

A Brief History of Swordsmithing

Straight swords had been in use for centuries by the end of the Heian period (794–1185), when swordsmiths first developed the slim, curved, single-edged blade for which Japanese swords are known. Curved blades were developed for fighting on horseback, and as the forging process became more refined, they were made longer and longer, reaching lengths of around 90 centimeters by the Nanbokuchō period (1336–1392). Over the next two centuries, foot soldiers played an increasingly larger role on the battlefield, and the long blades were replaced by shorter field swords (*uchigatana*).

During the long peace of the Edo period (1603–1867), swords symbolized the privileged social status of the samurai. Swordsmiths set up forges in the bustling cities of Osaka and Edo (now Tokyo) and made swords that were both weapons and garish works of art.

The swordsmithing trade was threatened by the Sword Abolishment Edict of 1876, which made it illegal for any civilian (including former samurai) to carry a sword. Disarming the populace was seen as an important step in shifting military power to the country's newly established army. By this point, swordsmithing was an art form in its own right, and in 1906 the Imperial Household appointed two swordsmiths, Gassan Sadakazu I (1836–1918) and Miyamoto Kanenori (1830–1926), to preserve the traditional methods of swordmaking.

After World War II (1939–1945), it became illegal to either own or produce swords. To prevent swords with artistic value from being destroyed, a group of experts founded the Society for Preservation of Japanese Art Swords in 1948. Eventually, exceptions to the ban were issued for swords officially registered as artworks.