono-no-aware*, among others.\* The intersecting of Hidetsugu’s time both as castellan at Kiyosu Castle and as *kampaku* during the early 1590s, and Oribe’s ascendance as the preeminent Tea Master in those same years, is a key dynamic informing Kirkpatrick’s ideas regarding the likely true Shodai (“Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei”) and Nidai (“Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei”) of the atelier. The thinking here is that, if Hidetsugu saw the value in and sought to continue the Nobunaga-established practice of presenting art works as gifts or rewards, especially in his role as *kampaku*, the “chic” sort of gift to present to important personages might or would be one that expressed the new (Oribe) aesthetic of the day. The aesthetic principles and tastes connected to Tea, however, were not limited to the articles associated with *cha-no-yu*. They could also be found in other material objects, including and especially in the high-end tsuba of the period. Such tsuba would make an eminently appropriate gift or reward to a loyal vassal or trusted ally.

According to Kirkpatrick, the sword guards of “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” and “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” best



Figure 16. Bird and sickle(?) *sukashi* tsuba. *Muttsu mokko-gata*. *Mei*: Yamakichibei (“Low-crossbar-*mei*” Yamakichibei). A powerful sword guard, it features a striking combination of a somewhat distorted, uneven shape, bold *tekkotsu*, and a lively *yakite* effect. Some would see this piece as the epitome of Oribe aesthetic sensibilities as expressed in a tsuba. This piece has achieved *Juyo* status



Figure 17. *Katabami* (oxalis blossom) *sukashi* tsuba (the author cannot determine the other *sukashi* element). *Kobushi-gata* (“fist”-shape). *Mei*: Yamakichibei (“Scrawled-*mei*” Yamakichibei). The *kobushi-gata* form of this guard certainly exudes the distortion prized in the Oribe Tea sensibility. The *uchikaeshi-mimi*, aggressive *tsuchime*, and use of the *katabami* (oxalis blossom) *sukashi* element all point to the influence of *Nidai* Yamakichibei.

embody the Oribe vogue of the early- to mid-1590s, being arguably the boldest, most exaggerated or distorted in form and treatment of the five (or more) early Yamakichibei masters (Figures 16 and 17). This theory would then have Yamasaka Kichibei as the third master, with the smiths classically known as “*Meijin-Shodai*” and the “*Nidai*” following, respectively, as the fourth and fifth. It is important to note here that Kirkpatrick does not see the active period of the early Yamakichibei atelier as a long and extended one. He argues that the more extreme a particular fashion is, the shorter is its time of popularity. And since Yamakichibei tsuba occupy a fairly extreme end of the aesthetic spectrum, being as bold and powerful as they are, it then follows that the duration of the atelier’s popularity must have been relatively brief, perhaps on the order of some twenty-five years, or even half that. What this suggests, then, is that the five smiths in question were working in very close proximity to one another, chronologically, with quite a bit of overlap in terms of which smiths were working with others.

Kirkpatrick’s ideas here are more than plausible on several fronts. Certainly, the idea that high-level tsuba could or would have been given as gifts or rewards is convincing. It is not in dispute that such objects as tea bowls, iron kettles, and water jars—all objects intimately linked with Tea—were prized items in the practices of gift exchange and presenting of rewards. And since high-level tsuba could embody both the martial values of the *Buke*, on the one hand, and important aesthetic principles connected to Tea, on the other, they may be seen as an ideal object for use in such exchanges and presentations in these years. Equally in no doubt is the potency of Oribe’s aesthetic

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\*Note: the definitions/translations of these terms is notoriously difficult, requiring detailed explanation and elaboration, and so will not be provided here.

influences. It is therefore not an overreach to see the possibility, if not even the likelihood, that Yamakichibei sword guards—as the epitome of Oribe’s aesthetic sensibilities in tsuba—would represent something close to the ultimate in tsuba to be used for the above-mentioned practices. Finally, the logic that the more extreme a fashion, the shorter is the sustenance of its popularity, is unexceptionable. And as stated above, Yamakichibei tsuba are a relatively extreme form in the art of the sword guard. When these reasons are taken together, Kirkpatrick’s contention that “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” and “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” were the first two masters of the atelier indeed may be seen to have considerable merit.

As to why he has “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei,” rather than “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei,” as the *Shodai*, his reasons concern, in large part, what he sees as an intriguing similarity between the workmanship in the tsuba of the contemporary Nobuie smith known as “*Futoji-meï*” (thickly-chiseled signature) and that in the tsuba of “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei.” He thus posits a connection of sorts between the two, one that he views as significantly more pronounced than what might be seen between Nobuie guards and “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” tsuba (or between Nobuie works and those of the other three Yamakichibei smiths, for that matter). This “connection,” however, is implausible in the eyes of the author, and at any rate, is beyond the scope of this article to pursue.

## Alternative Theory 2

The second alternative theory to the classical understanding overlaps with the first in that it, too, recognizes these five smiths as composing the early Yamakichibei group. It also sees Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hidetsugu, and Furuta Oribe playing integral parts in the ascendancy of the Yamakichibei atelier in the Momoyama Period. Finally, its views of the practice of presenting works of art as rewards or gifts in the context of the flourishing Tea Culture — and the role of Yamakichibei tsuba in this practice — align tightly with those of the first alternative theory. The second alternative theory, in fact, departs from the first primarily in only two significant ways — the sequence of smiths, and the duration of the working period of the Yamakichibei atelier.

Unlike the first alternative theory, which has “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” as the *Shodai*, and “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” as the *Nidai*, the second alternative theory places these two smiths as the last of the five, with “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” preceding “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” as the fourth smith in the group, after the *Nidai*. “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei,” then, would be the last of the five forming the early Yamakichibei atelier. This theory in fact agrees with the classical understanding in seeing the *O-Shodai*, Yamasaka Kichibei as the true first master, followed by the *Meijin-Shodai*, and then the *Nidai*. Where it differs from the classical understanding, of course, is in its recognizing “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” and “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” as smiths actually belonging to the atelier.

Why, then, does the second alternative theory diverge from the first? There are a number of reasons.



Figure 18. *Nata-mon* (hatchet crest) *sukashi* tsuba. *Nagamaru-gata*. *Mei*: Yamakichibei (Yamasaka Kichibei). An incredibly powerful sword guard, this piece exhibits the matchless strength of Yamasaka Kichibei works when at their best. Featuring a variety of tekkotsu enhanced beautifully by the yakite treatment, this tsuba's motif is direct and bold. The *sukashi* elements seems almost "hacked out" of the iron, creating an exhilarating martial effect.



Figure 19. *Nata-mon* and bird or hat *sukashi* tsuba. *Nagamaru-gata*. *Mei*: Yamakichibei (Yamasaka Kichibei). Another potent work by Yamasaka Kichibei. It has many of the same features as the tsuba in Figure 18. It is important to note that, in both of these sword guards, the *mei* reads "Yamakichibei," only, rather than "Yamasaka Kichibei." These two pieces are strong evidence for the assertion that the *O-Shodai* signed some (later?) pieces only "Yamakichibei." The workmanship and the rendering of the *mei* here are all markedly different from that of any of the other Yamakichibei smiths.

## Influence from One Smith to the Next

The first alternative theory posits that the actual sequence of smiths proceeds from "Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei" as the first, to "Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei" as the second, to Yamasaka Kichibei as the third, and then on to the *tsubako* referred to in the classical understanding as *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei and *Nidai* Yamakichibei, in that order. Again, it must be remembered that this theory holds that the working period of the Yamakichibei group was probably quite brief, perhaps only two or three decades, if even this long. If we assume that there was a single Yamakichibei atelier in which all of the smiths worked during their years of producing tsuba, we would likely anticipate seeing a reasonably high degree of influence — in workmanship, design, and/or motif use — from one or more smith(s) preceding the next. That is, the sword guards made by one smith we might expect to present with clear signs of having been informed or inspired by the work of the smith(s) who came before. Our expectations would only be enhanced by the understanding that the duration of the Yamakichibei workshop was relatively brief, since this would mean a greater likelihood that two or three (or more) of the smiths were working together at the same time. And, indeed, we can see such influence in the tsuba of Yamasaka Kichibei on those of the *Meijin-Shodai*, and then again in the works of the *Meijin-Shodai* on those of the *Nidai*. There are clear elements connecting one to the next in construction, design, and subject matter. Too, we can recognize in certain details of workmanship some connection between the sword guards made by "Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei" and those made by "Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei," suggesting a relatively close relationship between them.

According to the first alternative theory's sequence of smiths, and applying the above reasoning, we should be able to observe clear signs of influence from "Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei" on Yamasaka Kichibei, since these are the smiths whom the theory has as the *Nidai* and the *Sandai*, respectively. In fact, however, there is a wide gap to be seen between them in the workmanship, design, and motifs employed.

One significant difference to be noted is in the workmanship of the plate. Yamasaka Kichibei plates are lively. There are strong variations in the contouring and hammer work. Signs of folding are often evident. *Tekkotsu* are bold, abundant, or both, and the *yakite shitate* effect often quite pronounced, especially as it impacts the protruding *tekkotsu*, creating highlights in surface “activity” (Figures 18 and 19). “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” plates, on the other hand, rarely achieve the same degree of expressiveness we observe in Yamasaka Kichibei work, being rather flatter and quieter. More specifically, they do not present with the richly varying contours or boldness of *tekkotsu* seen in Yamasaka Kichibei tsuba, though their *yakite shitate* can be potent at times. Indications of folding tend not to be present. “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei,” too, sometimes used *kebori* (carving on the surface of the plate) in the form of lines radiating out in an ordinal fashion from the *seppa-dai* (Figures 11 and 12). Yamasaka Kichibei did not. Though the workmanship in the tsuba made by these smiths, respectively, retains and exudes a distinctive “Yamakichibei sensibility,” there is nevertheless a clear demarcation between the two here.

Next, while Yamasaka Kichibei favored *nade-mokko-gata* or *nagamaru-gata* for the shapes of his tsuba, seldom



Figure 20. *Kuruma-sukashi* tsuba. *Nagamaru-gata*. *Mei*: Yamasaka Kichibei. A classic example of the O-Shodai's wheel design. He did not utilize a true *marugata* (round shape), preferring either *nade-mokko-gata* or *nagamaru-gata*. This tsuba exhibits a beautifully modulated form, with much *hataraki* (activity) to be seen in the *ji* (ground or plate of the tsuba).



Figure 21. *Kuruma-sukashi* tsuba. *Nagamarue-gata*. *Mei*: Yamasaka Kichibei. This tsuba is similar to that in Figure 20; however, this example is of a lighter, more “airy” form. It is interesting to compare the two for their different effects.

employing the classic four-lobed *mokko-gata*, “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” relied on the four-lobed or six-lobed *mokko-gata* almost exclusively. The author knows of only one tsuba by this smith that is *nagamaru-gata*, and none that is *nade-mokko-gata*. Further, Yamasaka Kichibei rarely, if ever, utilized raised rims (*uchikaeshi-mimi* or *sukinokoshi-mimi*) in creating his sword guards. “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei,” however, did occasionally enhance the shapes of his *mokko-gata* tsuba with a raised rim (in a manner that is rather reminiscent of the *Nidai's uchikaeshi mimi*).

Finally, the motifs favored by each smith have almost nothing in common. Yamasaka Kichibei is justly famous for his *kuruma-sukashi* (“wheel-shaped” openwork) tsuba. In fact, the majority of his works employ this motif, whether in *nade-mokko-gata*, *nagamaru mokko-gata*, or even four-lobed *mokko-gata* (Figures 1, 2, 20, and 21). Those pieces that are not *kuruma-sukashi* designs present with motifs, such as birds and *nata* (hatchet), rendered in relatively

large *sukashi* apertures (Figures 18 and 19). One might assume, given the predominance of the *kuruma-sukashi* design in Yamasaka Kichibei sword guards, that it would also be found among the tsuba of “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei,” perhaps even being favored as much as it clearly was by Yamasaka Kichibei. It is striking, then, to find that, to the best of the author’s knowledge, there is not a single example of a “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” tsuba employing this motif/design. Additionally, all “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” works that do offer a motif (some are made *sans* motif) do so utilizing *ko-sukashi* (small apertures) only; no *ji-sukashi* (openwork) pieces are extant as far as the author knows. In this way, too, the sword guards of this smith depart strikingly from those of Yamasaka Kichibei.

It thus seems unlikely that, if “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” were Yamasaka Kichibei’s immediate predecessor, as the first alternative theory would have it, there would be such a marked difference in all of the above-noted details. Though any one of these differences by itself may be unlikely to raise doubts about this theory’s contention regarding the sequence of smiths, when workmanship, design, and motif are considered together, it becomes more difficult to see the plausibility of the theory’s assertions here.

## Cultural and Historical Considerations

Another major reason for the second alternative theory’s diverging from the first concerns again the *kuruma-sukashi* design and motif, this time in a broader cultural and historical context. The *kuruma-sukashi* tsuba was not



Figure 22. *Kuruma-sukashi* tsuba. *Nagamaru-gata*. *Mei*: Nobuie (*Shodai*). Nobuie was another master *tsubako* believed to have been living in Kiyosu at the same time as Yamasaka Kichibei. This tsuba is of a more “finished” form than what we see in the two Yamasaka Kichibei examples in Figures 20 and 21. Nobuie here employs a *karakusa* (scrolling-vine) motif in *kebori* (fine line engraving) along the perimeter and “spokes” of the wheel.



Figure 23. *Kuruma-sukashi* tsuba. *Nagamaru-gata*. *Mei*: Hoan. Kawaguchi Hoan was another contemporary smith residing in Kiyosu at the time of Yamasaka Kichibei. He is justly famous for his superb wheel designs in tsuba. This sword guard, a masterpiece held by the Tokyo National Museum, is a tour-de-force of martial strength. The *yakite* effect on this piece is especially noteworthy. He and the *O-Shodai* Yamakichibei are recognized by many to have made the finest *kuruma-sukashi* tsuba in Japanese history.



Figure 24. *Kuruma-sukashi* tsuba. *Nagamaru-gata*. *Mei*: Yamakichibei (*Meijin-Shodai*). This tsuba well illustrates the influence of the *O-Shodai* on *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei. The design and treatment of the plate, which is bristling with *hataraki*, combine to form an expressive work.

unique to the Yamakichibei atelier. In fact, during the late-Muromachi and Momoyama Periods, it appears to have been quite a popular type. Of particular interest here, though, is the fact that such major *tsubako* as Kawaguchi Hoan, as well as both the *Shodai* and the *Nidai* Nobuie made celebrated works of this kind, with the *kuruma-sukashi* sword guards of Hoan and Yamasaka Kichibei, especially, being admired for their superb quality (Figures 22 and 23).

The classical understanding of the Yamakichibei group has Yamasaka Kichibei and Kawaguchi Hoan not only as contemporaries, but also as “neighbors” residing in Kiyosu. Both of the Nobuie smiths, too, are believed to have lived in Kiyosu, serving Oda Nobunaga, during the 1570s and on into the 1580s. It is evident that the *kuruma-sukashi* design was one held in high esteem among the *buke* of Kiyosu and the larger Owari region during the early- to mid-Momoyama years. Therefore, with the *kuruma-sukashi* tsuba being such a prominent hallmark of Yamasaka Kichibei, as well as among these other celebrated Kiyosu *tsubako*, and since this type of guard apparently was not made by “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei,” we are left to wonder about the likelihood that “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” would have been either contemporaneous with Kawaguchi Hoan and the two Nobuie, on the one hand, or Yamasaka Kichibei’s predecessor, on the other. It is worth noting, additionally, that the *Meijin-Shodai* also produced *kuruma-sukashi* designs much in keeping with the sensibilities of Yamasaka Kichibei, though in a somewhat more subdued expression (Figure 24).



Figure 25. *Kuruma-sukashi* tsuba. *Nagamaru-gata*. *Mei*: Yamakichibei (*Nidai*). This is the only example of a *Nidai*-made *kuruma-sukashi* sword guard known to the author. *Nidai* works are encountered with more frequency than either *O-Shodai* or *Meijin-Shodai* pieces, so for this to be such a rarely seen design/motif by the *Nidai* suggests he didn't make many. While an excellent tsuba, this example doesn't have the same power and vigor to be seen in those illustrated in Figures 20 and 24.

The *Nidai*, however, very rarely produced *kuruma-sukashi* tsuba; the author is aware of only one such work extant (Figure 25). So it seems that the popularity of this motif in Owari may have waned some as the 16th century drew to a close. Prior to that, however, in the Kiyosu of the early and middle Momoyama Period, the *Shodai* and *Nidai* Nobuie, Kawaguchi Hoan, and both Yamasaka Kichibei and *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei all made masterpieces utilizing the *kuruma-sukashi* design. Ultimately, then, considering for the moment the matter of motif and design only, both within the Yamakichibei atelier itself and more broadly in Kiyosu and Owari in the 1570s and 1580s, it seems more plausible that the classical understanding's recognizing of Yamasaka Kichibei as the actual *O-Shodai* of the Yamakichibei group would be correct.

## What's in a Name?

The final point the second alternative theory would advance concerning Yamasaka Kichibei's place in the sequence of smiths is the questionable likelihood of the third smith in the sequence departing from his predecessors by adding an element to the art or trade name the group had been using. According to the first alternative theory, both "Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei" and "Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei" preceded Yamasaka Kichibei in the atelier. Both of these would-be prior smiths signed only "Yamakichibei." With this "art name" established by prior members of the group, then, and considering the great respect given to one's elders, teachers, and/or predecessors in Japanese culture, it strains credulity to suppose that this "third smith" would be so "bold" as to add "Saka" to the Yamakichibei name. What would elicit this? Would such a move be accepted or allowed, either within the workshop or among those these smiths served? While it is not impossible that this could be the case, it strikes this author as improbable. Further, as was noted in Part 1, Okamoto states that "[t]he first generation was called 'Yamasaka Kichibei Shigenori'...and it is said that he was an armour smith working for Oda Nobunaga." The fact that Okamoto would be able to cite "Shigenori" as part of Yamasaka Kichibei's full name suggests some level of certainty or confidence about at least this smith's actual name (after all, where would the name "Shigenori" be conjured up from if not factually belonging to the man in question?), and may indicate, too, that the other information — his having been an armorer for Nobunaga — is reliable. Together, these two points regarding Yamasaka Kichibei's name cast serious doubt on the possibility that he was only the third smith in the sequence of Yamakichibei *tsubako*.

## The Most Oribe of Them All

As was stated earlier, the first alternative theory asserts that the tsuba of "Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei" and "Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei," among the five smiths of the group, best embody the Oribe Tea aesthetic that was so



Figure 26. *Kuro-Oribe chawan*. Momoyama Period. The extreme “warping” of the this bowl’s form exemplifies one of the definitive features of this ware. The effect achieved via this distortion is only enhanced by the split in the wall of the bowl. Such a “defect” is understood to emphasize the process by which such works were made, a much appreciated quality. Yamakichibei tsuba were and are valued for much the same thing.

ascendent in the early- to mid-1590s. The Oribe Tea sensibility is one that prized boldness, often expressed through the exaggerated distortion of form and energized contrast of aesthetic and design elements (Figures 13, 14, 15, and 26). The first alternative theory views the sword guards of these two smiths as most in keeping with this sensibility (Figures 11, 12, 16, and 17). Such a viewpoint, though, is subjective, and in fact, this author sees the tsuba of the *Nidai* as likely the most Oribe of them all. The *Nidai* achieves this boldness through a combination of design choices, two of the most prominent being his magnificent *uchikaeshi-mimi* and his aggressive *tsuchime*. The rims on *Nidai* Yamakichibei works exude strength and confidence via their pronounced presence on the guard, but also through the “warping” of the edge of the hammered-down material onto the plate. This edge rarely maintains an even form for long, changing its contours as it travels along the perimeter of the plate, sometimes manifesting as a scalloped line, and others as a massive ridge. At still other times, the rim “slides off” the plate completely, vanishing from view until reappearing further along the plate’s edge. The effect created is one of terrific liveliness, expressing power here, delicacy there; in the opinion of the author, no other *tsubako* achieved such “life” in the rims of his sword guards (Figures 7, 27, and 28), and in so doing, capturing the “distorted” Oribe aesthetic sense so well.

Of scarcely less importance for “expressing Oribe” is the *Nidai*’s use of exceptionally powerful *tsuchime*. Often eschewing *yakite* effects in favor of tour-de-force hammer-work, the *Nidai* employed the boldest *tsuchime* of all the Yamakichibei smiths. That he was able to do so without slipping into crudeness or self-parody is a testament to his exquisite sharpness of vision and mastery of craft. Oribe *chawan* are the antithesis of sobriety, gentleness, or preciousness (Figures 14, 15, and 26); *Nidai* Yamakichibei tsuba echo the rejection of such values in favor of a martial directness and confidence, invigorated only further by the skewing of its forms (Figures 29, and 30).

Furuta Oribe reigned as the pre-eminent Tea Master in Japan from the time of Rikyu’s demise in 1591 to his own in 1615. *Oribeguro* and *Kuro Oribe* (Black Oribe) *chawan* are thought to have been developed very close to the turn of the



Figure 27. *Katabami-sukashi tsuba* (the *katabami* element is a later soft-metal insert). *Nade-mokko-gata*. Mei: Yamakichibei (*Nidai*). A magnificent sword guard, this piece shows the *Nidai*'s mastery of form and treatment. While there is much to appreciate in his use of *tsuchime* and engraving here, it is the *uchikaeshi-mimi* that especially stands out. The variation of line and mass, of contour and "scalloped" edge-work, is exhilarating. The *Nidai* is considered by some to have made the greatest *uchikaeshi-mimi* of all the *tsubako* in the history of Japan.



Figure 28. *Ame* (rain) motif *ita* (solid plate) tsuba. *Marugata*. Mei: Yamakichibei (*Nidai*). In this tsuba, the *Nidai* has carved broken vertical lines, some slightly slanted, to depict rainfall. The achieved motif, combined with the masterful *tsuchime* and classic *Nidai* rim, make for a superb sword guard, combining the lyricism of the subject matter with the strength of the metal work.



Figure 29. *Sukashi* tsuba. Unknown motif. *Mei*: Yamakichibei (*Nidai*). Another example here of the *Nidai*'s unique combination of *uchikaeshi-mimi* and aggressive *tsuchime*. This piece may be seen to embody the aesthetic sensibility of Furuta Oribe quite well.

Figure 30. *Moji* (Chinese Characters) *sukashi* tsuba. *Nade-mokko-gata*. *Mei*: Yamakichibei (*Nidai*). The interpretation of the motif here is Sasano Masayuki's as stated in his book, *Early Japanese Sword Guards*, where this tsuba is illustrated. However, he also says the subject matter is uncertain. Whatever it may be, the rim and hammer work the guard features are done in the classic *Nidai* sensibility. Juxtaposed against this strong, martial expression is the placement and rendering of the motif elements, which seem to be tumbling or "dancing" on the plate. This contrast creates terrific energy in the tsuba's overall presentation.

17th century, and it is these black-glazed forms that Yamakichibei tsuba mostly closely connect with, aesthetically. As was mentioned in Part 1, Okamoto in *Owari To Mikawa no Tanko* notes that the *Nidai*'s move from Kiyosu to Nagoya in or around 1613 is "documented," which likely means he had been working as an established smith in the Yamakichibei atelier in the years prior to that. How many years is difficult to say for certain, of course. But is more than plausible that he may have been a key figure in the atelier during much of Oribe's time as Japan's pre-eminent Tea Master, including the years just after the development of Oribe ware circa 1600. Given that his dates may be seen to "fit" the timeline of Oribe's term as Tea Master, and given that the specific aesthetic features of *Nidai* Yamakichibei tsuba arguably mirror those of Oribe *chawan* the most closely, it is possible to have some confidence in dating at least a good portion of the working life of *Nidai* Yamakichibei to the earliest years of the 17th-century.

### From *Nidai* Yamakichibei to "Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei"

The second alternative theory sees "Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei as the fourth man in the sequence of smiths, following the *Nidai*. Besides the reasons offered above for why "Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei" is not likely to have been one of the first two *tsubako* in the atelier, there are other signs pointing to some fairly close relationship between the *Nidai* and this smith.

Among the five Yamakichibei *tsubako*, the use of *uchikaeshi-mimi* is either unknown or rare in the tsuba of both the *O-Shodai* and the *Meijin-Shodai*. The author knows of no confirmed examples by either smith. The *Nidai*, however, is



Figure 31. *Tomoe* (“comma”) and *katabami sukashi* tsuba. Six-lobed blossom shape. *Mei*: Yamakichibei (*Nidai*). With this tsuba we see one of the *Nidai*’s favorite motif elements used — the *katabami*. This motif was not used by either Yamasaka Kichibei or the *Meijin-Shodai*. This tsuba is a masterpiece of form and surface treatment. When he was not employing powerful hammer work in the finishing of the surface of a tsuba, the *Nidai* often used a superbly-rendered *amida-yasuri* (fine-line engraving radiating from the *seppa-dai* to the *mimi*). See Figure 7 for another example. It can probably be said that the three elements the *Nidai* is most well known for are his *uchikaeshi mimi*, bold *tsuchime*, and exceptionally adroitly-done *amida-yasuri*.

Figure 32. *Katabami sukashi* tsuba. *Mokko-gata*. *Mei*: Yamakichibei (“Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei”). Among the five early Yamakichibei smiths, it is the *Nidai* and “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” who employed the *katabami* motif. The author does not know of any tsuba by the other smiths of the atelier who used in in their tsuba. By itself, this fact does not prove a close association between the *Nidai* and “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” (i.e. the *Nidai* was his immediate predecessor and/or teacher), but it may be seen to hint at it.

famous for his rims, and both “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” and “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” occasionally used raised rims in the design of their guards. The first alternative theory’s placing of these two smiths as the *Shodai* and *Nidai*, respectively, means that Yamasaka Kichibei and *Meijin-Shodai*, as the third and fourth, would have halted the use of *uchikaeshi-mimi* in the making of their sword guards before the *Nidai* suddenly decided to start employing them again. It seems doubtful that such would be the case. The fact that the only three of the Yamakichibei *tsubako* to use raised rims are the *Nidai*, “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei,” and “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” could indicate some relatively close connection among them, but by itself, it is not enough.

Perhaps the most intriguing detail linking the *Nidai* and “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” is the motif elements shared by



Figure 33. Unknown motif *sukashi* tsuba. *Mokko-gata*. *Mei*: Yamakichibei (“Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei”). As with the use of the *katabami* motif, the employing of this one — which resembles the edge of an I-beam or a capital letter “I” — appears to have been a practice only of the *Nidai* and “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei (though there is a tsuba extant that features this motif and whose maker may have been “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” or “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei”). The author is unaware of any tsuba made by the *O-Shodai* or the *Meijin-Shodai* bearing this element.



Figure 34. Unknown motif and *dango* (skewered dumpling) *sukashi* tsuba. *Mokko-gata*. *Mei*: Yamakichibei (“Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei”). Though worn, the workmanship is that of “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei.” Again, the I-beam *sukashi* element is seen. As noted, its use is limited to the *Nidai* and “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei,” implying perhaps a tight connection between them (i.e. the latter followed the former in the sequence of smiths). The specific placement of the element here is suggestive, too: the *Nidai* frequently favored locating this element in the same place on the tsuba (see Figure 6).

these two smiths. Two of these the *Nidai* utilized with some frequency: the *katabami* (Oxalis) blossom, and an abstract element resembling a capital letter “I” or the edge of an I-beam, sometimes in disjointed form (Figures 6, 30, and 31). Both of these motif elements appear on a number of his tsuba. Neither Yamasaka Kichibei nor *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei are known by the author to have used either of these, and “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” appears rarely, if ever, to have done so. The tsuba of “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei,” however, do sometimes feature them (Figures 17, 32, 33, and 34). Again, taken by itself, the fact that the *Nidai* and “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” shared motif elements not used by the other Yamakichibei smiths does not prove a tight association between them; it merely points to the possibility.

Lastly, it could be argued that among the tsuba of the five Yamakichibei artists, the tsuba of the *Nidai* and those of “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” are the most “Oribe” in their aesthetic expression. “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” works can be quite misshapen and distorted, and their motif elements can be as abstract as those seen on Oribe *chawan* (Figures 12 and 17). Since a good portion of the *Nidai*’s working period coincided with Furuta Oribe’s time as Japan’s foremost Tea Master, if “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” was the next man in the sequence and working for a time with the *Nidai*, it might be expected that his tsuba would also carry signs of the Oribe aesthetic sensibility. And indeed, some certainly do.

Taken together, these three considerations suggest a link between the *Nidai* and “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” that is stronger than that the first alternative theory implicitly posits between the latter smith and Yamasaka Kichibei.



Figure 35. Abstract *suskashi* tsuba. *Mokko-gata*. Mei: Yamakichibei (“Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei”). The *suskashi* work here recalls the *kuruma-suskashi* of the *O-Shodai* and *Meijin-Shodai*, but is not nearly complete enough to actually represent that motif. Whatever subject the tsuba aims to depict, the workmanship — featuring outstanding *tsuchime*, *tekkotsu*, and *yakite* treatment — confirms the superb ability of this Yamakichibei smith. \*Note: the use of lead plugs for the *hitsuana* (holes next to the *seppa-dai*) is known as *Owari-ume*, and seems to be a practice particularly associated with Owari province, though it is not limited to it.



Figure 36. *Dango sukashi* tsuba. *Muttsu-mokko-gata*. Mei: Yamakichibei (“Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei”). Another masterwork by “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei.” When he himself made pieces to the best of his ability, he was as good as any other smith in the early Yamakichibei atelier. However, the majority of extant tsuba carrying this *mei* are not close to the quality of the tsuba here or that seen in Figure 35, suggesting that students may be responsible for making a good many of the tsuba bearing the low-crossbar-*mei*, either as *daisaku* works (made by students but signed by the master) or as *daimei* pieces (made and signed by students with the master’s permission).

## Daisaku, Daimei?

The final piece of the puzzle as to why the second alternative theory departs from the first concerns the strong possibility that many tsuba produced late in the life of the Yamakichibei atelier came from the hands of students, rather than any of the five master smiths. This suspicion is based on two things: 1. The number of extant sword guards carrying the low-crossbar *mei*; 2. The relative quality of the majority of these pieces.

In the author's experience, there would seem to be as many "Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei" works in existence as there are works by the other four smiths *combined*, perhaps more. It is possible, of course, that a single artist could enjoy a long working life, and thus produce a large number of pieces. So, the sheer number of extant tsuba with the low-crossbar *mei* isn't necessarily indicative of (m)any having been made by students. Nevertheless, one wonders about the disparity in prolificacy between "Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei," on the one hand, and the rest of the smiths in the atelier, on the other. Could this disparity be explained by the possibility that students actually made some tsuba, which the master then signed (*daisaku* works), or even that students both made and signed pieces (*daimei* works) with the permission of the master (faithfully copying his *mei*)? It certainly seems possible, but by itself, the mere fact of the number of extant tsuba carrying the low-crossbar *mei* is not sufficient to be able to draw such conclusions, or even, perhaps, to entertain the likelihood.

However, it is not the *quantity* of tsuba with this *mei* alone that raises suspicions, but the *quality* — or lack thereof —



Figures 37 - 42). These tsuba are likely daisaku or daimei works. The quality of workmanship in these examples varies, but none come close to that seen in the sword guards illustrated in Figures 9, 35, and 36. These daisaku/daimei works are almost always small (under 74mm), mokko-gata expressions, utilizing a narrow range of motifs, usually rendered in rote fashion.

evident in the majority of tsuba with the low-crossbar *mei*. To be sure, there are some “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” works which are masterpieces (Figures 9, 35, and 36), and at least one (Figure 16) has even attained *Juyo* status (recognized as an “Important Sword Fitting”). It is pieces such as these, in fact, which reinforce the belief for both the first and second alternative theories that “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” was indeed an important and outstanding smith in the Momoyama to early-Edo Yamakichibei atelier. But the vast majority of sword guards carrying the low-crossbar *mei* present variously as relatively uninspired, rote, and/or self-derivative. The same few motifs and forms are repeated endlessly, mostly in small four-lobed *mokko-gata* pieces rarely measuring larger than 74mm, and often under 70mm. These tsuba carry the “Yamakichibei” signature, and they clearly express the “Yamakichibei” style and sensibility, but many come across as lifeless, as hollow shells of the real thing when compared to the genuine masterworks the atelier produced in those years. They are reminiscent of souvenirs, items one might pick up as a gift or as a memento of one’s time traveling through Nagoya in Owari province, perhaps on the way to or from Edo. As such, they can have the feel of a factory-produced good, though some are better than others (Figures 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, and 42).

Bruce Kirkpatrick, author of the first alternative theory, sees the “Yamakichibei” inscription as a sort of trademark or brand name for their product, rather than as a signature proper. While one might quibble about the effective difference between the two, it is still an intriguing, even compelling idea. Such a conception, in fact, would seem to align well with the notion of a “Yamakichibei factory” of sorts. But even if this picture has merit, does it mean that all five of the Yamakichibei smiths were “factory workers” across the entirety of the life of their atelier? This is highly doubtful. Beyond the fact of the relative dearth of extant *O-Shodai* and *Meijin Shodai* pieces — suggesting the lack of mass-production — the advent of the “factory” artisan workshop may not yet have dawned with much force in the latter decades of the 16th century, and such may likely have been even less the case in the provinces. However one may conceive of signed Yamakichibei work — whether as trademarked good or unique art/craft object — there certainly was no churning out of dozens or hundreds of small, dull, cookie-cutter sword guards in the time of the *O-Shodai* or *Meijin-Shodai*.

Even in the *Nidai*’s time, spanning perhaps from the 1590s on into the 1610s or 1620s, it is questionable how established the idea and practice of the “factory” artisan workshop may have been, but it is probable that it was further along than it had been a generation or two earlier, especially over the latter half of the *Nidai*’s working life. If this is true, and one then considers both the quantity and quality of the great majority of tsuba carrying the low-crossbar *mei*, one may arrive at the tentative conclusion that both can be explained by the late Yamakichibei atelier becoming a “factory” operating in the 1620s, 1630s, perhaps even later.

Who would the “factory workers” have been, then? Students. Students involved in different aspects of tsuba production, from the forging and shaping of the plates, to the cutting of (standard-issue) sukashi elements, to the application of yakite effects, to even the signing of the works (in the case of *daime*i pieces). For at least part of such a “factory’s” existence, the master himself would have overseen the operation, even adding his *mei* to approved pieces (*daisaku* tsuba). He may even have continued to make special-order tsuba himself.

All of the above concerning the possibility of a late-Yamakichibei “factory” as described — with students mass-producing small *daisaku* and/or *daime*i sword guards — is conjectural, of course. However questionable this conjecture may or may not be, however, the fact remains that it is only those Yamakichibei tsuba bearing a low-crossbar *mei* that present in such large numbers and with such relatively low quality. Is it more likely that this fact is better accounted for by the first alternative theory’s contention that “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” is the actual *Shodai*, or by the second alternative theory’s assertion that this smith is the *last* of the five early Yamakichibei smiths? Though there can be no certainty in one’s answer to this question, the author believes the thesis of the second alternative theory to hold more merit.

## The Rise and Fall of the Yamakichibei Atelier

According to the first alternative theory, the Yamakichibei group emerged in the early 1590s, achieving prominence in the dominant *Buke-Tea* Culture of the day before fading from view as a thriving atelier by or before the end of the Momoyama Period. This theory thus sees the duration of the atelier as somewhere between twelve and twenty-five years. As noted previously, this understanding is borne out of the idea that the more extreme a particular style or fashion is, the shorter is its time of popularity. And Yamakichibei sword guards were certainly not mainstream. There

does not appear to be any problem with the logic of this understanding, but certain factors bring the second alternative theory to diverge from the first on this matter.

The first of these assumes that the sequence of smiths is correct, and concerns the sources that place Yamasaka Kichibei in Kiyosu during the Genki Era (1570-1573), as well as identifying him with the full name, Yamasaka Kichibei Shigenori. The same and/or other sources have said that he was employed by Oda Nobunaga as an armorer (apparently in addition or prior to his becoming a *tsubako*), and since Nobunaga died in 1582, the statement that Yamasaka Kichibei was living and working in Kiyosu in the Genki Era is plausible, though the Nobunaga association may be apocryphal. The author cannot be sure of the reliability of these sources, but the specificity of the details do at least suggest the possibility of veracity here.

Also to be considered is the possibility that, as a smith local to Kiyosu, Yamasaka Kichibei may not have had his work seen by many outside of this castle town. He may have made only a few tsuba (especially if his primary work was that of an armorer), and when he did make a sword guard, it may have been a special order of sorts. It could even be the case that he didn't teach the *Meijin Shodai* until as late as the 1580s or even the 1590s, which could be when the larger popularity of Yamakichibei tsuba expanded. In this way, then, the key idea informing the first alternative theory's views of the duration of the atelier may not be so far away from how the second alternative theory sees it.

Be the above as it may, the other factor driving the second alternative theory to part ways with the first on the question of duration has to do with the ideas regarding a Yamakichibei "factory" presented in the *Daisaku, Daimei?* section above. The author sees the case being that, if such a "factory" in truth existed, it likely began as a "factory" in the 1610s or 1620s, and continued as a successful operation until the 1630s or even 1640s. This estimate is based mostly on the sheer number of small, rote Yamakichibei tsuba bearing the low-crossbar *mei*, indicating a reasonably long period of production, perhaps 10-25 years or so. Also considered here, however, is the growing phenomenon of the "factory" artisan workshop in the early-Edo Period, which included such burgeoning tsuba "Schools" as the Shoami, Choshu, and Bushu/Ito. This phenomenon appears less likely to have existed, or at least to have been as ascendant, in the Momoyama years.

Between these two factors, the second alternative theory views the rise of the Yamakichibei group as coinciding with the beginning of the Azuchi-Momoyama Period in the late 1560s or early 1570s, with the atelier continuing for some 60-70 years in total, if one counts the time during which the Yamakichibei "factory" was operating. If the "factory" years are excluded, and the focus is only on works of the five smiths from Yamasaka Kichibei to "Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei" (prior to the latter heading up the "factory"), the time might span some 10-20 years less.

Whichever theory (if either) may be correct as concerns the matter of the duration of the Yamakichibei atelier, it was a relatively short-lived "school" compared to many.

\*Part 3 of this article will address the matter of signatures among the five Yamakichibei smiths, offering a comparative examination toward arguing that key aspects of the classical understanding of the Yamakichibei group are in error. The article will end with a summing up of main points, as well as the sharing of final thoughts in the Conclusion, emphasizing the high status of Yamakichibei tsuba in the world of the Japanese Sword.

## Comparative Analysis of the Signatures of The Five Smiths

Part 2 of this article presented two alternative theories to the classical understanding of the Yamakichibei group of *tsubako* working in the Momoyama and early-Edo Periods. Emphasis was placed on important cultural and historical considerations, such as the role of Tea Culture and its association with the *Buke*, as well as on specifics concerning Yamakichibei tsuba themselves. These included the design and construction of pieces, the motifs employed, and the influence of one smith on another in such areas. Part 2 also examined further the question of the number and sequence of Yamakichibei *tsubako*. The article now turns to the matter of signatures on particular Yamakichibei sword guards, presenting an analysis of key details present in the *mei*. This analysis works to support the

contention that the classical understanding of this group of smiths, namely, that there were only three (or perhaps even only two) men comprising the Yamakichibei atelier in this period, is in error. The article will then conclude with final thoughts on the status of Yamakichibei tsuba in the world of the Japanese Sword.

*\*Errata:* In Part 2, Figures 29 and 30 were transposed. Text pertaining to the tsuba in Figure 29 was used in reference to Figure 30, and vice versa.

## The Matter of Signatures

To provide easy reference, close-up images of the five Yamakichibei smiths' respective signatures are reproduced here:



Figure 43 (left). *Mei*, Yamasaka Kichibei. Figure 44 (center). *Mei*, Yamakichibei. In some cases, Yamasaka Kichibei signed only “Yamakichibei.” This is one such example. Figure 45 (right). *Mei*, Yamakichibei. *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei.

*Mei* of Yamasaka Kichibei. (Figure 43).

*Mei* of Yamasaka Kichibei chiseled as “Yamakichibei.” (Figure 44).

*Mei* of *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei. (Figure 45).

*Mei* of *Nidai* Yamakichibei. (Figures 46, 47, 48, 49).

*Mei* of “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei.” (Figures 50, 51, 52).

*Mei* of “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei.” (Figure 53).



**Fig.46**(left). *Mei*, Yamakichibei. *Nidai*. The soft curve the the second stroke of the “Yama” *ji*, moving from the upper left of the *ji* to form the horizontal line of the character, is thought to be from the smith’s early working period.

**Fig.47**(middle, left). *Mei*, Yamakichibei. *Nidai*. Here the version of the *Nidai*’s signature with the harply-angled forming of the second stroke of the “Yama” *ji* is seen.

**Fig.48**(middle, right). *Mei*, Yamakichibei. *Nidai*. Another example of the *Nidai*’s signature. Whether the “Yama” *ji* is rendered with a soft curving lower stroke or a sharply-angled one, the *Nidai* always chisels this character with the left-most part leaning inwards towards the center.

**Fig.49**(right). *Mei*, Yamakichibei. *Nidai*. A less pronounced version of the sharp-angled “Yama” *ji* in the *Nidai mei*.



**Figure 50 (left).** *Mei*, Yamakichibei. “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei.” The signature of this smith is rendered in a less consistent, more scrawling fashion, hence the moniker.

**Figure 51 (center).** *Mei*, Yamakichibei. “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei.” This smith’s work also presents with a *tagane-mei* (chisel marks so associated with a certain smith that they form a sort of “secondary signature”) unique to him: the round punch marks around the *nakago-ana* are not seen in the tsuba of any of the other Yamakichibei smiths.

**Figure 52 (right).** *Mei*, Yamakichibei. “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei.” Again, the loosely-fashioned characters and round punch marks around the *nakago-ana* can be seen.

For the purposes of this article’s argument, the primary concerns as regards signatures involves the *mei* of *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei (Figure 45) and of “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” (Figure 53), respectively. The reasons for this are two. First, while there is some disagreement over whether Yamasaka Kichibei is the same smith as the *Meijin-Shodai*, the general consensus is that the former is not the same man as the latter. Further, tsuba seen as actual works of both men will be recognized (and papered) by the classical understanding as genuine. So there is little need for this article to examine closely the differences to be seen in the *mei* of these two *tsubako*. Second, setting aside the matter of whether Yamasaka Kichibei is the same smith as *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei, it is the sword guards of “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” which are at times confused with and/or seen by many authorities as the work of *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei.

It must be remembered, then, that the classical understanding recognizes at most only the three early smiths — Yamasaka Kichibei, *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei, and *Nidai* Yamakichibei. The classical understanding, therefore, posits that any other “Yamakichibei” tsuba are either later works (e.g. *Sakura* Yamakichibei, working at least 30-40 years after the *Nidai*), or fakes/copies.

As noted in Part 1, however, Okamoto Yasukazu in *Owari To Mikawa no Tanko* states that, “...production of fake Yamakichibei-*tsuba* already started very early in Owari province. Among them there are works which have a magnificent iron and an excellent *deki* [workmanship]. Such pieces are hard to distinguish from original works...” (74). He continues by asserting that, “...in most cases, such pieces with an excellent *deki*, where you can hardly tell the difference from an original [genuine] work, can...be judged correctly after a close examination of the signature,” and stresses that, “[w]hen one understands the...essential points of the signature style, it is easy to spot irregularities and make out forgeries” (74). Okamoto thus suggests that, fundamentally, the primary or even perhaps only way really to be able to distinguish between excellent-quality genuine Yamakichibei work and excellent-quality contemporary forgeries (whose material, workmanship, design, etc... is similar enough to be convincing on its own) is by examining the respective *mei* and knowing what constitutes the correct signature on a genuine Yamakichibei tsuba.

Okamoto’s comments here would seem implicitly to be concerned with differentiating those sword guards with a *Meijin-Shodai* signature (genuine) from those with a low-crossbar signature (forgery), as among the many tsuba the classical understanding would declare to be forgeries, it is those carrying the low-crossbar *mei* that are most often mistakenly seen as *Meijin-Shodai* works. This would seem to be due to a perception that the form or style of the low-crossbar *mei* is very close to that of the *Meijin-Shodai mei*. In fact, in some circles within the classical understanding, it is said that such “minor differences” as may be seen in the forming of the *Meijin-Shodai mei* are taken as “acceptable variations” in his signature.

It is thus the case that the *Nihon Bijutsu Token Hozon Kyokai* (NBTHK) has certified (papered) a number of “Low-



Figure 53. *Mei*, Yamakichibei. “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei.” This image illustrates all five of the features differentiating a low-crossbar signature from that of the *Meijin-Shodai*: a low central stroke in the “Yama” *ji*; the close-together, rather parallel forming of the two horizontal strokes in the “Kichi” *ji*; the manner of rendering the “feet” at the end of the “legs” at the bottom of this character (in the low-crossbar *mei*, these structures are “bisected” by the ends of the “legs,” and may also be chiseled such that they are not connected to the end-points of the “legs”); the “legs” themselves are often placed significantly farther apart than would usually be seen in a *Meijin-Shodai* signature; and the upper stroke of the upper-left structure of the “Bei” *ji* (which resembles a sideways “V”) hangs over the lower stroke of this structure in the manner of the eave of a roof.

crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” tsuba *as* *Meijin-Shodai* works (Figures 54 - 58). We can conclude that these tsuba are being taken as *Meijin-Shodai* works from the fact that since the classical understanding (which the NBTHK would be a part of) recognizes only the three early Yamakichibei smiths, any pre-1640 tsuba with a Yamakichibei *mei* that is papered by the NBTHK is therefore being implicitly attributed to a work by Yamasaka Kichibei, *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei, or *Nidai* Yamakichibei. And since the signature of “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” differs significantly from those of Yamasaka Kichibei and *Nidai* Yamakichibei, this leaves the necessary implication that any papered Yamakichibei sword guard with a low-crossbar *mei* has been recognized and certified in fact *as* a *Meijin-Shodai* tsuba. It is argued here that the NBTHK/classical understanding errs when it sees “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” works as *Meijin-Shodai* works as it has done (via the papering of such tsuba) in many instances.

This contention will be supported by analyzing key details in the respective signatures of *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei and “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei.” Before doing so, however, the assertion put forth in the classical understanding that minor variations in the forming of the *mei* of *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei explain noteworthy discrepancies must be examined more closely.

The notion that the “small discrepancies” seen in the forming of the *Meijin-Shodai* signature represent “minor and acceptable variations” would seem to rely on the idea that such discrepancies would occur here and there, one at a time,

rather than all at once, en masse. After all, if these are occasional deviations from a norm, the expectation would logically be that their appearance would manifest as an exception here with one *ji* in the *mei*, perhaps, and maybe an exception there with another *ji* in the *mei*, and that over time, the signature would gradually morph into one where these deviations appeared more often, working collectively and eventually to form a “new norm” in the way the smith chiseled his signature. In this case, then, we should anticipate seeing a significant number of Yamakichibei tsuba with both some clear features of a *Meijin-Shodai* signature and some clear features of a “low-crossbar version” of this smith’s signature, respectively. These would represent “missing-link” examples. And again, because our expectation of such a morphing should be one where that morphing occurs gradually, there is no reason to assume a dearth of such pieces in existence, especially when a sizable number of both “pure” *Meijin-Shodai* and Low-crossbar-Mei works are extant.

What are we to make, then, of the fact that these missing-link pieces are nowhere to be found?

In examining the respective signatures of *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei and “Low-crossbar-mei Yamakichibei,” there are five discrete differences to be found between them (sometimes, there will be a sixth and even a seventh as well). One (or as many as three) of these has to do with the “Yama” *ji*, three concern the “Kichi” *ji*, and one more involves the “Bei” *ji*. Let us examine these, one at a time.

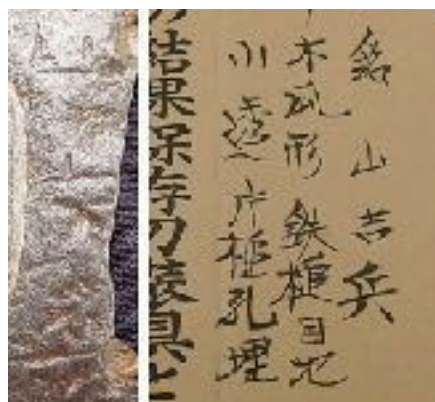


Figure 54 (top left). A “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” tsuba which was recognized (papered) by the NBTHK (as a *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei sword guard).

Figure 55 (top middle). The NBTHK paper for the tsuba pictured in Figure 54.

Figure 56 (top right). Close up images of the *mei* on the tsuba in Figure 54 and of the NBTHK attribution in Figure 55, respectively.

Figure 57 (bottom left). Another no-doubter “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” sword guard, papered by the NBTHK to (*Meijin-Shodai*) “Yamakichibei.”

Figure 58 (bottom right). This tsuba — clearly a “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” work — was not only papered (as a *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei) by the NBTHK, but achieved a *Juyo*-class paper. What is striking about this fact is that works attaining *Juyo*-level status have certainly been scrupulously examined and carefully considered while undergoing the *Juyo* deliberations process, and yet this tsuba, with a *mei* clearly distinct from that of the actual *Meijin-Shodai*, nevertheless was assigned a *Juyo* paper.

In the signature of *Meijin-Shodai*, he forms his “Yama” *ji* very consistently with regard to a few key details. First, the central initial stroke *always* appears at least partially above the uppermost tip of the adjacent left vertical stroke. At times, the entire central stroke lies above the left-hand vertical stroke completely. But it *never* occurs that the entire central stroke rests below the uppermost tip of the left-hand vertical stroke. Further, the central stroke of *Meijin-Shodai*’s “Yama” *ji* *never* actually touches the lower horizontal stroke (Figure 59). In the *mei* of “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei,” however, both of these can occur: the central stroke is sometimes lower *in its entirety* than the left-hand vertical stroke, and this central stroke at times does even touch the lower horizontal stroke (Figure 60). Moreover, the central stroke of a low-crossbar *mei* *never* rides entirely above the upper tip of the left-hand vertical stroke. These important differences in the rendering of the two respective “Yama” *ji*, then, become substantively if only partially diagnostic in differentiating between the two *mei*.

Additional differences between the two “Yama” *ji* may be seen, too, though they are not as fully reliable as those observed above. These include the following: the left-hand vertical stroke and the adjoining horizontal stroke (which are actually one long stroke) will always be essentially right-angled in the *Meijin-Shodai* signature (Figure 61); in the signature of “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei,” however, the left-hand vertical “stroke” can be either right-angled or somewhat inclined inward (Figure 62). Also, the horizontal “stroke” in the *Meijin-Shodai* “Yama” *ji* will almost always present as





**Figure 59 (top left).** *Mei*, Yamakichibei. *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei. Note the high placement of the central vertical stroke in the “Yama” *ji*. **Figure 60 (top center).** *Mei*, Yamakichibei. “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei.” Note the low placement of the central vertical stroke in the “Yama” *ji*. Such a placement is never seen in the signature of *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei. **Figure 61 (top right).** *Mei*, Yamakichibei. *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei. The second stroke of the “Yama” *ji* is rendered as a sharp right angle, a characteristic feature of this smith’s *mei*. **Figure 62 (bottom left).** *Mei*, Yamakichibei. “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei.” Here, the left-most vertical stroke in the “Yama” *ji* may be seen to be clearly “leaning in” toward the center of the character. Such a rendering of this stroke is not seen in a *Meijin-Shodai* signature. **Figure 63 (bottom middle).** *Mei*, Yamakichibei. *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei. The horizontal stroke forming the bottom of the “Yama” *ji* can be seen here to be angled upward toward the right. This is a frequent, if subtle, habit of the *Meijin-Shodai* when chiseling his *mei*; however, this example exhibits an unusually steep angle. An upward-leaning horizontal stroke in the “Yama” *ji* may occasionally be seen in a low-crossbar *mei* as well.

leaning upwards from left to right to some degree (Figure 63); with a low-crossbar signature, this stroke may or may not do the same, but it is as often as not completely “flat.”

When all of the above is taken into account, it becomes possible to distinguish with some confidence between the “Yama” *ji* in the two signatures. Having said this, it must be acknowledged that there are some tsuba by each smith which both have the central stroke “bisected” by the upper tip of the left-hand vertical “stroke” (if a line were drawn from this tip directly to the left and through the middle of the central stroke), which both have a right-angled second stroke (left-hand vertical “stroke” plus connecting horizontal “stroke”), and which both have a horizontal “stroke” that leans upward slightly from left to right. In such cases, where no clear and definite distinction can be made by examining the “Yama” *ji*, the other two *ji* of the respective *mei* must be analyzed.

Three differences between the forming of the “Kichi” *ji* in the respective signatures of the *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei and “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” announce themselves under close examination. Two of these are tell-tale, while the third is more of a tendency than diagnostic as an absolute.

The first of these, of course, concerns the placement and rendering of the upper “crossbar” above the lower horizontal stroke of this *ji*. In the “Kichi” *ji* of the *Meijin-Shodai mei*, this upper crossbar will be located a fair distance from the



**Figure 64 (left).** *Mei*, Yamakichibei. *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei. Note the wide gap between the horizontal strokes in the “Kichi” *ji*, as well as the forming of the “feet” at the ends of the “legs” at the bottom of this character; compare to the forming of these structures in the “Kichi” *ji* seen in the low-crossbar-*mei* signature. It should be observed as well that the “legs” are relatively close together (compare to the distance between the “legs” in a low-crossbar-*mei* “Kichi” *ji*). Note, too, the upper-left structure of the “Bei” *ji*: this “sideways ‘V’” is formed with a sharp point, which differs strikingly from how “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” chiseled this structure in the “Bei” *ji* of his signature. **Figure 65 (center left).** *Mei*, Yamakichibei. “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei.” The narrow gap between the horizontal strokes of the “Kichi” *ji* is typical, as is the “parallel-bars” effect achieved by this narrow gap together with the nearly equal length of each of the strokes. The chiseling of the “feet” here, too, is diagnostic for identifying the low-crossbar *mei*: the “feet” are both separated from their “legs” and “bisected” by the end points of the “legs.” While the separating of the “feet” from the “legs” does not always appear in low-crossbar signatures, it not infrequently seen. The relatively wide space between the “legs” often occurs in low-crossbar signatures as well. **Figure 66 (middle right).** *Mei*, Yamakichibei. *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei. In the “Kichi” *ji*, the right “foot” may be seen to have been formed in a capital letter “L” manner. The “foot” is connected to the “leg.” This is a variation of the way the *Meijin Shodai* rendered the “feet” when chiseling the “Kichi” *ji*. **Figure 67 (right).** *Mei*, Yamakichibei. “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei.” This is the *mei* on the *Juyo* tsuba in Figure 58. Notable here are the narrow gap between the two parallel horizontal strokes of the “Kichi” *ji*, the forming of the “feet” at the ends of widely-separated “legs,” and the dramatic “overhang” of the upper stroke forming the “sideways ‘V’” at the upper-left of the “Bei” *ji*. Any one of these three elements by itself points strongly away from a *Meijin-Shodai* signature; all three together confirm beyond reasonable doubt that this signature is not that of the *Meijin-Shodai*.

lower horizontal stroke; a sizable gap presents between them (Figure 64). Moreover, this upper crossbar will sometimes be shorter, often significantly so, than the lower horizontal stroke. With the “Kichi” *ji* in the signature of “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei,” on the other hand, as this moniker suggests, the placing of this upper crossbar is much lower, riding just above the lower horizontal stroke in the manner of parallel lines. This parallel-lines effect is enhanced by the fact that the upper crossbar is usually of the same length as the lower horizontal stroke (figure 65). This distinction in the rendering of this *ji* in the respective *mei* of the two *tsubako* is so reliable that the descriptive sobriquet applied to the one is wholly warranted.

The second reliable “tell” to note in the forming of the “Kichi” *ji* in the two smiths’ signatures concerns the “feet” at the bottom of the *ji*. These are the very short final strokes of the character, “attached” to the two vertical strokes descending from the lower horizontal stroke in the manner of feet on legs. In the case of the signature of *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei, these short strokes are chiseled either in a sharp diagonal angle away from the bottom of the

“leg” back toward the upper right, or at a right angle from the end point of the “leg,” with the “feet” pointed to the right. The visual effect is something akin to a vertical backwards check-mark in the first case, and to a capital letter “L” in the second. In either manner of rendering this stroke, the “feet” remain connected to the bottom of the “leg” (Figures 59, 66). However, in the low-crossbar *mei*, these “feet” are formed differently. They are often (but not always) detached from the bottom of the “legs,” and rather than looking like the finishing stroke in the rendering of a check-mark or of a capital letter “L,” they usually appear as short lines “bisected” by the end of the “leg,” such that part of each “foot” is to the left of the end point of the “leg,” and part is to the right (Figures 65, 67). Frequently, both of these habits present in “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” signatures, but at least one of them always does.

The third distinction to be seen in the forming of the respective “Kichi” *ji* concerns the “legs” of the character. *Meijin-Shodai* signatures will have these legs rather closer together than will usually be seen in low-crossbar signatures (Figures 59, 64, 66). This difference is not as reliable as those above, which are diagnostic, especially when taken together. However, it occurs often enough to include it as another piece of evidence that a given signature is either that of *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei or of “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei.” In fact, the distance between the “legs” in low-crossbar *mei* is often so great that they are essentially are drawn down from practically the very ends of the lower horizontal stroke, something that is not seen in the “leg” placement of a *Meijin-Shodai* “Kichi” *ji* (Figures 57, 60, 65).

It can be stated with confidence that if a given Yamakichibei tsuba presents with a *mei* whose “Kichi” *ji* is formed with a low upper crossbar which is tightly parallel to the lower horizontal stroke, “feet” which are either detached from the ends of the “legs” or which are “bisected” by those end points, or both, and “legs” that are spaced very widely, this *cannot* be a *Meijin-Shodai* work. These features are distinct enough such that, even when taken *singly*, they strongly suggest a different hand chiseled the *mei* in question. When taken *together*, though, there can be no reasonable doubt. Lest there be any, however, the last character in the Yamakichibei signature offers yet another diagnostic tell.

The “Bei” *ji* in the low-crossbar signature features a final and absolute give-away for the *mei* of this smith: the upper left-hand structure, resembling a sideways “V,” is rendered in such a way that the upper “stroke” of this structure “hangs over” the lower part in the manner of an overhanging eave on a roof (Figures 60, 62, 67). Virtually every low-crossbar *mei* the author has encountered presents with this feature (in those tsuba where the “Bei” *ji* is decipherable). Conversely, this structure in the “Bei” *ji* of *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei, when still present and visible (i.e. not abraded away or cut away to accommodate a *hitsu-ana*), has the upper and lower parts meeting in a sharp point, with no overhang (Figures 64, 66). This is a consistent mannerism in the rendering of this structure for *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei, one which differs markedly from the equally consistent chiseling of this same structure in the signature of “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei.”

Among all of these pronounced differences to be seen in each smith’s forming of his signature, it becomes implausible and ultimately untenable to hold that “minor variations” in the signature of *Meijin-Shodai* Yamakichibei account for such “departures” as observed and described above. Yet this is exactly what the classical understanding posits, as evidenced by NBTHK-papered “*Shodai*” Yamakichibei tsuba carrying a “textbook” low-crossbar *mei*. What is actually the case is that these are two different smiths, both working in the Yamakichibei atelier of the Momoyama to early-Edo Period, both of whom produced masterpieces in iron. Okamoto’s words, recognizing the “magnificent iron and excellent *deki*” of the contemporary “forgeries” of the time, actually hint at this much higher likelihood: these are not forgeries, but legitimate, genuine Yamakichibei works produced by a smith whose tsuba not infrequently fully measure up to those of the others in the atelier. It must be noted, though, that such papered low-crossbar-*mei* examples are from the hand of the master himself: *daisaku* and *daimei* works will not paper, most likely because the quality of these small, often rotely-made sword guards isn’t up to the the expected high standards of Yamakichibei master works, and so are seen as fakes/copies.

## Conclusion

Across its three parts, this article has argued that the classical understanding of the Yamakichibei group of *tsubako* working in Owari Province in the late-16th and early-17th centuries is in error. Specifically, the classical understanding’s recognizing of only three (or even just two) smiths working in the Yamakichibei atelier in these years is problematic. There is no clear, concrete evidence (to the author’s knowledge) of there having been only the three men composing the atelier, and at the same time, there *is* evidence (though perhaps only circumstantial) for as many as five smiths to have been active from the Momoyama to early-Edo Periods. It is possible, as was stated in Part 1, that “Scrawled-*mei* Yamakichibei” and “Low-crossbar-*mei* Yamakichibei” formed an offshoot of the main atelier, and/or worked together a little later than the *Nidai* (i.e. Genna or Kan’ei Periods), as their work does depart in some small

ways from that of the *O-Shodai*, *Meijin-Shodai*, and *Nidai*. Whether or not this is the case, however, the bulk of the evidence squarely places these two smiths in the early Yamakichibei atelier as important members of the workshop.

## Yamakichibei Tsuba: Where Do They Stand?

In his blog entry of October 2nd, 2016, Markus Sesko, a noted scholar of the Japanese Sword and superb translator of Japanese sword and fittings materials, presents the *banzuke* (ranking list) compiled in the Bunsei Period (1818 - 1830) by sword-fittings expert Noda Takaaki. This *banzuke*, entitled *Touken Tsuba Kagami*, offers Noda's ranking of the greatest iron tsuba smiths (those whose works were signed) in Japanese history (he did not include the *kinko* — tsuba artists working in soft metal — in this list). It is worth considering the era in which Noda compiled his ranking. The *Buke* were still extant as the ruling class in Japan, and a strong revivalist sentiment, nostalgic for the martial valor and glory of the past, was ascendant during the Bunsei Period. In this milieu, he constructs his hierarchy of the kings of the iron tsuba world. According to Noda, Yamakichibei stands as one of the greatest *tsubako* in history, ranking behind only the brilliant Nobuie and Kaneie (\*Note: Noda does not make any distinctions here among the various "generations" of smiths of these names. It may be assumed that his references then are to the respective *Shodai*, only). This is to say that in Noda's time, Yamakichibei was seen as a supreme master: among the thousands of *tsubako* across centuries of time, only the two giants of iron tsuba — Nobuie and Kaneie — were perceived to be superior.

Noda's *banzuke* is some two-hundred years old now; where do such smiths stand today? Nobuie and Kaneie retain their lofty positions as all-time greats in the tsuba cosmos, but while Yamakichibei is still respected, it is unclear if the name enjoys quite the same status it did in the Bunsei years. If not, this is a serious oversight of the present-day perspective.

In a world where the term "unique" is among the most overused, Yamakichibei tsuba are unique. Nothing else looks like a Yamakichibei tsuba. They are distinct from all other sword guards, offering an instantly recognizable aesthetic. No other *tsubako* combined *tsuchime*, *yakite-shitate*, *yasuri*, and *tekkotsu* so distinctively and masterfully as did the Yamakichibei smiths. No others brought together design and motif as they did. The bold power of their expression is matched by few if any others. But even beyond their appearance, the sheer quality of workmanship in genuine Yamakichibei guards is second to none. And as metalworks embodying and emanating the values and principles informing the exquisite aesthetics of *Buke* Tea in Momoyama Japan, they are at the top of the mountain, superior to all others. The Yamakichibei *tsubako* stand with the few who produced the very finest sword fittings in Japanese history, and absolutely should be so recognized, as did Noda Takaaki in his *banzuke* of those two hundred years ago.

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