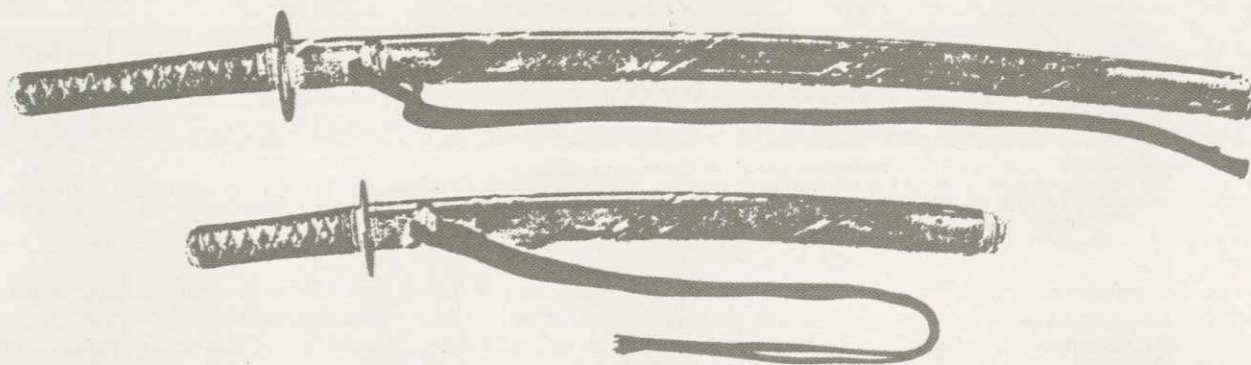


The Aesthetics of the Curve

By Shuji Takashina



Japan's first contact with Western firearms was in 1543, when a Chinese ship with several Portuguese aboard drifted ashore at Tanegashima off Kyushu. The lord of Tanegashima welcomed these first Westerners warmly and entertained them lavishly. In gratitude, the Portuguese presented the lord two harquebuses—gifts which were to revolutionize warfare in Japan.

Tanegashima's lord was quite impressed with the strange new weapons, and immediately ordered his swordsmiths to duplicate them. Having never before even seen such firearms, and lacking both teachers and texts, the swordsmiths had a formidable task before them. Incredibly enough, they soon solved the production puzzle and began turning out a steady supply of made-in-Japan matchlocks. When the Portuguese again visited Tanegashima the following year, they were astounded to find that the local lord had amassed a stock of 600 harquebuses.

It seems the famous Japanese adaptability to Western culture has been there all along. As knowledge of Western ways spread throughout Japan in the sixteenth century, the Japanese evinced a strong interest and proved to be very quick students. By comparison, although the Chinese had learned of firearms 30 years before the Tanegashima episode, they did not attempt production until much later.

Moreover, far from being mere imitators, the Tanegashima craftsmen produced a version of the Portuguese harquebuses which embodied distinctly Japanese artistic sensibilities. While the Tanegashima matchlock was an exact replica of the original Portuguese models in all of its functional aspects, its wooden grip was given the ever-so-subtle curves that are

characteristic of virtually all antique Japanese firearms. While viewing an exhibit of Japanese antique guns a few years ago, I was struck by the fact that every single gun and pistol exhibited, ranging from the sixteenth century models to those of the Edo period and right up to the Murata gun of the Meiji period, incorporated gentle curves in their design. The guns' barrels were completely straight, of course, but unlike the angular grips found on most Western firearms, the Japanese grips were delicately curved.

These curves are not the kind of geometric forms produced with a compass but are more akin to the curves found in nature—subtle, sloping shapes. In many cases, the Japanese gun grips were so exquisitely and gently curved that they belied the awesome terror of the weapons themselves.

The same aesthetic of gentle curves is reflected in another, more traditional weapon, the Japanese sword. Western swords generally have straight edges, but the Japanese sword describes a slight curve from guard to tip. This curve, called *sori* in Japanese, is not nearly as pronounced as the dramatic curve of the Turkish scimitar or the Chinese broadsword. What is more, the Japanese sword's curve is not uniform but has the same graceful line seen in the grip of the old Japanese-made firearms.

The Japanese inclination toward subtle curves is also reflected in many other traditional arts and crafts. The eaves and roofs of old Japanese buildings and the sloping walls of Japanese castles are all crafted in fine curves. The *sori* of the typical Japanese roof is worlds apart from the geometric arches found in Western architecture, and is far more subtle than

the curves in Chinese buildings. The Japanese roof curves gently in the same unobtrusive manner as the Japanese sword, revealing an aesthetic of natural curves and an aversion to the artificiality of geometric lines and patterns.

A comparison of Greek temple architecture and Japanese shrine and temple architecture may be helpful in understanding this particular Japanese aesthetic. The eaves of the Parthenon in Athens are actually not straight; they swell slightly from their center upwards, creating the optical illusion of a straight line for a person looking up from the ground. The Greek architect's purpose was not to create a curve but to create the illusion of straightness. In contrast, the curve or *sori* of the Japanese temple's eaves is meant to be evident.

Behind this difference in expression of form are differences of sensibility and of perception. In the West, the straight line and the curve are perceived to be essentially different; a rule is used to draw a straight line and a compass to draw a curve. A curve cannot be drawn with a rule nor a straight line with a compass. But the Japanese craftsman uses neither rule nor compass to draw the *sori* of the Japanese roof. A string held between two points forms a straight line when it is pulled taut, but this same string describes a subtle curve or *sori* when it is slackened a little. Thus the straight line and the curve are seen as two expressions of the same element, and not as conflicting entities. This wholistic orientation permeates not only Japanese form, but Japanese thought as well, and can be seen as part of the age-old Japanese adaptability to things foreign.

(This is the third of six parts.) ●

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