

ZOGAN 象嵌

History

Zogan (zo – symbolizing, gan – inlaying) is a beautiful traditional Japanese inlay craft with a number of different forms depending on the material used such as metal, wood, or ceramic. Using a thin metal plate as a base, small differently colored metal pieces are inlayed to create delicate patterns with subtle color differences and an uneven surface.

Various techniques of inlay crafts have prevailed widely around the world since ancient times. Metal inlay crafts originate from Damascus in Syria and it is said that the technique traveled along the Silk Road and reached Japan around the Asuka period (592-710). Inlay crafts were initially utilized in weapons or utensils for religious ceremonies. One of the early examples of inlay technique can be found on the ancient samurai sword called Shichisei-ken possessed by Shitennoji Temple in Osaka. Here, inlay decoration is applied on the blade and the end of the handle of this large sword. Another example is at the Shosoin Imperial Repository in Nara where a sword with gold inlay

is preserved. At Yakushiji Temple in Nara, symbolically important Buddhist patterns are inlayed on the palms and feet of their main Buddhist statue.

794-1185

Though Zogan flourished in the Asuka period, it gradually fell into decline in the Heian period (794-1185). Just a few fine examples of Zogan from that period have been discovered, such as small inlays applied on the door stoppers of the Ho-o-do Hall of Byodo-in Temple in Uji, Kyoto.

1185-1530

Later in the Kamakura period (1185-1333), Zogan was revived for use on round sword guards. Generally, these sword guards were inscribed with the characters for “Yamashiro-sumi 山城住” or “Heianjo-sumi 平安城住” as the name of the sword. Later around 1530, Fushimi-sumi Kaneie, the sword guard inlay master, founded his original method of creating decorative designs. His Zogan techniques depicting beautiful sceneries and people were outstandingly delicate

and superb employing various metals in different colors such as gold, silver, reddish copper, and common copper.

1603-1868

In the early Edo period (1603-1868), there were two outstanding Zogan master families in the Nishijin area of Kyoto. One was the Umetada Family and the other, the Shoami Family. The Umetada Family started their business as swordsmiths before employing Zogan. A particularly noteworthy Zogan artist from the Umetada Family was a man named Myoju who served Hideyoshi Toyotomi, one of the most powerful samurai lords who ruled Japan in the late 16th century. Myoju excelled in flat Zogan decorated with fine lines called Rinzu and Sayagata. The Shoami Family started from the master of samurai armor manufacture and their most well-known Zogan master was named Masanori. Disciples of both the Zogan master families spread throughout Japan and worked for regional lords as Zogan craftsmen. In this way, the Kyoto-style Zogan skill prevailed all around Japan.

1868-1912

Until end of the Edo period, Zogan was mostly used for decorating valuable items, such as swords, only for samurai lords and imperial members. Eventually, however, the Zogan technique began to be used for other items such as charcoal braziers and pipes. When Japan experienced its drastic social restoration in the Meiji period (1868-1912), the government banned the general public from possessing swords in 1876, a law which almost ended the Zogan tradition in Japan. However, some ardent artists, such as Yasunosuke Shikata and Yasuyuki Namikawa, fled overseas and succeeded to continue the tradition of Japanese Zogan. As a result, traditional Japanese inlay works were highly valued in Western countries, and many items were exported due to their sublime beauty.

Types of Zogan

- *Hira zogan* (平象嵌) is the inlay of sheet metal flush with the base metal.

- *Hira shizuku zogan* is the inlay of dots made flush with the surface.

- *Hon zogan* (hon, “flush”) is the general term for flush inlay made by first cutting grooves in metal, then undercutting them, and hammering in wire or sheet metal flat with the base metal plane.

- *Ito zogan* (“thread inlay”, 糸象嵌) is a very finely worked variation in which gold/silver threads are pressed down into hairline incisions.

- *Kinkeshi zogan*, *ginkeshi zogan* are respectively gold amalgam inlay and silver amalgam inlay (kin, “gold,” gin, “silver,” and keshi, “amalgam”). This process consists of inlaying a mercury amalgam of precious metals into grooves made in the metal, then volatilizing the mercury and leaving the precious metal behind. Very small dots representing mist and signatures were made in sword ornaments in this way.

- *Kirihame zogan* (“openwork inlay”, 切嵌象嵌) is the technique where the metal pieces are soldered together with high temperature solder (brazing). The result piece looks the same from front and back. In the west the technique is known as “marriage of metals.”

- *Nawame zogan* is the inlay of compound, multi-metal twisted wire, inlaid as in *sen zogan*.

- *Nunome zogan* (布目象嵌), literally “cloth inlay,” consists of first engraving a flat surface with crosshatched lines with a serrated liner to raise a series of burrs on the entire surface and give it a texture that resembles woven cloth. On this prepared surface wire or gold leaf is then inlaid.

- *Sen zogan* (線象嵌) is the flat inlay of round wire, flush with the ground, or in relief. Essentially the same as *Ito zogan*.

- *Shippou zogan* (“seven-treasure zougan”) is where the incised areas are filled with vitreous enamel instead of metal.

- *Shizuku zogan* is raised dot or domed dot inlay, also called “raindrop,” and “toad skin” inlay.

- *Suemon zogan* (据紋象嵌) is where the figural pieces of contrasting metal are attached to the surface with soft solder and left in high relief.

- *Sumi zogan* (“ink inlay”, 墨象嵌), in which the edges of the incised area are chiselled with slanting sides instead of straight ones; the resulting edge gradients resemble an ink painting after grinding and polishing.

- *Takaniku zogan* or *taka zogan* (高象嵌), literally “mound” inlay, is the inlay of raised or high relief forms made of solid sheet metal, repousse-worked sheet, or cast metal forms. These forms can also be carved, engraved, or themselves inlaid.

- *Uttori zogan* is a form of *taka zogan* where large, thick pieces of cast metal are set in a surrounding flange. The projecting inlaid metal is then carved or inlaid with other metals, or it can have been carved or inlaid in advance.