

Taikei Naotane

Naotane was born in 1778 (the 7th year of the Anei era) in Yamagata, Dewa Province, and was originally named Shōji (庄司 or 莊司) Minobē (箕兵衛 or 美濃兵衛). He used the name "Taikei" (大慶) as his smith name. Around 1821 (the 4th year of the Bunsei era), he received the title "Chikuzen Daijō" (筑前大掾), and in 1848 (the 1st year of the Kaei era), he went to Kyoto and changed his title to "Mino-no-suke" (美濃介).

He went to Edo and learned swordsmithing under Suishinshi Masahide. Like his master, he later served the lord of the Yamagata Domain, Akimoto, and became a notable disciple within the Suishinshi school. The exact time when he entered Suishinshi's school is not clear, but based on the inscription "Shōji Naotane, January, Kansei 13" (庄司直胤 寛政十三年正月日) on one of his earliest swords made at the age of 23, it is assumed that he began his apprenticeship around 1798 (the 10th year of the Kansei era). It is also believed that he became independent around the beginning of the Bunka era (around 1804).

His style was highly artistic and he skillfully handled "Gokaden" (The Five Traditions; Yamato, Yamashiro, Bizen, Sōshū, and Mino), with particularly notable works in the Bizen and Sōshū styles. It is unanimously agreed upon that he was one of the top disciples of the Suishinshi school.

Throughout his life, Naotane traveled extensively, making swords in various regions, including Aichi, Ibaraki, Chiba, Kanagawa, Shizuoka, Nagano, Mie, Kyoto, Osaka, and Okayama (as they are known today). Some of his journeys lasted for 4 years, even when he was over 70 years old. His strong physique, coupled with the purpose of his travels—such as studying iron materials—reflect his constant drive for improvement. His wide circle of connections, his popularity, and, of course, the high regard for his works at the time, were all key to his achievements. His extensive influence is a testament to his considerable skill.

Naotane passed away on May 27, 1857 (the 4th year of the Ansei era), at the age of 79. Over the course of his more than 50-year-long sword-making career, he gained great renown. His skills earned him the praise of surpassing his master, Masahide, and he became widely famous during his time. He is truly a swordsmith worthy of being called a master of the Shinshin-tō period.

No.18

Wakizashi Mei Taikei Naotane

Kanda Tōto ni oite kore wo tsukuru

This wakizashi, although lacking an inscription of the year, is thought to date from around the beginning of the Bunka era based on the style of the inscription. In that year, Naotane established his residence in Kanda, where he made swords for approximately seven years. Works with "神田" (Kanda) included in the inscription, aside from this piece, have not been confirmed, making this one particularly valuable from a historical perspective. The style features *ō-gunome-midare*, aiming to emulate the Osaka *shin-tō* style of the early Edo period, especially the *tōran-midare* of Tsuda Echizen-no-kami Sukehiro. This piece clearly shows the influence of his master, Masahide.

No.19

Katana Mei (Mikazuki-mon) Taikei Shōji Naotane (Kaō)

Bunka hachi nen chūshū (mid-autumn in the 8th year of the Bunka era)

Most of Naotane's Bizen-style works are believed to have been influenced by the late Kamakura period swordsmiths, Osafune Kagemitsu and Kanemitsu, and primarily feature *gunome* in the *katāochi* style. However, this piece stands out due to the more prominent, wide *gunome*, suggesting that he aimed to emulate the "Ōei Bizen" style of the early Muromachi period. Additionally, at certain points, the top of the hamon blends into the *ji*, creating the *utsuri*, a feature characteristic of Naotane's distinct style. On the other hand, the subtle *urumi* in the hamon at the base of the blade hints at the style of the Suishinshi swordsmiths.

No.22

Katana Mei Dewa-no-kuni Taikei Shōji Naotane (Kaō)

Bunka jūni kinoto-i nen chūshū (mid-autumn in the 12th year of the Bunka era)

Sugihara Gunki Masakane no Nozomi ni ōji kore wo tsukuru

This sword can be considered a derivative piece in the style of Kagemitsu or Kanemitsu. The hamon features a vivid and clear *midare-utsuri*, with a soft and bright *nioiguchi*, demonstrating a high degree of completion in the Bizen tradition, successfully realizing its intended design. It is traditionally regarded as one of the finest examples of Bizen-style swords made by Naotane. Incidentally, the client,

“Sugihara Gunki Masakane,” is likely to have been a retainer of Naritsune, the fourth lord of the Echizen Matsudaira family of the Kawagoe Domain.

No.24

Katana Mei Shōji Chikuzen Daijō Taikei Fuji Naotane (Kaō)

Bunsei yo nen go gatsu-jitsu (May in the 4th year of the Bunsei era)

In the year this sword was made, Naotane was granted the title of “Chikuzen Daijō.” The hamon of this sword is centered with squared waves, while incorporating various types of hamon to avoid monotony. At the same time, it carefully restrains the distinctive features of both Naotane and the Suishinshi school. Additionally, the shape of the sword shows a noticeable difference in width from the base to the tip, and the curvature is deep, clearly reflecting the appearance of ancient tachi. This sword was crafted with high ideals, keeping in mind the masterpieces from the Kamakura period.

No.25

Wakizashi Mei Shōji Chikuzen Daijō Taikei Naotane (Kaō)

Bunsei jūsan nen chūshū (mid-autumn in the 13th year of the Bunsei era)

This wakizashi features a well-forged jigane of itame-hada, with a complex and irregular hamon. Prominent kinsuji follow the texture of the hada, along with sunagashi, and the nie is thick and evenly applied, demonstrating an ambitious effort to work in the Sōshū tradition. The kurikara on the front, thought to be by Yoshitane, is intricately carved, enhancing its aesthetic appeal. The craftsmanship of Naotane, incorporating the techniques of various traditions, is fully displayed, and based on its dimensions, it is likely a wakizashi from a dai-shō (katana and wakizashi set).

No.28

Katana Mei Taikei Naotane tsukuru (Kaō)

Hisai ni oite Tenpō san mizunoe-tatsu nen go gatsu-jitsu

(May in the 3rd year of the Tenpō era)

Naotane crafted swords in distant locations three times during his lifetime. His first journey began the year before this piece was made, traveling along the Tōkaidō and culminating in a pilgrimage to Ise Jingū. It is highly likely that "Hisai" (久居) refers to the Hisai Domain, located to the northwest of the Ise Shrine. This piece features a robust and imposing shape, with a broad body and an extended chū-kissaki (medium-sized tip). The jigane displays a distinctive hada pattern, blending itame and ō-itame, and the hamon displays a unique structure. The yubashiri is prominently visible, which is rare to see in the ji. The kijimomo-gata tang (a tang with a rise in shape like the thigh of a pheasant) was likely a special order.

No.31

Naginata Mei Gojuppon no uchi Taikei Naotane (Kaō)

Tenpō go nen chūshun Ichi (mid-spring in the 5th year of the Tenpō era)

As stated in the inscription, this naginata (pole sword) was created by Naotane in response to an order for fifty swords (according to one theory, from the Sanada family of Shinshū). This particular piece features a hamon that is irregularly wavy, to the extent that it shows no fear of collapse. Along with the nie, prominent kinsuji, and sunagashi, the piece clearly displays the influence of the Soshū tradition. Since it was made in response to the order for fifty swords, it is likely that Naotane established a workshop, possibly leading a group of disciples and collaborators—something that could be referred to as the “Naotane workshop.” This piece demonstrates his strength as a leader.

No.32

Tantō Mei Fuji Naotane (Kaō)

Tenpō go nen haru ni gatsu-jitsu Hori Yoshitane

(February in the 5th year of the Tenpō era)

The construction of this tantō follows the style of a small knife intended to be mounted on a sword's koshirae, with a rounded mune, making it extremely rare among Naotane's tantō works. Additionally, the engravings by Yoshitane, which are the kiri-mon (paulownia crests) applied in gold iroe, are scattered in the hitsu (recess carved in a rectangular shape), giving it a decorative appearance and suggesting that it was made to special order. The hamon on the blade is straight on the front (inscription side) and irregular on the back (reverse side), demonstrating a transition to the characteristics of the school. Even though it is a small piece, it conveys a strong sense of craftsmanship and attention to detail.

No.33

Dai-shō Mei Taikei Naotane tsukuru (Kaō)

Tenpō nana nen chūshun (mid-spring in the 7th year of the Tenpō era)

This dai-shō (katana and wakizashi set) features a katana with a jigane of masame pattern throughout the blade, following the Yamato tradition, while the wakizashi showcases a unique jigane of swirling patterns mixed with itame. Both blades have a wide hamon with prominent nie, and display frequent kinsuji and sunagashi, reflecting the bold style of the Sōshū tradition. On the broad, robust blades of both swords, the Four Heavenly Kings are carved on the front and back, making these swords meticulously crafted pieces with many remarkable features. They were made during the time when Naotane worked in Shinshū Matsushiro, due to his connection with Kenmotsu Yazawa, the Edo chief retainer of the Shinshū Sanada family. This particular set was passed down within the Sanada family of Matsushiro Domain.

No.35

Important Sword

Katana Mei Taikei Naotane tsukuru (Kaō)

(Kokuin · Shinano) Tenpō nana nen jūichi gatsu kichijitu (An auspicious day in November of the 7th year of the Tenpō era)

This piece features a wide and thick blade with a slightly extended chū-kissaki (medium-sized tip), giving it a sturdy construction reminiscent of the shin-shin-tō (new new sword) style. It displays a hamon with a continuous gunome, along with a prominent nioi and nie, showcasing frequent sunagashi and kinsuji— all aimed at achieving the high-quality characteristic of the Sōshū swordsmiths. While Naotane's true intent is unknown, the finished product unexpectedly resembles the work of Sekishū Naotsuna, one of the Masamune Jittetsu (the Ten Great Disciples of Masamune). The piece is crafted to an exceptionally high standard. As indicated by the engraving, this sword was made in Shinshū Matsushiro.

No.37

Katana Mei Nanajū okina Fuji Naotane (Kaō)

Kōka go saru no ni gatsu-jitsu (February in the 5th year of the Kōka era)

Daijōden-ka no taimei ni yori tsukuru tokoro no on-tachi no fukusa nari (Kokuin · Miyako)

This piece clearly indicates that it was made in Kyoto, as evidenced by the "Miyako" (都) engraving. There is also a work from August of this year (when the era changed to Kaei) in which the swordsmith transitioned to using the name "Mino-no-suke" (美濃介). Additionally, as stated in the inscription, this sword was made as a secondary piece under the orders of the Daijō-daijin (Takatsukasa Masamichi), and another similar work from November of the same year has also been confirmed. The craftsmanship of this sword features a prominent gunome hamon on the front, while the back predominantly showcases a chōji-style hamon, along with occasional kinsuji and sunagashi, blending elements from various traditions.

No.38

Wakizashi Tōshin-mei Ansei san nen ni gatsu-jitsu Taikei saku (Naotane)

(February in the 3rd year of the Ansei era)

This piece is crafted in the katakiriba construction, with no yokote or kissaki at the tip of the blade. The inscription is engraved on the blade, not the tang, which is an

unusual feature for a sword, so it was possibly made as a special order. The blade exhibits well-forged, tight ko-itame. The hamon on the front displays a slanted gunome-midare, while the back features frequent sunagashi and nie suji (lines of nie running parallel to the hamon), following the Sōshū tradition. The hamon on both sides is different, in keeping with the unique construction of the piece. This work is extremely rare among Naotane's swords and demonstrates the high level of craftsmanship in its creation.