

剣道

JAPANESE SWORD SCHOOL

The construction of a Japanese katana is a long and meticulous process, passed down for centuries by master swordsmiths (tōshō). It is an art that combines metallurgy, spirituality, and tradition. Below are the main stages in the creation of a katana:



1. Selection of the Steel (Tamahagane)

The base material of the katana is tamahagane, a steel produced in traditional furnaces (tatara) using iron sand (satetsu). This steel contains varying levels of carbon, which are necessary to achieve the right balance of hardness and flexibility.

2. Steel Sorting and Folding

The smith divides the tamahagane into pieces with different carbon content:

- Hard steel (kawagane): used for the cutting edge.
- Soft steel (shingane): used for the core of the blade.

These pieces are repeatedly heated and hammered—a process called folding (orikaeshi tanren). This removes impurities and creates alternating layers, improving the blade's strength and elasticity.

3. Forging and Part Differentiation

The smith combines the kawagane and shingane using a “sandwich” technique, in which the harder steel wraps around the softer one. This results in a blade with an extremely sharp edge and a more flexible core.

4. Blade Shaping (Sunobe)

After welding, the smith shapes the blade by hammering, giving it its characteristic curvature. The blade is extended until it reaches the desired size.

5. Quenching (Yaki-Ire)

This is one of the most crucial steps. The blade is coated with a thin layer of clay, charcoal, and water. The coating is thicker on the spine and thinner on the edge to create a differential hardening effect.

- The blade is heated to about 750–800°C and then rapidly cooled in water.
- This process creates the hamon, a visible line on the blade that marks the transition between the hard edge and the softer spine.

6. Grinding and Sharpening

After quenching, the smith files and polishes the blade using abrasive stones of various grits. This work is performed by the togishi, a specialist in sharpening and polishing.

7. Handle Construction and Assembly

While the blade is being sharpened, other craftsmen create the katana's accessory parts:

- Habaki: metal collar that secures the blade in the scabbard.
- Tsuba: the guard, often artistically decorated.
- Tsuka: handle wrapped in silk or ray skin.
- Saya: lacquered wooden scabbard.

8. Final Touches and Naming Ceremony

After assembly, the katana undergoes tameshigiri (cutting tests) on bamboo bundles or tatami mats. Finally, it is blessed in a Shinto ritual.

Conclusion

The process of building a katana can take months or even years, involving several specialized artisans. The result is a weapon that is not only a symbol of technical mastery, but also of deep tradition and spirituality.

