

Autumn Special Exhibition

Meibutsu

Treasured Objects with Provenance, Pedigree, and Prestige

Foreword

Throughout Japanese history, exceptional objects have been given special names to distinguish them from other similar works. The practice can be traced back to ancient mythology, from which the divine Kusanagi-no-tsurugi sword is a well-known example. In the Heian period (794–1185), outstanding objects belonging to the imperial family and their close relations came to be called *meibutsu*—literally, “named things”—and in the Muromachi period (1336–1573), the title *meibutsu* was given to items associated with the shoguns and their equivalent. Gradually, use of the term spread to include swords and tea ceremony utensils of equal aesthetic and economic value.

This exhibition presents a plenitude of *meibutsu* swords and *meibutsu* tea utensils that developed in magnificent fashion from the Muromachi to the Edo period (1603–1867). At the same time, it is also an attempt to examine these two divergent fields of art from the single perspective of *meibutsu*. While *meibutsu* swords and *meibutsu* tea ceremony utensils have developed in different ways over their long histories, they share the same qualities of exceptional beauty in their respective mediums and an illustrious provenance of passing through the hands of famous historical figures. This exhibition explores the appeal of each of these special pieces that have been handed down through the ages and traces the evolution of the values and aesthetic sensibilities reflected in them.

We would like to take this opportunity to express our deepest gratitude to the owners of these precious works who have so generously lent them for exhibition and to all of those involved for their cooperation and support in bringing this exhibition to fruition.



September 17 (Sat.) - November 6 (Sun.), 2022

Part I & II: Exhibition Rooms of Hōsa Library, City of Nagoya
Part III: Main Building Exhibition Rooms of the Tokugawa Art Museum

Introduction

Starting in around the Muromachi period (1333–1573), certain masterworks of fine craft, primarily tea utensils and swords, came to be called *meibutsu*—literally “named” or “famed things.” To merit the title of *meibutsu*, an object had, of course, to be inherently compelling and be widely recognized for its exceptional craftsmanship. In addition, it was also very important that it have a significant provenance, that is, that it have a history of ownership that could be traced to notable historical figures, such as warlords like Toyotomi Hideyoshi or tea masters like Sen no Rikyū. As the premier examples of *meibutsu*, the articles known as the “Higashiyama Gomotsu,” which originally constituted the collection of the Muromachi shogunal family, became highly sought after by the warlords and wealthy merchants of Kyoto and Sakai in later times.

In the Edo period (1603–1867), many of these noted works were collected by feudal lords and exchanged as gifts on important occasions or displayed at tea gatherings, thereby becoming status symbols for the daimyo households. Catalogues of famous objects, such as the *Ganka meibutsu-ki* and *Kyōhō meibutsu-chō*, were compiled and published, securing the objects’ position as enduring treasures. Having received such historical endorsement, these *meibutsu* have had a significant impact on how we evaluate works in the modern era.

Remarks:

In Part 2 “Meibutsu Swords,” the term “Meibutsu” is used to refer to swords listed in the *Kyōhō meibutsu-chō*, and “O-ie Meibutsu” refers to swords that are not listed in the *Kyōhō meibutsu-chō*, but that were handed down in the various daimyo families and were classified by them as *meibutsu*.

In Part 3 “Meibutsu Tea Utensils,” *meibutsu* nomenclature is based on the principle that definitions of *meibutsu* expand and are redefined. “Ōmeibutsu” refers to items appearing in the *Yamanoue Sōji-ki*, *Ganka meibutsu-ki* and earlier *meibutsu* records as well as items designated as *ōmeibutsu* in Matsudaira Fumai’s *Unshū kura-chō* collection record. “Chūkō Meibutsu” refers to items listed in the *Kokon meibutsu ruijū* as well as items listed as *chūkō meibutsu* in Fumai’s *Unshū kura-chō*. “Meibutsu” refers to items appearing in other *meibutsu* records and similar historical documents. And “O-ie Meibutsu” refers to tea utensils that are not listed in major historical records, but that were handed down in the Owari Tokugawa family and were classified by them *meibutsu*.

For this exhibition, some of the items in the Tokugawa Art Museum have been reclassified according to these standards. For objects owned by other museums, their original *meibutsu* designations have, as a rule, been preserved.

* Please note that all names are in Japanese order with family name coming first.

Part I The Origins of Meibutsu

Exhibit No.1 - 9

Pouches for sword made of the *meibutsu-gire* ancient fabrics



Since ancient times, preeminent objects have been given names to distinguish them from other like items. This practice can be traced back to ancient mythology, where early reference is made to the divine Yata-no-kagami mirror, Yasakani-no-magatama jewel, and Kusanagi-no-tsurugi (or Amenomurakumo-no-tsurugi) sword that together constitute the imperial regalia of Japan. In the Heian period (794–1185), musical instruments belonging to the emperor are known to have been given the names Genjō and Mumyō, and the Heike and Genji clans owned precious swords that were known by the names Kogarasumaru and Dōjigiri.

Furthermore, the prefix *mei-* of *meibutsu* was also bestowed on things that became renowned as particularly special examples of their kind. In the Heian period, exceptional horses (*uma*) were called “mei-ba” and distinguished musical instruments (*gakkī*) were “mei-ki.” Around the same time, the word *meibutsu* itself can be found in the *Gōdanshō*, a collection of narrative tales dating to around 1111. In the Muromachi period, occasional instances of the word *meibutsu* being used in reference to swords and tea ceremony utensils can be found. Originally, the term was applied to items from the imperial or shogunal collections, or items of equivalent status, but gradually it came to be applied to other items of equal aesthetic or economic value.



No.22

[Important Cultural Property / Meibutsu]

Wakizashi Medium Sword, known as “Monoyoshi-sadamune”.

Nanbokuchō period, 14th century.

Provenance: Toyotomi Hideyoshi, Tokugawa Ieyasu and the 1st Lord of Owari, Tokugawa Yoshinao.

The Tokugawa Art Museum.

Part II Meibutsu Swords

Box and shirasaya plain-wood scabbard for the short sword,
Monoyoshi Sadamune



A comprehensive list of all swords ascribed with the status of *meibutsu* was compiled in the mid-Edo period in a document known as the *Kyōhō meibutsu-chō*. This catalogue is believed to have been compiled for presentation to the 8th shogun, Tokugawa Yoshimune (1684–1751), by Hon'ami Kōchū, the 13th-generation head of a family of sword polishers and appraisers active since the Muromachi period, based on his family's records. Today, the term *meibutsu*, in its narrowest sense, refers to the swords appearing in this *Kyōhō meibutsu-chō*.

Meibutsu swords listed in the *Kyōhō meibutsu-chō* are high-quality swords from the Nanbokuchō period (1336–92) and earlier that were forged by renowned swordsmiths, have specific names, and have a history of being owned by former shoguns and famous military commanders. Swords meeting such criteria had already been valued since the Muromachi period and were collected by Oda Nobunaga (1534–82) and Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–98), among others. *Meibutsu* swords owned by samurai and merchant families were exchanged as gifts until the early Edo period, but gradually they became concentrated in the collections of the Tokugawa shogunal family and a few powerful daimyo families. By the time of the compilation of the *Kyōhō meibutsu-chō*, it would seem that *meibutsu* swords had almost completely fallen out of circulation. In the Owari family too, *meibutsu* swords were not allowed to leave the premises, and it was not until the end of the Edo period that they again began to circulate publicly.

section <i>

Swords of the Shoguns and the Great Unifiers

Exhibit No.10 - 17

section <ii>

Famed Swords Lost to Fire

Exhibit No.18 - 22

section <iii>

Meibutsu Swords Turned Family Treasures

Exhibit No.23 - 41

Part III Meibutsu Tea Utensils

Boxes for various kinds of tea utensils



The first written references to *meibutsu* tea utensils date from the Muromachi period. In the 16th century, so-called *meibutsu-ki* (records of famous tea utensils) were compiled, listing objects by type and owner. In the latter half of the 16th century, under the rule of Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi, *meibutsu* tea wares were being collected by merchants from Sakai, Kyoto, and Hakata and meanwhile were also being used by the warrior class in tendering peace negotiations as well as for rewards from lord to vassal, imbuing them with political currency on top of their artistic and commercial value.

In the Edo period, many of these *meibutsu* tea utensils were collected by feudal lords and used at tea gatherings or presented as gifts to mark important junctures, such as formal visits from the shogun or hereditary succession of the family headship, thus coming to serve as symbols of a family's political or social status. However, in response to reductions in the scale of ceremonies and gift exchanges among the shogunal and daimyo families resulting from economic reforms implemented from the end of the 17th century to the beginning of the 18th century, these original *meibutsu* tea utensils became closely guarded within the various family collections. Later, from the mid-Edo period onward, new *meibutsu* catalogues were compiled and *meibutsu* tea utensils were expanded and newly created.

section <i>

Meibutsu of the Muromachi and Momoyama Periods: The Yamanoue Sōji-ki and its Time

Exhibit No.43 - 59

No.53 [Image of the work on the surface]

Tea Jar, named "Shoka".

Stoneware.

China, Southern Song-Yuan dynasties, 13th-14th century.

Provenance: Ashikaga Yoshimasa (attr.), the Shiba family (attr.), Shukō, Kondaya Sōtaku, Kitamuki Dōchin, Kitamuki Dōmai, Oda Nobunaga, Oda Nobutada, Hori Hidemasa, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, Toyotomi Hidetsugu, Tokugawa Ieyasu and Tokugawa Yoshinao.

The Tokugawa Art Museum.

section <ii>

Meibutsu of the Early Edo period:

The Ganka meibutsu-ki

Exhibit No.60 - 90



No.75

[Important Art Object / Ōmeibutsu]
Tea Bowl known as "Shiro-tenmoku".
Tenmoku type, Mino ware, glazed stoneware.

Muromachi period, 16th century.

Provenance: Takeno Jō'ō, Takeno Nakasada, and the 1st Lord of Owari, Tokugawa Yoshinao.

The Tokugawa Art Museum.

No.80

[Ōmeibutsu]

Tea Scoop, named "Namida".

Bamboo.

By Sen no Rikyū.

Momoyama period, 16th century.

Provenance: Furuta Oribe, Tokugawa

Ieyasu and the 1st Lord of Owari,

Tokugawa Yoshinao.

The Tokugawa Art Museum.



Sen no Rikyū carved this bamboo tea scoop and used it in his last tea gathering in 1591, when Toyotomi Hideyoshi ordered him to commit ritual suicide. It is said that Rikyū gave this tea scoop to his disciple, Furuta Oribe (1544-1615), who then carved a cylindrical container with a small rectangular hole to store his teacher's keepsake. The cylinder containing the tea scoop purportedly as Rikyū's memorial tablet.

section <iii>

Meibutsu of the Middle and Later Edo Periods:

The Blossoming of Meibutsu Records

Exhibit No.91 - 120

section <iv>

Meibutsu of the Early Modern Period

Exhibit No.121 - 128



No.125

[O-ie Meibutsu]

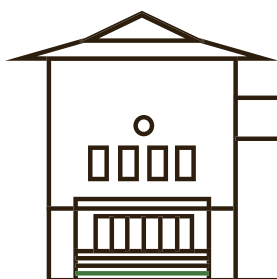
Tea Caddy, named "Yokota".

Katatsuki square-shouldered type, Seto ware, glazed stoneware.

Edo period, 17th century.

Provenance: The 2nd Lord of Owari, Tokugawa Mitsutomo.

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