

LIFE & ARTS



EXHIBITION REVIEW

Creativity Forged Anew in Japan

Celebrating the metalworking mastery achieved in the Edo period and the creative resilience that followed in the Meiji Restoration

BY LEE LAWRENCE

Worcester, Mass. **FOURTEEN OBJECTS** fill a wall in the Asian galleries of the Worcester Art Museum in a display titled "Last Defense: The Genius of Japanese Meiji Metalwork." It is a simple installation in three clusters that bears beautiful witness to the mastery achieved in the Edo period (1603-1868) and the creative resilience that followed in the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912).

A handful of Edo pieces exem-

plify the range of techniques and designs workshops perfected as they filled commissions from samurai and supplied objects for Buddhist temples and home worship. Three works in particular illustrate the range. As bold as it is elegant, a helmet made in 1618 by the Nagasone school emulates the spiraling shape of a conch shell with spur-like projections. An 1855 helmet by the equally famous Myochin family sports on its brim an exquisite relief of curling

waves. And in an incense burner made around 1850, another Myochin shaped the lid in the form of a miniaturized helmet topped by the sculpted figure of a dragon flying through flames. The censer reminds us that, as peace wore on and the economy thrived, metalworking studios also created accessories for samurai with sophisticated tastes as well as a growing merchant class with deep pockets.

Then the ground shifted beneath them all after the military shogunate

fell in 1868 and the Meiji Restoration began. Within a few years, samurai lost their class privileges as well as the right to carry swords; the new imperial ruler declared Shinto the state religion, marginalizing Buddhism; and a push to modernize the country and conquer European and American markets took hold.

Metalworkers were among the hardest hit. Buddhist temples stopped commissioning works. Samurai had no need for arms or armor. And, unlike potters, whose vessels Dutch merchants had been importing to Europe, metalworkers like the Myochin had to learn to cater to foreign tastes while cultivating and expanding their local clientele. The closest this display comes to the extravagant tours de force, sometimes up to six feet tall, that dazzled visitors at international expositions are the eye-popping reliefs on a pair of silver vases. Made by Hirayama Kantei between 1900 and 1916, they depict bantam chickens, every feather, talon and ridge of their combs rendered in detail with different alloys and gold.

Mostly, however, this display showcases the astute reuse of popular forms. The decorations on a three-tiered box by Takase Kozan, for example, are recycled sword guards, while his articulated figurine of a lobster (made around 1900) carries forward a prized specialty of the Myochin family—witness the impressively detailed dragon figurine next to it. It is easy to imagine how such works appealed not only to Japanese buyers eager to connect to the past, but to Western audiences excited by the exotic and admiring of skillfully handcrafted works in an age of increasingly industrial manufacture.

Last Defense: The Genius of Japanese Meiji Metalwork, Worcester Art Museum, through Sept. 2

Ms. Lawrence writes about Asian and Islamic art for the Journal.

