Discussion of a Ko-Shōami Tsuba (古正阿弥鐔)

Basic Information:
Japanese Title: 三又文繋図鐔 (mitsutama mon tsunagi zu tsuba)
Material: iron (tetsu 鉄)
Age: Middle Muromachi Period (室町時代中期)
Size: 8.0 cm X 8.0 cm, 2.4 mm at center, 3.0 mm at rim
Signature: mumei (無銘)
Shape: kurikomi-mokkō-gata (刳込木瓜形)
Surface Finish: tsuchime-ji (槌目地)

Introduction:
An early Japanese sword hand guard (tsuba 鏔) made of forged iron (tetsu 鉄). It was made during the middle Muromachi Period likely sometime around rule of the 8th Ashikaga Shōgun (足利將軍) Yoshimasa (義政) (r. 1449–1473 CE). The basic shape of the tsuba is like that of the cross section of the fruit of the Japanese quince. It is notched at the four corners with a small openwork design made to represent boar eyes (inome 猪目). This overall shape incorporating the small openwork designs is collectively referred to as (kurikomi-mokkō-gata 剋込木瓜形) and is a classic shape used on hand guards of early long sword worn edge down (tachi 太刀) and was carried over to shorter swords typically worn edge up (uchigatana 打刀). Both sides of the tsuba are decorated by thin vertical file marks (shino-yasurime 筿鏢目) mixed with a finely hammer surface texture (tsuchime-ji 槌目地).

Discussion:
Connected three-pronged elements (三又文繋 mitsutama mon tsunagi) made up of line inlays (sen-zōgan 線象嵌) of imported Chinese brass (sentoku 宣德) (ca. 1429 CE) and locally mined silver (gin 銀) are neatly inlaid along the rounded rim (maru-mimi 丸耳) of this tsuba. This inlaid pattern is applied to both sides and might have been added later when an original soft metal rim cover (fukurin 覆輪) was damaged and was removed. If the inlays along the rim are original to the tsuba then they are
an important bit of evidence. This early *tsuba* might be an important transition piece linking the origin of the early professional sword fittings artisans (Ko-Shōami 古正阿弥) that worked in the old capital of Kyōto (京都) with the early armor smith artisans (Ko-Katchūshi 古甲冑師) and the silver sword fittings makers (shirogane-shi 白銀師) during the mid Muromachi Period. (2,3)

The utility knife accessory hole (*kozuka hitsu-ana* 小柄櫛穴) might be original to the *tsuba* or not and displays the typical cross section shape of *kozuka* used on sword mounts during the mid Muromachi Period.

This *tsuba* was published in the KTK (Kokusai Tōsōgu Kai 国際刀装具会) 5th International Convention & Exhibition Book, page 49. (4) The tentative attribution provided in the KTK article is that the *tsuba* is the work of Ko-Katchūshi group or that it might have been even older, circa the Kamakura Period (鎌倉時代) and mounted on a long sword worn edge down (*tachi* 太刀). This *tsuba* was submitted to the Nihon Bijutsu Token Hozon Kyokai 日本美術刀剣保存協会 (Society of the Preservation of the Japanese Art Sword) for formal appraisal (*shinsa* 審査) in February 2018 and was attributed to the Ko-Shōami group. The NBTHK designated the *tsuba* to be of good quality, authentic, and worthy of historical preservation. The direct attribution to Ko-Shōami indicates also that the NBTHK was thinking the *tsuba* dates from the mid Muromachi Period and not earlier.
References:
1. Personal Communication with Markus Sesko on reading and meaning of Kanji.
3. Tosogu Classroom Volume 1 by Fukushi Shigeo, pages 116-120.
4. KTK (Kokusai Tōsōgu Kai 国際刀装具会) 5th International Convention & Exhibition Book, page 49.