Even in ancient times most swords were fitted with guards to protect the user’s hand from an opponent’s blade. Unlike their Western counterparts, Japanese swords were deeply curved in shape and were wielded with a slashing rather than a thrusting motion. Their specially crafted guards, called tsuka, were removable and interchangeable, and developed from a purely utilitarian device into a subtle and sophisticated art form.

The earliest tsuka, dating from about the eleventh century to the fifteenth, were entirely functional, most frequently constructed of lacquered leather, which is surprisingly strong and resilient. Beginning in the late 1500s, however, an evolution began to take place: tsuka started to become ornamental accessories as well as combat equipment — in both cases expertly fashioned by master craftsmen. Those made for fighting were of iron, the decorative ones of soft metals such as silver or copper. The protective effectiveness of the latter was virtually nonexistent against the steel edge of a good sword that, with a single stroke, could strike through many layers of soft metal, not to mention how many of flesh and bone! Like fine jewelry, wealthy Japanese owned attractive fittings for all occasions and changed them accordingly: to mark the arrival of a new season, the anniversary of a historical event, or simply to suit personal taste.

The earliest functional iron guards can be grouped into two categories: those made by armorers and those forged by swordsmiths. They are easy to distinguish since the armorers’ works have relatively elaborate openwork and a raised rim, and the swordsmiths’ very little piercing and no raised rim. This difference in style is perhaps explained by the fact that the technical construction of armor required a great deal of piercing of metal. The armorer’s guard pictured in Figure 1 is dominated by a design of four tea-flower buds, while only a small part of the rimless swordmaker’s tsuka (Figure 2) is adorned with an openwork bird’s-wing fan of the kind used for starting fires in tea ceremonies.

It was to the decorative rather than the more practical tsuka that artists and craftsmen devoted their talents beginning around the sixteenth century. Many of them worked in or near Kyoto, seat of the imperial court and of the civil government. They produced extremely fine works that were as prized as paintings or sculpture — in fact tsuka makers often were painters.

During the early sixteenth century a group of metalworkers in the Mino area near Kyoto experimented with applying techniques of elaborate inlaying, overlaying, and relief carving to the design of tsuka. Figures 3 and 4 are typical Mino tsuka. The deeply carved foliage is rather crude by later standards of refinement. The “stippled” background, composed of minute dots pounded into the metal, is an innovation of Mino craftsmen that was frequently used by later masters. Not substantial enough to ward off the blow of a sword, the Mino guards were probably used on ceremonial occasions.

Totally different from Mino tsuka, yet contemporary with them, are the openwork iron guards from Kyoto such as the one shown in Figure 5, which is obviously lacking in the kind of reinforcement required for combat.

This print by the famous artist Suzuki Harunobu (1725-1770) clearly illustrates an openwork tsuka on the sword a samurai warrior is about to thrust through his sash. 11 x 8 1/4 inches. Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, The H. O. Havemeyer Collection, no. 1629.
1 (left). The pierced floral design and raised rim of this tsuba are typical of an armormaker’s guard. Diameter 3 3/8 inches. Bequest of Howard Mansfield, 36.120.187

2 (right). The austerity of this swordsmith’s guard is broken only by the little fan carved out on the right. Diameter 3 1/16 inches. Bequest of Howard Mansfield, 36.120.186

3, 4. Early Mino soft-metal guards such as these two reveal how artists began to transform the functional tsuba into an intricately designed decorative object. Widths 2 1/16 inches, 2 1/16 inches. Bequest of Herman A. E. and Paul C. Jaehne, 43.120.486,942

5 (left). A chrysanthemum in full bloom fills the rim of this Kyoto guard. Diameter 3 1/16 inches. Gift of Mrs. Adrian H. Joline, 14.60.32

6 (right). A katydid creeps underneath a willow tree on this Akasaka guard. Width 3 1/4 inches. Bequest of Howard Mansfield, 36.120.134
tsuba. Note the delicate outlines of the chrysanthemum. The refined carving on this kind of guard reflects the somewhat effeminate, pacific nature of the court aristocracy whose aesthetic taste strongly influenced Kyoto's art.

By the middle of the sixteenth century masters of the Akasaka school, who also lived near Kyoto, produced magnificent tsuba that combined both aesthetic and functional qualities. Treasured by the samurai or warrior class, their excellent quality iron and carefully reinforced points of stress were hitherto unequalled. They were designed with bold thick lines that did not take away from the strength of the guard. One of the Metropolitan's outstanding Akasaka works (Figure 6) has a compact rendering of a katydid under a willow tree. It may not look as sturdy as it originally was, because the branch on the right has rusted away and no longer touches the tree trunk. Hard to see, too, are the tiny triangles of iron that fortify all points where the design connects with the guard.

Toward the end of the sixteenth century, craftsmen began to sign their works. Among the first to do so were a group or school that called themselves "Nobuiye." They created strong iron guards of an unusual bluish steel with incised decorations of austere simplicity. The Museum's Nobuiye (Figure 7) has a tortoise-like creature (at the upper right, but almost invisible in the illustration) carved into a background patterned like a tortoise's shell. The artist's signature appears just to the left of the center opening.

Contemporary with the Nobuiye tsuba, but stylistically completely different from it, is one by an artist called Kaneiye (Figure 8). His pictorial designs in relief accented with soft-metal inlays and overlays are totally unlike anything seen before. The naive charm of his tsuba make them appealing to collectors and, unfortunately, to forgers who have exploited this artist's signature on countless occasions. The Kaneiye illustrated here is an irregularly shaped iron guard depicting a man guiding his boat past distant mountains. The man's face is overlaid with silver and his pole inlaid with gold. Comparing the pictorial, raised designs of Kaneiye with the simple, incised, abstract patterns of the Nobuiye master, it is interesting to see how two artists, both from the Kyoto area and both at work at the same time, originated such radically different approaches to tsuba decoration.

Also in the late sixteenth century Umetada Myoju, a talented sword carver, perfected the technique of inlaying alloys into tsuba. Flowing designs created with fine tapering lines are distinctive to his style, and for this innovation his guards are greatly esteemed. Good forgeries of his work are practically nonexistent, since his technical skill is almost impossible to duplicate. The Myoju tsuba pictured here (Figure 9) has a wisteria vine of a dark alloy set into a brass plate.

After the Tokugawa family fought its way to power in the early seventeenth century, most of Japan enjoyed a period of relative peace. From this time on, the majority of tsuba were created simply as fashionable ornaments rather than as utilitarian devices, although the influence of socio-economic status, geographical location, and individual taste produced a variety of styles.

Tsuba crafted by Hamano Shozui, for example, were bought by the noblemen of Kyoto, who prized them as status symbols and for their splendid ornament. Shozui placed great emphasis on pictorial design and on charm and mood, epitomized by the copper guard shown in Figure 10 on which bickering birds flutter against a background of abstract clouds.

Swordguards from the Higo area—in extreme southern Japan, far from the court in Kyoto—reflect a style particular to the area, unaffected by courtly taste. The tsuba from Higo usually exhibit a certain amount of functionalism, probably because of the unsettled political conditions in that region. The Metropolitan's tsuba made by a member of the Jingo school of Higo (Figure 11) shows a stylized brass dragon on a roughly hewn iron plate, the intention being to produce a strong natural look rather than the slick finished appearance of contemporary Kyoto work.

Contact with Europeans resulted in a certain degree of Western influence on Japanese art. It was probably considered very avant-garde to own Western-inspired swordguards, although their low price also contributed to their popularity. Most of them are more or less copies of Western designs, such as the one illustrated in Figure 12, which is in the style of a seventeenth-century European court swordguard.

As years of peace continued into the eighteenth century, tsuba became more and more ornate. This is seen in the works of Mogarashi Soten, who produced intricately carved and detailed tsuba that usually depict battle scenes. In the Museum's piece (Figure 13), dated 1757, no less than fifteen warriors are crowded into its tiny rim!

Eventually this excessive decoration declined into a gaudiness that soon became tiresome. There resulted a radical change in taste, with artists returning to restrained, classic guards in the styles of earlier craftsmen. From this reaction arose the supreme master of simplification, Kano Natsuo. Illustrated here (Figure 14) is a sparsely adorned yet powerful dagger guard with two gold ants on a plate carved to resemble rotten wood. When Natsuo died in 1898, the long line of great tsuba artists came to an end.
9 (left). A branch of flowering wisteria hangs gracefully from the top of this guard by Umetada Myoju. Diameter 3 inches. Bequest of Howard Mansfield, 36.120.83

10 (right). Hamano Shozui has created a charming scene of billowing clouds and flying birds on this tsuba. Width 2¾ inches. Bequest of Herman A. E. and Paul C. Joehne, 43.120.705

11 (left). A fierce dragon writhes around the edges of this Higo guard. Width 2⅜ inches. Gift of Mary Larkin Joline, 14.60.11

12 (right). This Western-style Japanese tsuba is inspired by swordguards of European craftsmen. Width 2½ inches. Gift of a trustee, 17.207.11b

13 (left). A host of fighting warriors are crowded into this guard by Mogarashi Soten. Width 2½ inches. Funds from various donors, 46.122.92

14 (right). This guard by Kano Natsuo shows how the last great tsuba master rejected the ornate compositions of his immediate predecessors and returned to the restrained simplicity of earlier artists. Width 1⅜ inches. Bequest of Howard Mansfield, 36.120.99