

A Famous Fourteenth-Century Japanese Armor

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THE LARGE AND DISTINGUISHED COLLECTION of Japanese arms in the Metropolitan Museum's Department of Arms and Armor, which numbers about 6,000 pieces, is generally accepted as the finest outside Japan. Indeed, the collection is so rich that in some areas it surpasses that of the Tokyo National Museum. One object in the collection stands out from the rest: a rare armor of the *yoroi* type, which dates to the late Kamakura period of the early fourteenth century (Figures 1–3). According to tradition, the armor is said to have belonged to Takauji Ashikaga (1305–58),¹ founder of the Ashikaga shogunate.

Japanese body armor is typically of lamellar construction, formed of lacquered leather and iron lames laced together in overlapping horizontal rows to provide a balance between strength and flexibility. The term *yoroi* refers to an early form of lamellar armor that wraps around the torso and is closed on the right side by a separate side panel (*waidate*) and a pendant skirt section; these are tied to the front and back plates. The skirt (*kusazuri*) of the *yoroi* has a distinctive boxlike form. In addition to the cuirass (*dō*) and the skirt, the complete armor would have included a helmet, large, rectangular shoulder guards (*sode*), and armor for the arms and legs. The *yoroi* was generally worn by a warrior mounted on horseback with the skirt telescoping upward when he was seated in his saddle. This type of armor had gone out of fashion by the late fourteenth century and was gradually replaced by armors of the *dōmaru* type (which opened with a single seam on the right side and a more flexible skirt of eight, eleven, or thirteen vertical panels) and of the *haramaki* type (which opened at the center of the back rather than on the right side).

Yoroi are exceptionally rare today; only about thirty-five complete examples and about twenty incomplete ones are known. Of the complete *yoroi*, thirty-one are in shrines or temples and two are in private collections in Japan. The two remaining examples are in The Metropolitan Museum of Art.²

As exhibited today, the Museum's *yoroi* consists of a helmet and cuirass with skirt. The cuirass retains its characteristic shoulder straps, the right one (*sendan no ita*) of lamellar construction, the left one (*kyūbi no ita*) of solid iron. The front of the cuirass and the main panel of the *waidate* are covered with stenciled doeskin; the design on the breast includes an image of Fūdo Myōō, the god of war. Most of the lacings have been lost, but those that remain enable us to identify the armor as a *shiroito tsumadori odoshi yoroi*, that is, a *yoroi* laced mostly with white fabric but that would have had multicolored lacings arranged in a diagonal pattern on the corners of the skirt and on the edges of the shoulder guards. The colored laces presumably allude to a rainbow, a thing of beauty and good fortune. A slightly later example of the *shiroito tsumadori odoshi yoroi*, in which the original pattern is still preserved, is in the Kushibiki Hachimangū, a shrine in the Aomori Prefecture in northern Japan (Figure 4). Only eight armors laced in this fashion are known, so the Museum's example is of considerable importance.

The armor came to the Museum from the private collection of Bashford Dean (1867–1928), the first curator of the Department of Arms and Armor. Before his curatorial appointment in 1912, Dean's interest in arms and armor was an avocation, for his profession was that of a zoologist. He held the titles of professor of vertebrate zoology at Columbia Uni-

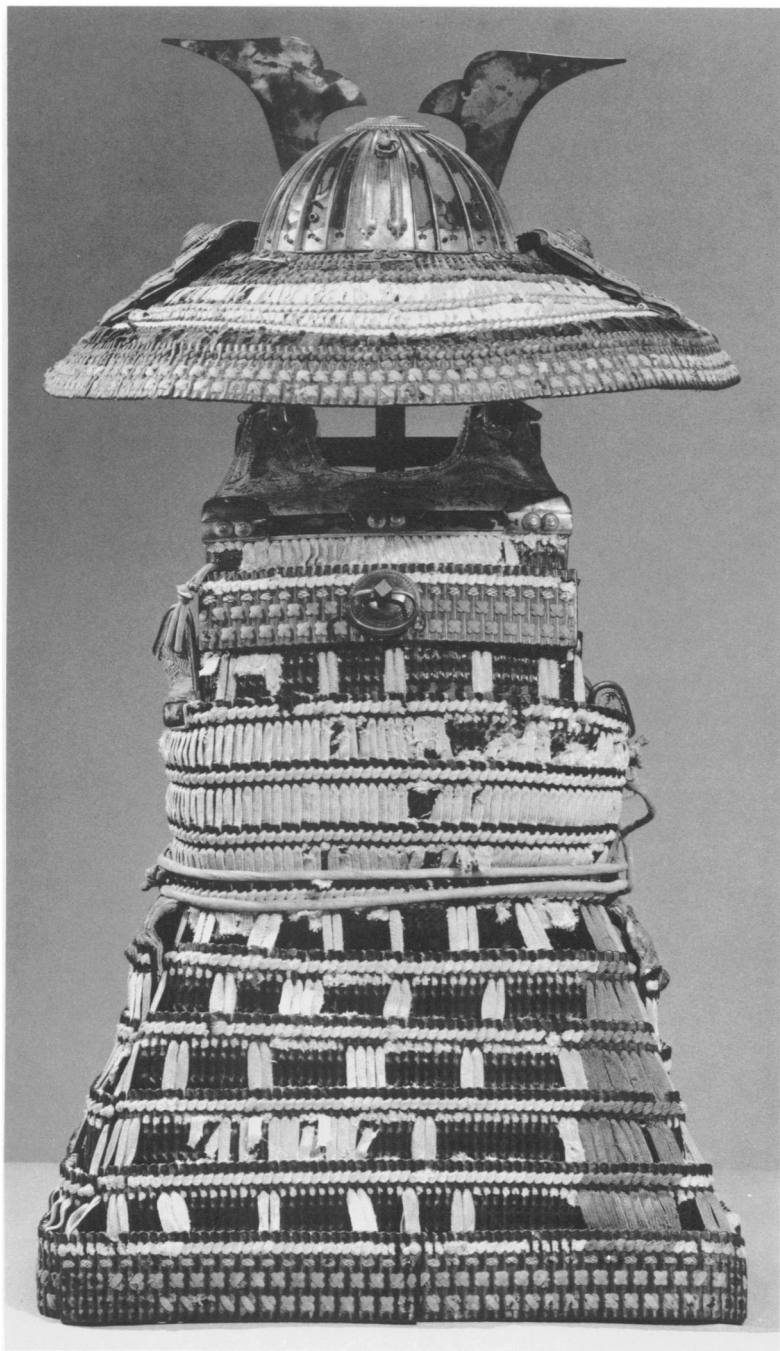


1-3. Armor of the *yoroi* type. Japanese, Late Kamakura period, early 14th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Bashford Dean, 1914. 14.100.121

versity and curator of fossil fishes at the American Museum of Natural History. Dean made two trips to Japan, in 1900 and 1905, when he was invited by the Japanese government to study the nation's fish hatcheries. These trips gave Dean an opportunity to de-

velop a taste for and an expertise in Japanese armor, and it was in Japan that he formed two important collections of Japanese arms and armor. The first of these he sold to the Metropolitan in 1904 (just before his return to Japan); the second he donated in 1914. This *yoroi* belongs to Dean's second collection.

Very little is known about the armor before Dean acquired it. As mentioned above, tradition held that it had belonged to Takauji Ashikaga, who is said to have donated it to the Shinomura Hachimangū,

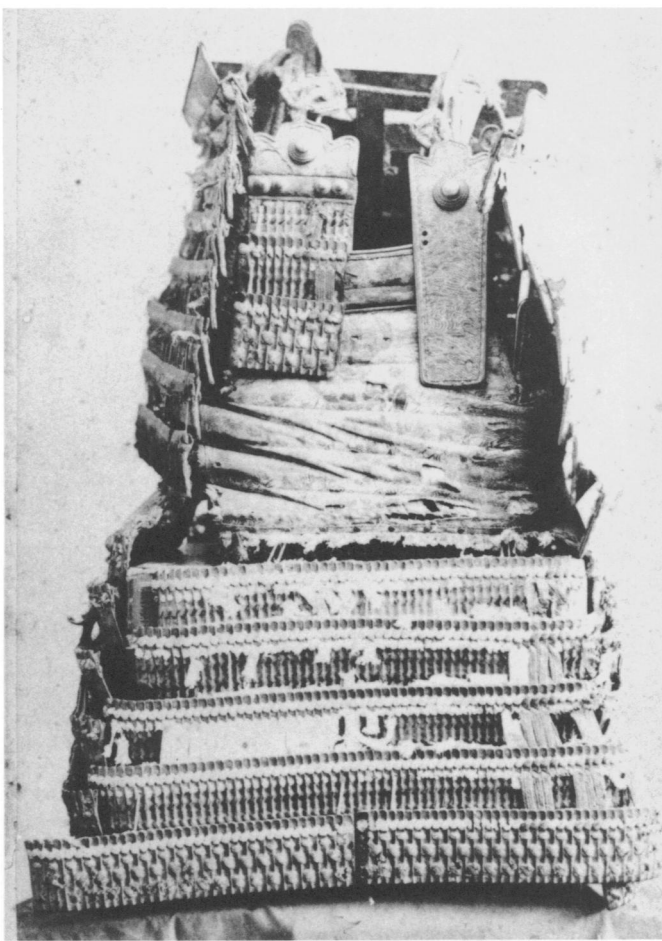


about fifty miles from Kyoto, on March 29, 1333, on his way to battle against the armies of the reigning Kamakura shogun.³ In 1902 the armor is recorded as being in the Matsui family house, near the shrine. Shortly after that date the armor was sold by the family to Ide Zembe, owner of the well-known Jidaiye antiques firm in Kyoto. Once on the art market, the armor attracted great interest and competition among the leading collectors of Japanese arms and armor, including Baron Mitsui, Professor Seki



4. Armor of the *shiroito tsumadori odoshi yoroi* type. Japanese, Late Kamakura period, early 14th century. Kushibiki Hachimangū, Aomori Prefecture (photo: Aomori Prefecture)

Yasunosuke, and Kobori Tomoto. However, it was Dean who eventually prevailed. The dealer's receipt preserved in the archives of the Department of Arms and Armor indicates that Dean purchased the armor on July 19, 1905 for 1200 yen (approximately \$600),



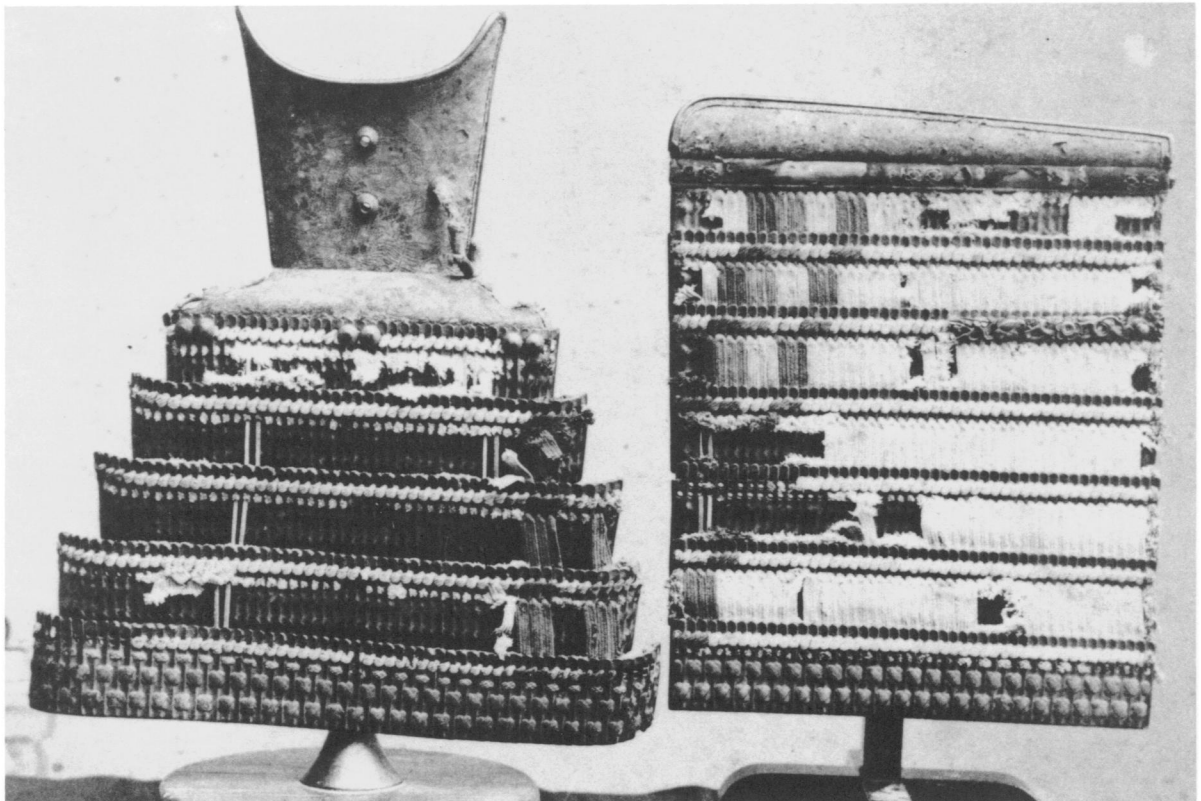
5. Photograph of the armor in Figures 1–3, ca. 1905 (photo: Bashford Dean)

a record price at that time for an armor in Japan. Since 1914, when Dean gave it to the Museum, the *yoroi* has appeared in every major study of Japanese armor⁴ and it has been the object of keen interest for all students of the subject.

Two photographs of the armor in its unrestored state are known; these were presumably made for Dean shortly after he purchased it. One (Figure 5) shows the armor from the front, mounted with two shoulder guards but without a helmet; the skirt is present but appears to have different colored laces from those now on the armor. The other (Figure 6) shows the separate side panel and a left shoulder guard laced in the same *shiroito tsumadori odoshi* design, with a diagonal section of multicolored lacing at the front. A comparison of these photographs to the armor as it has traditionally been displayed at the Metropolitan Museum—with a helmet but without *sode*—has raised a number of questions among anxious Japanese scholars.⁵ What has happened to the *sode*? What has happened to the skirt, which appears to have been relaced and to have different colors? Where did the otherwise unrecorded helmet come from?

These questions can now be answered, at least in part, as the result of a close examination of the ar-

6. Photograph taken ca. 1905 of the side panel (*wai-date*) and left shoulder guard (*sode*) associated with the armor in Figures 1–3 (photo: Bashford Dean)



mor, the study of Bashford Dean's photographs and papers in the archives of the Department of Arms and Armor, and the discovery of an unpublished series of drawings in the Imperial Library in Tokyo.

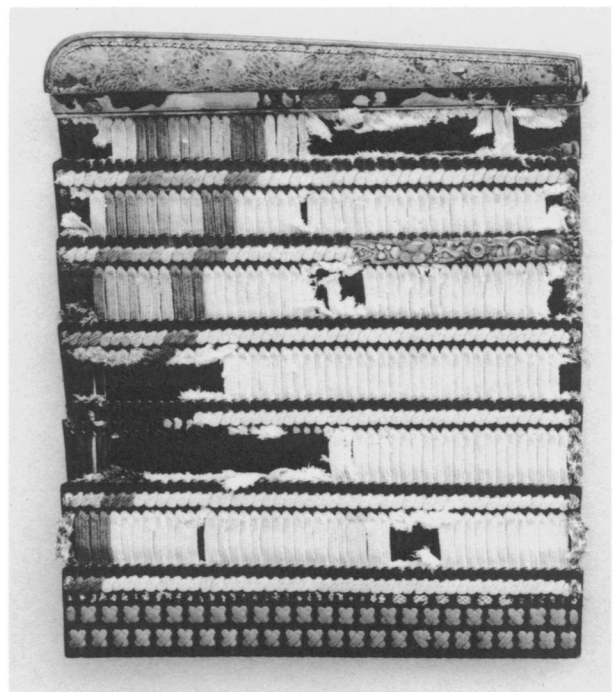
In the course of an ongoing study of the collection of Japanese arms and armor, this writer discovered that one of the two *sode* formerly associated with the armor, the left one, is still in the Museum (Figure 7). The *sode* is reproduced in both of the old photographs, although in that of the mounted armor it can only be identified by counting the number of lames and by the study of such hard-to-see details as the metal mounts and the pattern of damage along the edges. The *sode* is of the mid-fourteenth century, and it is in relatively well-preserved and unrestored condition; its lacings show that it once belonged to an armor that was laced in the *shiroito tsumadori odoshi* style like the example under discussion. However, when it is mounted on the Museum's *yoroi*, a number of differences become clear. The most noticeable difference is in the metal fittings: those on the left *sode* are decorated with plum blossoms rather than the chrysanthemums found on the cuirass. Furthermore, the curvature of the *sode* scales, which are slightly rounded, differ from those of the skirt, which are flat, and the color of the lacquer on the *sode* is also slightly different from that of the armor. It was disappointing to have to admit that this fine fourteenth-century *sode* belonged to a *yoroi* other than the Museum's. The right *sode*, no longer in the collection but recorded in an old photograph, is completely unrelated to the *yoroi* and therefore need not be considered further here.⁶

The old photographs of the armor also raised disturbing questions about the condition and apparent restoration of the skirt. As illustrated in Figure 5, the section of the skirt facing front is shown with colored lacings on the (armor's) left side, with very little lacing remaining on the right. Compared with the present appearance of the skirt, it seemed likely that considerable relacing had been done before the armor left Japan, restoration that would have employed modern, chemically dyed laces to replace the rare, older lacing. That this was not the case is proved by a photograph of the armor taken in Bashford Dean's house at Misaki, near Tokyo, in 1905 (Figure 8). The armor can be seen on a table by the window, with the back of the armor facing the camera. What is surprising is that we are also looking at the true front of the

skirt, with its few original, colored lacings on the right side (the lowermost left skirt lames, shown here to be missing, were replaced with genuine fourteenth-century lames from a different armor before the *yoroi* left Japan). Obviously, the entire skirt had become separated from the body, perhaps even before it was sold by Matsui, with the result that (as seen in Figure 5) it was turned around, back to front. This error was corrected before the armor left Japan, when some additional laces were added to hold the cuirass and skirt together and the missing lower front skirt plate was replaced.

Japanese armor is unique in the importance accorded to fabric—in the form of lacing—as a major element of its aesthetics. Armors that have not been substantially relaced are extremely rare. The original laces of the Museum's armor are few in number. The remaining original laces on the right side of the skirt at the front are the four dark purple (now dark brown) ones and one green lace on the third row (counting from the top); four dark purple and three green laces on the fourth row; and three dark purple, three green, and three orange-red laces on

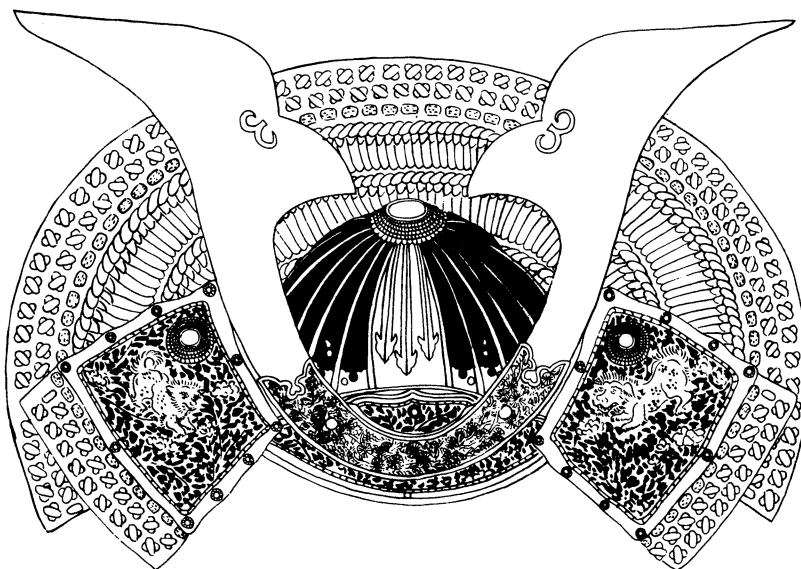
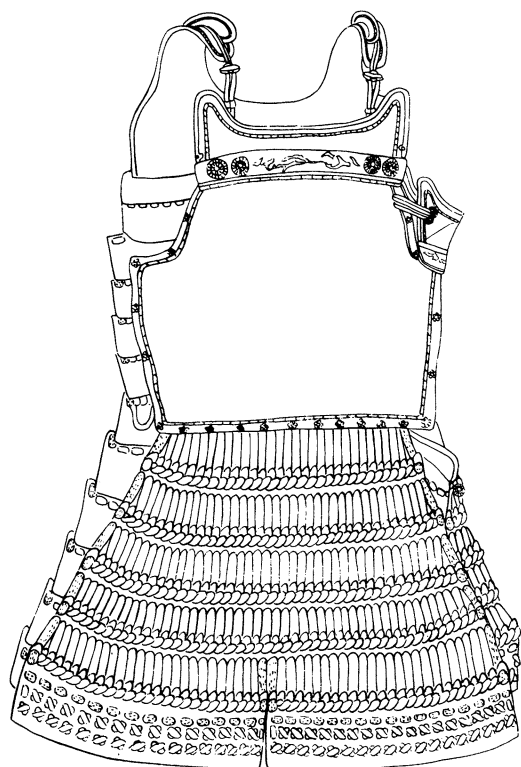
7. Shoulder guard (*sode*). Japanese, mid-14th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Bashford Dean, 1914, 14.120.50





8-9. Photographs showing Bashford Dean's collection of Japanese armor in his house at Misaki in 1905 (photos: Bashford Dean)

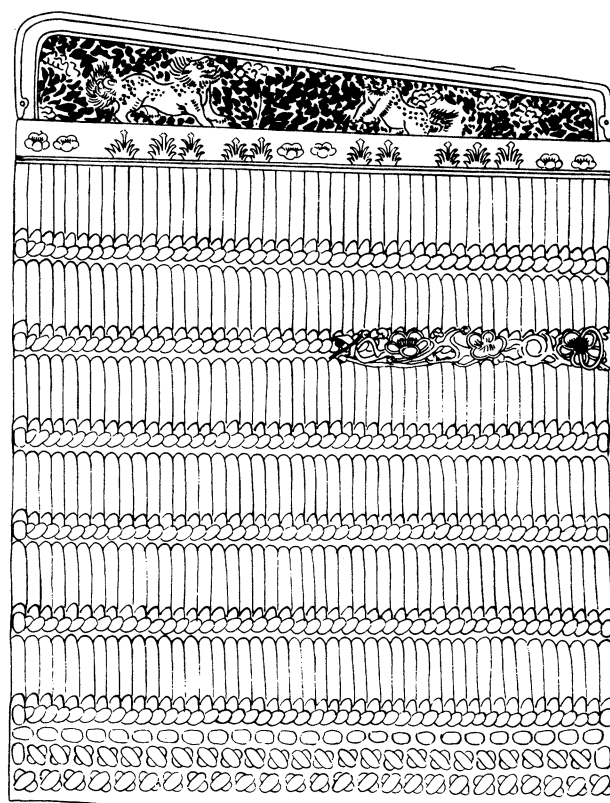




the fifth row. On the back of the skirt the original laces appear to be the two white and four dark purple ones on the third row; thirteen white, four dark purple, and two green laces on the fourth row; and three dark purple, three green, and two orange-red laces on the fifth row. On the skirt lames of the *waidate* the original laces are the two of dark purple on the second row; three dark purple and one green on the third row; three dark purple and three green on the fourth row. Aside from these, the colored replacement laces are chemically dyed and have discolored.

The photograph of Dean's study at Misaki is equally valuable in showing the rest of his collection, including the two *sode* formerly associated with the armor. The *sode* are shown side by side on the left wall, and it is obvious that they are not a pair. The *waidate* for the *yoroi* is displayed separately at the back of the room.

A second photograph of Dean's study (Figure 9), apparently taken in the opposite direction from the first, shows the helmet that is now exhibited with the *yoroi*. This is the only photograph known to have been taken of the helmet when it was in Japan. However, a detailed examination of the armor in connection with the questions about the *sode* and skirt revealed that the helmet, although long associated with the armor, does not in fact belong to it. The helmet



10–12. Ink tracings made from a series of original drawings in the Imperial Library, Tokyo, showing the cuirass and skirt, the helmet, and the left *sode* of the *yoroi* in Figures 1–3 (photos: Suzuki Keizo)

is slightly younger than the armor, dating to the mid-fourteenth century, although like the *yoroi* it has fittings with chrysanthemum motifs. However, it is of the ridged-helmet (*suji kabuto*) type used with *dōmaru*-style armors. A *yoroi* was typically accompanied by a helmet constructed like that of the *suji kabuto*, with a shallow, domed skull built up of overlapping iron segments and a wide, flaring, semicircular neck guard; distinguishing it from the *suji kabuto* type, however, are the vertical rows of large, domed rivet heads within each segment. A helmet of this type, known as the star helmet (*hoshi kabuto*) because of its knobbed appearance, is mounted on the *yoroi* in the Kushibiki Hachimangū (Figure 4). The lacing of the helmet's lamellar neck guard does not match that of the armor, either. Its lacing style, which consists of two rows of white laces between rows of blue-black leather laces above and below, is much closer to that of the right *sode* once associated with the armor and might even have come from the same armor as the *sode*. The original helmet belonging to our *yoroi* would have had predominantly white laces with diagonal bands of three of the "rainbow" colors.

The dealer's receipt described above gives further evidence to support the aforementioned conclusions. The receipt itemizes the purchase, indicating one helmet, one armor including *waidate*, and four skirt lames. The two *sode* are noted as two things (*ni-mai*) rather than as a pair (*issō*), indicating that from the start Dean knew he was acquiring associated but not matching elements.

These conclusions about the armor can now be confirmed by the discovery of a series of drawings of this armor, as well as of a separate volume of detailed notes explaining the drawings, in the Imperial Li-

brary, Tokyo.⁷ These drawings, of which only a few tracings after the originals can be reproduced here (Figures 10–12), provide the earliest record of the armor. Made by Matsuoka Tokekata, or by his son Yuki Yoshi,⁸ in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, the drawings render each part of the armor, with detailed descriptions of the lacings and mounts. The drawings show the cuirass and skirt, the *waidate*, and the present, associated helmet.⁹ One *sode*, the left one now in the Museum but no longer exhibited with the armor, is also illustrated, indicating that these pieces had been associated by that date. Significantly, the right *sode*, acquired by Dean with the armor in 1905 but obviously unrelated to it, is not represented in the drawings and must therefore have been associated with the armor at a later date. The drawings also indicate that, by around 1800, the armor was no longer in the Shinomura Hachimangū but belonged to Matsui Kyosaku. A noted physician, Matsui was one of the patrons of the shrine and may have kept the shrine's armor for safekeeping at his home, following established practice. With the passage of time, the ownership of the armor seems to have been forgotten, as is evident from its sale by members of a later generation of the Matsui family.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deepest thanks to Professor Suzuki Keizo for his valuable advice on the armor, and especially for having given me information about as well as tracings after the original designs now in the Imperial Library. I owe special gratitude to Stuart W. Pyhrr for having edited and proofread this essay and also to Mrs. Ann Willard, who helped in the preliminary stages of gathering information.

NOTES

1. Throughout this article the names of Japanese individuals are given in the traditional form, with the family name given first.

2. The second *yoroi* in the Metropolitan Museum is acc. no. 28.60.1.

3. The attribution to Takauji Ashikaga was made by Yamagami Hatirō, *Nippon Katchu no Shin Kenkyū* (Modern Study of Japanese Armor) I (Tokyo, 1928) p. 7.

4. The *yoroi* was first published by Bashford Dean in "A Specimen of Early Japanese Armor," *MMAB* 3 (1908) pp. 23–24,

while it was still in his private collection. The three most important Japanese publications in which it is discussed are Yamagami, *Nippon Katchū no Shin Kenkyū*, I, pp. 71, 887, and Yamagishi Motoo, "Metropolitan Bijitsukan zō Shiroito Tsumadori Odoshi Ōyoroi" (The White Lace Armor in the Metropolitan Museum) *Katchū Bugu Kenkyū* (Study of Japanese Armor) 32 (1974) p. 5–11; 33 (1975) pp. 5–9; 34 (1975) pp. 6–11; and Ogawa Morihiro, "Zaigai Nippon Token Bugu no Rekishi" (History of Japanese Arms and Armor outside Japan) *Zaigai Nippon no Shihō* (Japanese Art: Selections from Western Collections) (Tokyo, 1979–81) X, pp. 131–132..

5. Notably in Yamagami, *Nippon Katchū no Shin Kenkyū*, I, p. 71, and in Yamagishi, *Katchū Bugu Kenkyū*, 32, p. 9.

6. Originally part of Dean's gift of 1914, this *sode*, acc. no. 14.100.48, was deaccessioned because of its bad condition and was sold at Parke-Bernet Galleries, New York, Nov. 15, 1956, lot 198.

7. Registration numbers 12921-1-B6-185 for the volume of drawings and 11101-1-209-1544 for the volume of notes. The relationship of the two volumes, inventoried separately in the Imperial Library, was recognized by Professor Suzuki Keizo. As permission to publish the original drawings was not received in time for publication, Professor Suzuki's tracings after the original drawings have been substituted.

8. The surname of the artist is not noted on the drawings. It is also conceivable that one of the Matsuoka artists, father or son, was in fact copying earlier drawings produced by another artist.

9. The drawings also indicate that, on the second row of lamellae on the back of the cuirass, there was a large copper-alloy mount of chrysanthemum shape, with a circular knob pierced by a large ring. This mount is not visible in the photographs of the armor in Dean's house at Misaki in 1905 (Figure 9) but is present today. It would appear that the chrysanthemum base of the present mount, inexplicably absent in the earlier photograph, is original, although its faceted knob and ring are clearly modern replacements.