Early History of the Hirata School of Higo Province
By David Stiles

Introduction

In this article I will present Japanese names, places, and terms, for the first time in italics followed by the kanji (漢字) or kana (仮名) in brackets to aid the reader in understanding Japanese texts and notes. Reference to the same term later in the text it will only be italicized.

I will be discussing the origin and early history of the Japanese sword fittings artisans of the Hirata (平田) school, located in Higo (肥後) Province of the southernmost island Kyūshū (九州) of pre-modern Japan. I will start before the time of the school's first generation master Hikozo (彦三) to discuss the school's origin outside of Higo Province and the Hosokawa (細川) clan and continue until the third generation master who also used the name Hikozo and was only an appraiser of precious metals. More direct information is available in the Japanese book Higo-Kinko Roku (肥後金工録) by Nagaya Shigena. Masayuki Sasano states in his book, Early Japanese Sword Guards, that after the third generation the Hirata school only supervised the making of sword fittings by others. There are no works of the Hirata family known from the third generation onward, although the family lasted for a total of eight generations, until the Meiji (明治) Period.

I will examine works produced by other groups of fitting makers before the time of the first generation Hikozo and discuss possible craftsmanship and stylistic, and artistic influences, either direct or indirect, that influenced the development of the Hirata School. This is an attempt to better understand the techniques used by the Hirata School and to put them in a broader, more historical and developmental context. My objective is to show that not only the Ko-Shōami (古正阿弥) and Kyō-Shōami (京正阿弥) schools based in Kyoto and Buzen (豊前) Province, but also the even earlier Ko-Kinko (古金工) group of a more indeterminate origin had a profound impact on the development of the Hirata School.

Early History before Higo Province

Hirata Hikozo's father Matsumoto Inaba no Kami (松本因幡守) belong to the Samurai (侍) Sasaki (佐々木) family of Ōmi (近江) Province. After the downfall of the Sasaki family his father was forced to flee and become a masterless Samurai. While seeking work in Kyoto, Inaba became employed by Hosokawa Tadaoki (細川忠興). Inaba and his family, including the young Hikozo who's birth date is not recorded but I have estimated to be about 1590, moved to Tango (丹後) Province. This province was given to the Hosokawa clan by the Shogun Oda Nobunaga (將軍織田信長) in 1580. Later, in 1600, the Hosokawa family transitioned to the Lordship (Daimyo 大名) of Buzen Province in northern Kyūshū (九州). After this transfer to Buzen Province, the Inaba stipend was raised to 350 koku (石高) of rice (One koku of rice was volume equivalent in dry rice of what an adult male would eat in one year). It was recorded that shortly after this time, Inaba passed away unexpectedly due disease and the leadership of the family passed to Hikozo's uncle Matsumoto Sukenojō (松本助之允) with a stipend of 250 koku, as Hikozo, Inaba's legitimate son, was yet a young child. The details of Matsumoto Sukenojō's fate were not recorded. Later, as Hikozo matured, he charged his family name
to Hirata and was awarded a special stipend of 100 koku as an appraiser of precious metals and a sword fittings maker.\textsuperscript{3} The period in Buzen Province from 1600 until 1632 was important for Hikozo’s development as he likely was instructed in basic techniques for soft metal and iron by members of the early Shōami and Kyō-Shoami schools already present in or recently moved to Buzen Province from Kyoto.\textsuperscript{5} Being recorded as a personal friend of Hosokawa Tadaoki allowed Hikozo to study and have access to earlier Ko-Kinko and Ko-Shōami work. It was also recorded that Hikozo, along with Tadaoki, was a student of the tea ceremony, which likely also had a profound influence on his artistic sensibilities.

Early History of the Hirata School in Higo Province

The Shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu (徳川家光) appointed the leadership of Higo Province to Hosokawa Tadatoshi (細川忠利) in 1632.\textsuperscript{5,6} Hikozo, his son Shōzaburō (少三郎), and his nephew Shimizu Jinbei (志水仁兵衛) moved to Yatushiro-jo (八代城) (jo means castle) in northern Higo Province and stayed there for the remainder of Hikozo’s life, until his death at the age of 45 in 1635.\textsuperscript{3,7} Upon Hikozo’s death, Shōzaburō moved along with the Hosokawa family to Kumamoto-jo (熊本城). Shimizu Jinbei stayed in Yatushiro and later went on to establish himself as a silversmith and a sword fittings artist. Shōzaburō worked as a sword fittings artist in the style of his father. The profession of sword fittings artist was passed from Hikozo to Nishigaki Kanshirō (西垣勘四郎) and Shimizu Jinbei, both of whom started their own schools. It is recorded that Shōzaburō received a stipend of 20 koku of rice from the Hosokawa family and died in 1686.\textsuperscript{3,4} The role of appraiser of precious metals was left to Shōzaburō’s adopted son Saburōbei (三郎兵衛) who later changed his name to Hikozo. The fourth generation master Hirata Isata (平田尹三太) was recorded to have become the supervisor of a craftsman's village at Kumamoto-jo.
Genealogy of the Early *Hirata* School

Hirata Inaba no Kami
Born in Matsumoto, Gōshū
After the downfall of the Sassaki clan, their retainers were scattered
Retained by Hosokawa Tadaoki in Kyoto
Wife was Lady-in-Waiting to Hosokawa Gracia
During the Keichō era took part in the siege of Ishida Mitsunari’s Tanabe-jō
Died of illness in Nakazu, Buzen

1st Gen. Hirata Hikozo
Retained by Lord Hosokawa Sansai
Resided in Kokura, Buzen
Excused from duties as a warrior
Silver artisan of the cloisonné tsuba school
Died the 9th day of the 11th month, the 12th year of Kanei, 1635

Tani Denji
Nishigaki Kanshirō
[谷伝次] [西垣兼四郎, 吉弘]
1st Gen., Yoshihiro
1st Gen., Kazuyuki
Shimizu Jinbei
[志水仁兵衛, 一幸]

2nd Gen. Hirata Hikozo
Legitimate heir, Shosaburō
Died the 24th day, the 3rd month, the 3rd year of Jōkyō, 1686

3rd Gen. Hirata Hikozo
Adopted son, Saburōbei
3rd son of Haga Gozaemon
Commanded to change to the office of gold & silver
The craftsman Kanshirō to receive entire inheritance
Died the 27th day, the 11th month, the 3rd year of Enpō, 1675

4th Gen. Hirata Hikozo
Isata [伊三太]
Supervisor of craftsmen’s village
(subsequent generations omitted)
Early Influences of Hirata Hikozo

In this section I would like to present some examples that, at the time, were antique Ko-kinko tsuba which used the same base metal, some of the same surface treatments, and show similar compositional aspects in terms of openwork as does the work of Hikozo. These works could have had an indirect influence upon Hikozo's artistic development. The first example tsuba is made of unrefined copper, yamagane (山銅), a soft metal often used by Hikozo. The tsuba displays a textured lacquer surface, also a common feature of Hikozo's when working with a copper based soft metal. The simple but elegant openwork design of a chrysanthemum flower was a common subject of Hikozo masterpieces. The tsuba has a raised rim which also is characteristic of Hikozo work. Overall, the piece lacks the high level of refinement and finish of Hikozo work. The elongated oval shaped kozuka hitu-ana (小柄樋孔穴) and large seppa-dai (切羽台) indicate its antiquity and use on early uchigatana koshirae (打刀瘡).

Illustration 1: This tsuba dates from the middle to late Muromachi Period (1400-1568). The surface, with a hammered texture, has been covered in thick black lacquer. Measurements are 6.8 cm wide by 6.8 cm high. The thickness at the turned up rim is 4.0 mm and thinner towards the center.
The next example of early work that likely had a influences on Hikozo is a large sized tsuba, possibly used in a daisho koshirae (大小揃) from the Azuchi-Momoyama Period (1568-1615) but more likely dated to the Keicho (慶長) era (1596-1615). The surface of the refined copper tsuba is polished smooth and displays the remnants of black lacquer that has been intentionally worn away for aesthetic purposes. This, along with the chrysanthemum shape, is often seen in a more refined level in the work of Hikozo. The rounded punch marks around the nakago hitsu-ana (中心櫃孔穴), done with a specialized chisel, are similar to examples from Hikozo discussed later in the next section.

Illustration 2: This large tsuba is the work of the Ko-Kinko group and measures in at 9.4 cm wide by 9.8 cm high. The thickness at the rim is 4.0 mm. The smooth texture, treatment of the yamagane plate with lacquer, and overall bold shape likely influenced the later work of Hikozo. (Courtesy of www.Juyo-bi.com)
The final early example is a soft metal Ko-Shōami (古正阿弥) tsuba, circa Azuchi-Momyama Period, with a base metal of brass (shinchū 真鍮). Stylized devices are carved in high relief and highlighted nicely with the use of black lacquer, similar to what is observed on many pieces attributed to Hikozo and his Hirata School.

Illustration 3: This is a Ko-Shoami tsuba measuring 7.6 cm wide by 8.0 cm high. The raised rim at 5 mm and the thin center of 2.5 mm, in the context of the other techniques used, show striking similarly to Hikozo and works of the Hirata School.
These are just a few early examples of soft metal *tsuba* that display some remarkable similarities that could have had an influence on the later works of the *Hirata* school of *Higo* Province.

**Examples of First and Second Generation *Hirata***

Following are a few soft metal examples of first and second generation *Hirata* School work. All of the examples were attributed at a minimum to the *Hirata* School by the Society for Preservation of Japanese Art Swords (*Nihon Bijutsu Token Hozon Kyokai* 日本美術刀剣保存協会) [NBTHK] at the Japanese Sword Museum located in *Shibuya-ku, Tokyo*.

The first very fine example, which I was able to examine in person at the Tampa Japanese sword show, was awarded a *tokubetsu hozon* (特別保存) certificate by the NBTHK, with a direct attribution to *Hirata Hikozo* even though it is unsigned. Notice the similarities to the previously

Illustration 4: This fine example, while unsigned, has been attributed directly to *Hirata Hikozo*. The measurements are 6.5 cm x 6.5 cm and 2.6 mm at the rim. (Images Courtesy of [http://tetsugendo.com/](http://tetsugendo.com/))
presented Ko-Kinko examples in terms of the thin plate as well as the use of black lacquer to give the refined copper a wonderful dark patina and depth to the surface texture. The rounded punch marks around the nakago hitsu-ana, described as hidden cold chisel (kakushi-tagane 隠し鏨) in Japanese, are done with a specialized chisel unique to the artist and very similar to the Ko-Kinko example in Illustration 2.⁸

This next example, the current owner and I also think, is the work of 1ˢᵗ generation Hirata Hikozo. However, the NBTHK has given it Tokubetsu Hozon to Hirata School only. The simple, bold, and elegant negative openwork is of a chrysanthemum. The work is done in a dark shakudo (赤銅) with a thick layering of black lacquer, giving the textured surface a very nice glossiness. The edge of the tsuba is fitted nicely with a soft metal rim cover (fukurin 覆輪).⁸ A rim cover of the same or different metal is a feature frequently found also on Ko-kinko tsuba. The rounded punch marks around the nakago hitsu-ana are unique to the artist and very similar to the Ko-Kinko example in Illustration 2 as well as to the first Hirata example in Illustration 4. The surface is nicely textured in a style similar to the first Hirata example.

Illustration 5: This large Hirata tsuba is done in very fine shakudo with an applied surface texture and black lacquer. Measurements are 8.1 cm x 7.8 cm, 4.2 mm at the rim. (Courtesy of www.Juyo-bi.com)
The next example I will present seems to be in the style of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation Shōzaburō; it has an NBTHK hozon judgment attributing it to the Hirata School. The design is of two folding fans with a centrally located pine bark styled family crest. It, like all the previous examples, is unsigned. The rounded punch marks around the nakago hitsu-ana are unique to the artist and very similar to the Ko-Kinko example in Illustration 2 as well as to the first and second Hirata examples in Illustrations 4 and 5. Unlike in the previous two examples, surface texture is a smooth, fine polished finish.

![Illustration 6: The base metal of this tsuba is a bit hard to tell but I think it is likely some copper based Japanese alloy such as shibuichi (四分一) with a layer of clear lacquer and patina. The measurements are 7.4 cm x 7.3 cm x 4 mm and 3 mm at rim. (Courtesy of www.Juyo-bi.com)]
The final example, Illustration 7, is in my opinion another work of the 2nd generation Shōzaburō. I was able to examine this tsuba in person at the Southeast Japanese Sword Show & Auction and found it both very refined and impressive. The attribution on the NBTHK hozon paper is only to the Hirata School. This tsuba is constructed in 3 layers: a yamagane plate is sandwiched between two thinner layers of highly polished dark shakudo. The yamagane, visible only along the rim of the tsuba, is nicely polished along its outer edge. This style of “sandwich” construction using three layers of differing soft metals is sometime found also in earlier Ko-Kinko work of the Azuchi-Momoyama Period.

Illustration 7: The measurements of this Hirata work is 7.8 cm x 7.2 cm and 3 mm at the rim. (Images Courtesy of http://tetsugendo.com/)
Summary and Conclusion

I have presented the Samurai origin and early history of the Hirata School before, during, and after their move to Higo Province. I have presented a few examples of Ko-Kinko (Illustrations 1 and 2) and Ko-Shōami (Illustration 3) School work that exhibit many techniques and design aesthetics that were later incorporated by the Hirata School.

My theory is that not only the early Ko-Shōami and Kyō-Shōami Schools based in Kyoto but also the even earlier Ko-Kinko group of a more indeterminate origin had a profound impact on the development of the Hirata School. This impact was carried over to the early Shimizu and Nishigaki Schools of Higo Province that evolved from the Hirata School.

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References