



Art of the Japanese Sword

by Tyler Rothmar

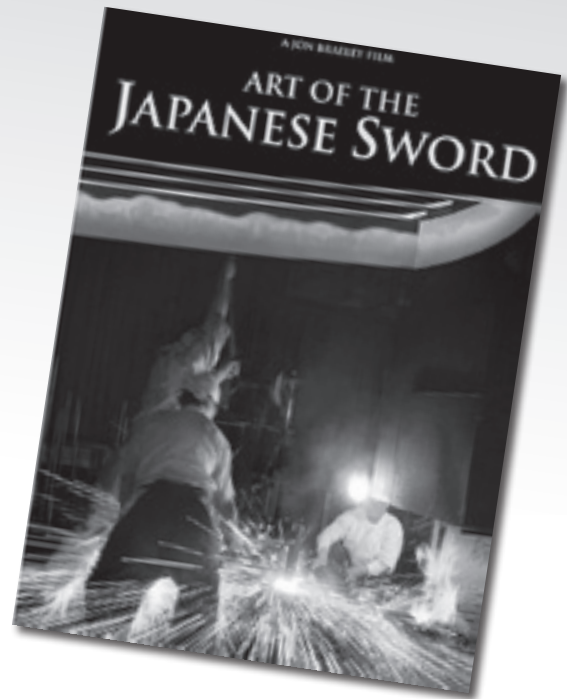
'Art of the Japanese Sword' is a new documentary from Empty Mind Films that focuses not only on Japanese swords themselves, but on the many detailed aspects of their production and use.

The first thing worth mentioning is the quality of the footage. The unique processes through which blades are made, from initial steel production through forging, folding, quenching, shaping and polishing are all shown in clear detail. This has the effect of giving continuity to the various stages, bringing them to life in a way that step-by-step photos in a book cannot.

This DVD contains many interviews with craftsmen from different traditions, and the filmmakers have made the sound decision to subtitle them in English. This gives the viewer a chance to get a feel for the personalities of the craftsmen, and is much preferable to watching long stretches of voice-over.

As objects of artistic value, the beauty of the Japanese sword stems from fine detail, so it follows that they are the product of some very subtle and refined labour. Essentially, the value of this documentary is in its recognition that swords are not made all at once. Rather they are the cumulative result of the slow and careful work of multiple craftsmen. The narrative takes care to depict and explain all aspects of the process, right down to *tsuka*-wrapping, engraving, *saya* carving and more. Watching this, one can really appreciate how any given stage, no matter how fine, slow or small, contributes to the final product. Footage of the work is alternated with interviews with the workers, and we come to understand that in a sense, their distinct personalities become part of the blades they produce.

Kawachi Kunihara, one of the many smiths featured, states adamantly that a sword, "... does not cut well because it is beautiful. It is because it



is designed to cut well that it became beautiful." Art of the Japanese Sword conducts a thorough examination into our fascination with swords, and the curious notion that an object created for the express purpose of cutting people could be so beautiful in and of itself.

Aside from swords themselves, there are also sections that explore how swords are used. There is a brief section on kendo, an explanation of Tenshin Shōden Katori Shintō-ryū, Japan's oldest martial art school, and a section on the relationship between swords and Shinto, Japan's native animistic religion.

In short this is an excellent documentary and a must-have for anyone with an interest in Japanese swords. My single reservation is that at times the narrator mispronounces some Japanese words such as "Tenshin Shōden Katori Shintō-ryū" and "*bokken*". This will not be a problem for people with experience, but the neophyte should take care. All in all, a fantastic DVD. For more information, visit www.emptymindfilms.com