

Kyoto by the Sea

FORGING AHEAD

The Art of Sword Making in Tango

The Tango region is located on the Tango Peninsula about 100 km northwest of Kyoto. A mountainous, seaside area, it has a climate, history and culture very different to those of the “big smoke” of Kyoto, and a more relaxed, rural feel. It also boasts a thriving traditional craft scene—there’s a 1300-year-old silk textile industry and an 800-year-old papermaking tradition still going strong here—that is attracting young artisans from urban areas to set up shop here. Among them are three transplants from Tokyo who moved here to establish the Japanese sword making workshop Nippon Genshōsha.

The Japanese sword is characterized by the beautifully curved and exceptionally sharp single-edged blade (Japanese swords are said to be the sharpest in the world) made with techniques that are centuries old. The curved blade is thought to have evolved from the straight swords of the Asian continent about 900 years ago when samurai began to emerge. The shape made it easier to access to the sword while on horseback.

Interestingly, Japanese swords are considered not only weapons but also works of art. People have historically revered them for their sharpness and mystical sheen, believing that swords housed gods or spiritual powers. The warrior class also cherished their swords as “the soul of the samurai,” treating them as protectors. These traditions and tales add to the endless fascination with swords.



The sparks that fly during forging are from impurities burning off. The steel is folded and hammered up to 15 times, resulting in 32,768 (2 to the 15th power) layers.

The Three Musketeers

Nippon Genshōsha was established in 2019 in Kyotango City by Tomoki Kuromoto, Kōsuke Yamazoe, and Tomoyuki Miyagi. All three were inspired by the samurai movies of their childhood to become swordsmiths and met as apprentices in Tokyo under one of Japan’s top swordsmiths. Despite being at different stages of their training, the three became firm friends.

The workshop in Kyotango was formerly the home of Yamazoe’s grandparents. Kuromoto and Miyagi had no prior connection to the region, but on discovering the area’s ancient ironmaking history and a

nearby tomb from which swords were unearthed, they sensed the hand of destiny.



Tamahagane

Tamahagane, the raw material for Japanese swords, is an extremely pure type of steel made from Japan’s unique iron sand.

The decision to establish a workshop together was motivated by the belief that one person could not singlehandedly pass on the art of swordsmithing to the next generation. Three swordsmiths are better than one, so to speak, when it comes to taking on new challenges. Currently, they are each tackling sword making in their own unique way while opening the workshop to the public and exploring the possibilities of swords as objects of art—they currently offer stunning pieces consisting of a sword suspended in a sleek resin panel. One senses the ambition in this next generation of sword makers.



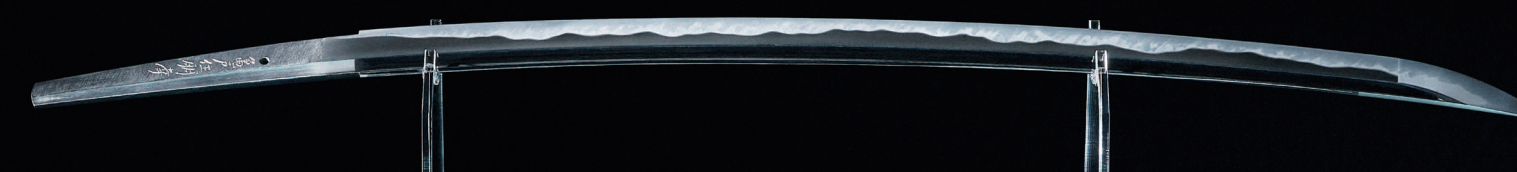
Tomoki Kuromoto



Kōsuke Yamazoe



Tomoyuki Miyagi



Sword

A Japanese sword crafted by Tomoki Kuromoto. The distinctive blade pattern was a signature technique of his master. To better appreciate a sword, take note of ① the overall appearance, ② the edge pattern (*hamon*), and ③ the visible surface pattern of the steel (*jigane*). Detailed explanations are also provided during the workshop tours.

In a Blazing Fire

Opening the door of the forge, we were struck by the dimly lit interior and roaring pine charcoal fire. On the day we visited we observed *tanren*, a critical process in the roughly 15 steps of sword making. *Tanren* or forge folding involves heating a special type of steel called tamahagane, which is repeatedly pounded with large hammers and folded to remove impurities from the steel and maximize its strength and toughness.

The person managing the flame, called a *yokoza*, acts as the leader (on this day it was Kuromoto). He extracts the red-hot tamahagane, heated to 1300 degrees, out of the flame and taps it lightly with a small hammer, after which the other two standing across from him take turns to swing their hammer and pound the tamahagane, sending sparks flying with a resounding clang each time.

The *yokoza* is constantly checking the color and sound of the tamahagane and intervenes as neces-



sary using the small hammer to indicate where and with what degree of force the next blow should land. This is fascinating to watch as the sound and rhythm of the hammers varies each time.

The sword-making process continues over several days. There’s a process that involves wrapping the harder steel we saw today around softer steel, which contributes to the sharpness and durability of the blade. This is followed by *hizukuri*, shaping the sword with a single hammer, and *yaki-ire*, a process that further enhances sharpness by heating the blade to 800 degrees before quenching it in cold water.

Miyagi explains, “I want to create a strong and beautiful sword that uplifts the spirit of the person who holds it.” He especially considers *hizukuri* an important moment of “quiet reflection between the sword and oneself.”



Edge of Perfection

We had the opportunity to hold a sword ourselves on our visit. It was profoundly heavy to hold, and we could feel ourselves tense. The brilliant, gleaming sword was entirely captivating, a perfect form with not a single unnecessary element and the exquisite wave-like edge pattern characteristic of the Japanese sword. Our initial fear of holding it was replaced by an intense sense of emotion. The swordsmith’s single-minded honing of their skills and mind and their relentless pursuit of beauty and functionality all made sense.

Nippon Genshōsha offers several ways in which you can experience the wonders of sword making—something everyone should do at least once in their lifetime! Choose from shorter experiences such as a forge tour, sword appreciation and knife making or full-day and two-day options. Understand Japanese swords and you’ll have a greater understanding of Japan itself.

Nippon Genshōsha

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