



Gentle Advice Regarding Collecting

By Ted Tenold, Director, NBTHK-American Branch

As with any art form or collectable, when considering a purchase one must always exercise prudence and be ever vigilant against fraud and deception. As long as there has been art, there has been an effort to profit from the notoriety of great masters through the production of look-a-likes, misrepresentation, and contrived provenance or documentation.

A reasonable amount of reliance on organized authentication and documentation is a matter of comfort for any collector, adding credibility that the sword fits the desired interest and place in their collection, and will serve as a good platform to expand their knowledge base. Yet, therein lays the possibility of yet another opening for fraud to be perpetrated upon the unsuspecting collector. Even a seasoned collector can fall prey to fraud if unwary, but beginners venturing into the lifelong study of Nihonto find the subject daunting enough, and to be subjected to determining the authenticity of the piece *as well* as any supporting documents becomes nearly impossible.

Authentication-Documents

With the advent of advance copier and printer technology, the possibility of counterfeit documentation has increased dramatically and cases continue to grow in number. The techniques of original document forgery or alteration are also numerous, the discussion of which goes beyond the scope of this article, but clearly there is no logical method to prevent counterfeiters from producing copies, or the unscrupulous from representing forgeries as originals with some form of dubious documentation to bolster their scam. It therefore falls upon the buyer to be on the defensive armed with preventative measures that when utilized can help prevent a serious loss from occurring.

Buy the Work First. In collecting, the first rule is always; acquire work, not signatures, nor papers, nor the verbal stories. Signatures can and are forged, even in contemporary examples. Papers are effectively a qualified opinion, and though often of the highest regard, the work should speak for itself. Stories are just wind. Only with study can collectors truly arm themselves against fraud by observing everything from the most obvious inconsistencies, to the minor details that might raise an eyebrow. Regardless of the signature, provenance, or documentation, a Rembrandt should look like a Rembrandt, not a Picasso regardless of what any accompanying certificate defines.



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Trust But Verify. When considering an acquisition, do not be afraid to ask for some contingencies. The seller should be willing to confidently stand by the piece in the particular manner they are representing it. If the sword is offered as a particular work, ask for a guarantee that it will pass shinsa as represented. If it is accompanied by Kanteisho, ask if there is a guarantee that they can be verified as genuine, and if they are older papers such as Tokubetsu Kicho or Koshu Tokubetsu Kicho, which are no longer issued, ask for a guarantee of upgrade to current issue papers of the same level or better.

Seek Trusted Guidance. Work with someone you trust. Ask for recommendations from others. When you find them, ask them for help and guidance. A fellow experienced collector, a broker, or dealer that will help you learn as well as support your acquisitions is the firm foundation for a successful development of a good knowledge base, a solid collection, and an invaluable relationship. The manner by which a dealer will assist and support your purchases will define their character. If they cannot guarantee a particular piece, there should be clear logic behind the reason in the form of a straight answer.

Consider Everything Carefully. Utilize logic and prudence, not emotion and blind trust. The Internet has proven to be a fantastic avenue to find many excellent pieces, but this environment as has also greatly magnified the possibilities of fraud. Images can be altered electronically, and what is seen on the screen may look very different in hand. Ask for contingencies and conditions that will maximize your protection. If the piece is truly as represented, then the seller should be absolutely confident and display that confidence by supporting a clear procedure of customer support.

Grant Benefit of Doubt. Also consider that the seller may *not* be fully aware of the piece they offer. They may be downstream from the fraudulent party, they themselves having purchased it in full faith. Therefore, when in doubt one should avoid pointing fingers or making accusations as it may not be completely warranted. In the absence of negotiating favorable protective measures, it is better to thank the seller and decline respectfully. Any preventative measures afforded you during negotiation of purchase may ultimately (and unfortunately for them) lead to the death of the transaction, but also inform the unknowing seller, and help prevent yet another downstream transaction from occurring had you purchased the piece and likewise sold it later.



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If It Seems Too Good To Be True.... The odds against purchasing a masterpiece in any public venue at bargain basement prices are *staggering*. Internet auction sites will display various pieces represented as works of master craftsman that would be rarely be seen at all outside private collections and museums. In this day of world wide communication and education it is not wise to think that one can buy a genuine Kiyomaro, a maker whose works sometimes command prices exceeding \$1,000,000 for under \$10,000. Any art object when exposed to the general and knowledgeable public (as on Ebay) will nearly always reach its "realistic" value and if one thinks they are getting a "steal" price wise, they are only fooling themselves. Look carefully at descriptions. Often it is not what they say that must be scrutinized, but what they **do not** say, and if it seems to too good to be true, it most likely is.

The perpetuation of art is dependant on those that appreciate and protect it. Without knowledgeable, dedicated collectors, the masterworks that have been passed down for tens of generations will suffer deterioration, neglect, and abuse. This is completely dependant on new generations that will learn about them and assume the position of curator for yet more subsequent generations. Everyone begins as a beginner, and every beginner that is soured by a bad experience or a series of them, is a tragic loss not only to our community, but places the very art we strive to protect in dire jeopardy for want of appreciation and protection. Protecting Japanese Art Swords also means protecting yourself.