

Thematic Exhibition

THE CONNOISSEUR'S EYE

ART APPRAISAL IN THE EDO PERIOD

June 3 (Sat.) - July 17 (Mon.), 2023
Hōsa Bunko Galleries



Folding Album of Calligraphy,
named "Hōsa".
Compiled in Edo period, 17th c.
[The Tokugawa Art Museum]

INTRODUCTION

The act of appraisal—the evaluation of the authenticity and value of works of art—requires specialized knowledge for identifying the subject matter of a painting, the nature of an object, the creator or place of creation of an artwork, and other relevant details. In the Edo period, the Hon'ami family of sword polishers, the Gotō family of sword fitting makers, the Kohitsu family of calligraphers, the Kano and Sumiyoshi painting schools, and the headmasters of the respective tea ceremony lineages conducted appraisals of works in their respective genres. This exhibition explores the nature of the appraisal process through expert-appraised artworks in conjunction with the written certificates of appraisal, authentication slips, box inscriptions and other records of these appraisers' assessments, which were conducted at a time before the invention of instruments for scientific analysis or precision photography for documentation.

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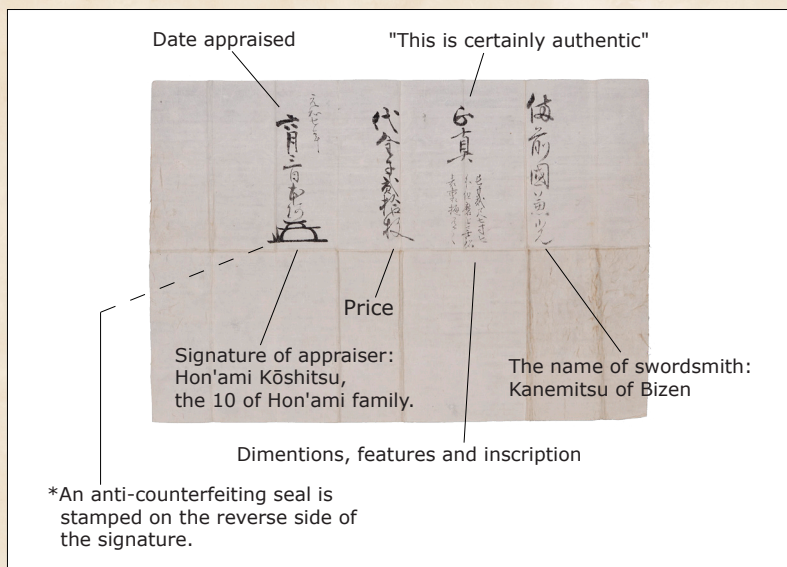
THE ORIGINS OF ART APPRAISAL

Since ancient times, cultural objects such as calligraphy and paintings have been judged for their relative quality and worth. Art appraisal as we know it today—that is, the formal assessment of the authenticity of a work and its value—seems to have started in the Muromachi period (ca. 1333–1573), with the development of the market economy. As the exchange of cultural objects as property and payment in coin currency became more widespread, the need for a formalized means of assigning monetary value to cultural properties and guaranteeing their value arose.

MASTERING IDENTIFICATION

The Momoyama period (1568/73–1600) witnessed the rise of appraisers in various fields. The Hon'ami family, which specialized in sword authentication, and the Kohitsu family, which specialized in calligraphy appraisal, are perhaps the best-known examples. Their assessments were inscribed on various types of written certificates, such as labels attached directly to objects (*gedai*), and folded paper documents (*origami*) and authentication slips (*kiwamefuda*) that accompanied objects. As in English, saying that something “has a certificate” (*origami-tsuki* or *kiwame-tsuki*), i.e., being “certified,” has come to indicate that it is a reputable item.

One important function of appraisal was to identify the maker of a piece. Generally, the value of a work and demand for it increases as the reputation of the maker becomes well-established. Likewise, the identity of the artist greatly affected the value of a work in the past as well.



Origami Certificate of Evaluation for *Katana* Long Sword.
By Hon'ami Kōshitsu. Edo period, 1621.
[The Tokugawa Art Museum]

MASTERING CLASSIFICATION

When appraising a piece, it was also important to determine where it was made—in China, Korea, Southeast Asia, or Japan—when it was made, and what classifications applied to it. For tea ceremony utensils, classifications for tea bowls, tea containers, and lacquer wares existed already in the Muromachi period, and in the Edo period, a classification system for tea containers based on period and place of production, known as *kama-wake* (kiln division), was invented.

Many of the classifications based on the values and views of those times have been carried over in the ranking and naming conventions still used today, but the number of discrepancies arising from modern findings based on scientific analysis has left numerous issues of classification that remain to be resolved.

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MASTERING QUALITY ASSURANCE

Being “accompanied by a certificate” (*origami-tsuki*) is an assurance of the authenticity of an object and, in turn, of its reputation. As such, formal appraisals serve the important function of also guaranteeing the value of an object. In the context of appraisal, a guarantee means attesting that a work has been recognized as excellent by some authority in the art world. Box inscriptions (*hakogaki*) signed by tea ceremony masters confirming a tea utensil’s name or provenance and written certificates (*kakitsuke*) verifying the sharpness of a sword’s blade, are two examples of endorsements that are understood as significant guarantees of an object’s quality.

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MASTERING VALUATION

The most obvious criterion for assessment provided by an appraisal is of course the standard of an object’s monetary value. Unlike judgements of an object’s form, which may be subject to differences in personal taste and preference, monetary value is a quantifiable standard that is easily understood and makes it easy to compare objects with each other. For daimyo families, assessment of a sword’s monetary value was a particularly important part of the appraisal process as it served as a standard for determining what objects should be presented as gifts to the shogun.

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UNLIMITED APPRAISAL

When a long time has passed since an object was made, there can be a lack of information to serve as criteria for judgment or insufficient reference pieces for comparison, making appraisal difficult or inconclusive. Even today, with advances in photographic technologies and techniques of scientific analysis, there are still many artists or fields that lack reliable criteria or known examples to compare against to support a justifiable assessment.

In addition, works by popular artists are prone to imitation and forgery, which was a challenge for many connoisseurs even during the Edo period. It is undeniable that many forgeries were so carefully made that it is difficult to corroborate an object’s authenticity after the purported artist or related individuals have died, and as a result, many forgeries likely still exist in the present day.

