

## NOTE

# A Study of the Works of Gassan Sadakazu in The Metropolitan Museum of Art

BENJAMIN VINCENT

*Clawson Mills Fellow, Department of Arms and Armor, The Metropolitan Museum of Art*

GASSAN SADAKAZU (1837–1919), the most brilliant Japanese swordsmith of the Meiji era, came from a nonswordmaking family named Tsukamoto, whose home was in Omi province. At a very early age, the young Tsukamoto was adopted by Gassan Sadayoshi, a fairly well-known swordsmith residing in Osaka, and given at first the name Yagoro and later Sadakazu.<sup>1</sup> Yagoro proved to be a very precocious student with an amazing talent for making swords and began producing them at the age of fourteen.<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly he deserves to be called a genius; even the unusually staid *Nihonto Koza* enthuses that Sadakazu was “born into this world for the purpose of making swords.”<sup>3</sup> Great ability at carving decorative designs paralleled Gassan’s expertness with forging techniques, and a close study of the blades of earlier masters enabled him to produce excellent works in the Yamato, Yamashiro, Bizen, and Soshu styles, a feat unequaled by any other artist. Additionally, the Osaka marvel perfected the technique of forging rippling ayasugi jihada<sup>4</sup> and executed calligraphies and paintings of high merit.

Sadakazu’s swordmaking career seems to have fallen into an unusual cycle. The blades he made during his earliest years were often signed by his foster father. Then, around the beginning of the Meiji era, Sadakazu began forging swords in the Yamato and Yamashiro styles. During his middle years, however, counterfeiting the costly works of prominent swordsmiths occupied his energies for reasons that are not completely under-

stood.<sup>5</sup> As Sadakazu himself became increasingly well known, lesser smiths made forgeries of his work in turn, and in later years he inscribed his name on blades made by his son, Sadakatsu.

In the collection of the Metropolitan Museum’s Arms and Armor Department, there are six blades that bear the noted Gassan inscription, five of which are authentic. A fine early one is a tanto in the style of the first-generation Tadayoshi (Figures 1–3). Of *katakiriba* shape, it is 10.6 inches long and 1.2 inches wide, with *horimono* of a descending dragon grasping a *ken* on the *omote* and a *bobi* with *tsurebi* on the *ura*. In keeping with the Tadayoshi tradition, the *hamon* is a *nie deki suguha* with a touch of *notare* in places and the *boshi* is *komaru* with the *kaeri yoru*, while the *jihada* is a somewhat flat *Hizen*-style *itame*. On the *omote* the signature reads, “Naniwa Gassan Sadakazu, *hori mono do saku*,” which indicates that Gassan Sadakazu of Osaka, for which *Naniwa* is an ancient name, made the blade and also executed the carvings.<sup>6</sup> Near the tip of

1. *Sadakazu* can also be read *Teiichi*.

2. Mitsuo Shibata, *Shin-shinto Nyumon* (Tokyo, 1969) p. 156.

3. Kunzan Homma and Kanzan Sato, eds., *Shinpan Nihonto Koza*, V (Tokyo, 1967) p. 321.

4. For many of the technical terms used to describe Japanese swords, no equivalents exist in English. In order to make this note on Gassan Sadakazu more intelligible, a glossary has been included at the end.

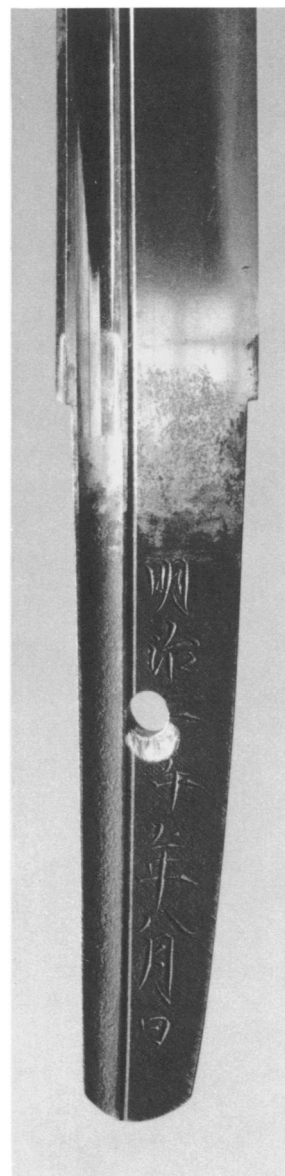
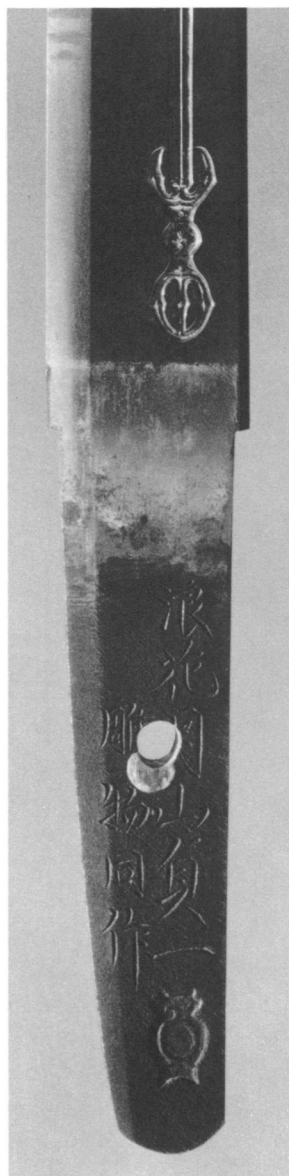
5. Sho Kawaguchi, *Shinto Koto Taikan*, II (Tokyo, 1930) p. 158.

6. Intricate carvings were often done by specialists rather than by the makers of the blades themselves.



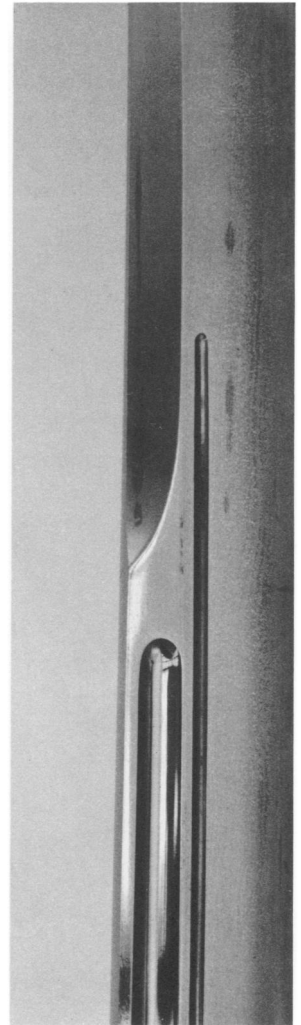
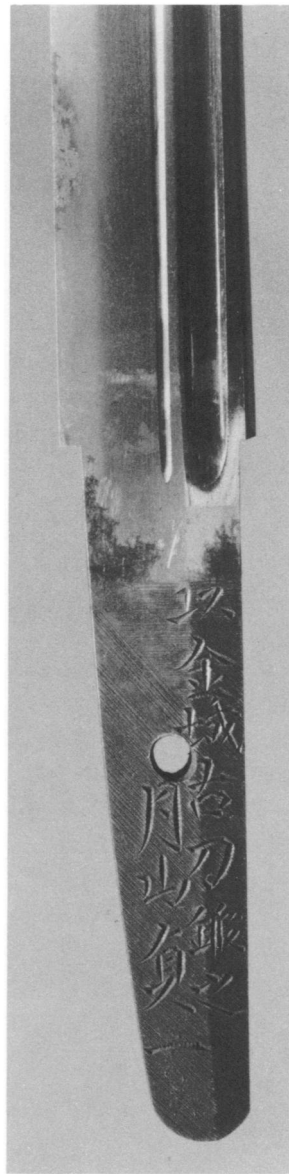
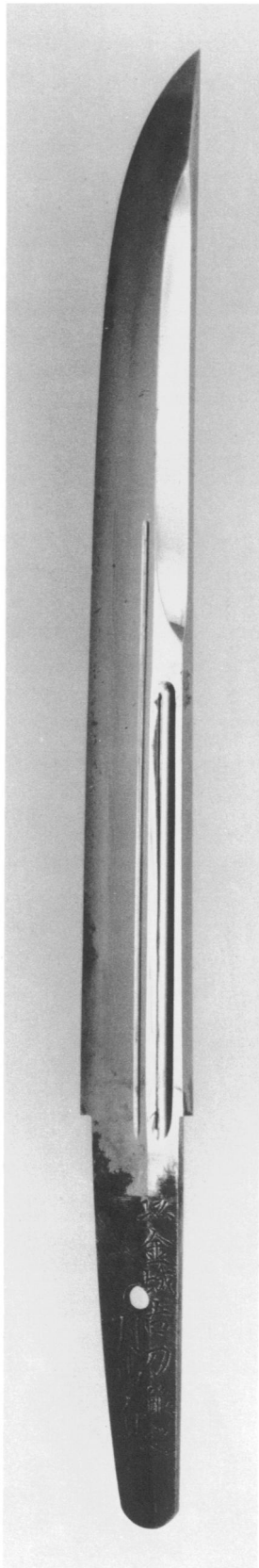
**FIGURE 1**  
Tanto in the style of the  
first-generation  
Tadayoshi, by Gassan  
Sadakazu. The Metro-  
politan Museum of Art,  
bequest of Michael  
Friedsam, The Friedsam  
Collection, 32.100.470

**FIGURES 2, 3**  
Details of the signed and  
dated sides of the tanto in  
Figure 1



the tang is a deeply impressed seal in the shape of an owl, inside of which is the Japanese character *sada*. On the reverse is inscribed a date reading, “Meiji san uma nen hachi gatsu hi,” or “a day in August in the third, horse, year of the Meiji period,” which corresponds to the Western date 1870.

Gassan’s early, Yamato-style technique is illustrated by a superb tanto of unokubi shape having a length of 9.4 inches and a breadth of 1.1 inches (Figures 4–7). The jihada is a beautiful masame covered profusely with sparkling nie, and the hamon features a hotsureta suguha leading to a boshi with medium kaeri. The inscription has some interesting features. The usual



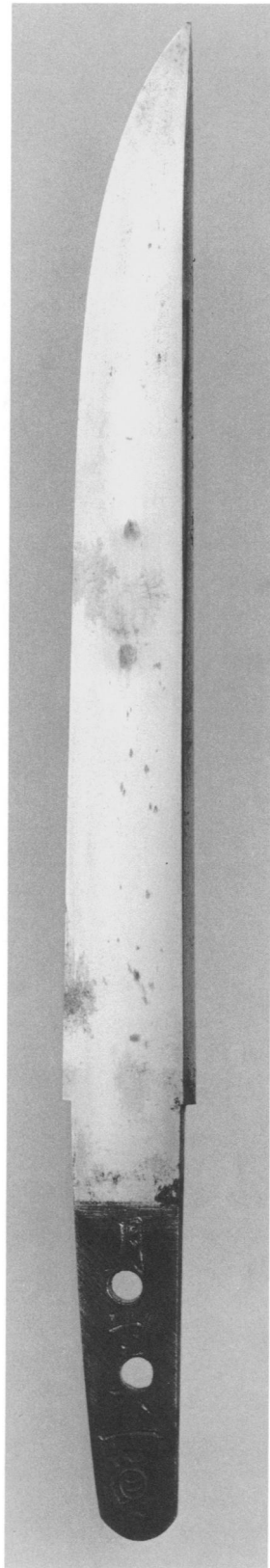
**FIGURE 4**  
Tanto of unokubi shape,  
by Gassan Sadakazu. The  
Metropolitan Museum of  
Art, gift of Brayton Ives  
and W.T.Walters, 91.2.35

**FIGURES 5–7**  
Details of the tanto in  
Figure 4 showing the  
signed side, the dated side,  
and the straight forging  
grain and nie

part of the signature, which reads “Gassan Sadakazu,” is followed by “Motte kinjo koto kitaeru kore,” meaning “This was forged using [steel from] an old sword of *kinjo*.”<sup>7</sup> The inscription on the reverse begins, “Tame Genda,” which indicates that the artist forged the blade for a man named Genda. The presence of this name serves as an important indicator as to the reason for the blade’s superiority, for special-order blades usually contain the highest-quality workmanship. Next, “tatsu nen shoko” means that this dagger was forged in “early summer of the dragon year.” Ascribing this particular cyclical date to a specific year presents some

7. *Kinjo* was another name for Osaka Castle.

FIGURE 8  
Sa-style tanto, by Gassan  
Sadakazu. The Metro-  
politan Museum of Art,  
bequest of Mrs. H. O.  
Havemeyer, The H. O.  
Havemeyer Collection,  
29.100.1372



difficulty since Gassan's lifetime included seven years of the dragon. But the first of these years occurred in 1844 when Sadakazu was only seven years old and can be eliminated. In 1856, when the Osaka master became nineteen, the second dragon year came, and it was possibly at this time that the Metropolitan's work was constructed. However, a very strong case can be made for contending that the next dragon year, 1868, saw the forging of this blade, since around that time Gassan often added two-character seasonal notations to his signature, such as the *shoko* on this example.<sup>8</sup> When Sadakazu reached forty-three in 1880, the next dragon year arrived; but by then his interest had turned from making Yamato-style blades, and therefore this and the following dragon-cycle years can be eliminated.

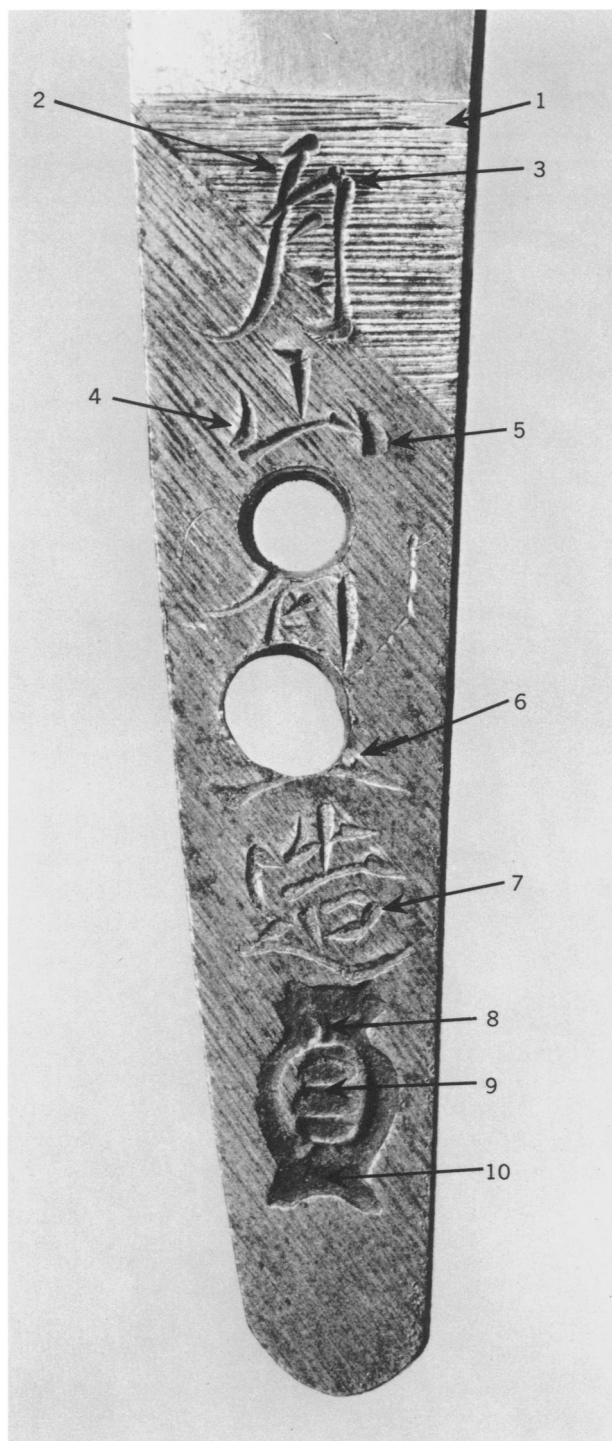
A third blade by Sadakazu in the Museum's collection is a Sa-style tanto that has a length of 7.6 inches and a width of .9 inch, uchizori, shin-no-mune, nie deki notare midare hamon with a sampin-style boshi, and itame jihada (Figure 8). The simple four-character signature of Gassan Sadakazu has beneath it a deeply impressed owl-shaped *sada* seal. This dagger's quality, while far from being poor, falls below the very high level of the previously mentioned early examples, merely proving that even Gassan did not always produce a masterpiece.

Throughout the history of Japanese art, forgeries of the works of successful artists were made, and swords bearing spurious signatures appearing to be that of Sadakazu present difficulties to students and collectors. An example of such a work is a tanto in the Museum's collection.<sup>9</sup> A comparison of the tang with that of the tanto just discussed, aided by photographic enlargements about three times actual size, should adequately illustrate the basic differences between the forgery (Figure 9) and the authentic blade (Figure 10).<sup>10</sup>

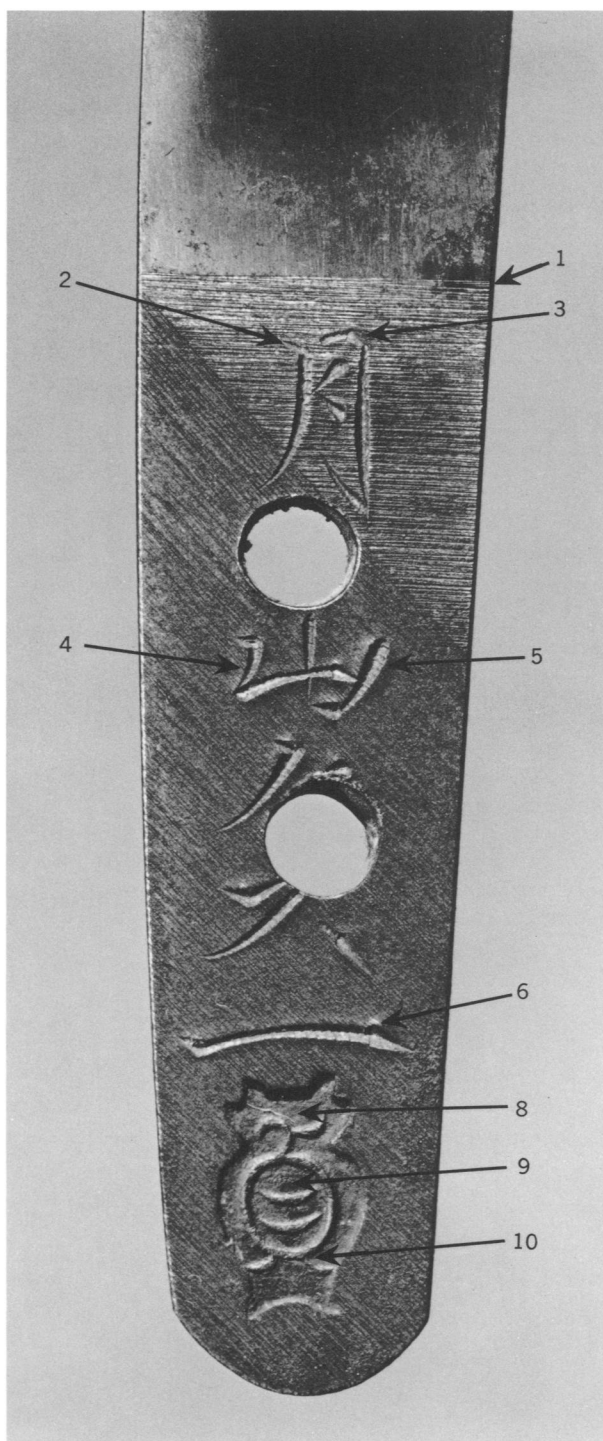
8. Homma and Sato, *Nihonto Koza*, V, p. 326; Shibata, *Shin-shinto Nyumon*, p. 26; Oichi Hiroi and Kazuo Iida, *Nihonto Kantei Nyumon* (Tokyo, 1971) p. 90; and Yoshio Fujishiro, *Nihon Toko Jiten* (Tokyo, 1965) p. 375, contain other examples of these seasonal dates along with more accurate period dates, all of which are around the beginning of the Meiji era.

9. Since this blade is a forgery and atypical for Sadakazu, there is no need here for a technical description.

10. To judge the authenticity of shin-shinto solely by the workmanship is often dangerous since the productions of the majority of late smiths vary widely in quality and style. The distinctive steel that had often typified the blades of earlier individual smiths or schools had generally ceased to be utilized.



**FIGURE 9**  
Detail of a tanto with the forged signature of Gassan Sadakazu. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Brayton Ives and W. T. Walters, 91.2.26



**FIGURE 10**  
Detail of the signed side of the tanto in Figure 8



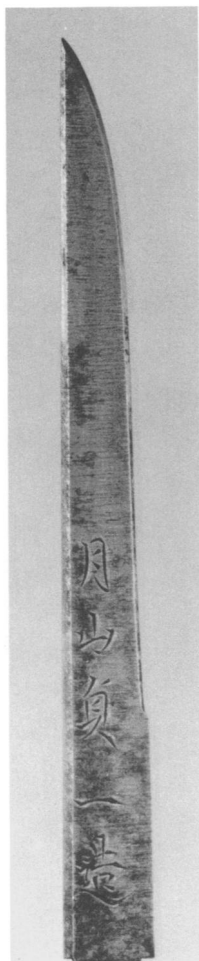


FIGURE 11  
Kozuka blade, by Gassan  
Sadakazu. The Metropolitan  
Museum of Art, gift of  
Brayton Ives and W. T. Walters,  
91.2.29

To begin with general considerations, the tang of the forgery is too long and narrow in relation to the length and width of the blade. Further, the file marks are too coarse.

In addition, many of the atari tagane, or chisel marks, and the strokes forming the characters do not match those on authentic blades. Specific points of comparison are numbered on the photographs. Note point 1: on the forgery the file marks do not touch the edge of the tang, which is a serious fault. The uppermost character in each case is substantially different. At point 2 on the forgery the stroke was greatly over-extended. At point 3 on the authentic blade there is a special triangular chisel mark; this is missing on the forgery. On the next character there are differences in the taper of certain strokes. For example, at point 4 on the forgery the stroke incorrectly widens from top to

bottom. A similar divergency is present at point 5. The next character is partially obliterated by tang holes, so it will not be studied here. The simple fourth character would seem the easiest to forge, but even in this case there is a very clear and essential difference. Inside the groove at point 6 on the authentic blade there is a series of fine chisel marks; on the forgery no such marks are visible. The character *tsukuru*, meaning "made," appears next on the forgery, at point 7, and has incorrectly formed parts, but it is not present at all on the authentic blade.

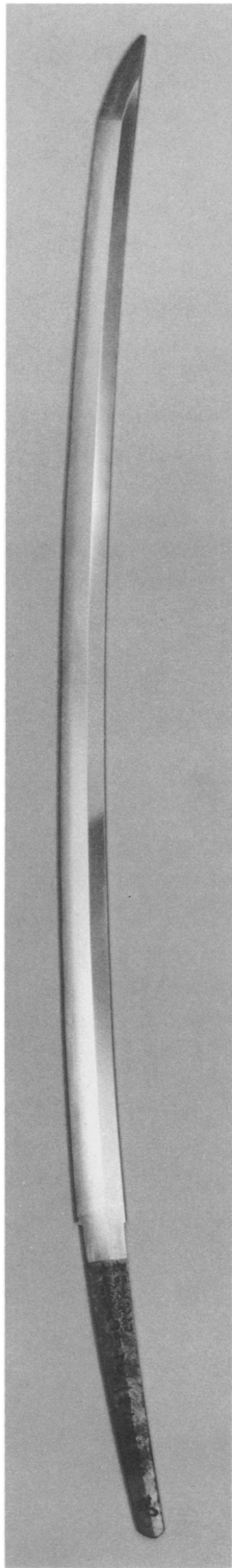
The owl seals also provide important clues about authenticity. Notice how crisp the eyes of the owl are at point 8 on the authentic example, when contrasted with the forgery. Also, the two horizontal lines inside the character *sada*, within the owl (9), are concave on the authentic blade but straight on the false one. The feet of the character are spread farther apart at point 10 on the authentic blade than they are on the forgery.

Kozuka blades generally have little artistic merit and were mass-produced by minor smiths, although many bear the forged names of great masters. On occasion, however, Gassan Sadakazu made kozuka blades of superior quality. In the Arms and Armor Department's collection, there is a fine one signed "Gassan Sadakazu tsukuru" (Figure 11).<sup>11</sup> While few sword-makers took the pains with these small knives that they took with their larger works, this blade has definite merit, as seen in the graceful shape, the distinct execution of the decorative file marks on the face and top, the skillful *suguha hamon*, and the beautiful calligraphy of the signature.

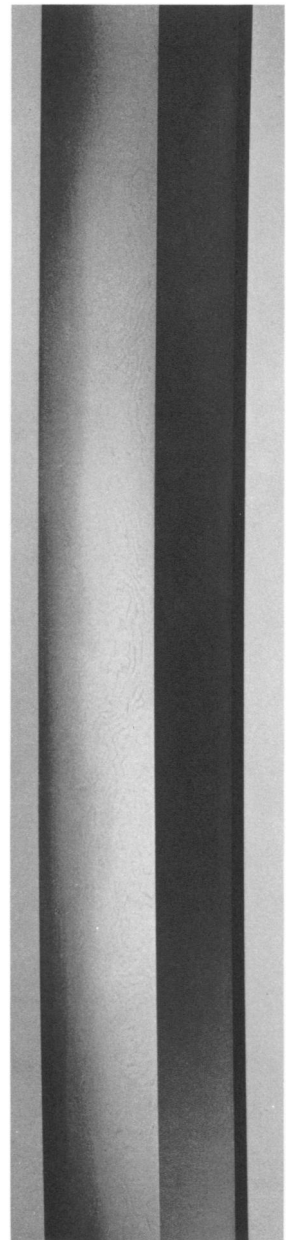
11. This kozuka blade is part of a mounting with the acc. no. 91.2.29.

FIGURE 12  
Daito, by Gassan Sadakatsu, but signed by  
Sadakazu. The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
Rogers Fund, 17.217.1

FIGURE 13  
Detail of the signed side of the daito in Figure 12.  
Note the written seal of Sadakatsu at the very  
bottom and the burnished signature of the pol-  
isher just above the file marks



FIGURES 14, 15  
Details of the daito in  
Figure 12 showing the  
dated side and the  
forging pattern



One of the most impressive Gassans in the Metropolitan is a long sword in the style of Masamune, the most famous of all Japanese swordsmiths (Figures 12–15). In keeping with the style of the Yoshino period, this daito, with a length of 28.1 inches and breadth of 1.2 inches, has an elongated point and Soshu-type itame jihada, which was skillfully imitated by mixing steels of varying hardness, thus rendering the appearance of the plentiful jikei so characteristic of Masamune's work. The hamon is a nie deki gonnome midare that continues into the point, and there is moderate kaeri.

The inscription is very informative. Following the regular four-character Gassan Sadakazu signature are the words “Toki hachiju sai kosaku,” indicating that the sword was “respectfully made at the time of eighty years of age.” The inscription continues with “gosokui kinen,” meaning “in commemoration of the corona-

tion,” which would be that of the emperor Taisho. “Teishitsu gigei-in,” which appears next, refers to Sadakazu's appointment in 1905 to a position as a “member of the Imperial Household artisans.” At the bottom is the written seal of Sadakazu's son, Gassan Sadakatsu, who no doubt made this blade, as well as most other works purported to have been made by Sadakazu at an advanced age. On the reverse is the date “Taisho yonen juichi gatsu kichinichi,” which can be rendered as an “auspicious day in November of the fourth year of the Taisho era” (1915). Then come the characters reading “motte Soshu Kamakura Goro Masamune den,” or “using the style of Goro Masamune of Kamakura in Soshu.” In addition to the inscriptions by Sadakazu and Sadakatsu, the sword bears the name of Yoshida Toshiyuki, who polished the blade, and the date of his work, which was also November in the fourth year of the Taisho era.

## GLOSSARY

ayasugi jihada	a forging pattern with uniform undulation	masame	straight-grained forging pattern
bobi	wide longitudinal groove	midare	variation in the width of the temper line
boshi	pattern of the temper line in the area of the point	nie	troostite
daito	long sword	nie deki	temper line formed of troostite
gonnomo	peaked temper-line pattern	notare	undulating temper-line pattern
hamon	overall pattern of the temper line	omote	the signed side of a blade
horimono	carvings on a blade	sampin	literally, “three things”; describes the temper pattern of a point that resembles an irregular triangle
hotsureta suguha	literally, “unraveled” suguha; straight temper line that looks like a piece of unraveled string	shin-no-mune	the back of a blade formed in three planes
itame	forging pattern resembling burl wood	shin-shinto	swords that were made after about 1780
jihada	the forged pattern of the steel	suguha	straight temper-line pattern
jikei	accumulation of troostite that forms a shiny line on the side of a blade	tanto	dagger
kaeri	the return portion of the temper line around the area of the point	tsurebi	small groove accompanying a larger groove
katakiriba	shape of blade in which the single ridge line is close to the edge	uchizori	literally, “inside curve”; type of blade in which the curvature is toward the edge
ken	double-edged straight sword; a stylized rendition of such a sword, when used in reference to carvings	unokubi	literally, “cormorant's neck”; a blade shape said to resemble the neck of a cormorant
komaru	temper line in the point having a fairly small amount of roundness	ura	the side of a blade on the reverse of the side that has the signature
kozuka	handle for a small side knife, which was often carried in a special pocket in the sheath of a sword	yoru	type of temper pattern in the area of the point in which the reverse portion leans toward the edge