

Swords of the Tokugawa Shoguns

The Collection

Kunozan Toshogu Shrine has more than 40 swords in its collection, the majority of which were donated by the Tokugawa shoguns. Upon taking office or on other auspicious occasions the shogun would present a sword to Kunozan Toshogu. Often an emissary of the shogun would actually deliver the sword—the donation alone was considered an appropriate substitute for the shogun visiting the shrine to pay homage to the founder of the shogunate, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616).

The practice of presenting swords to shrines was not unique to the Tokugawa shoguns. It is thought to have begun in the Kamakura period (1185–1333) with the establishment of Japan's first samurai government. To the samurai, Japanese swords were not simply weapons, but were considered sacred, and many were forged specifically for religious or ceremonial use.

About Japanese Swords

Japanese swords rust easily and require regular maintenance. During the Edo period (1603–1867), the Tokugawa shogunate hired specialists to sharpen and polish their swords. The specialists would regularly clean and apply oil to the blades to protect them in storage. Today, members of the museum staff continue to maintain the swords in much the same way as they were cared for in the Edo period.

Most of the bladed weapons in Kunozan Toshogu's collection are *tachi* and *katana* swords. Both have long, curved blades, but *tachi* are usually longer than *katana* and have a greater degree of curvature. The way each type is displayed reflects the orientation of the sword when it was worn. *Tachi* were worn with the sharpened edge downward, and they are placed on the display rack with the edge facing down. *Katana*, which began to replace *tachi* during the fifteenth century, were worn with the edge facing upward and are displayed accordingly.

The difference in the orientation of the blade is thought to reflect how the swords were used. Samurai normally used *tachi* while on horseback, slashing down at their enemies. In contrast *katana* were used by samurai on foot and tying the sheaths to their belts with edge facing upwards made it easier to draw the sword and slash at an enemy in a single stroke.

Artisanship and Fittings

Creating the scabbards and various fittings for Japanese swords involved many different craftsmen, including metalworkers, lacquer appliers, woodworkers, and textile artists. The swords given to Kunozan Toshogu by the shoguns were originally presented with lacquered wooden scabbards and intricately tied silk cords. Each generation's sword is decorated in nearly the same way. For example, the Tokugawa family crest adorns all but one of the scabbards, and the cords are all the same color and are tied in similar knots.