



ITEM# UJKA505

A CHÛ-AOE KATANA

UNSIGNED, NANBOKUCHÔ PERIOD (ENBUN-JÔJI ERAS: 1356~1368)

Swordsmith:	<i>Aoe school</i> (青江)
Measurements:	Length: 69.9cm (<i>ô-suriage</i>) Sori: 1.4cm Moto-haba: 3.13cm Weight: 890g (!)
Jihada:	<i>Itame mixed well with mokume, chirimen-hada, fine ji-nie, chikei, brilliant utsuri</i>
Hamon:	<i>Vibrant chû-suguha, ko-gunome, ko-notare, ashi, yô, saka-ashi, kinsuji, sunagashi</i>
Certificate:	5th NBTHK Tokubetsu Jûyô Tôken (<i>Especially Important Sword, awarded in 1976</i>)
Provenance:	November 2025 NBTHK Kantei session (study sword)
Published:	Documented in the December 2025 <i>Token Bijutsu</i> (No. 827)
Included:	Shirasaya, fabric bags, stand, kit, printed description

SOLD

This is a museum-quality *Chû-Aoe katana* awarded *Tokubetsu Jûyô* in December 1976 at only the 5th TJ session. It belongs to an elite group of just ten *ô-suriage mumei* Aoe blades that achieved TJ on merit alone, without needing provenance to make the case. In November 2025, the NBTHK selected it as a study sword for their monthly *kantei* session and nearly all participants correctly identified it as Aoe. The blade is remarkably healthy with wide *mihaba*, magnificent *ô-kissaki*, refined *chirimen-hada* with iconic *sumihada* spots, and precise *suguha hamon* with *saka-gunome*. Every signature Aoe characteristic present in textbook-perfect execution. The 1963 *torokusho* examiner couldn't resist noting 'Aoe' on the official paperwork - breaking protocol because the attribution was so obvious. If you want the definitive 14th-century *Nambokuchô* Aoe katana, this is it.



Saki-kasane: 4.7mm

Moto-kasane: 6.2mm

Kissaki: 4.95cm

Saki-haba: 2.52cm

Nagasa: 69.6cm

Nakago: 22.4cm

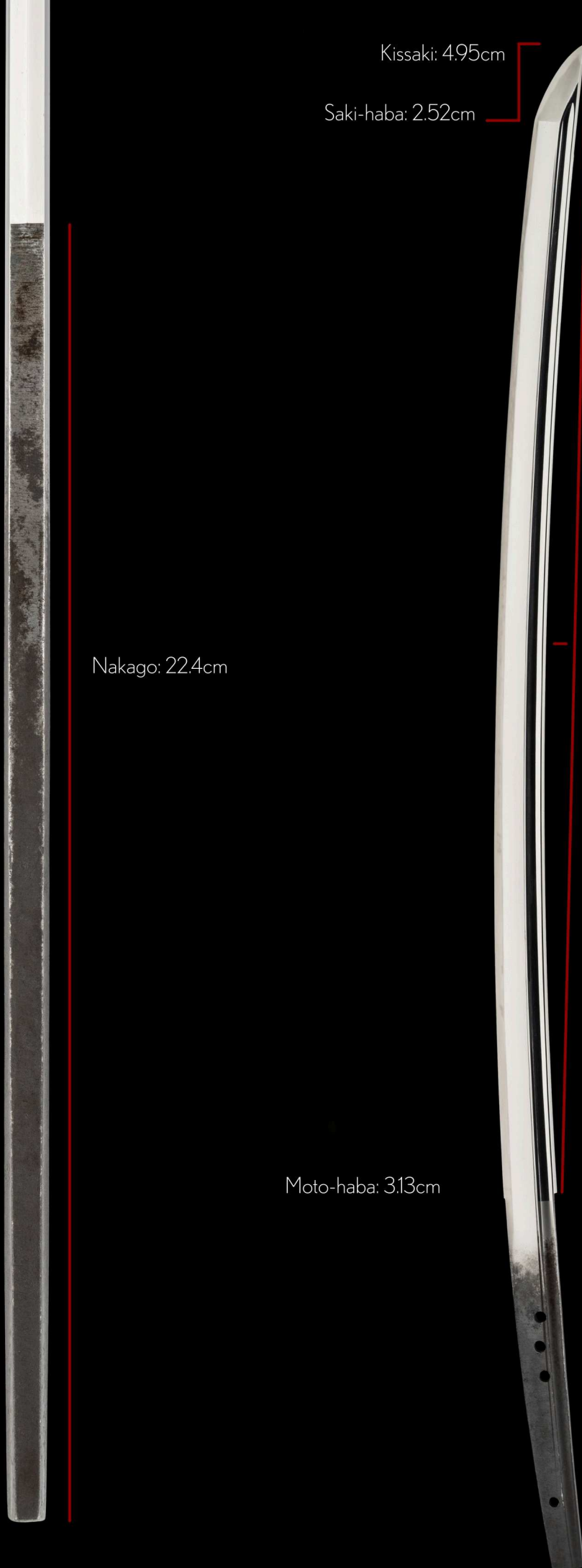
Sori: 1.5cm

Omosa: 890g

wow

Moto-haba: 3.13cm

Mekugi-ana: 4



The *Aoe* (青江), meaning "Blue River," rose to prominence in *Bitchû* Province during the late *Heian* period and flourished through the *Nanbokuchô* era. Located near the *Takahashi River* with access to exceptional iron ore, the region became a major sword production center alongside neighbouring *Bizen*. The *Aoe* smiths were both warriors and craftsmen, serving local clans like the *Uekami* - a dual identity that meant they understood intimately what samurai needed in combat.

As Japan's political landscape shifted during the *Nanbokuchô* period, *Aoe* craftsmanship evolved from elegant curves into robust, powerful forms suited for civil war. The mid-14th century *Enbun* and *Jôji* eras (1356-1368) marked their golden age. But the school's fortunes were tied to the Southern Court. When their patrons fell and the courts unified at century's end, the *Aoe* school vanished from production. Their legacy endured - the extraordinary quality achieved during this brief, intense period made *Aoe* blades among the most prized swords in Japanese history.

This blade represents *Chû-Aoe* at its absolute peak - textbook execution in every detail. Even the 1963 *torokusho* examiner couldn't help himself, breaking protocol to note '*Aoe*' on official paperwork. That instinct was validated in July 1976 when the sword passed *Jûyô Tôken* and was further elevated to *Tokubetsu Jûyô* just five months later in December that same year at only the 5th TJ session. Then in November 2025, the NBTHK selected this blade for their monthly *kantei* session, where only five swords are chosen as exemplary teaching tools. The result? Nearly all participants correctly identified it as *Aoe*. When everyone from beginners to veterans gets it right, you're looking at something extraordinary.

Only 10 *ô-suriage mumei* long swords attributed to *Aoe* have achieved TJ. This is one of them. It passed on merit alone - structure, quality, health - without needing provenance to make its case. The blade is remarkably healthy with a wide *mihaba* and a magnificent *ô-kissaki*. The *jigane* combines refined *ko-itame* and *mokume* with fine *ji-nie*. *Sumihada* spots appear in glorious fashion - the most iconic *Aoe* characteristic. The hamon flows in graceful *suguha* with slanting *gunome*, and beautiful *chôji-ashi* runs the length of the edge. Every box checked. Museum-quality preservation of a golden-age masterwork. If you want the definitive 14th-century *Nanbokuchô Aoe* katana, this is it.



Location: *Bitchû province*

School name: *Aoe*

ô-suriage nakago (altered tang)

katte-sagari-yasurime (slanting file marks)



bô-hi

soe-bi

This blade features masterful carving of both a wide *bo-hi* and slender *soe-bi*. The deep *bo-hi* runs the entire length of the blade, carved with highly practical intent - reducing weight while maintaining structural integrity for combat. In contrast, the *soe-bi*, or accompanying groove, is a narrow line running parallel to the main groove, serving a more decorative purpose. Together, these elements represent perfect harmony between the functional demands of a weapon and the refined aesthetic sensibilities of the *Aoe school*.

(*ura*, reverse)



特重要第一五九號

指定書

刀 無銘 青江 一口

長六九九釐 反り四釐 鋒長四九釐

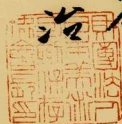
鑄造庵棟身幅廣く大鋒 鍛小板目
交とり澄肌風に地斑交じり 双文直
双上半小互の目交とり逆ごころ 帽子
浅くのたれ突き上げ尖つて返る 彫物
表裏棒樋漆樋搔通す 莖大磨上先
浅い粟尻鉦目勝手下り目釘孔四

右者當協會に於て審査の結果
特別重要刀劍に指定する

昭和五十二年十二月七日

財団法人日本美術刀剣保存協會

會長 本間 順治



Tokubetsu-Jûyô Certificate No. 159
Shiteisho (指定書) Certificate of Designation
Katana, mumei: Aoe (青江)

Measurements
nagasa 69.9 cm, sori 1.4 cm

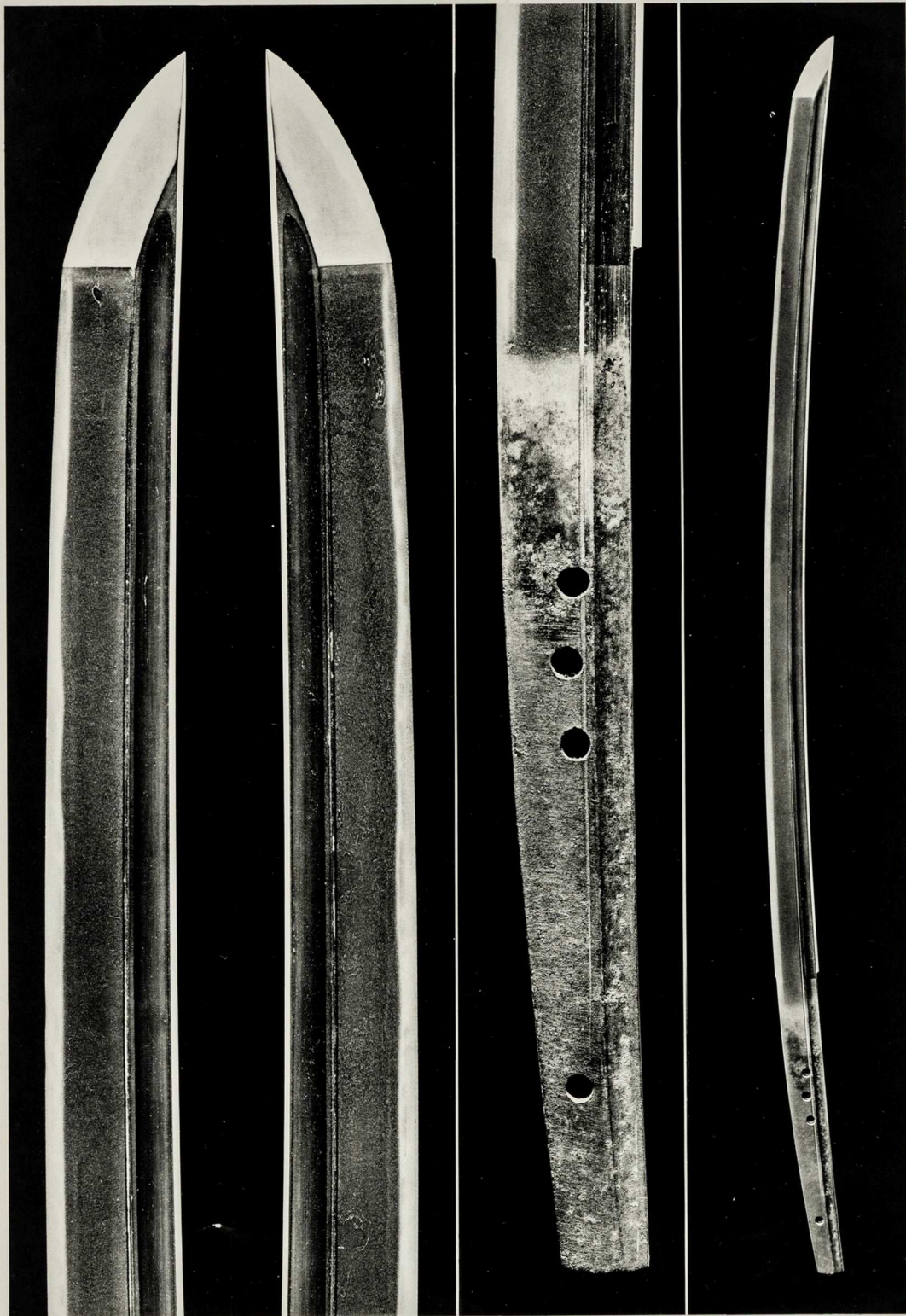
Description

Keijo: *shinogi-zukuri*, *iori-mune*, wide *mihaba*, *ô-kissaki*
Kitae: *ko-itame* that is mixed with *mokume* and that features *sumihada*-like *jifu* in places
Hamon: *suguha* along the upper half with *ko-gunome* that tends to slant
Bôshi: gently undulating *notare* with a late starting pointed and brief *kaeri*
Horimono: both sides with *bôhi* accompanied by *soe-bi* running through the tang
Nakago: *ô-suriage*, shallow *kurijiri*, *katte-sagari yasurime*, four *mekugi-ana*

According to the result of the shinsa committee of our society we judged this work as authentic and rate it as *Tokubetsu-Jûyô-Tôken*.

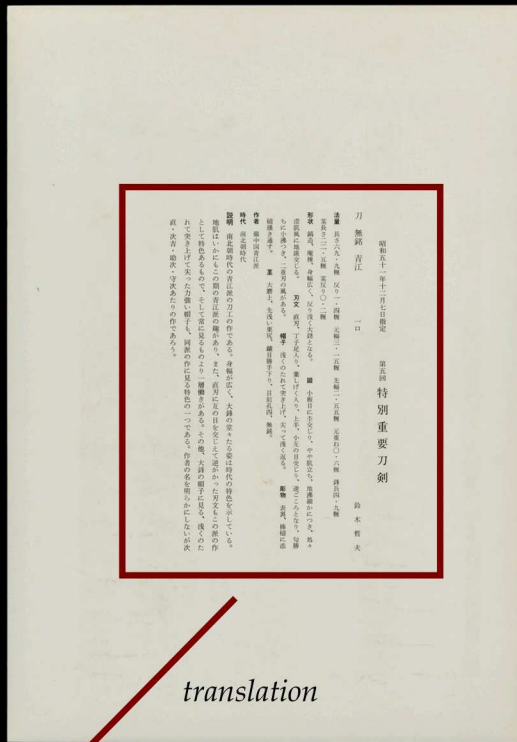
December 7, 1976

[Foundation] Nihon Bijutsu Tôken Hozon Kyôkai, NBTHK
[President] Honma Junji (本間順治)



刀
無銘
青江





Tokubetsu-Jûyô Tōken at 5th Tokubetsu-Jûyô Shinsa from December 7, 1976

Katana, mumei: Aoe (青江)

Measurements

Nagasa 69.9 cm, sori 1.4 cm, motohaba 3.15 cm, sakihaba 2.55 cm, moto-kasane 0.6 cm, kissaki-nagasa 4.9 cm, nakago-nagasa 22.5 cm, nakago-sori 0.2 cm

Description

Keijō: *shinogi-zukuri*, *iori-mune*, wide *mihaba*, shallow *sori*, *ô-kissaki*

Kitae: rather standing-out *ko-itame* that is mixed with *mokume* and that features fine *ji-nie* and *sumihada*-like *jifu* in places

Hamon: *suguha* in *nioi-deki* with *ko-nie* that is mixed with *chōji-ashi*, *nijûba*-like elements, and along the upper half with *ko-gunome* that tend to slant

Bôshi: gently undulating *notare* with a late starting pointed and brief *kaeri*

Nakago: *ô-suriage*, shallow *kurijiri*, *katte-sagari yasurime*, four *mekugi-ana*, *mumei*

Artisan

Aoe School from Bitchû province

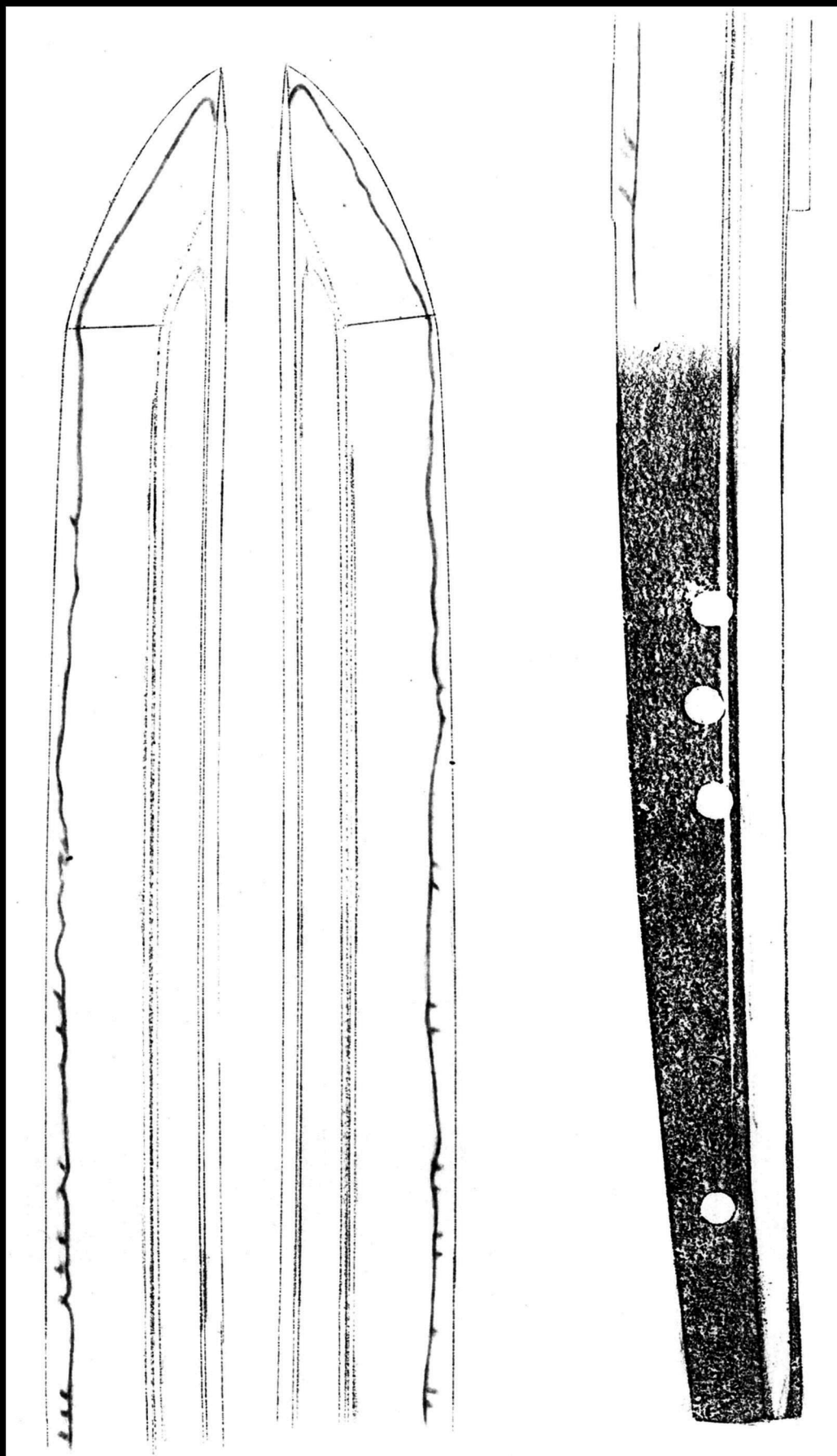
Era

Nanbokuchō period

Summary

This blade is a work of a *Nanbokuchō*-period smith from the Aoe (青江) School.

With its wide *mihaba*, *ô-kissaki*, and overall magnificent *sugata*, it reflects in terms of shape the characteristic features of the *Nanbokuchō* period. Also the *jihada* is typical for the Aoe School from said time period, as is the *hamon* in *suguha* mixed with *gunome*, whose elements tend to slant, although it shall be mentioned that the *ha* displays more activities than usually seen with then Aoe works. Looking at the *bôshi* of the *ô-kissaki*, it appears as gently undulating *notare* with a late starting and pointed *kaeri* in a powerful manner, which is typical for the school as well. Although the individual maker is unclear, masters like *Tsugunao* (次直), *Tsuguyoshi* (次吉), *Suketsugu* (助次), or *Moritsugu* (守次) appear to be appropriate candidates.



The katana was awarded *Jûyô Tôken* in the 24th session held on July 10, 1976. This is a copy of the original *oshigata* (tracing) for the sword. It did not stay *Jûyô* for long, however, as it was elevated to *Tokubetsu Jûyô* status just five months later in December 1976. Quite an achievement for such a strict competition.



Token Bijutsu magazine
December 2025



A typical *kantei* meeting



Oshigata, nakago and featured article. Translation follows.

鑑定刀二号
刀 無銘 青江
長さ二尺三寸 反り五分 鑄造 庵棟
(地)板目に杳よく交じり細かに肌立ち、縮緬肌風を呈し、地沸細かにつき、地景入り、刃寄りに筋映り、棟寄りに乱れ映りの段映り立つ。
(刃)中直刃調に小互の目・小のたれ交え、部分的に逆がる乱れを見せ、足・葉よく入り、処々に逆交じり、匂口縮まり、匂勝ち、金筋・砂流し細かにかかり、匂口明るく冴える。
(帽子)浅くのたれ込み、先突き上げて尖り、短く返る。
(彫物)表裏に棒樋と添樋を掻き流す。
(講評)この刀は、大磨上ながらも身幅は非常に広く元先の幅差が目立たずに重ねを薄めに造込んで、反りが浅くついて大鋒に結ぶ南北朝時代中期の延文・貞治型の豪壮な体配を見せており、手持ちはよく刃肉も落ちておらず健体さが際立っている。地鉄は板目に杳よく交えた鍛えが細かに肌立つ所謂縮緬肌を呈し、指裏には澄肌(墨肌)と呼ばれる独特な黒味のあるかねが点在しており、また刃寄りには細い筋状の映り、棟寄りには乱れ映りが立つ複層構造の段映りが立っている処はいずれも青江の見どころとして見逃せないものである。更には刃文も匂口がよく締まって匂勝ちの直刃出来で明るく冴えており、処々に交じる小互の目や足が逆がる刃文構成は南北朝期の青江物の刃文としての典型的特徴が表れ、盛んに入る足・葉や細やかな金筋・砂流しといった刃中の働きも端正な直刃調の刃文を華やかに演出している。加えて帽子も浅くのたれ込んで先が突き上げて尖って返る様相も青江の帽子として典型的であり、漆・地・刃全において青江物の特色と美点が横溢しており、上記の諸相を見て入札では殆どの方が当たりを導かれていた。
(堂写真のみ縮小率95%)

The NBTHK holds monthly sword appreciation meetings where enthusiasts, from beginners to veterans, practice *kantei* (appraisal). Each month, generally five swords are selected for these sessions - blades the NBTHK deems exemplary teaching tools. This *Aoe* katana was chosen for the November 2025 meeting, with details documented in the December 2025 issue of *Token Bijutsu* (No. 827), the NBTHK's monthly journal.

Kantei result summary:

"Its magnificent *Enbun-Jōji* style shape dates it clearly to the *Nanbokuchō* period. The *sumihada*, *utsuri*, and *suguha* tempering with *saka-gunome* (slanting patterns) are so definitive that nearly all participants correctly identified it as *Aoe*. A masterpiece and quintessential example of the school's work."

The December 2025 *Token Bijutsu* issue (No. 827) accompanies the blade.

Kanteitô 2-gô (鑑定刀二号) Appraised Sword No. 2

Katana (刀): *mumei Aoe* (無銘 青江)
Katana, unsigned Aoe school

Nagasa 2-shaku 3-sun (長さ二尺三寸), *sori 5-bu* (反り五分)
Shinogi-zukuri (鑄造), *iori-mune* (庵棟)
Blade length 69.9 cm, curvature 1.4 cm, *shinogi-zukuri* featuring *iori-mune*

Jigane: *itame* mixed well with *mokume*. The *hada* is finely standing out, exhibiting a *chirimen-hada* (crepe-like texture). Fine *ji-nie* is present with *chikei*. A *suji-utsuri* (straight reflection) appears near the cutting edge, while a layered *midare-utsuri* appears toward the *mune*.

Hamon: based on *chû-suguha* mixed with small *gunome* and small *notare*. It exhibits wavy patterns that are partially inverted (slanting back toward the tang). The *ashi* and *yô* are well-defined throughout, with backward-sloping (*saka-ashi*) activities appearing in several places. The *nioiguchi* is tight and *nioi*-dominant. Fine *kinsuji* and *sunagashi* are present within the temper line, adding to its vibrant activity.

Bôshi: shallow *notare-komi*, pointed *togari* and thrust-up *tsukiage* tip and a short turnaround (*kaeri*).

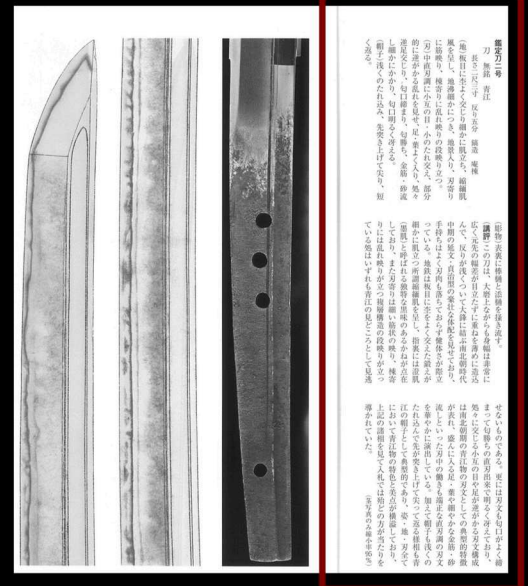
Horimono: *bô-hi* and *soe-hi* on both sides, running into the tang.

[Commentary]

Although the blade is *ô-suriage*, it retains an exceptionally wide profile with minimal tapering from the base to the tip. The *kasane* (thickness) is relatively thin, and the shallow curvature culminates in a magnificent *ô-kissaki*. This silhouette embodies the grand and powerful *sugata* typical of the *Enbun-Jôji* style from the mid-*Nanbokuchô* period. In the hand, the sword feels remarkably well-balanced; the blade remains healthy, showing no loss of its original 'meat,' which underscores its superb state of preservation.

The *jigane* features a fine, standing grain of *itame* and *mokume*, creating the famous "*chirimen-hada*." On the *omote* side, one can see spots of "*sumihada*" (clear dark spots unique to *Aoe*). Furthermore, the complex "*dan-utsuri*" consisting of straight reflections near the edge and irregular reflections near the *mune* is a quintessential highlight of the *Aoe* school that should not be overlooked.

The *hamon* is a brilliantly clear, *nioi*-based *suguha* with a tight *nioiguchi*. The occasional small *gunome* and the inverted *ashi* elements are classic characteristics of *Aoe* workmanship from the *Nanbokuchô* period. The active internal features, such as *ashi*, *yô*, *kinsuji*, and *sunagashi*, add a sense of elegance to the dignified straight temper line. The *bôshi*, which tapers to a sharp, high point, is also typical of *Aoe*. As the form, steel, and temper all overflow with the hallmarks of the school, most participants in the appraisal correctly identified it.



The *Nanbokuchō* period (1336-1392), literally "Northern and Southern Courts," originated from the failure of the *Kenmu Restoration* led by Emperor *Go-Daigo*. Following the collapse of the *Kamakura* shogunate, *Go-Daigo*'s attempt to restore direct imperial rule alienated the warrior class, prompting *Ashikaga Takauji* to revolt. *Takauji* established the Muromachi shogunate in *Kyōto* and supported the Northern Court, while *Go-Daigo* fled to *Yoshino* to establish the Southern Court. This dual-monarchy system plunged Japan into over half a century of civil war, splitting powerful clans and provincial families across the nation.

The mid-14th century, specifically the *Enbun* and *Jōji* eras (1356-1368), represented a critical turning point. While the second shogun, *Ashikaga Yoshiakira*, worked to stabilize shogunate authority in *Kyōto*, the provinces remained in constant flux. Powerful military lords like the *Yamana* and *Hosokawa* clans frequently shifted allegiances between the two courts. Paradoxically, this era of chronic instability became the golden age of Japanese swordmaking. The sheer volume of surviving blades bearing *Enbun* and *Jōji* inscriptions far exceeds those of other periods - direct evidence of peak military demand fueled by nationwide combat.

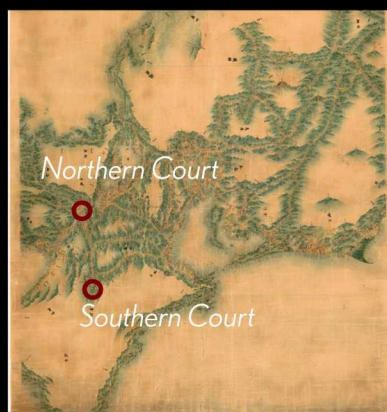
Based in *Bitchū* province, the *Aoe* school flourished during this production peak. Their success was deeply intertwined with the fortunes of local Southern Court loyalists, such as the *Uekami* clan of *Bizen*. As conflict spread to *Shikoku* and *Kyūshū* - marked by significant events like the *Battle of Chikugo River* (1359) - the *Aoe* smiths provided essential weaponry for the Southern Court's resistance.

However, the tide turned during the *Jōji* era. As *Ashikaga Yoshimitsu*, the third *shōgun*, consolidated power, the shogunate transitioned from fragile alliance to dominant central government. One by one, Southern Court strongholds were dismantled, and the provincial clans supporting them were either destroyed or forced to defect to the Northern Court.

While rival schools like the *Bizen Osafune* successfully adapted by forming ties with the new shogunate elite, the *Aoe* school remained tied to the fading Southern cause. With the collapse of their patronage and the eventual unification of the two courts at the end of the 14th century, the *Aoe* school rapidly declined and vanished from production. But their legacy endured - the extraordinary quality of their work during this brief, intense period ensured that *Aoe* blades became among the most sought-after swords in Japanese history. Today, surviving examples from this golden era of production are prized as rare windows into the height of *Nanbokuchō* craftsmanship.

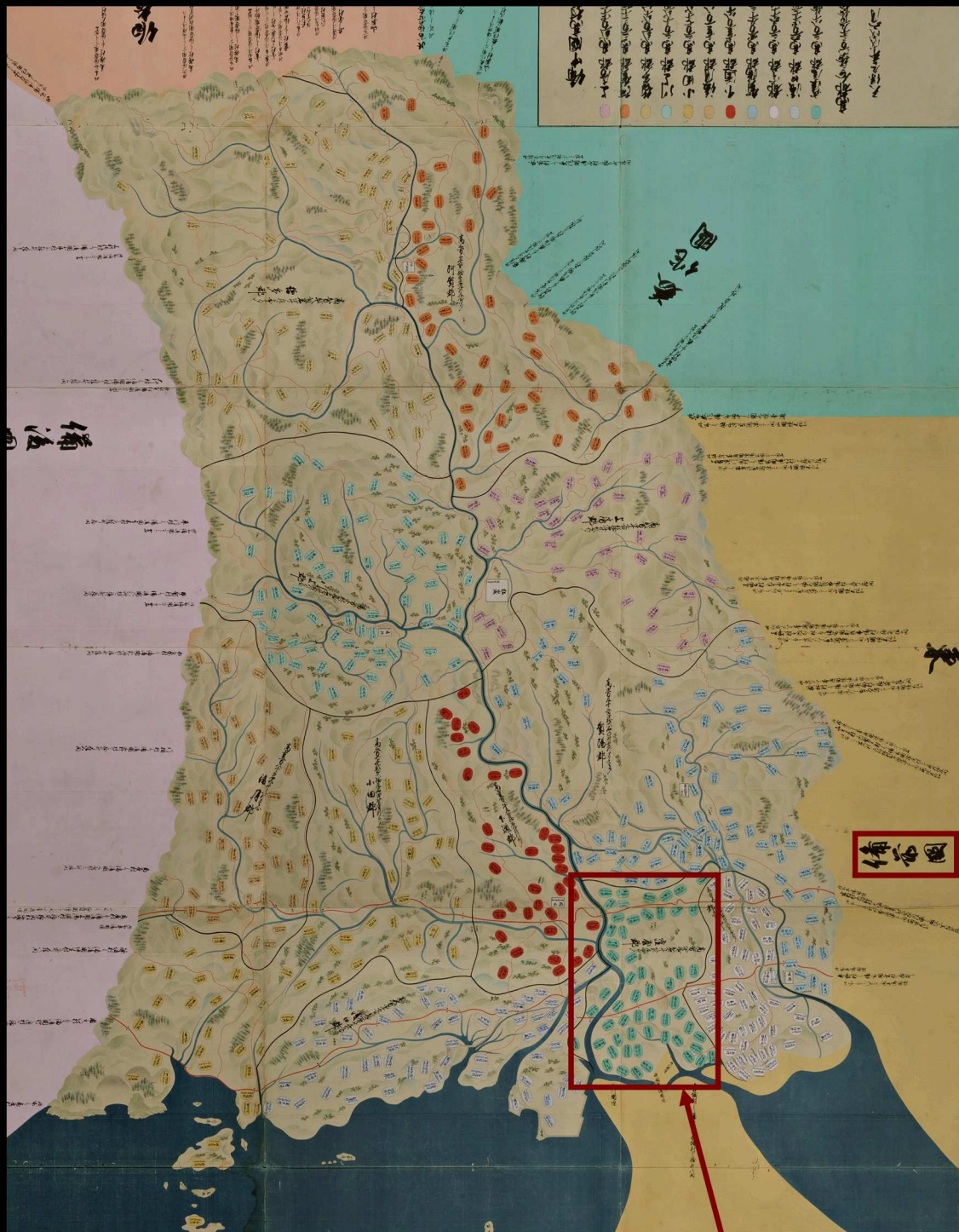


Ashikaga Takauji
(Northern Court)



Emperor Go-Daigo
(Southern Court)

Map of *Bitchû* province (1838)



Kubo no Shô (Aoe area)

Aoe (青江), meaning "Blue River," wasn't a village but a colloquial name for the *Kubo no Shô* district of *Bitchû* Province. Located in close proximity to neighbouring *Bizen* Province, the area enabled frequent exchange of ideas and techniques between the regions, *centered* on their shared access to high-quality iron ore.

In modern-day Aoe, the *Aoe Shrine* still stands, where the guardian deity of the Aoe swordsmiths remains enshrined.



Aoe Shrine



We asked **Markus Sesko**, a highly respected author, translator, and expert researcher on Japanese swords (*nihontô*), for an overview and comparative study of Aoe swords at the highest levels.

Here is an excerpt from his research:

When it comes to quantities of unsigned Aoe works not attributed to an individual smith that hold the highest ranking statuses issued by the NBTHK and that hold designations by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, we are facing the following numbers for *Aoe* (as per November 2025):

3 blades have been designated as a *Jûyô-Bunkazai* (3 tachi)
15 blades have been designated as a *Jûyô-Bijutsuhin* (15 katana)
24 blades have passed *Tokubetsu-Jûyô* (23 katana, 1 wakizashi)
228 blades have passed *Jûyô* (5 tachi, 203 katana, 20 wakizashi)

Summary:

When it comes to the competitors of TJ5 [this sword] within the ranks of said 24 *Tokubetsu-Jûyô* blades, seven should be dismissed as they either come with *Daimyô* provenance (or other important historic figures). Another blade may be dismissed as potential direct competitor as it is accompanied by an early *Hon'ami* origami issued by *Hon'ami Kô'on* in *Meireki* three, evaluating it with 10 gold coins. To elaborate, early Edo period *Hon'ami origami* issued before the turn of the 18th century are referred to as *ko-origami*, lit. "early origami," and are particularly rare and valuable, also because these are regarded as most reliable in terms of their attributions of unsigned blades. Accordingly, the *existence* of a *ko-origami* is a significant contributing factor of a blade's importance and subsequent ranking.

This leaves 15 direct *Tokubetsu-Jûyô* competitors to TJ5 that passed this rank on their own merits, if you will, that is, as stand-alone important *ô-suriage mumei Aoe* works that are not *Ko-Aoe* and that are not attributed to an individual smith.

However, this list may be further narrowed down by excluding blades that do not date to the same period as TJ5, although also coming under the category *Aoe* and not *Ko-Aoe*. To be specific, 6 of the above mentioned 15 *Tokubetsu-Jûyô* are dated from the end of the *Kamakura* to the early *Nanbokuchô* period, marking so the early stages of the typical *Aoe* style that then matured at they heydays of the *Nanbokuchô* period, to which TJ5 is dated. As a result, the final number of very direct *Tokubetsu-Jûyô* competitors to TJ5 arrives at 9.

Thus, TJ5 belongs to an elite group of only 10 *ô-suriage mumei* longs swords attributed to the **Aoe School** that passed *Tokubetsu-Jûyô* - the highest ranking of swords outside of designations by the Agency for Cultural Affairs - which passed on their own merits as stand-alone important works, without contributing factors like provenance, period appraisals, etc. This directly speaks to the outstanding structure, quality of workmanship, and overall health of the sword.







"Although the blade is *ô-suriage*, it retains an exceptionally wide profile [that] culminates in a magnificent *ô-kissaki*."

November 2025 NBTHK Kantei session



A small *hada-ware* appears between *sumihada* islands at the *yokote* - prominent in zoomed photographs but disappears in hand.

This is 14th century character. *Nanbokuchô* period smiths forged for war, not exhibition.

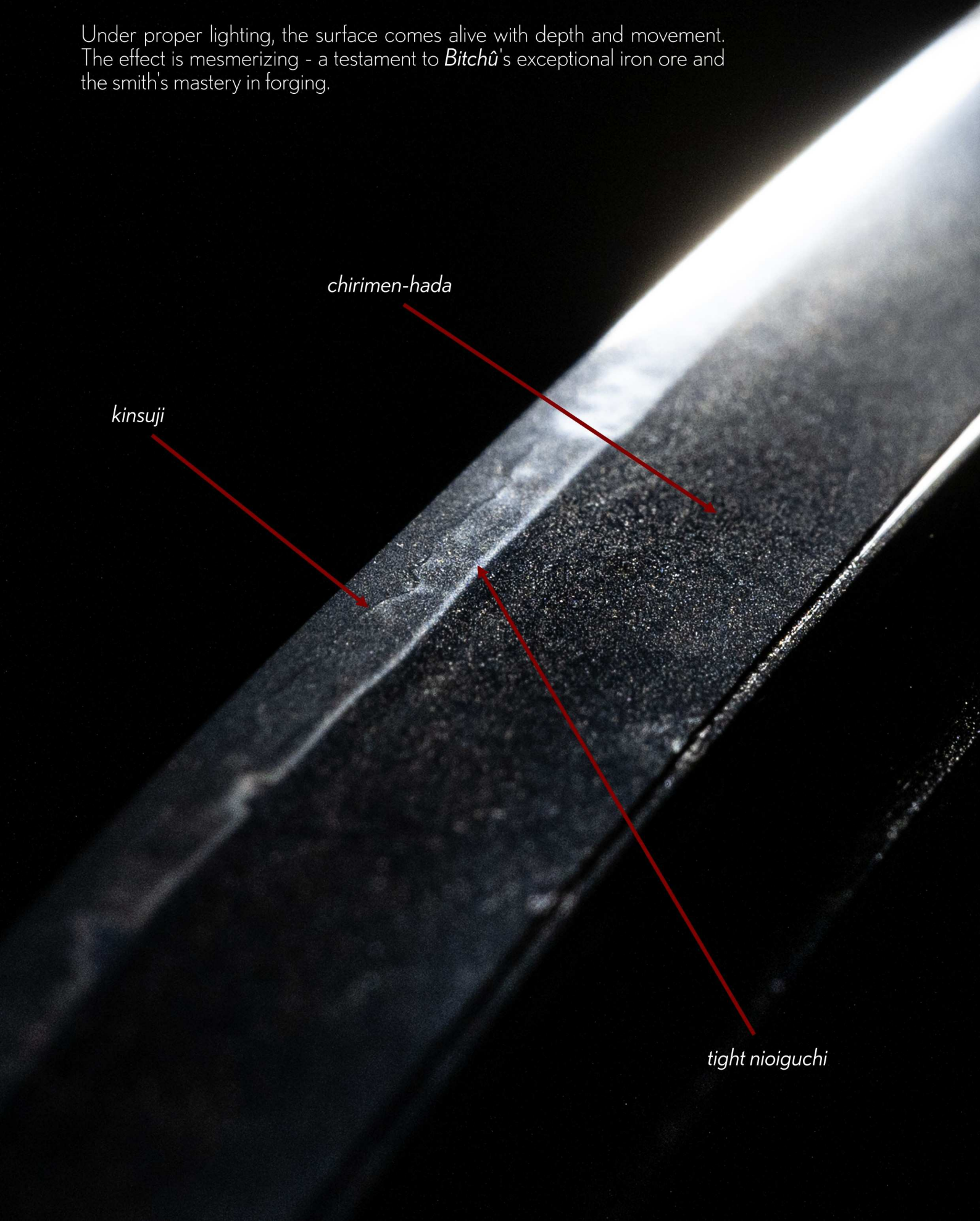


A shallow *notare-komi*, pointed *togari* and *tsukiage* tip with a short *kaeri*.



The *jigane* displays *chirimen-hada* - literally "crepe silk texture" - the most prized and distinctive characteristic of *Aoe* steel. This fine, three-dimensional grain pattern combines *ko-itame* and *mokume* in such tight, intricate formations that it resembles the subtle wrinkles of fine Japanese silk fabric.

Under proper lighting, the surface comes alive with depth and movement. The effect is mesmerizing - a testament to *Bitchû*'s exceptional iron ore and the smith's mastery in forging.



chirimen-hada

kinsuji

tight nioiguchi

sublime *ji-nie*

Precise lines form the *suguha hamon*
punctuated by subtle peaks - a cool
deliberate touch of *Aoe* character.





perfect examples of *sumihada*

Namazu-hada, dark spots of *nie* crystals that resemble the skin of a catfish (*namazu*), a unique feature of the *Aoe school*. Also known as *sumihada*.

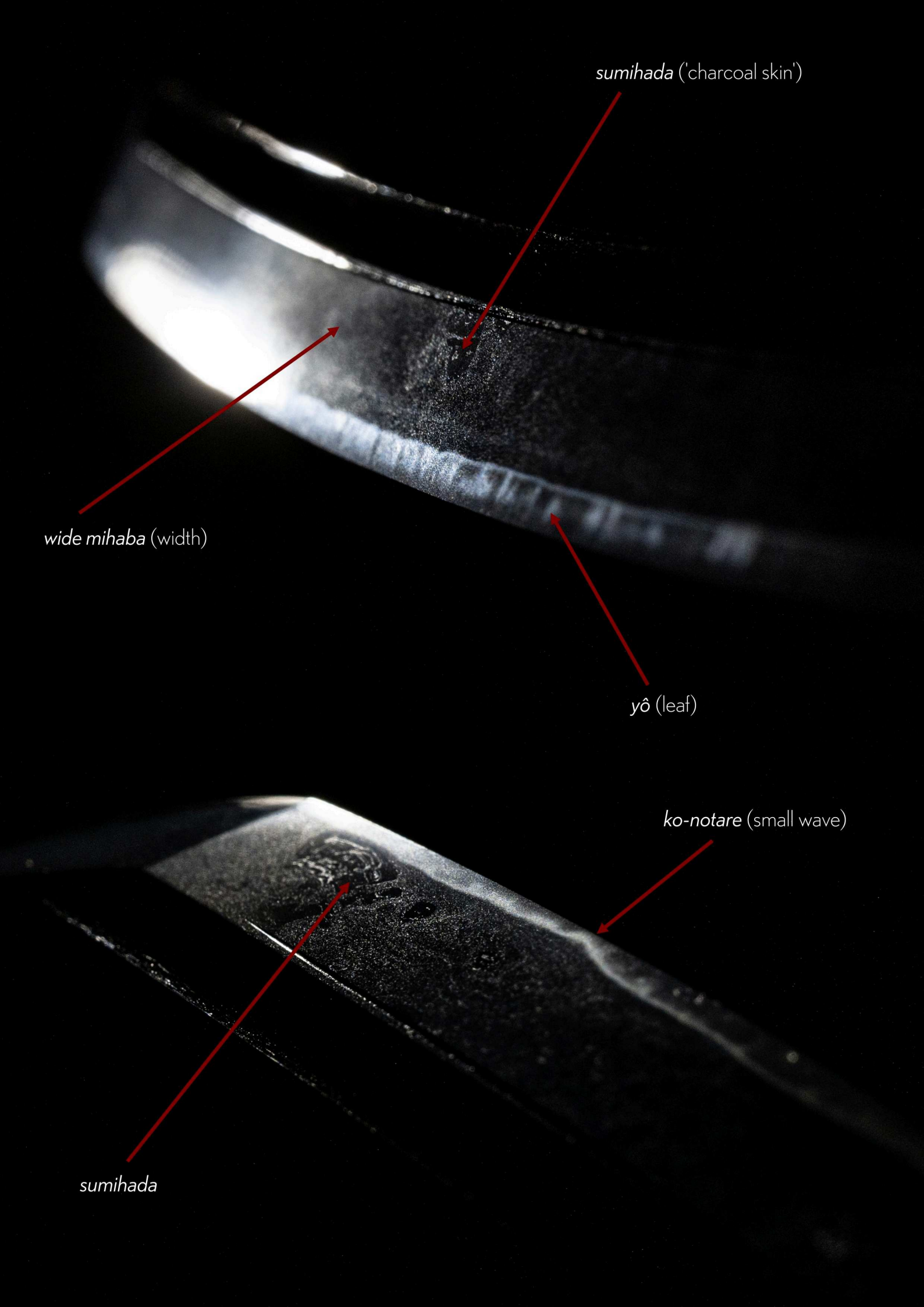
sumihada ('charcoal skin')

wide mihaba (width)

yô (leaf)


ko-notare (small wave)

sumihada



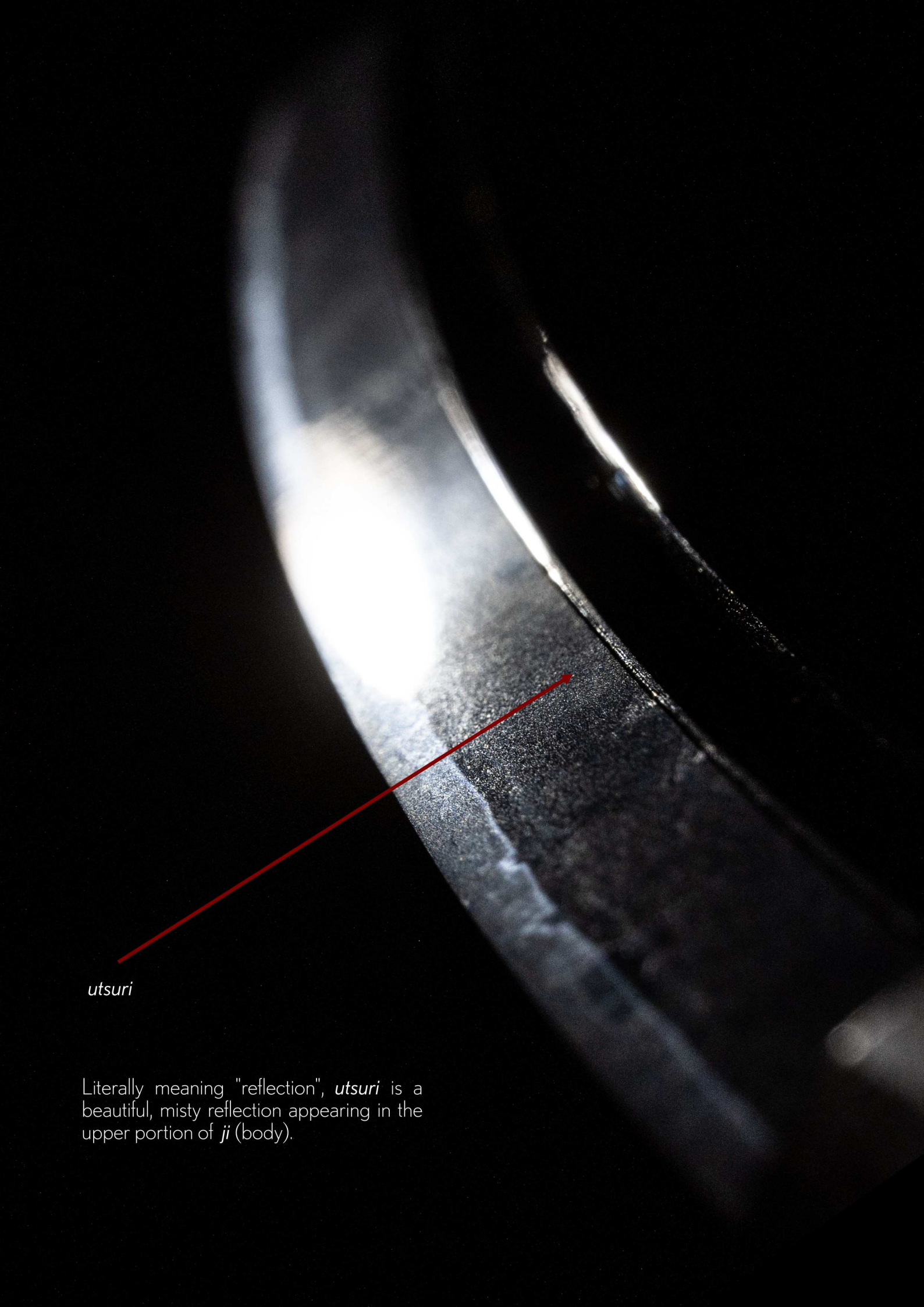


Section of spectacular *chôji-ashi*, 'legs' that extend from the *hamon* in the form of clove blossom buds together with *yô* (falling 'leaves').

A close-up photograph of a sword blade, showing the hamon (temper line) and the saka-ko-gunome (slanted hamon). The blade is dark and metallic, with a bright edge. The hamon is a wavy line that runs along the length of the blade. The saka-ko-gunome is a slanted hamon that runs along the edge of the blade. A red arrow points to the hamon in the upper cutting area, and another red arrow points to the saka-ko-gunome.

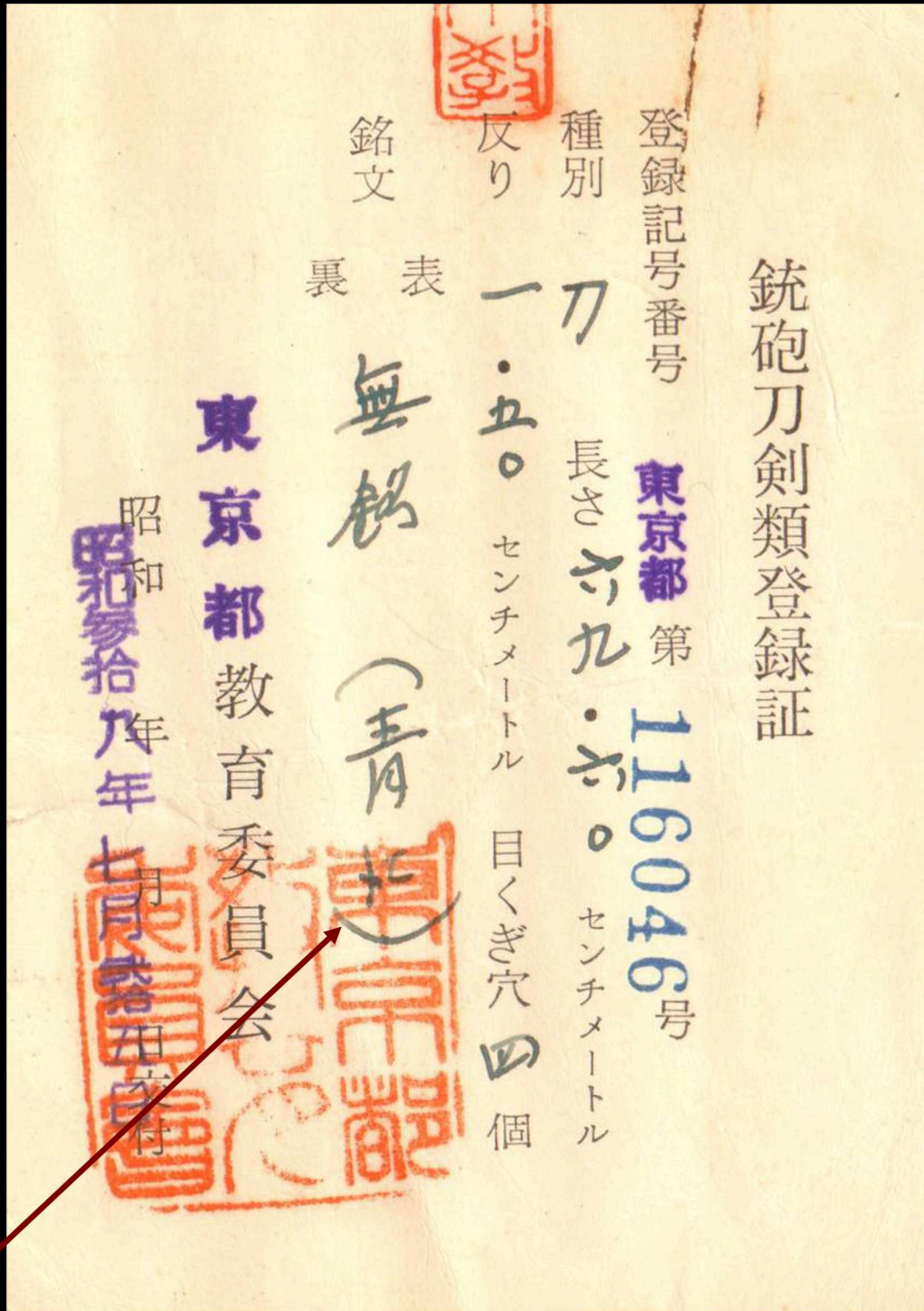
In the *monouchi* (upper cutting area),
the *hamon* slants into *saka ko-gunome*.

saka-ko-gunome



utsuri

Literally meaning "reflection", *utsuri* is a beautiful, misty reflection appearing in the upper portion of *ji* (body).



青江 (Aoe)

This is the original *torokusho* (registration card) for the *Aoe* katana, registered in the 38th year of Showa (1963).

Despite being unsigned, the *torokusho* includes an addendum noting '*Aoe*.' The examiner took one look at this blade and couldn't help himself - he had to write it down. The style screamed *Aoe* so loudly that leaving it blank would've felt wrong.

This kind of enthusiastic attribution on official paperwork is rare. When a government examiner breaks protocol to note attribution, you know the blade made an impression. Thirteen years later, the NBTHK would award it TJ status, confirming what that 1963 examiner already knew.



We will take this sword to *Tanobe-sensei* for *sayagaki* services.



Shirasaya
(protective scabbard)



gold *habaki* with
copper ground

Your path to excellence.



Custom koshirae?

While a sword of this calibre can certainly be acquired in *shirasaya* only, building a special custom koshirae will complete the story.

A gift to both the sword and future generations to cherish.

Past custom koshirae examples:

From left to right:

ujka373 - A Hankei Katana
NBTHK Tokubetsu Jûyô Tôken

ujka324 - A Yasusada Katana
NBTHK Tokubetsu Hozon

ujka382 - A Yôsôzaemon Katana
NBTHK Jûyô Tôken

ujka462 - A Munetsugu Katana
NBTHK Jûyô Tôken

