Nihonto: Practical Collector's Guide

There are many texts on *Nihonto*, Japanese Sword: catalogues, history books, kantei manuals. It is reasonable to assume that by now the reader already consulted a number of those.

But while they present plenty of opportunities to study, their purpose is not to offer a direct guidance to a beginner collector. What to learn? What to buy? When caution is advised? This manual tries to answer these questions in a straightforward, direct, practical though quite a bit controversial manner.

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Papers.

Let us begin with the most controversial subject among those we are going to cover. Nihonto is one of a very few collectibles where nearly every expensive item is expected to be accompanied by "papers" – written opinions issued by one of the expert panels or "shinsa", of which the one provided by NBTHK is widely accepted as the golden standard. Nevertheless, papers, their true meaning and value have always been a topic which generated many heated discussions. This Chapter is split in four sections: the basics, understanding how kantei or judgement is performed at the top level, how it is reinterpreted by papers and finally how dealers are then reinterpreting the attributions stated in papers.

The Basics.

NBTHK, NTHK or NTHK NPO?

Short answer: NBTHK. Unfortunately, paper market automatically prefers a monopoly. "Second best" papers always generate doubt: could it be that the "first choice" organization previously rejected the item and then the owner repapered it with the "second best" team?

In truth however NTHK offers many advantages:

a. Same day judgement, i.e. providing judgement sheet with attribution. In Japan NTHK NPO shinsa is held every month.
b. Typically alternating NTHK and NTHK NPO shinsa in the USA, held at one of the major sword shows.
c. Always indicating period in attribution, not just confirming the name, which is very important for multi-generation smiths.
d. Somewhat broader range of names used for the attribution.

e. For the shinsa in the US – if the signature is gimei they will write what they think the blade really is but will not issue the certificate. They usually do not offer this service in Japan.

NTHK or NTHK NPO?

Split between the two organizations (NTHK and NTHK NPO) was an ugly affair accompanied by numerous "quiet" accusations, including papers issued to a gimei (?) blade owned by a friend or even somehow connected to an active shinsa member. This however remains irrelevant when it comes to "regular" judgements; there are simply notable differences between how the organizations operate. The split was largely driven by a conflict between two sword experts: Miyano sensei and Yoshikawa sensei. Both were absolutely dominant on the respective shinsa teams (i.e. NTHK NPO and NTHK) and their demise meant that recently the quality and nature of judgements changed *drastically* both with NTHK and NTHK NPO.

My *personal* take is that NTHK NPO has become more conservative compared to NBTHK, preferring generic Muromachi-period attributions like "Kaga" to more advantageous and optimistic assessments. NTHK also evolved its preferences, i.e. there are more "Echizen Seki" attributions which basically means inconsequential early Edo work, there is greater emphasis on "Bungo Yukihiro school", the name given to what NTHK considers Kamakura period's Kyushu work and NBTHK usually papers to Muromachi period's Naminohira or similar school.

NTHK NPO is more notorious for outright factual mistakes on papers, like calling shinogi-zukuri blade "shobu-zukuri", misidentifying hada and so on. The person filling out the initial description form is not part of the shinsa panel and therefore glaring mistakes in description are sometimes made and if undetected, they will appear on certificates issued. They do not affect the attribution which is issued by the panel.

In terms of quality of judgements issued, one can roughly define it as probability that the attribution if resubmitted changes significantly, for better or worse. In my opinion NBTHK had a solid lead between 1990 and 2005, but later the quality degraded, especially at some point after 2015. There were a lot of generic judgements to Bungo, Uda and Shimada, which at times are subjected to substantial re-evaluation. NTHK NPO was a quality choice until Miyano-sensei's demise, but even then once in a while it issued judgements which raised eyebrows. Within the last few years it became very conservative and generic in attributions. NTHK was generally conservative in its judgements under Yoshikawa-senseis, but after the family's demise it also began to significantly diverge from NBTHK judgement standards.

Who serves on shinsa panel? Traditionally the preference always goes to polishers, seen as more independent compared to dealers and by means of their profession having both access to and experience with better blades. NTHK shinsa panel can include active dealers, which can be both good and bad. NBTHK at some point was driven by leadership to become more "academic" by promoting young people with proper history education and credentials, which was later understood to be a mistake.

Hozon or Tokubetsu Hozon?

There is not much distinction in the bottom two grades of the papering world, the only matter of practical importance being that mumei/o-suriage blades from Muromachi period very seldom achieve Tokubetsu Hozon and thus if there is any doubt whether the blade is from Nanbokucho or Muromachi period it makes sense to pursue Tokubetsu Hozon to confirm the earlier date.

As always however there are no absolute rules in nihonto and everything is complicated. It always has been that if a particular blade is considered superior for some reason, it can still get higher grade papers even if it has flaws. For an average blade being retempered or missing hamon in a particular spot means no papers, but a good early Kamakura blade will still get Hozon, possibly Tokubetsu Hozon, and if its exceptionally important even Juyo is a possibility. Mumei Muromachi blades usually don't get Tokubetsu Hozon papers, but there are some borderline Nambokucho/Muromachi smiths (for example, "third generation" Hasebe or Nobukuni, Naoe Shizu) whose most likely Muromachi period's mumei blades can still get Tokubetsu Hozon. Unfortunately this boundary keeps getting more lenient and during some shinsa sessions certificates are issued even to lesser Muromachi mumei blades in reasonably good condition.

Juyo. Juyo papering process adheres to a very different standard compared to lower (Hozon/Tokubetsu Hozon) NBTHK grades. There is a certain number of Juyo spots allocated each year (say, about a hundred), typically plus or minus about 10% from a total number of blades submitted. The allocation can be slightly extended (say, to 110) when there are too many high grade submissions, or lowered if the opposite is true.

Juyo status is thus awarded to roughly 10% of the "best blades" among the ones submitted. What is considered the "best" can be ascertained by looking at the past awards, published in *Juyo Nado Zufu*. If a specific attribution has many Juyo swords, it is likely to receive more in the future. However, with an exception of very few names, Juyo status implies "the better works" even by a master smith. For example, if it is often repeated in books that such and such master is known for his skillfull horimono, it can be expected that the blades with horimono will have a much higher chance to be awarded Juyo, since his other works are by default considered as "lesser" ones. By the same token signed ubu blade is always judged higher than mumei. For post-Nambokucho period mumei works can be awarded Juyo only in exceptional cases. For a daito, longer blade is generally considered superior to a more common, shorter example, etc. etc..

There are dealers who excel in obtaining Juyo certifications because they know these expectations very well. They also know the judges and can pick their brains in regards to different criteria used. For others, the judgement often appears as a very arcane and mysterious process.

When submitting for Juyo or higher (Tokubetsu Juyo or government issued certification) papers, the blade is considered as a package with any additional material (sayagaki, papers, historical records, koshirae) which helps to confirm its attribution or importance. Historical value like association with an important person or early publication might play a significant role in securing high level papers.

One often hears about "tough shinsa year". The issue is that many judgements issued by NBTHK and its individual members during 1973-1979 period have been found lacking by modern standards. During this time and later into the early 80s the number of Juyo awards continuously expanded and many lower grade koto blades were admitted.

As a result, some "lower end" attributions like Mihara from 20-something Juyo shinsa sessions are not particularly respected, though each piece has to be judged strictly on its own merit and a number of first class blades have been awarded Juyo during this period. During the following decades 1980-2010 (30-50s Juyo shinsa) the quality and the number of awards each year visibly oscillated, until in 2010s the decision was made to further reduce the number of awards to the current "100 or below". Therefore post 2010 shinsa years are generally considered as "tough" and the items which received Juyo status tend to be associated with specific, high end attributions and minimal number of blemishes.

Tokubetsu Juyo. (TokuJu) The process is similar to Juyo in a sense that about 10% of the submitted Juyo blades are successful to obtain next level (Tokuju) papers. There is even greater emphasis on the blade representing the very best of a very important school or master. Only a handful of schools were ever awarded this level of certification.

Juyo Bijutsuhin (JuBi). It was a pre-war, government issued designation for "important art objects", a second grade below the national treasure (*kokuho*). Post-WWII this designation has been summarily revoked/abandoned. Some items have been reconfirmed with a similar modern classification rating Juyo Bunkazai (precious cultural object), but the vast majority did not receive any designation. Despite a considerable number of blades that received Juyo Bijutsuhin status they do not come up for sale very often and are considerably expensive, despite the fact that for some of them a modern attribution would differ substantially from the one in Juyo Bijutsuhin papers. It is of note that some of the early Juyo Bijutsuhin certificates are not informative enough to ensure a one-to-one association with the blade (nakago's photograph, for example) and thus can be a subject of fraud.

In the aftermath of WWII most Japanese dealers and collectors were extremely reluctant to see any of the important blades to leave Japan, preferring such items to change hands through private transactions. Such reverence still exists with respect to anything that received a government recognition: if as a foreigner you make it publicly known that you collect Juyo Bijutsuhin, be prepared that a number of jobs or contracts inside Japan will no longer be an option.

Juyo Bunkazai and Kokuho. Second and the top grade of importance respectively, which are assigned by Japanese government to cultural objects (swords including) considered an irreplicable part of national heritage. The export of thus designated objects is allowed only for temporary demonstration and requires about half to two year long approval process supported by recognized domestic and foreign cultural or government entities. Kokuho is generally extended to objects owned by temples or other esteemed institutions over considerable time, with a long history of appraisal and appreciation. Juyo Bunkazai can be awarded to newly discovered objects of extreme importance, though with blades new designations are exceptionally uncommon. The decision to initiate a consideration for an award as well as the decision to award the status is issued strictly on the case by case basis unlike a well established Tokubetsu Juyo process. Such items can be owned by foreigners, however they must be permanently stored in Japan, their ownership and location registered with the government.

There is a lesser category, that of a prefectural important art object. This designation is common with statues or paintings located in a specific prefecture, especially if they were manufactured within the prefecture or were part of an old (usually temple based) local collection, but it is relatively seldom used for blades – usually only in case if the blade belonged to an important historical local resident or was produced by a representative local smith.

Green Papers.

Green papers is a colloquial name for Tokubetsu Kicho papers issued by NBTHK until 1979 and to a lesser extent (as will be explained below) to the same type of papers issued until the system was changed in 1982. The problem is that at the time (till 1979) there were multiple provincial branches issuing papers and it was common to resubmit any "worthy" item to different shinsa panels until the desired attribution was secured, at which point one could even proceed with securing higher papers to the same name from

the main office. The system has been discontinued due to “yakuza scandal”: Fukuoka (Kyushu) office has been papering modern fakes to Kiyomaro and a few other Edo period smiths.

Another contributing factor was the demise of Kanzan Sato sensei in 1978, which marked the end of the whole generation of NBTHK judges, which caused the judging standards to change drastically. Some attributions (like Muramasa) became associated with more specific kantei features and much more seldom issued, and thus the earlier attributions (i.e. green papers) are not expected to be confirmed by the modern shinsa.

Generally green papers are still reliable when the attribution is made to chujosaku rated smiths, as well as any average or above average work from Muromachi period: precise attribution of an unsigned blade like this is more often than not impossible. If the attribution is to Edo period’s first tier smith the default assumption should be that the blade already failed the modern shinsa. If the attribution is associated with a top koto name and the blade is unsigned, usually it means it did receive modern papers, but to a lower level smith. How much lower and how certain is the re-attribution remains a question.

Among the Tokubetsu Kicho papers those issued in 1974-1979, i.e. during the sword market boom coinciding with the resurgent local branches activity, are the most suspect. After 1979/1980 until 1982 the main office continued issuing Tokubetsu Kicho papers with a characteristic red stamp placed on them. These papers tend to represent more conservative judgements, comparable to those of “modern”, post-1982 papers, but caution is still advised.

Kicho, known as White Papers. Lower level judgement compared to green papers. Generally most things stated above do apply. However, It should be noted that most surviving examples are from 1950-1970, i.e. before the rampant popularity of “green papers” and the era of optimistic judgements. If associated with an inexpensive sword the attribution usually presents an acceptable possibility.

Koshu Tokubetsu Kicho or Blue Papers. An interesting case as this paper level has been issued by the central office and was not impacted as much by provincial judgements. It is also roughly equivalent to a better portion of Tokubetsu Hozon judgements, i.e. intended for blades with a clear Juyo potential.

In almost all cases the attribution presented in these papers appears to be both reasonable and possible. However, if it involves a well known name, the question remains why the blade has not be resubmitted for modern papers, and the usual answer is that it has been, but failed to receive a comparable good judgement. As all other papers produced in 1970s, Juyo level included, “blue papers” reflect an optimistic style of appraisal and often a famous name is used in lieu of a more average and representative smith from the same school. Nevertheless, there are cases when a careful consideration would back the attribution stated in “blue papers”.

Horyu deferred judgement. In 95% of cases it is given to a signed blade, usually from the Edo period, where the work is a very good match for the signature, but the signature itself differs significantly in places, but not entirely so, from the ones published in the literature. Judges are uncertain whether the signature should be accepted as authentic, though in principle they do not discard such possibility.

Sayagaki:

Dr. Honma Junji's (Kunzan) sayagaki. Relatively rare, were issued to superior blades, the attribution quality is first tier and almost never successfully challenged by modern experts. Exceptions from "almost" tend to concern Soshu examples where some of Dr. Honma's opinions might not be among the most popular interpretations today.

Michihiro Tanobe sayagaki. Attribution wise it has been argued by many that Michihiro Tanobe sensei's sayagaki are at the same level or even slightly above Dr. Honma's work and also above the quality of attributions of modern NBTHK papers, though some argue it's a subjective matter and his judgement style is often a bit more optimistic compared to the current NBTHK panel. However, the counter-argument is that current NBTHK papers are conservative and sayagaki often present observations that NBTHK setsumei missed, if only because their typical inspection time per blade can be rather short.

Dr. Kanzan Sato sayagaki. Very common, sometimes faked, reliable in 90% of cases, but in remaining 10% are utterly wrong. Can be too optimistic with better quality Bizen and Soshu works. Worst cases tend to be associated with the sayagaki bearing later, post 1974 dates.

Honami Nishu sayagaki. Wrong attribution in 40% of cases, though his supporters argue that there are many fakes. Because Honami Nishu was the next best choice after Dr. Sato Kanzan (who was a prolific sayagaki writer), his sayagaki tends to be associated with lower grade and more questionable blades, though he did polish and wrote sayagaki for a few masterpieces. Often he assigns very famous names to average blades from roughly the same school.

Honami papers.

Honami was a family of polishers, dealers and sword experts supported by the Shogunate. They issued considerable quantity of papers.

The earliest appraisals (pre Honami Kochu, i.e. before the end of 17th century) were usually done as kinzogan mei (gold inlayed signature on the nakago) and are exceptionally rare. Honami Kochu (active mostly in the beginning of the 18th century) and his son produced an exceptional number of written (i.e. as origami "papers" rather than inlaid on nakago) judgements, but there is an astonishing number of fakes which were produced at all times between the late 18th century and modern era. Some fakes are so good they are virtually indistinguishable from the originals. Generally if the blade has only Honami papers, there is a strong chance the papers are fake and the blade is a run of the mill Muromachi period's work. Honami Kochu's judgement is solid, though in some instances (i.e. early Soshu works) there can be a disagreement with the assumptions being made. Unfortunately, there is also a contributing factor that if the modern judgement differs significantly from old papers, they are also automatically considered fake, even if their appearance is 100% genuine – and given the same logic if one encounters Honami papers not accompanied by NBTHK or other certificate it is a good sign the attribution provided is not confirmed by modern judges.

This is especially relevant since later Honami generations opinions are often "hit and miss". Starting with the great economic crisis which occurred in 1710s and basically until after the WWII selling swords was a

very tough business. There was a tremendous “inflation” of attributions and sword scholarship generally declined until being rejuvenated in 1950s.

Important part of Honami legacy are inlaid attributions on the nakago. During the Edo period such operation was considerably expensive and a state backed monopoly of Honami legacy. Typical format is a name followed by kao (personal signature) of the appraiser, but there are those that contain just the attributed name. It is not entirely clear in which case the latter (short) style was chosen. On the one hand, surviving documents confirm that even the head family of Honami used those - the price of engraving did go up with full signatures and shorter ones were offered as a “budget” version. On the other hand, it has been proposed that those could have been placed by junior branches as well. Similar situation existed with origami (papers) – only the head family could use the “standard” format with kao and stamp, while junior families issued personal free form letters which discussed the examination procedure and its results.

Kinzogan mei is a gold inlay signature placed on o-suriage nakago.

Shu mei is a signature in red (vermillion) lacquer placed on ubu nakago which in all likeness was never signed by the smith.

Shu sho is a signature in red lacquer placed post Edo period, including those by one of the corresponding generations of Honami family. It can be placed on an o-suriage as well as ubu blade. Often the term is applied specifically to red lacquer signatures placed on o-suriage blades to distinguish such practice from the earlier requirements that such signatures can be placed only on ubu blades.

Kimpun mei is a signature in gold lacquer. Almost all of those existing today were applied after the Edo period. In theory there could be a distinction similar to kinzogan versus shumei, i.e. shu sho presuming the blade was never signed, but it is not nearly as strictly followed as with Edo period’s attributions.

Shu sho or kimpun mei executed as nijimei was probably done by one of many Meiji to early Showa appraisers who were not part of any of the main Honami lineages.

Kantei.

To understand the nature of Japanese attributions one must first understand kantei competitions.

First, the blades selected for a professional level competition are carefully vetted to be absolutely representative for the given smiths with as few as possible deviations compared to a “textbook standard”. Many Japanese specialists see such examples as the very best that the given maker produced, and any variation from the “standard” raises questions whether it could have been caused by unintentional loss of control and thus represents a “lesser” sword.

Second, it is strongly preferred to use signed blades, as any judgement on an unsigned blade can be a subject of contention.

Third, they are selected from works of about 250 smiths considered important and consistent in their style. Of those 250 names defacto allowed in competitions, only about 50 are the “core participants”, i.e. out of three blades presented for appraisal at least two will be made by smiths from this “short list” of excellence.

This list has much in common with the list of swordsmiths whose works have been awarded “Tokubetsu Juyo” certification.

Under such extremely restrictive conditions serious competitors are expected to receive at least “dozen” on every single blade, i.e. to correctly identify school and period. However, it is common that even the winning “atari” bid does not mean precisely identify the smith’s name. In many cases there is a list of names accepted as “atari”, which in certain cases includes any premier smith from the same school/period, thus effectively erasing the distinction between “dozen” and “atari”. Even though a post-competition explanation always points out some minor traits which can in principle be relied upon to precisely identify the maker, still any name from the list is treated as “atari”, a correct answer. With “lesser” schools the “atari list” can include five, ten, or even more names. For many schools like Kozori, Muromachi Bizen, Uda, Kaga there are but a few smiths whose work can be precisely attributed to a person.

In a good competition it is expected that one blade is “tricky”, i.e. requires very specific knowledge to ascend from “dozen” to “atari”. For example, the blade looks like either Rai Kunitoshi or Rai Kunimitsu, but there is a specific feature which warrants one attribution and not the other.

To succeed in such competitions one therefore studies in great detail the works and distinguishing features of the 50 smiths. You don’t expect in the competition to see a blade by a “second generation” be that Naokatsu or Hisamichi, and seldom if ever you encounter provincial schools like Hirado Sa. Edo period is represented only by the most famous names like Kotetsu, Kiyomaro, Inoue Shinkai and a few others; there are not going to be many Muromachi blades, and those present will either be masterpieces, or “tricky” entries where it can be confused with earlier work and the participant is not so much required to attribute the blade as to realize that it does not date from Kamakura period.

Here lies the main problem of Nihonto certification:

In a competition one deals with a carefully prepared selection of blades in the best possible condition, yet even then one is often *not expected* to go beyond correctly identifying the period and the school. Blades submitted for appraisal to any shinsa panel, even in poor condition, despite being restored by vastly different schools of polish, shortened, tired – by default per Japanese tradition the certificate issued still needs to attribute the blade to a **specific smith name**.

When discussing the same blade with a recognized expert you will seldom hear such a narrow attribution. Typical statement will sound more like “later Soshu from 1380s, good but not great, possibly sue-Sa or Naotsuna”.

Attributions appearing in papers are a matter of convention.

It implies, first, discarding all alternative choices in favor of the most likely one, second, each judgement represents a complex statement on date/quality/attribution condensed into a single specific name with a tacit acknowledgement that any alternative attribution to roughly similar period, similar school and similar price point might also be acceptable. Add to this the established tradition that NBTHK certificate will state only the bare minimum required for such assessment.

For example – in many cases for signed blades NBTHK certificate simply states that the signature is authentic. In some cases it means it’s a major smith, whose name is unique and thus the attribution is precise and if there was a lesser smith with the same name who worked in a different school/period, then

a certificate issued to this lesser smith will include the additional information making sure it is not the famous Master. Alternatively however it can mean that there have been many smiths going by this name and the appraisers do not know which one made this blade, but they are confident that this should not have a very significant impact on a commercial valuation, since it is more or less the same for all of them. In the third case the shinsa panel does not know who exactly this smith was and does not want to form a hypothesis, simply stating that the signature looks original.

This immediately creates a very important question: if there were multiple generations using the same name, which one does the certificate refers to? The answer follows the same scenario: if one of those smiths was famous, which is usually the first generation, then if the certificate issued bears no additional explanation, it likely refers to the famous (first) generation, while certificates to second and later generations might include additional information confirming it is not the first generation's work. However, if it's not a very (and "very" can be a very subjective term) famous name, the lack of additional information simply means "we do not state which generation it is, but it is probably from the same period (i.e. Muromachi or shinto) as the first generation". If it's a much later work compared to the first generation the statement "later generation", "go-dai", can be added, or with NBTHK a specific period (say, Muromachi) can be mentioned.

Important point: each written certificate is supposed to correlate with the blade's monetary valuation, which however means that if the valuation differential is "only" a factor of two, it is not considered appraiser's duty to provide the sufficient distinguishing information.

In case of NTHK and NTHK NPO the time period when the blade was supposedly made is always provided (this is obviously helpful), but it should be noted that the specific generation is usually not identified. Main reason is that different books give different dates for the same generation and thus narrowing down the attribution to a specific generation means taking a stand on the issue; if one has a chance to orally inquire from the shinsa which generation is being considered, they can be more specific. Often sellers even without such oral clarification attempt to "convert" the dates to a specific generation since it allows them to tap into different titles and salutations provided to this specific smith, but it is worth repeating that such one to one correlation is *not* specifically stated in NTHK papers.

By the same token when it comes to pre-Muromachi works even an approximate explicit dating is avoided by many texts and appraisers like NBTHK, and instead the work is identified either as "ko" (for example, ko Aoe, ko Naminohira), which is the earliest works known for the school, "chu" or simply school's name without specification, which identifies the school's later (main) activity period, and "sue" which identifies its latest works. Often "sue" refers to Muromachi, "ko" to Kamakura/possibly late Heian and "chu" to late Kamakura/Nambokucho periods , but this obviously has many exceptions.

What happens during the shinsa?

Shinsa panels typically spend 3-5 minutes on a blade. In theory, Confucian principles applied to traditional Japanese expert organizations require that each panelist performs the examination independently, and then opinions are stated beginning with the most junior member. In reality the number of submissions is always so great that either each panelist is assigned an independent workload or when a blade is examined

by the entire panel, to save time it is the most senior member who begins the examination and states his opinion first. Therefore, when the shinsa chair is replaced this has an exceptional impact on the judgements issued.

Because of time limitations it is unrealistic to expect a thorough examination when a blade submitted is in a bad state of polish. Those are always judged by NBTHK conservatively. Signed blades are always given extra attention as affirming a questionable signature can have long running consequences, while even deeply contested attribution of an unsigned blade does not have a similarly disruptive impact.

Why different shinsa and different judges arrive at different attributions?

First and foremost every judge has in his mind a table of features related to sugata, boshi, hamon, jigane, each with a given weight. For example, some place high emphasis on kissaki type and size so that everything with ikubi-kissaki will have a high chance to be graded as Kamakura period's work, even though later examples having this feature are also known. Other judges will look at the same blade but will pay greater attention to other features.

Sugata by itself can point towards a selection of periods appropriate for the blade. For example, o-suriage broad blade with shallow and uniform curvature and large kissaki is typically associated with either Nambokucho, Tensho (Momoyama, Muromachi) or shinshinto periods. There are however exceptions, and the best sugata can do is to limit options to two-three possible time periods.

Nakago. If the blade is ubu, i.e. has the nakago which is representative of its original condition then even in the absence of signature patina and yasurime by themselves often provide significant clues as to approximate date, at times even sufficient for an exact attribution. For signatures the most important thing is first check how well it is executed and whether the execution style is a good match for the school/period. Fake signatures were seldom placed by top tier smiths, but rather by people who've chiseled a particular name maybe couple of times. As a result, the distance between kanji can be uneven, sometimes the signature is "condensed" because the writer is afraid he will run out of space. There are also transitions in style, "tempo" associated with the writer putting aside his tools to consult a paper template.

Unfortunately, almost any blade signed by a top level smith appearing on the market without papers, especially in Japan, means some shinsa somewhere already rejected it. With famous Edo period's smiths (Kotetsu, Shinkai, Sukehiro) the quantity of fakes is staggering. But the top levels names are not the only ones being faked. To us today it seems strange to use second tier late Muromachi Bizen names – yet such fakes are common. Anything recognizable could and was faked simply because the signature still improved the blade's value even if not by much. Conversely, any top tier koto name would invite additional scrutiny.

Jigane either points towards a specific school or at least helps to exclude most schools. It is also extremely important (the notable exemption are probably some Bizen blades) when estimating the blade's quality: bright jigane with ji nie, with consistent execution throughout the entire blade is always a sign of quality, while any bland or rough spots are detriments.

Hamon carries most of the information and warrants the most precise attribution, sometimes down to a specific smith. It is important to note that in terms of blade's quality the requirements imposed on hamon are very school and even smith specific. The valuation of most Rai school or similar works (Rai Kunitoshi, Hizen) will strongly depend on nioiguchi's consistency (brightness, width), while it is not true for many

Soshu makers, for whom a smooth, graded variation of nie size, clear, discernable nie activities are much more important.

Boshi For pre-Nambokucho blades the appearance of boshi needs to be consistent with the school attribution. For later blades it becomes progressively less relevant, though there are exceptions either way.

Most shinsa panels issue attributions typically to only two, three or four different names per school (out of 10-20 whose signatures are known), which are also often ranked in terms of quality. For example, a superior early Soshu work can be attributed to "Masamune" while similar work with a more coarse appearance can be assigned to something along the lines of Shizu Kaneuji, Etchu Tametsugu or Hasebe Kunishige. In a similar manner within what is roughly defined as "Kozori" school an attribution to Masamitsu is accepted as superior, other two or three named attributions are accepted as second tier, and generic "Kozori Bizen" as a third tier attribution.

There are numerous problems with this scenario. First, it means that for an unsigned (mumei) blade an attribution presents a different quality assessment compared to a signed work. Good signature will secure an attribution to Nobukuni even if the blade is weak, as long as it is a good match for school's work. Same weak blade but unsigned would be given a "lesser" attribution. Second, the attribution cannot or should not reflect quality first and foremost since it is based on observing specific kantei features. Shizu Kaneuji is seldom just a "lesser Masamune", because there are distinguishing features: masame hada and togari. Tametsugu is almost never a "lesser" Norishige or Go but can be something that has features which make Go or Norishige attribution impossible. Each attribution can defacto be a complex compromise, a combination of quality, date and school assessment expressed through a single name – but at the same time this does not constitute a 100% belief by the shinsa panel the blade was actually made by this specific smith to the point that it is not uncommon that the traits exhibited by a typical signed blade and an average mumei blade with the same attribution are substantially different. Yamato Taima is a good but not the only example.

For Edo period the signature is the most important portion of the judgement. Even if the work otherwise is a near perfect match, for a top level smith any significant variations in writing from what is seen in "the books" disqualify the blade from being accepted as "genuinely signed" (zaimei). For koto blades the reverse is usually true: as long as the style is representative of a specific school, the signature will be given benefit of the doubt. It is accepted that there can be another, unknown generation or signature variant which is not recorded in the books. If the work is strong, adheres to the school's style and the signature is more or less consistent with the school, the work will likely be accepted as genuine. If the work is very strong, but the signature clearly differs from anything associated with the maker, yet likely predates the Edo period, there is a high chance it will be issued papers stating "to ga aru", i.e. "there exists a signature such and such", a polite refusal to judge its validity while confirming the blade's attribution.

When resubmitting (i.e. contesting) the judgement of koto or shinshinto blades it is important to understand whether the original judgement was weak or strong. In the latter case there is a very similar signed blade accepted as genuine. In the former case the judgement is a conjecture and some features were ignored because the judges considered other features to be more important. It is obviously important to understand which other attributions appear as a typical alternative. For example, it can be hard to distinguish between Soshu school from 1370s, better Shimada works from 16th century and sometimes even something made by Dewa Daijo Kunimichi. Obviously getting Nambokucho attribution is

a more valuable alternative here, but one needs to realize why within this lineup the judgement can (was) made to Shimada or Kunimichi instead.

On the other hand, resubmitting a typical average late Muromachi work will simply result in a different, somewhat random, yet also late Muromachi judgement – Fuyuhiro can become Kaga, Uda can become Kaifu, but neither reassessment has significant (any) impact on blade's valuation.

It is important to be attentive to "bucket" attributions assigned to schools known to imitate with a different level of success earlier works by famous smiths - most importantly Muromachi period's Bungo, Kaga and Shimada schools. Unfortunately, such attributions issued by shinsa often mean "we don't really know what it is, but suspect its from Muromachi and don't want to waste more time on the issue".

If sugata is consistent with earlier blades and the quality is high, resubmission can change the attribution to Rai, Aoe, Nambokucho's Soshu or other premier school. On the other hand it is not unknown to resubmit a highly ranked (Juyo or even Tokuju) blade for the lowest papers in hope of a better name (i.e. Masamune) only to have the blade judged as Shimada.

Polish makes tremendous impact on how the blade is judged since it always accents some features and not the others. Noted, the blade will have only a few minutes to make an impression on the shinsa.

All panels tend to be heavily dominated by one, seldom two, recognized experts. Demise of such figure always changes how the judgement proceeds. Even the bucket school names can "change" and what was before judged as "Bungo" now becomes "Echizen Seki". It is also not unusual for major attributions to be affected as well. When there are few to no signed examples to rely upon it is not too uncommon that attributions issued to the same name in 1960s and those issued today refer to different styles and quality levels.

There is a notion that each paper "level" (Tokubetsu Juyo, Juyo, Tokubetsu Hozon, Hozon) and each smith's rating (like jo-jo-saku per Fujishiro's book) comes with its own price range and the combination of two allows one to determine the blade's price even without any additional information.

Unfortunately, there is much truth to that.

Some multiple of smith level and paper level provides a reasonably accurate price range when one wants to sell a blade without employing services of a premier shop, whose own brand and clientele allow it to be a market maker rather than a follower. The argument "yes, its Bungo, but it's a great blade" is a solid one – there are some very good Bungo blades. But the market reality is most buyers don't know anything about blades. Buying a blade at a significant premium compared to expected multiple of smith ranking * paper level means you are buying it for your enjoyment rather than resale potential. Which is frankly the only true way to collect, since long term Nihonto is a horrible investment.

Paper level also underlines the attribution's certainty. Masamune Hozon will cost a fraction of Masamune at Tokubetsu Juyo, since higher papers mean the prestigious attribution was affirmed at least two more times and is considered rock solid. Obviously, Masamune Hozon will cost more than most Juyo blades to lesser smiths. For shinto and shinshinto it is not unusual that the top smiths (Kiyomaro, Sukehiro, Kotetsu) can yield very high prices at Hozon simply because Edo period blades are not often submitted to Juyo and being signed they do not require repeated scrutiny.

Noted, most experienced collectors undergo the following evolution with respect to certificates:

1. Its CERTIFIED by NBTHK! Guaranteed quality and attribution, that's what I want.
2. Well, I've tried to paper a waki that John thought was Ichimonji, they gave it Bungo, John thinks they are idiots. Everyone knows John is the man, he's been doing this for decades. The shinsa is getting worse!
3. I thought Bungo papers were crap, but now I know Bungo attribution comes into play when nioiguchi is hazy, jigane stands out and utsuri is clearly not the best. This is what the blade has, so Bungo is a possibility.
4. The choji are all a bit uniform in height and the top is a bit squarish, utsuri is subtle. 10 years ago they would have attributed it to Omiya, but nowadays the leading judge likes to point out a specific signed Bungo blade which is a very good copy of Bizen, and therefore the shinsa likes to use Bungo attribution. Personally I prefer Omiya, but since its just a cutdown waki, we can't really see sugata and there is not much to go on. NTHK NPO however does not often use "Bungo", so if I send them this blade I will probably get Omiya.

Dealer's speak

The information provided in certificates is expected to be interpreted by a dealer with a strong commitment to undying optimism. If there is a book providing "Heian period" for the given smith or school, this claim will make it into dealer's description, even if the certificate's attribution is *not* period specific, as its almost always is. Even if the sugata definitely does not suggest Heian attribution. Ko Hoki, ko Naminohira and ko Senjuin attributions are especially often abused in such a manner: for these schools very often Kamakura dating is more appropriate. Good luck finding a dealer who thinks so.

If there is a book reporting some "prestigious" genealogy like this smith being a son of Rai Kunimitsu, or grandson of someone from Fukuoka Ichimonji school, it will make it into dealer's description. Never mind it is based on a single obscure Edo period's source and has no bearing on smith's work.

Dealers will always insist the attribution is very specific to the given smith. As we already discussed, in 95% of cases it is not, though generally the school and the period are identified with some certainty.

It is important to remember that a significant portion of information presented in books is based on Edo period's genealogies. For pre-Muromachi smiths it is common that the dates provided do not match the existing blades. Expect the dealers to use the earliest dating possible, even if the work itself is obviously later.

Storage.

This is likely the first subject one encounters since nihonto does require certain care standards and even in such basic questions there are many alternative viewpoints and plenty of inconsistencies.

One needs to estimate how rust-prone is the environment. A very good proxy are sterling silver utensils: how long does it take for silver to acquire a dull, grey color?

Rapid "oxidation" is seldom caused by humidity per se, but rather by sea salt or sulfur particles in a combination with moisture. Reaction occurs 5-100 times faster in silver compared to iron: if you need to clean silverware once every year (this corresponds to a relatively "corrosion-prone" area), it means that iron sword can develop visible red rust spots in less than five years if left in the open without oiling. In the same environment, for a blade stored in shirasaya (which offers good seal against moisture and salt) without oiling, taken out 2-3 times a year the amount of time needed for rust to develop increases to 100 years.

As long as the air quality is reasonably controlled: the humidity does not exceed 60% and there is no sea salt or sulfur particles (which can be filtered out by any quality HEPA filter/air conditioner), there is little to no concern when storing blades in shirasaya even without oiling. If you are located oceanside and not using air conditioner or live very close to a coal fired powerplant, blades definitely need to be oiled.

New collectors are often recognized by blades literally drenched in oil. This is not an exceptionally dangerous a habit, but it does come with issues, ranging from very regrettable oil spots on shirasaya and koshirae to having to spend considerable time removing the oil just so one can study a blade.

There is not much to be seen on an oiled blade, so if one studies blades often keeping them oiled requires constant oiling-deoiling operations which does come with risks.

In general, almost any kind of "sword" oil is safe to use, though traditionally choji oil with its nice aroma is preferred. Camelia or tsubaki oil are also fine.

Uchiko. Best avoid using it unless you know how to. Its relatively safe, but for a simple deoiling any modern microfiber does better job, and if one needs to remove a sticky oil drop a high grade (>90%) alcohol solution can be used to dissolve it. Uchiko is very useful when one needs to remove small blemishes like spit spots which occur when someone breathes onto the blade.

Using uchiko comes with a slight danger of scratching a blade. One needs to make sure all uchigo particles are removed before placing the blade back in shirasaya, otherwise there is a chance it will eventually slide off a large uchiko particle creating a characteristic horizontal scratch. Over time uchiko also damages hadori; there are some who believe it might actually improve sashikomi polish by gradually subduing hada in the vicinity of hamon, but this effect certainly requires a very specific polishing style.

Koshirae and lacquer. Japanese custom is to always store lacquer next to a plate of water to "improve the humidity". It is of little effect and is not a requirement. Lacquer benefits from being stored at humidity between 60% (most types) and 90% (damaged, old pieces), but most pieces still do fine at 40%. What is dangerous is a rapid (within 24 hours) change in humidity by 30% or more, which can easily happen in a vicinity of a heating unit or air conditioner, or equivalently when wiping lacquer with a very wet cloth or washing it in the area with less than 60% ambient humidity. Post 1850 objects are especially notorious for warping and cracking under such conditions. Prior to the late Edo period the wood used in lacquer objects was dried for decades which limited the warping experienced in different humidity environments. In the turmoil of the 19th century this lengthy process was abandoned and many modern lacquer makers predominantly rely on imported wood with vastly varying properties. This manifests in post-1850 objects being made from multiple pieces glued together which helps to prevent cracking when warped; the

lacquer itself can also be an imitation (for example, cashew lacquer) rather than a proper *urushi* work. Often old armor (Edo period) has modern repairs, including recent lacquering. This might be easily impacted (warped and cracked) by humidity changes. Again, the main danger is exposing such items to rapid changes in humidity or temperature rather than exposing them to very low humidity per se.

Climate. Japan is more humid than most countries and shirasaya wood as any other reacts to humidity and temperature changes. In the worst case the handle can become stuck when moved out of Japan or the curvature will warp to the point the blade is impacting the wood upon being drawn out. With shirasaya its best at first to wait couple of days for it to self-adjust to the new climate before doing anything. Theoretically, more expensive wood and more professional saya-maker should prevent such things from happening, but today even well known saya makers often use a cheap(er) stock which does warp somewhat even when one moves to a new place 200km away.

Most regrettable "incidents" are not associated with storage but rather with taking a blade out of shirasaya. One needs to develop the habit of slowly increasing the pressure applied so that the blade does not lunge out if the handle is "a little bit stuck". One needs to avoid scratching the blade, touching it with fingers or breathing on it. Finger marks or spit should be removed as quickly as possible – and it is one of a few cases when using uchiko is definitely advisable. In regards to scratches one needs to take care to never have a blade touching any hard material. Fabric and paper are usually ok, and even in this case one needs to avoid situations when the blade "slides" without specific need against any other object, even if its just a piece of paper.

Inspection.

For a beginner the best lighting setup is a point source (i.e. single bulb lamp) placed high. Pointing the sword's tip towards and slightly below it provides a good observation angle which works for almost any sword. Other lights need to be turned off and viewing (and also photography) is best done in the evening, otherwise the contrast is severely reduced.

For koto Bizen such setup can be the only viable option, but in general depending on the blade there are many different layouts one should try. Shinto, most shinshinto and Soshu can be studied by placing them on a table (obviously on a pillow or thick piece of carton or fabric) and viewing them from above. The light in general should be directed from a side, placed about 10-15 inches above the table's level, though some Bizen blade prefer even lower placement. However, it is also preferable to experiment with a light source placed above the blade: while usually such placement effectively kills all contrast to the point the hada cannot be discerned at all, there is one position right on top of the hamon, in which case the nie appears as bright white. Other options include placing a light somewhat above the table level either above the mune or below the ha, which at some specific angle can help to accent the hada. Its best to use an elongated light source, 4 inch or longer (light stick).

There are other common recipes regarding how one should study at blade, like holding it in your hand, tip up, to study sugata and hada. It can be of use in a room with many light sources, but when there is a single light source (which is preferrable) the above described setups in my opinion work better.

There are different ideas in regard to what kind of light is best for viewing nihonto. Incandescent (still available at specialized photography stores) was the choice for a long time, if only because this is the kind of lamp most polishers used. Today however LED is accepted as default; as a personal observation most LED do accent nie a bit more and utsuri and some other elements – a bit less, but overall the difference is small.

Kizu

Beginners pay too little or too much attention to defects (kizu).

In the first case they find a blade which they "really like" with a 20cm long ware. "So what, it speaks to me". There are very many Japanese blades out there. Soon you will find another "speaker" which has only 2cm long ware. It will be a better purchase and you'll enjoy it more.

In the opposite scenario they constantly remind themselves and everyone around them that "hi are cut to conceal the kizu" (no, they are not) and that "red lacquer is applied over kizu to conceal them" (no, it is not). They treat a ware in a shinogi ji as a deal breaker for a Kamakura blade. They study photographs under 500% magnification.

In fact the impact of kizu on koto blade's valuation is very school specific. Generally, Bizen is not expected to have many issues and therefore any defect is an issue. Fukure is basically a deal breaker, in 99% of cases meaning the blade is no longer a collectible. Major Soshu blades on the other hand can have ware or at least some roughness, i.e. ware in Hankei's work is somewhat expected, in Rai Kunitoshi it's a much bigger issue. Very major Soshu blades can easily get away with fukure, which is even a strong kantei trait to Masamune.

"Sumigane" or even "shintetsu" are acceptable if such are cited in books as being associated with a school. Inconsistent or dull nioi-guchi is ok for most Hasebe works, in case if the polish actually allows you to follow the nioiguchi throughout such blade (Note: very few people admit they can't see nioiguchi, but with some blades and some polishes its in fact amazing if you do), but it's a severe detriment on most things Rai related.

Relax. When thinking about a prospective purchase, don't fall 100% in love with any blade you see, don't believe accepting kizu is a sign of true love, but also don't think the dealer is out to get you with all those kizu hidden away by the sinister dragon horimono.

Probably the most important issue one needs to be aware of is saiha: burned blade which was retempered and put back to use. Almost all of those tend to pre-date Edo period. The reasoning is twofold: first, Sengaku period saw arguably even greater destruction than allied bombings or great Kanto earthquake. Second, burned shinshinto blades were generally disposed of, while during Sengaku everything that could still cut was hurried back to the frontlines.

There is a combination of signs which suggests that the blade is saiha: dull jigane; hamon is usually suguha-notare (since it's the one most simple to implement when retempering a random blade), with little to no activity, or activity which is bright in couple of places but is completely absent everywhere else; larger than usual curvature – actually in experienced hands its best felt when swinging or placing the blade on its back. Sometimes there is mizukage.

Saiha blades can still get papers if they predate Nambokucho (as always there are exceptions), but it will be explicitly noticed that the blade is saiha. Noted, cases where the blade was out of polish, was papered as saiha but then turned out to be not after polish – are known. As always, shinsa is not divine and describes what it sees at the moment. If it looks like saiha, they will make a note of that.

Polish.

There comes a day, usually within the first two years of collecting, when a collector decides to send a blade to be polished.

Short advice – don't.

At least 70% of blades are being sent to polishers only because a new collector wants to experience the thrill of discovery and participation in this unique nihonto practice.

99.99% of everything made after Nanbokucho period and unsigned is unlikely to recoup the polishing costs. Every signed blade from the same timeframe can have its signature checked first to determine if its authentic, thus understanding whether it makes sense to polish it.

Before you polish anything, ask yourself if what you have is *substantially* above the average. Not if its interesting (it is), not if its fun (otherwise you would not have bought it), but is it within the top 10% of what nihonto has to offer?

If one still decides to proceed with polishing, there are many factors to consider.

Unfortunately even among experienced collectors very few understand the polish. There are plenty of texts regarding which stones are used, but near zero instruction on how different styles of polish affect the blade's presentation. There are many opportunities to study swords, but very few to study the polish itself, i.e. to understand how the same blade looks in Honami, Fujishiro or Nagayama's polish.

Many books will tell you that every "good" polisher uses more or less the same technique. Many dealers in Japan will tell you there are grades of polish ranging from "practical" to "mukansa" level.

Reality is a bit more complicated.

To start with, there is cheap non-traditional western polish. It uses concentrated acidic solutions to accent the hamon. Jigane lacks details and the hue is dark. Hamon comes out in relatively high contrast compared to the jigane but with a characteristic smudged and whitish appearance. It also looks more or less the same independent of light source or observation angle. This style of polish should only be used with non-traditionally made shinsakuto and showato.

There is Japanese dealer's polish. Many Japanese dealers took lessons in polish or employ a polisher who works in volume. Usually it costs only about 50,000-150,000 yen per daito. This polish will have very heavy bright white hadori and hamon's details will not be distinctive. Jigane will be a bit subdued. It can sometimes be ok with cheap shinto blades, but it is not recommended on any semi-decent koto ones. "Hadori suffocation" is a real, major and common polishing issue. In the worst case the impacted hamon

will appear more or less the same at every angle except when looked at a very obtuse angle (i.e. from the nakago) and nothing but hadori will appear in most photographs.

Specialization. Good polishers are expected to excel in either Soshu, Bizen or Shinto works. In the last case they tend to focus on bringing up the jigane in a bright, high contrast fashion, since it's a distinguishing feature of better shinto pieces and shinto hamon tends to be bright in any case. There is a concern that one should not use "shinto" polishes for koto Bizen since they do not often work with utsuri, can apply heavy, wide hadori and focus on bright blades with limited variety of appearance. There is a concern in general that "shinto" polisher makes a work which is "too bright". This is very subjective. For example, personally I think Kenji Mishima (who was considered by many to be a "shinto" polisher) did very good job with koto pieces.

Honami polish. Unless you've seen it and you like it, don't order it. Honami is a big name, but "Honami polish" is not something that is ordinary considered the very top grade today.

Sashikomi or Hadori (kesho)?

20 years ago (i.e. around year 2000) the term *sashikomi* was associated with a western newbie collector who read somewhere that sashikomi is "deeper", "more traditional" or even better preserves the blade compared to a "shallow", "superficial", "concealing the issues", "modern hadori" polish. This echoed opinions which were somewhat popular in 1950s. Reality is that the quality of "sashikomi" polish considerably shifted back and forth. If you look at the 19th century examples in the original polish, the quality is exceptional, however between 1980 and roughly 2010 even the better examples of sashikomi were often lacking.

Second, there is unfortunately no single standard of what constitutes *sashikomi* polish. A practical (and technically not completely incorrect) way to think about it, in sashikomi polish hamon's upper boundary stands out against unobstructed nioiguchi and jigane. Conversely, in "kesho" polish the hamon is surrounded by the whitish area (hadori) where jigane is suppressed. Noted, in either sashikomi or kesho acidic solutions can and are being used (contrary to the popular belief that they are associated only with kesho polish), i.e. in many traditional polishing schools the water used during the process is a little bit acidic. In fact since sashikomi polish requires good presentation of nioiguchi, and nioiguchi responds very well to acid, the use of weak acid in sashikomi style polish is common.

Positives of sashikomi (conversely negatives of hadori) polish are:

a. Hadori completely subdues utsuri within a significant portion of the blade above the hamon, possibly taking away much of the beauty in utsuri-heavy blades.
b. Hadori area is sensitive to scratching, aggressive use of uchiko can significantly dull its appearance over time. Sashikomi polish is generally more resistant to uchiko and some claim it even improves since using uchiko over time helps to accent smaller nie particles.
c. Sashikomi is expected to have clear, unobstructed view of nioiguchi. On the contrary with hadori polish in many cases (for example, shinto blades), little to no effort is made so that the nioiguchi can be easily observed. P.S. Obviously no one admits in public that they can't see the nioiguchi, since this makes them look unprofessional.

d. Inferior polishers often opt for “hadori suffocation” making it impossible to see the hamon at all except at very low angles. This is not uncommon with Japanese “dealer’s polish” where the goal is to end up something visible from ten feet away, not underline the blade’s true quality.
e. Hadori polish becomes progressively more difficult when there is a considerable height variation within the hamon as one has to minimize the hadori area to make sure at least some jigane is visible, and at the same time have enough hadori to accent the hamon.

There are two positive aspects of kesho polish:

a. At the top level there is less skill-dependent variation, i.e. top quality kesho is always top quality, while within the best 10% of sashikomi there is still significant variation.
b. Hadori generally helps to accent any work in nie. In sashikomi nie might appear as a rough, solid, grey rump to the point that sue Sa blade will get “downgraded” to Uda or Yamato.

The choice between sashikomi and hadori therefore comes down to whether one needs to accent utsuri, nioi based hamon, especially if it has a lot of variation in height - in which case sashikomi is preferred, or if one needs to accent the nie based activities, in which case hadori is a better alternative. Generally, quality sashikomi polish of Soshu blades is uncommon.

This being said, one should be aware that a high quality polisher has his preferences and forcing him to polish in a specific style is seldom a wise decision.

Learning.

The question “I am a new collector what should I do” always solicits the answer “buy books”.

But the only way to use books efficiently is to have a blade in front of you while looking through the literature and better yet having someone knowledgeable commenting on the blade.

Nothing beats being guided by a senior collector, despite the fact that most collectors are (putting it mildly) – unusual people. But the better they are, the more they like talking swords, the more they like seeing blades. Ask them for help. On the contrary, it is problematic if instead of a clear opinion you are getting a lecture about what it means to “study”, to be a “scholar” followed by the advice “show it to a polisher” or “only NBTHK can tell, just get the papers”.

It takes studying about 200 blades to get to a basic proficiency. At about 1000 one starts to experience saturation in most topics while yet lacks understanding of the earliest and most arcane subjects which require analysis of but a few existing masterpieces.

Be aware that the amount of information you learn depends significantly on what kind of swords you study (buy). Aside from run of the mill Muromachi examples, koto pieces can require multi-hour analysis with many books involved. By comparison, 85% of shinto pieces will lead you only as far as “its shinto”; for a mumei blade, one can still distinguish Hizen, Inoue Shinkai or other top work, maybe there is Osaka yakidashi, or Mishina boshi, or some other distinguishing factor, but otherwise a more specific attribution can be next to impossible. Generic shinto piece can still be very attractive and of good quality, but there is

not much to *study*: even the best shinto works rely on a more limited set of tools compared to better than average koto examples. Yet shinto pieces make for great introduction to the field since even at low price point they are some good examples, bright and impressive, kizu are uncommon, and they are not particularly difficult to observe as they look about the same with every light source and at every angle. They are easy to appreciate, at a price point which can at best provide you with a very problematic koto blade.

Clubs are a mixed blessing. Most center around lectures given by one or two senior people, highly structured and hierarchical with little room for interactions or discussions.

Books.

There are very many. Few texts by now are accepted as "classic".

Beginner level.

Dr. Kanzan Sato, *The Japanese Sword*.

Probably the most standard introductory text and still considered the best by many.

John Yumoto, *The Samurai Sword*

Since the author was one of the earliest collectors in American community this book is highly regarded by older collectors. It is not to be recommended.

Nobuo Nakahara, *Facts and Fundamentals of Japanese Swords*

Many people like it. Personal opinion – avoid. The author has a very strict theory on what can and can't exist in Japanese swords. Historic blades not matching it, including a significant portion of high ranking examples, are deemed later fakes. Book's primary merit is it points out a number of consequences due to shortening and other intrusive operations, which other texts do not.

Albert Yamanaka, *Newsletter*.

Often considered more "advanced" because it lacks basic explanations, it is still an easy to read and interesting text which can be accessed by a beginner. It puts emphasis on the development of nihonto tradition but also offers some information which is missing in more "conventional", hardcover publications. It is somewhat aged though.

Advanced.

Dr. Kanzan Sato and others, *Nihonto Koza*

Significant work which covers a large portion of Nihonto schools. Compared to “basic” textbooks it addresses such subjects as the earliest/dated/signed examples, why the attributions are what they are and how this school’s works are different from others, i.e. what one expects to find in a more advanced manuscript.

Kokan Nagayama, *The Connoisseur's Book of Japanese Swords*

Specialized reference text which briefly outlines distinguishing features, genealogy and dates associated with more or less every major school. It needs some experience to relate to, but it can serve as a short kantei reference for a more advanced collector. The author’s observations are sharp, focused andwhen someone has a good grasp of what the terminology used means on practice, are often sufficient to kantei a blade.

Catalogues.

Dmitry Pechalov, *Soshu Den Masterpieces*

Far from being a general book on a general subject, Soshu Den Masterpieces is nevertheless an example of what a very professional catalogue of a very high class collection should be when compiled in accordance with resources available to a 21st century scholar.

Matsuo Fujishiro, *Meito Zuikan*

This periodic publication-newsletter still remains a standard and inspiration for all Nihonto photographers, myself included. Rare combination of exquisite polishing, the top photography technique and high class blades.

Reference/Kantei.

Yoshi Fujishiro, *Nihon Toko Jiten*

It used to be a standard reference for nihonto signatures that one could find in a library of every serious collector. Today its role is diminished by more extensive specialized publications, but its heritage remains, including the famous Fujishiro ranking system.

Nihonto Meikan or *Swordsmiths of Japan* (edited and translated by Markus Sesko)

The must for everyone with a serious interest in the subject. Reference book which includes brief information on more than 99% of known swordsmiths.

Markus Sesko, *Koto and Shinto Kantei*

Markus Sesko has been instrumental in introducing to the English speaking world many advanced Japanese studies to the point it is not an exaggeration to say his contribution permanently altered the western nihonto experience. Reading NBTHK journal, kantei section and relevant explanations is a typical pastime for a nihonto collector, and Koto/Shinto kantei publications by Sesko offer a concise selection of many important examples of such discourse.

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Shin Nihonto no Kantei Nyumon by Yuichi and Kazuo with Translation by Watson

Good older textbook with a number of kantei case studies.

Purchases and collecting.

There is a pattern of first acquisitions which the majority of newcomers follow without realizing the consequences:

a. Strongly preferring blades that come with koshirae.
b. The older the better, specifically looking for “Heian”, or if of limited means, “Sengaku” blades.
c. Believing that the more time they spend discussing a blade with others and the more information they get about it (measurements, photographs etc.), the better their purchase is going to be.
d. Wanting to buy a blade with 100% warranty yet at the same time to get an amazing deal which others missed.
e. Wanting to have their blade Professionally appraised and restored.

Its not wrong to harbor such feelings, but they come with a number of consequences. Let’s consider those in the same order as above.

a) blades with koshirae with a beginner price tag are offered by a few dealers who specialize in “newcomer-oriented” deals. At the very least they make sure each part of the koshirae is inexpensive, removing and trading out anything (tsuba, kozuka etc.) of above average quality. As a result, these packages are shunned by experienced collectors since they have little desire to own a random and indistinctive koshirae for the sole purpose so that they can occasionally walk with it around the house, shrugging off the imaginary ninja attacks. Communities of blade and tosogu collectors are a bit separate and neither is interested in acquiring an “add on”: if one wants a koshirae, one buys the best, same goes for blades. Best blades in best koshirae is however a very expensive package.

b) As we already discussed the definition of “old” depends on dealer’s speak. It can be 10th century blade according to the description, but in reality it has 13th century sugata – and the vagueness of certificates and assertiveness of dealers tend to trap newcomers into aggressively pursuing pieces like this. This often manifests by acquiring lesser Naminohira, Senjuin or even ko Hoki in a problematic condition. Later they have a choice to either accept it’s not that old and not that rare and the condition is not that great, or as most in the community to double down that the blade in question is “at least 1000 years old”. In nihonto a great 19th century blade is always superior to an ordinary-poor condition Kamakura period’s example.

c) Dealing with new collectors can be exceptionally painful for a seller since he is flooded with messages demanding ten more pictures, five more measurements, warranty that the top expert who happens to be the buyer’s best friend will appraise it as genuine, and proof that the seller actually did receive the certificate from NBTHK and not printed it himself.

Problem: such buyers have absolutely no idea what they are doing.

Experienced person is used to operate with incomplete information and relies on inspection period (mandatory in the US and the West in general) to confirm the blade is something what he thinks it is. Myriad pictures and measurements cannot replace this. Unless you have a very specific reason to request additional detailed information, if you don’t know which measurements are crucial to which period, and which photographs are crucial for the attribution – please do not pretend you and your friends have figured it out.

By the same token it is almost guaranteed that among 10 experts asked by the buyer “what do you think about this blade” at least two will advise that the certificate is fake and the blade was polished in “nishi-gori hadori” style which no elite collector should own. Or on the contrary the same “experts” will appraise the blade as “obvious Ichimonji” that everyone missed, putting the buyer on a five year long quest of polish and papers before he realizes the blade has a “stainless steel” stamp on the nakago.

Keep in mind that nihonto is a social club where people don’t feel the need to anger the “old timers”. When you ask someone’s opinion on a blade, expect to be asked where did you buy it. Nobody wants to badmouth their friends’ sale; however, if it did not come from a friend than saying it “has multiple issues” identifies the speaker as a true expert capable of seeing the hidden truth. Collecting is a difficult subject filled with turbulent emotions.

Relax. If the blade is in a reasonable state of polish and comes with (reasonable) papers, there is no deep secret and no great danger. Minimal homework comparing the blade you want to other online offerings from the same school is about as good as you can do and is enough to make a reasonably informative decision. Buy something you actually enjoy at the price which more or less matches a typical average for a blade with similar papers, length, condition. Many really bad purchases occur when someone buys not something they personally like but something which has a great attribution or appears as a great deal.

d) This one is obvious. Warranty and risk are mutually exclusive. Also you are not the Chosen one of nihonto who gets a super blade for peanuts on the first try.

e) Fifth and the last point, at the risk of repeating some of what was said in the Chapter on Polish:

a. There are tons of nihonto blades out there.

b. You will hear many times that something “should not be collected”, for example “one should not collect mumei Muromachi” or “mumei shinto”. You should collect whatever you like, but the underlining argument of such statements is that anything mumei past Nambokucho is expected to be valued *less* than the price of polish, meaning there is not much “potential”.
c. Accordingly, for most blades it is not practical to invest in polish, habaki, shirasaya. Don’t expect most polishers will tell you that, don’t expect them to be ANY good in kantei (most of them are *not*), don’t expect them to be held responsible for frankly anything. If a polisher decides he is too busy and sends your blade to his first year blind student and it comes back looking like cheese, holes included, its on you. If you protest, his numerous friends will do their best to shut you up since “John has been a great polisher for decades”. Remember – you are but a passerby in a community which goes back decades.

General rule for the first blade – least risk, least thinking, something you personally enjoy, purchased at a specialized show or from one of better known dealers or collectors. Minimize risk, maximize enjoyment, don’t try to make a deal of your lifetime and don’t try to rely too much on other’s advice – simply because at this point you can’t yet figure out what constitutes a “good advice”.

Also, don’t bother wondering “is it tachi or katana” as most beginners do. Distinction is practically irrelevant since o-suriage daito is always considered “katana” regardless of what it has been originally.

The choice you have to make is whether you’ll be buying from the US or Japan.

The US market:

a. Includes a number of sword shows each year where you can look at 200-500 blades, out of which 200 are nightmarish, 100 are ok, 5-10 are good and 2-4 are (potentially) very good.
b. When shopping online (i.e. not at the show), there always should be a moneyback guarantee which is often a lifesaver.
c. Somewhat less pricy on entry items, especially at the show, but can be significantly more expensive on better (Juyo+) items, since they are all purchased and imported from Japan.
d. Friendlier. Sellers do answer questions and are reasonably honest. Please don’t ask them for more photographs – if they thought more are needed they would have taken more. Rely on inspection period and moneyback guarantee.
e. *Many* saiha blades, especially on ebay and in auctions. Obviously without papers. Many originally came from military mounts since during WWII it was acceptable for a Japanese officer to carry an utilitarian grade blade, saiha included.

Japanese market is:

a. The largest market with many offerings at every level. If you are looking for a Juyo or Tokubetsu Juyo, consider Japan first and foremost.
b. Zero trust in dealer’s description at any level. Expect Juyo explicitly papered to Mihara to be also referenced in the description as Masamune, because the seller is “very experienced and sees it that way”. It is not uncommon for dealers to include photographs of certificates

issued to OTHER blades in the description, “for illustration purposes”. Outright lies and thievery are (very) uncommon, but very aggressive bending of the truth is exceptionally so.

c. Moneyback is uncommon. If the seller offers any sort of warrantee, have it spelled out as specifically as possible. “Everything will be good” means *nothing*. “I personally guarantee the description” means *nothing*. “I guarantee it papers” means I guarantee it will receive some paper to some name. Nothing more.

d. Japanese have different communication standards. By default they are hospitable, welcoming, friendly and ready to help. However, there is a fine line somewhere, and if you cross it they start believing you are being abusive of their hospitality. Before they suddenly and permanently cut off all communication look out for slowing email responses, vague answers, often rescheduling or changing positions/prices – these are signs of being displeased. Don’t ask them many questions, expect short answers in poor English and don’t ask for discount more than once.

   You do have the right to ask two questions and maybe ask once for a discount, especially if you buy a few items. Everything beyond that can be considered *abuse*. This is the reason many dealers do not want to deal with westerners.

e. In a large city every single blade offered for sale has been studied by at least ten different people. Everything with a slight chance of being Kamakura period is placed aside. Unless you know where to look for them, don’t expect super-deals and don’t expect super-finds. Especially if you are a beginner - these people know more than you do and they are not in a habit of giving away their money.

f. Typically exporting a blade from Japan is straightforward – every item above 200,000 yen and *all blades* need to clear an export permit (2-4 weeks), after which they can be mailed to you. Be aware that significant portion of Japanese society has issues with westerners collecting swords: if it is an upper grade item, there might be sudden random delays. More specifically, if you work in Japan, don’t brag about buying higher end swords unless you are *ready to change jobs*. Japanese usually do not openly communicate their displeasure but rather permanently cutoff any and all connections.

g. Unfortunately, some provincial dealers treat government issued sword permits (torokusho) rather freely. Considerable number of blades remains unregistered and when sold they are married with a random “spare” certificate. Export permit needs a valid certificate to be deregistered and therefore the description is torokusho should match the blade or you will have to wait for a new sword permit to be issued first.

h. Japanese are not too comfortable with public sales. There is one auction with open participation, the rest are auctions open only to members of dealers association. There is yahoo japan which hosts many blades usually in somewhat cheaper price segment. In the end majority of better blades are sold in stores via private transactions. There are however sword shows, ranging from regional ones to the country-wide Dai Token Ichi (DTI), which is held in November. Do not expect however to find many sword items at any non-specialized antique show or market.

i. DTI: you will see quite a few good swords. Prices are diverse, but more in line with mid-range Tokyo retail (i.e. on somewhat expensive side). Cash is good, USD is often accepted, otherwise you can arrange for the blade to be shipped to you later when the wire clears.

Generally: American market is more beginner friendly, and Japanese market is more risky yet it is where the majority of top grade blades are acquired.

There are many good arguments that the first purchase should be made at a sword show. Scan the place, see if something really attracts you, and most importantly don't feel bad if nothing looks good – it happens. Always better to walk away than to force yourself into a purchase just because you are here.

Finally, **a few general statements.**

Don't trust anyone, first and foremost yourself. Psychologically, every non-purchased blade can lead to regret, and every purchased one can generate remorse. Every obscure piece of information leads one to believe there might be something great hidden there or on the contrary instills a great fear the blade is not what it appears to be. Getting lucky once can generate a flurry of ill advised purchases because "I finally learned how to beat the market". Worst purchases are often the result of not seeing anything good for quite sometime and buying just to stay in the game.

Your first 10 purchases are expected to be very bad financial decisions. There are exceptions to this rule, but its best to accept the pessimistic scenario. First few years, anytime you think you are getting a deal, worse yet – you think you are discovering a deal that others missed, you are *wrong*. Even if you get lucky and buy a really good blade on a dime, chancing are when selling it you'll be facing a dealer who knows its value far better than you do.

The cards are stacked against you, and you are expected to loose: in the collecting community only 5% are professional dealers who live by taxing the rest 95%. They survive not because of great knowledge per se but because their behavior and mentality is different from that of a collector. They don't buy a blade because they "like it", despite the fact they tell everyone else that's what they do. They buy it when they know they can sell it for 40% more. They invest a lot in their personal brand, including rumors how purchasing from other dealers is a "bad financial decision benefitting unscrupulous behavior" while they "sell only true art that only the select few can appreciate". When you feel bad about loosing money by collecting, it helps to realize that the only alternative is thinking only about the money. If instead you prefer to enjoy the money in form of collectibles – pay the price and enjoy the game.

Your taste will change after the first 5-10 years. Things you pursued in the beginning will grade "so so" 10 years later. Things you did not like might become attractive.

Its best to start with simpler blades. Shinto or shinshinto, full polish, papered, competitively priced, no defects. Don't try to apply kantei skills you learned from books – shinto is its own game and "gokaden" knowledge will only confuse you. Appreciate the blades for what they are. At this point you will most likely be attracted to bright pieces from Yokoyama Bizen, Sukehiro and others. There is no shame in that.

There are no rules to collecting,

Collecting is not an investment. Dealers and senior collectors will tell you otherwise. You'll be told that the quality always appreciates and is investment grade while plebes unable to see the real art suffer financially. The truth is, no true collector for the past 30,100, 200 years has beaten the stock market with Japanese swords. Explanations how swords at the top level are great for investment should be left to dealers and

married guys. You can make a profit by buying an undervalued blade, but you will do better by buying an undervalued company.

There are no rules to collecting because we all seek different pleasures within this endeavor. Some like to travel into the unknown, others like taking risks and once in a while winning the lottery, others like the elite status of being a discerning Gentleman, many are into collecting just so they can drink with sword friends. There is a community of those who simply like blades, but it is admittedly a small one.

… but there are consequences.

Don't buy swords just because you are getting 20% deal off retail. You'll lose at least 20% on fees and expenses during the resale so its not worth it. People who are looking only for "deals" end up with a humongous assembly or random, useless, unattractive and hard to get rid of items. There are very many collections like that.

Buy what you like. You will always make mistakes, but at least with something you genuinely like you will spend time with something enjoyable and when you no longer enjoy it, it can be your taste have advanced to another level. Don't buy things you don't like just because the papers are impressive unless you really know the blade, the market and confident you can resell it.

The quantity of blades you buy is expected to peak sometime around your 3rd-10th year of collecting and is supposed to go down afterwords. If you are good, by this time you've seen most things dealers have to offer. You had it, you had fun with it, you sold it. You don't need another one even if its 25% off. At this point many collectors begin to wander – what's next?

There are collecting subjects like coins, stamps and military decorations where any decent collector is expected to hyper-specialize. You can't own one iron cross, you are expected to have them in all possible variants by every possible maker, otherwise your collection is considered "lacking" and beginner grade.

It does not work with blades: nihonto hyper-specialized topic collectors are extremely uncommon. Good sword collector would find it difficult to appreciate a dozen rows filled with near identical material, be it coins or crosses, and even more so to contemplate accumulating something like a "complete collection of Yamato". However, it is equally unusual to find a better collector lacking a specific taste. You are supposed to look at a collection and immediately understand the two main factors which guided the acquisitions.

Hyper-specialty is also uncommon because unless one has a very large budget, sword collecting is about pursuing the opportunities. One can be on a lookout for signed and dated Hosho and Taima works, but unless one considers purchasing other items as well, a hyper-specialization at high level means abstaining from acquisitions for many years at a time, though being wealthy can substantially shorten the waiting period.

At high level one needs to develop resilience against random trash purchases just to stay in the game in favor of buying two-three blades that actually matter - when they become available.

Experienced collector can walk away from a deal on anything except the best, or on the contrary to keep an eye if needed for decades on a single piece he is committed to acquiring. The better is the collection, the more collector can tell about each piece, its place in the collection and realize how many years it would take to find another one.

Most importantly, collecting should temper one's character. It is a very challenging pursuit, filled with temptations, rivalry, jealousy and unsubstantiated beliefs. Painful experiences can stack up and we seldom realize when our soul weakens - until it actually improves. Consolation is that internalizing different forms of suffering is the only way to advance in wisdom. In the best case collecting combines passion with resilience – ability to take on losses, denigration, mistakes and most importantly to move forward despite all of this, even if one needs to walk away from something that took years to accomplish.