

Kozuka with Origami Cranes and a Pine Tree

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Abstract

In 2013, a collector and connoisseur of Japanese sword mountings Nakanishi Yūhiko acquired a *kozuka*, a handle of a knife installed in the scabbard or *saya* of a *katana*, on which three origami cranes, along with a pine tree, were carved (Figure 1). Being identified as a work of Gotō Eijō (1577-1617) made in the late sixteenth century (NOA2014), the *kozuka* is urging us to rewrite the history of origami.



Figure 1: Kozuka with origami cranes and a pine tree

The oldest evidence of origami in Japan that had been known before the discovery was a design of *kimono* published in the late seventeenth century, which also depicted some *orizuru* or paper cranes. The *kozuka* enabled us to trace the history of origami almost a century older. Moreover, it can be argued that this is the oldest evidence of origami ever found in the world.

The Gotō house was a renowned metalsmith family that served for Ashikaga and Tokugawa Shogun. As the sixth master of the family, Eijō founded coins, weights, and sword mountings for Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598) and Tokugawa Hidetada (1579-1632). Those facts strongly suggest that people of the Samurai class enjoyed origami at that time in Japan, not the townspeople as in the Edo era.

According to Ise Sadatake's *Tsutsumi-no ki* (1764), what we now call ceremonial origami, the formal paperfolding for wrappings and decorations practiced by Samurai, dates back to "the era of Kyōto Shogunate," which lasted from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. Hence we have conjectured the so-called recreational origami derived itself from the ceremonial origami.

The *kozuka* enhances the conjecture. It is now certain that the recreational origami emerged from the ceremonial origami in the sixteenth century or earlier within the Samurai class. That in turn leads a natural inference that it took a century for origami of the Samurai class to spread among the townspeople class in Japan.

It should be noted that Europeans seem to have become acquainted with the paper crane more than two hundred years later than the kozuka is made, possibly when some Japanese magicians took part in the second Paris International Exposition in 1867. That gap confirms the assumption that Japanese and European origami traditions were independent until the middle of the nineteenth century.

References

- [NOA2014] Nakanishi, Yūhiko “Orizuru-ni Matsuzu Kozuka” *Monthly Origami* **461** (Jan. 2014) pp. 6-7