



# Japanese Sword Collecting in America: A Phenomenological and Consumer Culture Approach to Understanding Collecting from 1945 to 2020

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Japanese Sword Collecting in America: A Phenomenological and Consumer Culture Approach to  
Understanding Collecting from 1945 to 2020

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## Abstract

The Japanese sword is often called the ‘soul of the *samurai*’ and has come to be a recognizable symbol of Japanese history and culture. The American fascination with Japan began in the late nineteenth century, following the United States’ actions to open the country to Western trade in 1853. This resulted in the exportation of Japanese art and goods and America’s fascination with the ‘exotic’ fueled consumer culture on many levels. Japanese swords and their accompanying fittings were admired and collected by a number of Americans. To this day many reside in the museums to which they were donated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g., the Museum of Fine Arts Boston and the Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum). The increased nationalism and militarization of Japan in the early twentieth century culminated in World War II and changed the nature of the relationship between the two countries. The ‘souvenir’ swords that many Allied servicemen brought home with them sparked a collectors’ market in the decades following the war.

Through interviews with twenty collectors (ages eighteen to eighty-three) this research seeks to identify why they collect, how they view these swords, and understand what has made the Japanese sword grow as a cultural and collectible icon in America. It also investigates the role of women collectors in a field stereotyped as ‘masculine.’ The principal framework used to analyze Japanese sword collecting from 1945 to 2020 is Merleau-Ponty’s perceptual phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty argued that material culture is an extension of individuals and objects may exert influence over people, just as people

influence objects. This idea is supported by the findings of this study, which illustrates that physical exposure to the Japanese sword itself was an important inspiration for new collectors post-World War II. Consumer Culture Theory also provides a framework for understanding how consumer and popular culture evolved over this seventy-five year period to provide alternative entry points for collectors' interest in Japanese swords to be piqued. Martial arts, movies/TV, books, and anime/manga provided new outlets to learn about the sword and eventually led these individuals to seek out the physical Japanese sword. Perceptual phenomenology and consumer culture share a symbiotic relationship that is cyclical in nature and evolves with time and technology, inspiring new collectors each generation.

## Dedication

For Mom, in appreciation of all of the hats you wear and all of the love you give.  
Thank you for putting so many books about women wielding swords in my hands as a  
child.

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## Chapter I.

### Introduction

Humans have collected objects for thousands of years, demonstrating a behavioral trait that stretches across historical and cultural divides and spans a wide range of collectible items (Belk 1995b; Muensterberger 1994; Rigby and Rigby 1944). From art to stamps to rocks, humans have a habit of accumulating possessions. In fact, a pebble collection in an 80,000 year old French cave evinces the age-old appeal of collecting (Neal 1980). Long and varied though the tradition of collecting may be, this research focuses specifically on the collection of Japanese swords post-World War II. Japanese swords as we know them have been produced since around 700 CE and are still crafted today using traditional techniques, although only roughly thirty swordsmiths are able to make this a viable full-time pursuit (“Katana - Yoshindo Yoshihara” n.d.). The sword, as part of the Japanese Imperial Regalia or Three Sacred Treasures, has a long history both as a weapon of the *samurai* class of warriors and a cultural symbol. New and antique swords (*nihonto*) are used in Shinto ceremonies in Japan, including the 2019 enthronement ceremony for Emperor Naruhito. The interest of American collectors in these swords began in the nineteenth century, decreased leading up to World War II, and rose once more after 1945. While collectors of these swords exist all over the world, this study focuses on the private collection of Japanese swords in America post-World War II through 2020.

Following World War II there was a renewed interest in collecting and today *token kai* (collectors’ clubs) are scattered throughout the United States. Japanese Sword

Expos take place annually in San Francisco, Chicago, Atlanta, and Orlando. Clearly the interest in these weapons has not vanished and has spread far beyond medieval and early modern Japan when the men of the *samurai* or warrior caste carried the *katana* (long single-edged sword) as a tool of their profession and a symbol of social status within the military nobility. It should be noted that while women of the *samurai* class also trained in weapons, the sword was not typically one of them – women used a polearm called a *naginata* and a *kaiken* or short dagger instead<sup>1</sup> (Ratti and Westbrook 1973, 104). The ‘*samurai* sword’, as linked to the men of the *samurai* caste, has become synonymous with Japan in Western culture and can be found throughout popular culture in movies, martial arts, and video games (the latest of which, *Ghost of Tsushima*, was released to acclaim in July 2020). With the sword’s utility as a weapon of warfare now defunct, how and why has the sword attained this long cultural reach and what sparks and sustains the interest of American collectors? The aims of this study are to examine collectors’ initial interest in Japanese swords, explore what motivates these collectors’ pursuit, and understand their views of the swords in relation to Japanese culture, World War II, and ‘souvenir swords.’ Ultimately, a better comprehension of what has made the Japanese sword grow as a cultural and collectible icon in American culture post-World War II will be gained. Additionally, the role and perspective of women collectors in the field will also be investigated.

This introductory chapter examines the cultural and historical context of the Japanese sword in the following subsections: Myth and Symbolism; Metallurgy and

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<sup>1</sup> *Samurai* women fighting on the battlefield was not a common event but also not exceedingly rare, as there are accounts of them participating, usually as a cavalry force (Conlan 2008, 35). While women were taught to wield weapons as members of the warrior class, the social system was a chauvinistic one, in which loyalty and commitment to male relatives was expected (Ratti and Westbrook 1973, 104).

Craftsmanship; The Sword is the Soul of the *Samurai*; Collection and Appraisal of Swords During the Tokugawa Shogunate; Japonisme, Early American Collecting, and Museums; The Road to World War II; and The Disarmament of Japan. These subsections lay the foundation for understanding the swords within the context of Japanese history, as well as the spread of Japanese culture to Europe and America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The background section concludes with providing an overview of the disarmament of Japan after World War II and how these policies affected Japanese sword production and the phenomenon of American collecting. The final section of Chapter 1, The Japanese Sword in American Culture Post-World War II, outlines the aims and methods of the research.

### The Japanese Sword in Its Cultural and Historical Context

The following overview of the history, mythology, and symbolism of these swords provides greater context for understanding why some collectors may value and pursue these objects.

#### Myth and Symbolism

The *Kojiki* or *Record of Ancient Matters* (712 CE), serves as one of Japan's earliest mythological texts within which, swords play an essential role in the origin myths of the Japanese nation. In the mythical period of Japan's creation Susanoo, one of the first gods of the animistic Shinto religion, beheaded an eight tailed serpent and found inside one of the tails a sacred sword. The sword was called "*Ame-no-murakumono-hoken*... 'Heavenly precious sword of the gathering clouds'" and Susanoo presented it to his older sister, the sun goddess Amaterasu (Robinson 1961, 16). This sword became one

of the Three Sacred Treasures which, according to mythology, was given to the first human emperor of Japan, Jimmu Tennō. It is better known by the name *Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi* or the “Grass-cutting Sword” for the tale in which Yamatotakeru, son of the twelfth emperor, used it to escape an enemy that had set fire to the grass in order to trap him. Yamatotakeru used the powers of *Kusanagi* to mow down the grass and escape (Aston 1956, 2005; Philippi 2015, 240). He then went on to unify clans under Yamato rule during what is now known as the Yamato Period (250–710 CE).

*Kusanagi* occupies an important place in the myth of early Japan, as possession of the sacred sword constituted one of the ways to legitimize the power to rule. Its role as a symbol of power and legitimacy, in conjunction with the other two objects that make up the Imperial Regalia came to a head during the Nanbokuchō or Northern and Southern Courts era (1336-1392 CE). At this time “possession of the Three Regalia was deemed critical in a dispute between the two imperial lines over imperial legitimacy,” (Atsushi 2006, 270). Kitabatake Chikafusa, counselor to Emperor Godaigo of the Southern Court, wrote that the regalia each had qualities necessary for a successful emperor to rule: “The sword, which is the font of wisdom, has as its virtue strength and resolution,” (Kitabatake 1980, 77). Therefore, possession of the sword was deemed vital for being a strong and wise ruler. In *Imperial Politics and Symbolics in Ancient Japan*, Herman Ooms states that “As a rule, power becomes accepted only when sacralized. Rulership without religious sanction is power without legitimacy,” (2009, 28). *Kusanagi*, originally procured through divine circumstances and then given to the first ruler of Japan and incorporated as part of the Imperial Regalia, has been a tool for the religious sanctioning and legitimizing of imperial rulership for hundreds of years. As a crucial symbol of imperial power, the



sword then became linked with authority and religious mythology in Japan throughout the centuries.

### Metallurgy and Craftsmanship

The physical properties of Japanese swords as well as the craftsmanship required to create them have been extolled for centuries. The molding of raw materials – iron sand and charcoal – to create *tamahagane* steel that is forged into a sword can be viewed as a negotiated relationship between humans and materials. In the introduction to *Enduring Crafts of Japan* Tsuneari Fukuda wrote:

The true craftsman...knows that the material he works with has a mind of its own and that if he seeks to impose absolute control, both the material and the finished product will take revenge upon him...the materials of craftsmanship are willing to be controlled if their special qualities and virtues are understood and appreciated, but they do not openly reveal the nature of their adaptability. This is for the craftsman to discover, and when he meets with the refusal of his materials – and consequently of his creations – to adapt themselves absolutely to his preconceived demands, they become, for the first time, living objects to him. (Fukuda in Sugimura 1968, ix-x)

What makes the Japanese sword so unique among weapons is not its mythology or symbolism, since the sword is widely used as a weapon in many cultures and therefore, a frequent symbol of power. The forging methods and skills employed by the smith and the superior quality of steel these produce make these swords exceptional. Satō Kanza (1907-1978), an expert on Japanese swords wrote that this uniqueness stemmed from the techniques to forge the blade, which balance the “...three conflicting

requirements of a sword: unbreakability, rigidity, and cutting power. Unbreakability implies a soft but tough metal, such as iron, which will not snap with a sudden blow, while rigidity and cutting power are best achieved by the use of hard steel,” (Satō 1983, 13). It is these three features which give the swords a “very distinctive character” (Satō 1983, 13).

Part of this distinctive character is that the sword is made of two types of steel: the softer steel for the inner core (*shingane*) and the harder steel for the exterior (*kawagane*). The more flexible inner core allows for the “unbreakability” and the harder exterior provides the “rigidity and cutting power” that Satō described. The process of forging requires the smith to fold the steel twelve times, creating thousands of layers of steel (Yoshihara, Kapp, and Kapp 2012, 140). The folding and hammering removes impurities from the steel and also results in a specific *jihada* or surface pattern.

Cyril Stanley Smith (1903-1992), professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), was a metallurgist and historian of science. He studied steel from around the world and thought that the only steel comparable to that made in Japan was Damascus steel:

It is significant that Damascus and Japanese swords, which are deservedly famed for their superiority to European weapons, both have surface patterns visible to the naked eye. The textures are directly related to the way in which steel is made and provide a guarantee of proper composition and fabrication. (Smith 1965, 914)

The *jihada*, or surface pattern, forms because the crystal structure of the steel alters as its carbon content fluctuates with heating and quenching. Many schools of sword smithing existed in Japan and the *jihada* provides insight into the time period a sword was made as

well as the smith who created it (Ogawa, Harada, and Metropolitan Museum of Art 2009, 34). Another aesthetically pleasing aspect produced by the forging technique is the temper line (*hamon*) that derives from quenching the blade. This causes crystalline structures (*nie* or *nioi*) to form on the sharp edge and the ridgeline of the blade (Ogawa, Harada, and Metropolitan Museum of Art 2010, 34). Kawachi Kunihiro, a modern fifteenth generation swordsmith, states “[The Japanese sword] did not become beautiful because it cuts well. It is because it is designed to cut well that it became beautiful,” (Braeley 2011). Form and function are inextricably linked.

It is also important to note that the social status of a swordsmith was not that of a laborer. The emperor himself could forge a blade as it was considered a sacred art form (Hickman and Japan Society of London Transactions and proceedings 1978, 251). Swordsmiths underwent a Shinto purification ritual before the forging process, wore the robes of Shinto priests, and gave prayers to Inari (god of metalworkers and rice) who takes the form of a white fox (Irvine 2000, 8). In the 2011 documentary *Art of the Japanese Sword*, the curator Fukui Yoshihiko of Atsuta Shrine’s Sword Museum states that, “The work is performed with a pure spirit and attitude and prayers are made to the gods of fire, wind and water - all of the elements required in a sword’s production,” (Braeley 2011). The resulting blade, therefore, has a spirit (*kami*) in accordance with Shinto belief.

While the forging process was sacred and developed a number of schools and styles over the centuries, the crafting of these swords did not fall solely to the swordsmith. The sword polisher played a pivotal role in finalizing the shape of the blade, its sharpness, and the polish that reveals the unique patterns and characteristics in the

steel. One wrong move during the polishing process could result in a ruined sword. With the blade complete, the handle (*tsuka*) requires wrapping in ray skin and silk and a wooden scabbard (*saya*) is made to store the blade. Each of these processes has its own, specialized artisan. Sword guards (*tsuba*), which may be removed and swapped out for other *tsuba*, also typically required a separate artisan and stand as works of art in their own right. Heather Lechtman, Director of the Center for Materials Research in Archaeology and Ethnology at MIT along with Arthur Steinberg, MIT Professor of Anthropology, wrote that "...the Japanese development of special bronze alloys and inlaying techniques expressly for the elaboration of *tsuba* (sword guards) [is] but one example among many of [the] extraordinary investment in exploiting to the fullest the aesthetic and working properties of materials" (Lechtman and Steinberg 1979, 156). In fact, some collectors pursue only *tsuba* for their collections and forgo the sword entirely.

The production of the Japanese sword, when viewed in its entirety, is the work of many craftsmen with specialized skills. In the words of Cyril Stanley Smith, "There is, in fact, no better symbiosis of the highest aesthetic and technical standards than in these swords," (Smith 1970, 517). The final product, after all of this labor, is a technically impressive object that is both functional and beautiful. But it is only with skilled craftsmanship, passed down through the centuries, that this is possible. Since 1950 Japan's Law for Protection of Cultural Properties has honored those who have reached the highest level mastery of traditional crafts (including those related to swords) by bestowing them with the title of Living National Treasure in an effort to ensure the continuation of these skills for future generations.

## Collection and Appraisal of Swords During the Tokugawa Shogunate

During the Tokugawa Shogunate or Edo period (1185-1868) the collection of swords by the *shogun* (military dictator) took on a new weight and standardization. *Shoguns*, while ostensibly appointed by the emperor, held the reins of power. While technically considered a hereditary position, the role of *shogun* was held by various clans over the centuries courtesy of political machinations and power grabs. As the first Tokugawa *shogun*, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) came to power through military force by overthrowing Imperial Regent<sup>2</sup>, Toyotomi Hideyoshi's heir. After Ieyasu's sieges of Osaka Castle in 1615 he ordered that some of the highly prized material culture of the Toyotomi clan be salvaged from the wreck of the burned castle and repaired.<sup>3</sup> By claiming ownership of highly valued objects (including famous swords) that once belonged to the Toyotomi, Ieyasu controlled the narrative and the memory of his defeated enemy (Pitelka 2016, 137-138). Owning these significant and symbolic objects was an avenue that Ieyasu pursued in order to claim dominance and signal his incontestable power.

It was also during this period that the Hon'ami family were appointed as the official sword appraisers by the Tokugawa. While the earliest book (*Kanchi-in Bon*) recording the different schools of smiths dates from 1316, it is not until the Edo period that the groundwork for connoisseurship was laid regarding the characteristics of specific schools and individual smiths' work (Irvine 2000, 81; 2012, 104). In 1719 *Shogun* Tokugawa Yoshimune asked the Hon'ami to create the *Catalogue of Famous Things* (*Kyoho Meibutsu Cho*). It listed the best swords in possession of the Tokugawa clan and

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<sup>2</sup> Hideyoshi was never formally given the title of *shogun*

<sup>3</sup> This included a famous 13<sup>th</sup> Chinese Southern Song dynasty tea caddy named Nitta. See (Pitelka 2016).

important *daimyo* (lords) of the time. This collection and cataloguing followed in the footsteps of Ieyasu's precedent of legitimizing power through possession. The Hon'ami issued appraisals of swords and their centuries of work also provided a framework for modern connoisseurship and appraisal.

### The Sword is the Soul of the Samurai

The now ubiquitous phrase 'the sword is the soul of the *samurai*' serves as an epithet for the importance of this weapon to the warrior class. It can be traced back to *Shogun* Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) who stated in his will that the sword is "the soul of the *samurai*; [and] to forget or lose one's sword is unforgiveable" (Meulien 2012, 115). His statement refers to the *katana* or long single-edged sword that *samurai* wore along with a *wakizashi* (short sword) or *tanto* (dagger). Only *samurai* were allowed to carry two blades, known as *daishō* or 'big little'. However, the sword was not the weapon of choice for *samurai* on the battlefield. The bow and spear dominated warfare since they provided further range from which to attack opponents. The *samurai* way of life had been known as 'the way of the horse and bow' in recognition of the most important skills and tools required (Turnbull 2003, 95-96). While *katana* were certainly used in close combat they were also viewed as a weapon of self-protection outside of battle and increasingly as a status symbol of the *samurai* class. A 1588 edict by Toyotomi Hideyoshi restricted ownership of weapons (swords, bows, guns, etc.) to *samurai*. This was enforced through 'sword hunts' that relieved farmers of their weapons and served to restrict social mobility (Butler 2012, 315).

During the relative peace of Tokugawa/Edo period (1603-1868), which included isolation from Western influence, *samurai* underwent the transformation from warriors to

bureaucrats. In the absence of battle, they codified martial arts practices into structured forms and philosophized on the warrior way of life, using the new term *bushido* (the way of the samurai) to define *samurai* ideology and honor. At this time schools of martial arts focused on swordsmanship (*kenjutsu*) were created, from which the modern martial art of *kendo* (way of the sword) descends. Since the Edo period was largely peaceful, *samurai* rarely had the opportunity to fight, although they remained the only members of society allowed to carry *daishō*, as a symbol of their status. Without the ability to carry out their original military function some *samurai* began to glorify death in texts such as the *Hagakure*<sup>4</sup> in protest of this lost role, which resulted in the romanticization of the warrior past (Gainty 2012, 351-352; Ikegami 1995, 279). The stringent control over social mobility continued under Tokugawa Ieyasu and resulted in a hereditary, landless *samurai* class, with many members struggling to survive on meager government stipends. The alteration and glorification of the *samurai* ethos during this period, which began with Tokugawa Ieyasu's stricter control on social order, would later be exploited for militaristic and nationalistic purposes during the period leading up to World War II (Ikegami 1995, 278-281, 298). The concept of the *samurai* that persists today really developed during the Edo period.

Following the 1854 Treaty of Kanagawa, which forcefully opened Japan to Western trade after more than two hundred years of isolation from Western influence, Japan began a rapid transformation. The Meiji Restoration in 1868 brought the end of the Tokugawa Shogunate and saw the reinstatement of the emperor as head ruler, with an accompanying parliament. And in 1876, the Sword Abolition Edict officially put an end

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<sup>4</sup> A compilation of stories told by retired *samurai* Yamamoto Jin'uemon Tsunetomo (1659-1719) to fellow *samurai*, Tashiro Matazaemon Tsuramoto about *samurai* warrior life and the shift to bureaucracy.

to the *samurai* class and outlawed the wearing of swords. Denis Gainty discusses the transformation of the *samurai* class through the Tokugawa Shogunate and its fall, observing that: “While the flesh-and-blood reality of the *samurai* ended with the modernization of the Meiji period, the *samurai* as a cultural force became even stronger and more influential...specters haunting the halls of Japan’s past and present,” (Denis Gainty 2012, 354). While *samurai* no longer exist, their swords are tangible pieces of the past with meaning and significance that evolved with new political landscapes and became symbols of a lost, romanticized way of life.

#### Japonisme, Early American Collecting, and Museums

Japan’s forced opening to trade (which began in 1858) had a significant impact on both the Western world and Japan, with reverberations that stretched into the twentieth century. Following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan set a course for rapid Westernization and modernization as it sought to compete with world powers. The world’s fairs or expositions became one setting for the introduction of Japan to the Western world. Its first official entry onto this stage took place at the 1873 Vienna International Exposition, where many Japanese arts and crafts (*ukiyo-e* prints, porcelain wares, lacquer wares, instruments, etc.) were displayed, including swords and armor. Philadelphia hosted the next World’s Fair in 1876, as part of the United States centennial celebration. In Francis Walker’s critical account of the event he noted that, “The expenditure of...[Japan] was lavish in the extreme, and the result was a representation of its art and industry which formed one of the most striking features of the exhibition,” (Walker 1878, 45). Thomas C. Mendenhall, a professor of physics who would go on to teach at the Tokyo Imperial University, stated in his 1904 “Autobiographical Notes” that



the 1876 fair was a “revelation to most people” in terms of Japanese art and culture (as cited in Chisolm 1963, 36). In the ensuing year, New York’s Tiffany and Company sold ‘curios’ from Japan, while Japan’s Kiri Koshu Kuarsha<sup>5</sup> opened a branch office in New York to sell Japanese objects to an American audience that had become enamored with its crafts and aesthetics.

This strong Western interest in Japan, known as Japonisme, was driven in part by curiosity for the East and an appreciation for craftsmanship, which had begun disappearing in America with the rise of manufacturing. Coined in 1872 by Philippe Burty, a French writer and collector, the term Japonisme described the study of Japanese arts that had become popular throughout Europe and America. Edward S. Morse<sup>6</sup> (1838-1925), American zoologist, Japanophile, traveler, and collector called it “the Japan craze” and it permeated art, home décor, design, and popular culture through the early twentieth century. Japonisme also consisted of a fascination of the ‘other’ and a tendency to exoticize and romanticize ‘primitive’ Japan. This was at odds with the reality of Japan as a swiftly modernizing nation, but it was also an idea that sold very well, and the Japanese government and individual dealers capitalized on it. However, Western interest centered on the material culture of Japan’s past and not its modern productions, which resulted in the exportation of Japan’s cultural heritage. A late nineteenth century administrator relayed to Japanese artists that “the American [designer] Tiffany... says that Japan's ancient arts are far superior to its modern ones... [and] is engaged in applying the ancient

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<sup>5</sup> Kiri Koshu Kuarsha was a Japanese government sponsored exporting company (1873-1891) formed in order to take advantage of the popularity of the Japanese pavilions at World’s Fairs and parlay this into a source of revenue.

<sup>6</sup> Morse was from Salem, Massachusetts and his Japanese ceramics collections are housed in the Peabody Museum in Salem and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

arts of our country to his own works. Japan's ancient paintings are today in the process of being stolen away by him!” (as cited in Foxwell 2009, 45). Importation businesses such as A.A. Vantine & Co. in New York thrived through the 1880s. Japanese immigrants also set up successful importation businesses, which provided American collectors the opportunity to acquire goods (both antique and specifically made for export) without traveling.

Two such dealers, Bunkio Matsuki (1867-1940) and Sadajiro Yamanaka (1866-1936), arrived in America in the late 1800s. Matsuki arrived in 1888 and opened shops in Boston and Salem, Massachusetts. Yamanaka arrived in 1894 and formed Yamanaka & Co., Dealers of Japanese Art Objects, with branches on Fifth Avenue in New York as well as in Boston, Chicago, London, and Paris. Constance Chen writes that, by stressing the “cultural and spiritual significance” of their wares, these Japanese dealers garnered success and constructed an American market, but also constructed an idealized version of Japanese history that emphasized heroics and was eminently saleable (Chen 2010, 29). Chen posits that the collectability of *samurai* swords at this time stemmed not only from their aesthetic appeal, but the novelty and romanticism attached to owning an object that had been the mark of the *samurai* class until 1876 (Chen 2010, 30). The description of swords in Yamanaka & Co.’s 1913 publication, *Japanese Swords*, conveys this romanticism:

Blades had been treasured for centuries, handed from father to son, looked upon as the soul of the owner for the sake of which he would refrain from any deed unbecoming a gentleman; some possessed histories going far back into the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when the country was at war within itself, around

others were entwined romances, and above all, the sword was the faithful friend with which the Samurai might honourably end his life, either in the field or on the mats. (Yamanaka & Company 1913, 1)

This publication demonstrates that the dealers clearly knew their ‘Japan crazed’ target audience and used the appropriate sales tactics to move merchandise.

George Walter Vincent Smith (1832-1923) of Springfield, Massachusetts had a longstanding relationship with Yamanaka & Co, which illustrates the success of Yamanaka’s business model (Ushikubo 1905). Smith collected around 100 Japanese swords and knives and around 150 *tsuba* (Maggie North, Springfield Museums’ Curator of Art, pers. comm., Oct. 6, 2020). He also amassed a collection of Japanese lacquer, armor, ceramics, and bronzes. All without stepping foot in Asia. Smith donated his collection between 1888 to 1896 to the eponymous George Walter Vincent Art Museum in Springfield, MA (the city’s first art museum), with the purpose of providing education and appreciation of craftsmanship and the arts to Springfield’s residents (Eliot 1914, 421).

Other Boston based collectors actually acquired Japanese art and arms during their travels in Japan. The first Japanese Department of Art in the country, created in 1890 and located at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, benefited from the donations of William Sturgis Bigelow (1850–1926) and Charles Goddard Weld (1857-1911). Both men traveled to Japan in the 1880s and made purchases with the assistance of a member of the Hon’ami family, the official sword appraisers since the Tokugawa era (Ogawa 1987, 38). Weld, a Harvard trained surgeon whose family had a successful trading business with China, was close friends with Bigelow and most likely influenced his

interest in this area of collecting. Weld donated 326 swords and 270 fittings, while Bigelow donated 503 swords and 1,111 fittings<sup>7</sup> to the Boston MFA (Ogawa 1987, 37). A 1906 article on Japanese swords in the *Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin* highlights the good fortune of the museum to be in possession of the “exceedingly valuable collections of Japanese swords belonging to Dr. W.S. Bigelow and Dr. C.G. Weld, which include examples of many of the most famous smiths of both the ‘old’ and ‘new schools’” (“The Japanese Sword” 1906, 31). Their donation to the Japanese Department of Art, created just twenty years after the museum’s founding in 1870, houses the largest collection of Japanese art outside of Japan today, thanks, in part, to their efforts.<sup>8</sup>

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were indelibly marked by a fascination with Japan. This time period also saw the proliferation of public museums for the edification of middle-class America. Large donations to museums not only enabled education (however romanticized and removed from the reality of Japan’s modernization), but they also permitted distinguished collectors to immortalize their names and accomplishments within these institutions. The philanthropist and industrialist Andrew Carnegie visited The George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum in 1897 and wrote to Smith:

The precious treasure which you have given Springfield impressed me so deeply that I could not resist sending you a “Mercury in Repose” as a memento of my

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<sup>7</sup> The Boston MFA has 522 swords and 1,808 sword guards, as catalogued by Morihiro Ogawa in the 1970s (Ogawa 1987, 39). This discrepancy in number stems from the fact that the craftsmanship of *tsuba* became appreciated separate from the sword itself and a collectible art object in its own right. Okabe-Kakuya’s 1908 exhibition at the MFA on sword guards may, according to Okakura-Kakuzō, “be the first attempt to treat the history of the *tsuba* and the *tsuba* makers apart from the other branches of metalwork” (Okabe-Kakuya 1908, iii).

<sup>8</sup> Edward Sylvester Morse (1838-1925) and Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908) also donated large collections of art and ceramics at this time and were hugely influential in shaping the study of Japan, alongside Okakura Kakuzō (1863-1913).

visit. Will you please accept it and let me feel that I have just a wee bit of cooperation with you in spirit – Springfield cannot today realize what your gift means but it will some day although each succeeding generation will have to set a higher value upon it. (Carnegie 1897)

With the means to collect and the will to create a museum or donate a collection, individuals like Smith, Bigelow, and Weld created repositories for Japanese material culture in America that continue to be studied and viewed today. These collections endure as legacies of personal collecting pursuits, but also reflect the larger cultural movements of Japonisme and a growing disconnect between modern nineteenth and twentieth century Japan and the West's romanticized picture of it.

## The Road to World War II

The eighteenth and early nineteenth century divide between Japan's reality and Western perception of it would shatter with War II. The growing disconnects between Japan's romanticized past and the increasing nationalism and militarization of the nation came to the fore in 1905 with Japan's decisive defeat of Russia over Manchuria. The Manchurian Incident constituted the first defeat of the West by an Asian power and it altered Japan's relationship with Europe and with the United States. President Theodore Roosevelt mediated the peace treaty between the countries and, to the outrage of the Japanese people, supported Tsar Nicholas II's refusal to pay reparations. The Russo-Japanese War was a pivotal turning point for Japan's world standing. It marked a shift in Western colonization of the East and elevated Japan as a powerful force, both within Asia and among world powers. This evolution eventually led to Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910, its entry into WWII by signing the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy in

1940, and the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. It should be noted that the production of Japanese swords never ceased after the abolition of the *samurai* social class in 1876. Swords remained in use for state functions and for Shinto shrine consecrations. During the twentieth century period of militarization, high ranked officers also carried well-made swords, while those officers of lower rank carried machine-made blades, referred to as *shin-guntō*.

Japan's military actions and the subsequent entry of the United States into the war tamped down the Japan craze in America and led to anger, racism, and the internment of Japanese Americans. The Boston Museum of Fine Arts, renowned for its collection of Japanese art, shuttered its Japanese galleries in 1941 and rotated small exhibits on the art of the American allies: the Netherlands, China, England, Russia, and France (Edgell 1943, 55). Official government action in the form of the seizure and liquidation of Japanese businesses, like Yamanaka & Co., also took place in 1941. In 1944, a public auction for what remained of Yamanaka & Co.'s inventory was held; its target audience was first time collectors. Alfred Salmony (1890-1958), professor of Chinese art history at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts, wrote in *Art News* in May 1944:

The Yamanaka Sale will be followed by a new type of collector who has never received attention in this country - the man with small purse and ardent desire.

This species could not have been found during the boom years. For at that time the greatest objects of Far Eastern art went directly to New York, to be absorbed by the then numerous wise and wealthy. (Salmony in Kuchiki 2013, 49)

While collectors still existed, they were no longer the ultra-wealthy, nor necessarily members of society's upper echelons.

After Japan's surrender to Allied forces in 1945, Yamanaka & Co. eventually reopened in 1952 amidst an economic climate in which goods were once again flowing out of Japan and into the hands of American collectors and museums (Kuchiki 2013, 50-51). However, the company never attained the same level of success as before and closed its New York store fourteen years later. Salmony's prophecy that an age of a new type of collector, one with a "small purse and ardent desire" came to pass, especially as an entirely new generation of Americans were exposed to Japanese culture during the Allied Occupation. Although the war shattered nineteenth and early twentieth century Japonisme into pieces, those pieces were still very much ready to be picked up and reassembled after 1945 – not quite the same as before, but still extant.

### The Disarmament of Japan

The demilitarization of one's enemy after violent conflict is an enduring aspect of warfare and Japan's defeat in 1945 proved no different. However, it would have a profound impact on the Japanese sword. Japan, unlike other militaries, issued swords (mostly mass produced, low quality *shin-guntō*) to soldiers, drawing on the Tokugawa era interpretation of *bushido* and using it to fuel nationalistic pride. Kamikaze pilots were even issued swords to carry with them in the plane for their final flights (Roach 2010, 137). The articles of Japan's surrender specified military disarmament, which included the surrender of all weapons - both heirloom and military issued swords. There exists ample documentation of servicemen standing next to piles of confiscated swords, with approximately five thousand swords held at one United States military base alone (Martin 2019). Many Japanese soldiers believed that their swords would eventually be returned to them, so they attached 'surrender tags' providing their personal details. An estimated

172,000 to three million swords were surrendered (Irvine 2000, 118). Many were taken home by United States and Allied military personnel as souvenirs. The confiscation of heirloom swords ceased in 1946, when the United States authorities understood them to hold cultural and artistic value to the Japanese people. However, the majority of swords were not returned, as they had already left the country and no record of their dispersal was kept.

This recognition of the cultural value of heirloom swords resulted in the official designation of ‘art sword’ as a category and allowed for the older swords (not mass-produced *shin-guntō*) to be kept as personal property in Japan, as long as they were registered with the police. Even after the war, the sword still remained an important symbol of cultural heritage to Japan and the first special exhibition in the National Museum (formerly the Imperial Museum) in 1947 was “An Exhibition of the Art of the Sword.” Furthermore, the Nihon Bijutsu Token Hozen Kai (NBTHK), known in English as The Society for Preservation of Japanese Art Swords, formed in 1948 in response to the destruction of swords during the Occupation.

The ban on forging new swords was lifted in 1953 when swordsmith Hikosaburo Kurihara requested permission to make blades to be given as gifts to world leaders in celebration of the formation of the United Nations. While the craft of sword making began once more, restrictions now included the requirement that swordsmiths be licensed, restricted to making two blades per month, and required to register all new swords. These restrictions remain in place today. As of 2012, several hundred licensed smiths carry on this traditional craft in Japan and sell their swords to collectors worldwide (Yoshihara, Kapp, and Kapp 2012, 99). The NBTHK foundation remains in



existence to carry out the function of conserving swords that have artistic value and supporting their study. There is even a branch of the NBTHK in the United States, which illustrates a sufficient amount of continued American interest to warrant its presence. The disarmament fueled the movement of these swords out of Japan and into Western hands, creating a new group of collectors and enthusiasts marked by war.

### The Japanese Sword in American Culture Post-World War II

Hundreds of years of history, myth, craftsmanship, war, and collection surround Japanese swords and in 1945 a new chapter of its evolution began. Looting and appropriation are inherent to war, and one could argue that parallels exist between the Allied disarmament of Japan and Tokugawa Ieyasu's seventeenth century salvaging of the Toyotomi clan's swords in order to claim victory and legitimize power over a defeated enemy through possession of their material culture. However, the concept of 'conquering the enemy' through American possession of these swords does not sufficiently elucidate post-World War II collecting or the presence of Japanese swords that grew in American popular culture such as movies, books, television shows, video games, and martial arts. This research will take steps to arrive at a better understanding of this phenomenon.

### Primary and Secondary Aims

The primary aims of this study are to: (1) examine how collectors from different generations and backgrounds first became interested in these swords (2) explore what motivates these collectors in their pursuit and how they view these swords in relation to works of art or weaponry, spirituality, Japanese culture, and World War II 'souvenir

sword' repatriation (3) understand what has made the Japanese sword grow as a cultural and collectible icon in American culture. The secondary aim of this study is to investigate the role and perspective of women collectors in a field stereotyped as 'male' (Belk 1995b, 98).

## Methods

Heterogenous purposive sampling was used in this research. Male and female participants came from a range of communities that included: martial artists, sword polishers, students, retirees, and working professionals. Participants were initially recruited from Facebook groups dedicated to Japanese swords and snowball sampling was used. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of twenty participants, eighteen years of age or older, who live in the United States and currently collect or have owned Japanese blades (*katana*, *wakizashi*, *tanto*). Every participant filled out a consent form, which included a demographic questionnaire. Each interview was conducted by me over the phone or by video conference and recorded with permission of the participant. The data were analyzed to assess commonalities between collectors and assess generational trends. Merleau-Ponty's perceptual phenomenology provides the main theoretical framework for understanding collectors' interactions with Japanese swords, while Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) offers a way to analyze collecting in a consumer society.

A note on terminology: the term '*samurai* sword' technically relates only to those swords made before the 1876 Sword Abolition Edict. In this thesis the term 'Japanese sword' is used to encompass both new and old swords.

## Structure of Study

This thesis follows a social science format and is divided into five chapters: Introduction, Literature Review, Methods, Results, and Discussion. This introductory chapter presents the history and background of the sword in Japanese culture, as well as the history of its collection in America in the late nineteenth century, as it is integral to understanding the evolution of its presence in American culture. Chapter 2 Literature Review presents what literature has been written about collectors of Japanese swords since WWII as well as the transmission of Japanese culture during the period directly following the war. Arms and armor collecting in America is also briefly reviewed as an analogous collecting activity since swords are also often sold at gun shows. Consumer Culture Theory and perceptual phenomenology, used to analyze the data generated by this study are also reviewed. Chapter 3 Research Methods provides an account of how the study was conducted. Chapter 4 Results addresses the findings of the research, which include four case studies on individual collectors, as well as a section devoted to the aggregate data from twenty study participants. Chapter 5 Discussion includes an analysis of the data, as well as observations on the limitations of this study and opportunities for future research.

## Chapter II.

### Literature Review

The collection of Japanese swords in the United States post-World War II has drawn little interest in the way of targeted scholarly research aimed at understanding this activity. In contrast, we know much about the Japonisme of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and the American collecting which was spurred by the opening of Japan to the West. An analysis will be conducted of what literature exists regarding these sword collectors and the wider interest in *samurai* culture from 1945 to 2020. Since few academic works focus solely on the subject of sword collectors, the literature review will include an analysis of American consumption of Japanese culture post-World War II and a review of the twenty-first century Japanese military history boom in order to place Japanese sword collecting within its broader context. Scholarship on collecting in general, as well as sources from museum exhibition publications, newspapers, and articles written by sword collectors will be included.

Due to a paucity of scholarship pertaining to sword collectors and their motivations, the understudied field of American arms and armor collecting will also be briefly reviewed as an analogous collecting activity which informs the methodology of the study. This chapter situates Japanese sword collecting within the literature that exists on sword collectors, American cultural consumerism, and increasing interest in Japanese *samurai* and military history, with an assessment of gaps in the current research. The last

section of this review also provides a summary of the theoretical frameworks that will be applied to the research data.

### Japanese Sword Collectors Post-World War II

No publication exists that is devoted exclusively to discussing American collectors of Japanese swords post-World War II. However, some information on collectors (American and British) can be found throughout publications, newspapers, and even in an advertisement for Turkish Airlines. These nuggets of information hint at a compelling narrative that may provide a deeper understanding of the perpetuation of Japanese sword collection post-World War II. Clive Sinclair (a British writer, sword collector, and martial arts practitioner) categorizes 1950s and early 1960s sword collecting as a period of “gradual growth” during which an increase in interest led to the formation of many study clubs, as well as the increased popularity of existing clubs<sup>9</sup> (Sinclair 2017, 157-158). Due to Allied service personnel’s increased exposure to Japan during the war and subsequent military occupation from 1945 to 1952, it stands to reason that some of those personnel would become interested in Japanese swords and begin collecting them.

In Sinclair’s 2017 publication he mentions the “many legendary characters” involved in sword appreciation when he began collecting in England in the 1960s. One of these characters, Basil W. Robinson, began collecting while serving as a British officer during World War II and he received advice on acquisitions from a Japanese prisoner of war under his charge while stationed in Singapore (Sinclair 2017, 7). Likewise, Marine

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<sup>9</sup> Sinclair notes that some of these clubs were fortunate enough to have Japanese experts to teach them, such as John Yumoto in the United States (Sinclair 2017, 158).

Colonel Dean S. Hartley, Jr. of the United States collected his first swords while on Guadalcanal Island during World War II (Powers 1968). After the war, Hartley's collection of swords reached sixty-five in number and he acquired them everywhere from Japan to pawn shops in Washington DC, becoming known as an expert on the subject (Powers 1968). Robinson and Hartley's experiences offer two concrete examples of World War II's effect on the phenomenon of Japanese sword collecting in the decades following the end of the war.<sup>10</sup>

Hartley, as an active collector and member of sword clubs, wrote in a chapter in the *Northern California Japanese Sword Club Token Taikai '76 Lectures*, that there are "accumulators (they could just as easily collect beer cans), collectors, and students" of Japanese swords, while readily admitting that people do not generally fall neatly into one category (Hartley and Buttweiler 1976). His assessment of the state of collecting in 1976 provides insight into the variation in treatment the swords received in the US, and the necessary study required to be deemed a 'genuine student' or 'serious collector':

I have seen fine swords released to children for chopping brush - a beautiful Soshu *tanto* employed for 30 years as "the turkey knife." I have seen opportunists grab up every blade in sight to hoard as a "speculation." But then I have also seen individuals and groups undertake a genuine study, first of swords, and then of the entire history and culture of Japan. All of this is necessary if one is really to understand the impact of the Japanese sword or Japanese culture and vice versa. It

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Ames Compton (1911-1990) possessed one of the best private collection of Japanese swords in the world, which he began before World War II (in the early 1930s while attending Princeton). His initial interest was sparked at the age of fourteen when he read about these swords in a boy's magazine. Compton's final collection consisted of 1,100 swords and were sold at a Christie's auction in 1992. The first day brought in a record eight million dollars and the buyers were largely Japanese (Reif 1992).

is my guess that there may be 20-30 genuine students in this country. There are perhaps 3-400 serious collectors, and 7-800 more genuinely interested collectors - and then there are the others. (Hartley and Buttweiler 1976)

Hartley's blunt assessment of collecting informs us that these collectors had a variety of attitudes and perspectives. However, it does not illuminate what sparked the collection of these swords (as opposed to another item) or how individuals became involved in this activity.

Yoshihara, Kapp, and Kapp (2012) spotlight three collectors over three pages in *The Art of the Japanese Sword* (2012, 64-66). In comparison to the length of the manuscript (256 pages) Yoshihara, Kapp, and Kapp's coverage of collectors and the act of collecting is minimal. Each of the bio sketches in *The Art of the Japanese Sword* includes the name of the collector, where they live (two are American and one is British), their careers (unrelated to swords and Japan), and what initially sparked their interest in the subject. The collectors have male names (Jim, Wayne, Clive) and their age can be extrapolated in terms of descriptors such as "long-term experience" and collecting which began "more than twenty-five years ago." Implicit in the descriptions is that these collectors are male and around forty years of age or older. Wayne Shijo, a third-generation Japanese American, is the only collector whose ethnicity is described. Shijo's interest in the swords developed due to his Japanese heritage:

For me, *katana* are not only a window to the history and culture of Japan, but also a physical connection to my ancestry. They are a manifestation of an ancient craft, something constant and stable I can hold in my hands in today's too-transient modern world.... Admittedly, I was initially drawn to *katana* because they are

weapons. I was interested because they are from Japan and they are old, and my eyes were attracted to them. (Yoshihara, Kapp, and Kapp 2012, 65)

He feels a personal connection to the swords due to his ancestry, but also because they are weapons – indicating an interest that speaks to the basic purpose of the sword as an object of warfare. In contrast, American Jim Sandler’s pursuit of both old and modern blades stemmed from participation in martial arts as a young man and his interest in collecting was inherited from his parents, whose passion was modern art (Yoshihara, Kapp, and Kapp 2012, 64). Sandler writes: “When I first started to learn about the Japanese sword, I was fascinated by the reverence that enthusiasts showed for the blades and the swordsmiths that produced them” (Yoshihara, Kapp, and Kapp 2012, 64). His interests, broadly speaking, seem to stem from martial arts and the artistic qualities inherent in the swords, as well as the emotional response the blades evoke.

The third collector spotlighted in Yoshihara, Kapp, and Kapp’s book is the British author Clive Sinclair who has published three books (in 2001, 2009, and 2017) on the history of the *samurai* and their weapons. As an instructor of kendo and *iaido*<sup>11</sup> Sinclair “sees the practice of these arts as the practical and reverse side of the same coin; that is, the artistic appreciation of *Nihonto* [Japanese swords]” (Yoshihara, Kapp, and Kapp 2012, 64). Sinclair is also chairman of the Token Society of Great Britain, which is one of the first groups in the West to focus on the study and preservation of these swords (Yoshihara, Kapp, and Kapp 2012, 64). While martial arts drove Sinclair’s initial curiosity, he states: “I owe a debt of gratitude to the Japanese sword for bringing me to many places and introducing me to friends that I have made all over the world. This is the

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<sup>11</sup> Iaido is a martial art which focuses on the drawing of the sword and Kendo is a Japanese style of fencing.



culture of the Japanese sword as I see it today, and it is this culture I enjoy so much” (Yoshihara and Kapp 2012, 65). One driving force for Sinclair seems to be the sense of community and connection that this pursuit provides, something that has been discussed in other research (Belk 1995a, 486) on collecting and consumption as a general activity. What we glean from Yoshihara’s small sample of collectors is that their interests range from martial arts and weapons to cultural heritage, community connection, art, and the emotional response the blades evoke.

Paul Martin is a sword specialist and martial arts practitioner from the UK and a former British Museum curator who now resides in Japan. He is a trustee for the Nihonto Bunka Shinko Kyokai (NBSK) or Society for the Promotion of Japanese Sword Culture and has spoken about Japanese swords on BBC TV, BBC Radio 4, and Discovery Channel, among other places. In an interview with the *Magazine of the British Chamber of Commerce in Japan* he shared that it was seeing the 1974 gangster movie, *The Yakuza*, which drove his interest in Japanese history and martial arts (Ryall 2014). Martin expressed that, “Looking at one of these swords is not like looking at a painting, where what you see is what you get.... A lot of what you get out of a fine sword is in the eye of the beholder. Some swords just speak to you when you look at them,” (Ryall 2014). In an interview with Turkish Airlines for their in-flight series on people pursuing their dreams, he stated he was introduced to the actual, historical Japanese swords when he joined the British Museum in the early 1990s as a part of the security team. He stated of the experience:

That was a real turning point in my life, splitting it into two, like before and after...the Japanese sword is not merely a weapon, it is a beautiful art object and

an instrument of self-enlightenment...that is for the annihilation of one's own ego. If you declare yourself a master, then you probably need to study more. I have learned that it is not the destination, but the journey that is important. (IPD Post Productions 2015)

While a 1970s movie set in post-occupation Japan originally inspired Martin's interest in martial arts and Japanese history, it was his introduction to Japanese swords at the British Museum that sent him in a new direction and led to a career path in the field.

The information gathered about the collectors mentioned above offer small windows of insight into how collecting may be driven by and also drive cultural exchange – from war to movies, martial arts, museums, and cultural heritage. It also highlights the fact that the materiality of swords can be a draw for collectors. Twenty Japanese sword clubs currently exist in the United States<sup>12</sup>, indicating that the post-war growth in clubs left a long-term presence in the country and continues to provide a dedicated space for collectors to connect, socialize, sell, purchase, and learn. This research seeks to enlarge the data set of Japanese sword collectors to better analyze the broader trends of American collecting post-World War II and fill in knowledge gaps regarding both women collectors and those under the age of forty.

### American Consumption of Japanese Culture

The occupation of Japan by U.S. forces resulted in American consumption of Japanese culture beyond GIs taking home 'souvenir swords.' It stretched through the decades (and continues today) to include entertainment, martial arts, and technology. In

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<sup>12</sup> According to [japaneseswordindex.com](http://japaneseswordindex.com), which posts information from clubs around the world

the fifteen years after 1945, hundreds of thousands of Americans gained exposure to Japanese culture through military and civil service and this exposure would help spark a second Japan craze even greater than that of the nineteenth century (Mettler 2018, 8). The U.S., as the major occupying force of Japan, largely shifted gears from promoting racist propaganda and policies to fostering an alliance<sup>13</sup> focused on democratization and the rebuilding of Japan's infrastructure and image – aided by cultural institutions and tastemakers in the States (Mettler 2018, 4). What resulted was a rising popularity and consumer market in America for Japanese ideas, arts, and hobbies that would outlast the period of military occupation. The sword, as a consumable object, image, and concept of the *samurai* appears consistently in American culture. But the phenomenon of Japanese sword collecting remains understudied in relation to the American consumption of Japanese culture.

Meghan Warner Mettler's 2018 book, *How to Reach Japan by Subway: America's Fascination with Japanese Culture, 1945–1965*, details this second wave of the Japan craze, which included interest in film, home aesthetics, ikebana, bonsai, and Zen Buddhism. Ironically, while interest in bonsai and Zen Buddhism grew in the US at this time, it held little interest for the Japanese, who equated the first to a retirement hobby and viewed the second as subverted by the Japanese military during World War II (Mettler 2018, 16). D.T. Suzuki's *Zen and Japanese Culture*, a best seller published in English in 1959, pushed this connection between “Zen humility and serenity” and artistic qualities – although Mettler notes that the book was published first in the 1930s to encourage Japanese nationalism (Mettler 2018, 159). In the chapters pertaining to the

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<sup>13</sup> An unequal alliance with Japan treated as the “junior partner” (Mettler 2018, 4).

sword, Suzuki states that the sword is “most intimately connected with the life of the *samurai*, and it has become the universal symbol of loyalty and self-sacrifice” (Suzuki 2019, 89). While this symbol was subverted in the name of nationalism leading up to the war, Mettler argues that its qualities were then feminized to make it more palatable to an American audience that might be offended by its former militaristic connotations.

This is exemplified by the Japanese *samurai* films<sup>14</sup> shown in America.

Considered arthouse movies and enjoyed by the upper- middle class, American movie critics “...emphasized the films’ seemingly feminine qualities, like graceful photographic composition and measured pacing” while the feudal era setting placed violence safely in the past (Mettler 2018, 30, 45-46). Mettler states that “Japanese traditions appealed to American consumers both as exotic exports from a country newly rediscovered and as a culture that could reflect and reinforce their own middle-class values. It was this type of popular interest in Japan that the U.S. government hoped to re-cultivate in the mid-twentieth century” (Mettler 2018, 8)<sup>15</sup>. In fact, after the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951 was signed, the exhibit *Japanese Painting and Sculpture* (a “result of cultural diplomacy” that was jointly curated) toured the U.S. in 1953 with some of Japan’s highest ranked national treasures (Shimizu 2001, 126). Mettler’s discussion of American consumerism regarding Japan does not extend to the collecting of Japanese swords or the exportation of martial arts. Therefore, a gap in the literature remains concerning how

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<sup>14</sup> Some of the most famous directed by Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998) include: *Rashomon* (1951), *Seven Samurai* (1954), *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), *Yojimbo* (1961), *Sanjuro* (1962), *Kagemusha* (1980), *Ran* (1985).

<sup>15</sup> The early twentieth century had seen the rise in popularity of Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*, which toured America from 1907-1908, and became the most common visual of Japanese people that Americans had. The Japanese sword is also a prominent feature of the opera, since it is what Madame Butterfly uses to commit suicide in the closing scene, after discovering her American husband’s betrayal (Miyao 2014, 197).

collecting these swords fits into America's morphing consumption of Japanese cultural exports in the two decades after World War II.

The 1960s and 1970s saw widespread interest and growth for Japanese martial arts. In part, this was due to the U.S. military's presence in Japan, specifically on the island of Okinawa. Servicemen stationed there learned Okinawan forms of karate such as *Shōrin-ryū* and *Uechi-Ryū*, which they brought back to America. The first karate dojo in the U.S was opened in 1946 and by the 1970s karate had blossomed across the country, thanks to returning servicemen (Krug 2001, 401). Japanese martial arts also became part of the larger international sports movement associated with the Olympic games (Sánchez García 2019, 204). The 1964 Tokyo Summer Olympics launched judo onto the world stage as an Olympic sport and also aided in reviving kendo through exhibitions (Sánchez García 2019, 204).

The Olympics re-introduced Japan to the world as a peaceful nation interested in international exchange. Any reference to World War II and recent military history was conspicuously absent in historical and cultural displays. The main exhibit called 'Exhibition of Japanese Old Art Treasures' emphasized Japanese cultural heritage and art from ancient times through the 1800s, including artifacts of *samurai* material culture and swords (Droubie 2011, 2318). Many of these swords were disassembled, perhaps in an effort to emphasize their beauty as art objects and not weapons<sup>16</sup> (Droubie 2011, 2318). According to newspaper reports on foreigner purchases made during the Olympics, swords frequently made the top of the list, most likely because they had been successfully separated from the memory of World War II and had "returned to a safely oriental past of

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<sup>16</sup> None of the swords displayed were *shin-guntō* from World War II (Droubie 2011, 2318).

mysticism and exoticism...a safely useable symbol of an older, less threatening Japan, while at the same time keeping it as a vital part of Japanese identity...” (Droubie 2011, 2318-2319). Consequently, the Japanese sword was once more a collectible item being sold in Japan to a Western audience and valued on its artistic merits and historical relevance to the *samurai*, rather than taken as a spoil of war.

Sinclair observes that Japan’s buying back of swords, which had left the country as ‘souvenirs’ and through post-war commerce, only began in earnest in the 1970s and coincided with the growth of the Japanese economy (Sinclair 2017, 159). He observes that many older collectors he knew called this period (which lasted over ten years) the “Gold Rush”, as thousands of swords were brought to market and sold back to Japanese buyers. While the sheer volume of swords within the U.S. may have decreased after this period, this does not seem to correlate to a decreased fascination with samurai or their weapons. The evidence for the appeal of this subject could still be found in literature and entertainment, such as James Clavell’s 1975 best-selling novel *Shogun*, set in the Tokugawa period. The book was later adapted as a television miniseries, as well as a video game and board game in the 1980s. This was not the only samurai-based video game to take off during this period; others included *Samurai Nipponichi* (1985), *Sword of the Samurai* (1989), *First Samurai* (1991), and *Bushido Blade* (1997), and others continuing to the highly acclaimed *Ghost of Tsushima* released in 2020. One can assume that the literature and entertainment spun from Japanese history and culture has perpetuated the interest in Japan and introduced the subject to younger consumers, born decades after World War II. However, there is little scholarly literature to corroborate this.

The monograph, *Japanese Sword: The Soul of the Samurai*, published in 2000 by Gregory Irvine (Senior Curator in the Asian Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London), devotes roughly three pages of the conclusion to the post-World War II culture of the sword and its rise in popular culture through the martial arts of iaido and kendo, as well as collecting of traditional and modern productions of swords, samurai-themed manga, and the American movie industry's work inspired by director Akira Kurosawa (Irvine 2000, 120-122). In the movie industry in particular, consumption of Japanese film did not end with viewing, but also inspired wholesale adaptations of films. Kurosawa's film *The Seven Samurai* (1954) inspired John Sturges' 1960 movie *The Magnificent Seven*, which was then adapted into a 1998 television series, and remade once more as a movie in 2016 (Barber 2016; Irvine 2000, 121-122). Likewise, Kurosawa's *The Hidden Fortress* (1958) provided inspiration for George Lucas' *Star Wars* (released in 1970), which also included similarities between the two-handed 'light sabre' wielded by Jedi knights and the Japanese sword (Barber 2016; Irvine 2000, 122). Irvine offers observations on the influence of Japan on American culture, particularly in the form of the heroic samurai figure, but does not indicate how this may affect interest in or collection of Japanese swords either in the UK or America.

### *Samurai* and the 21st Century Military History Boom

While little has been written on collectors of Japanese blades and their inspiration for collecting, much has been written in the 21st century on the blades themselves, along with the history and culture of the samurai. In publications created with collectors in mind, the information skews towards the highly technical, with emphasis placed on forging and polishing techniques, connoisseurship, and care of the blades (Nakahara

2010; Takaiwa et al. 2013; Yoshihara, Kapp, and Kapp 2012). Likewise, much has been published about the history of the samurai, their weapons, and martial arts (Conlan 2008; Kure 2002; Turnbull 2003; 2004; 2012; Vaporis 2019; Wert 2019). Clearly there has been a sustained interest in this subject over the past twenty years.

Birgitta Augustin and Masako Watanabe remarked upon this never-ending interest in the 2014 article “Transforming Power: Art and Arts of Japan's Warriors,” by noting the number of museum exhibitions on *samurai*, arms, and armor within the five-year span from 2009 to 2014. These include: The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s 2009 *Art of the Samurai: Japanese Arms and Armor, 1156-1868* and The Detroit Institute of Arts’ 2014 *Samurai: Beyond the Sword*, which was based on Andreas Marks’ 2012 *Lethal Beauty: Samurai Armor and Weapons* in D.C. (Augustin and Watanabe 2014, 9). In addition to these, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston held *Samurai! Armor from the Ann and Gabriel Barbier-Mueller Collection* in 2013, while the Springfield Museums in Massachusetts displayed *Turtle Power! Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles & Samurai Heroes* from 2016 to 2017. And in 2019 the Metropolitan Museum of Art also exhibited *Japanese Arms and Armor from the Collection of Etsuko and John Morris*. These exhibits follow a long practice of displaying and interpreting the art and artifacts of Japan in American museums. The material culture of the *samurai* persists in fascinating and capturing the imagination of Americans. However, little is known about the private collectors who take their passion for this subject beyond visiting museum exhibits and consuming *samurai* related popular culture. This study aims to address that gap.



## Repatriation of World War II ‘Souvenir Swords’

There has been little push to repatriate the so-called ‘souvenir swords’ taken during World War II. The most notable documentation of this is Walter Compton’s discovery of a missing National Treasure within the course of his collecting, which he returned to Japan in 1963 (Martin 2019). By and large, it is deemed that the majority of swords taken were machine-made, mass produced weapons that hold no artistic value. In 2013, an American man returned a ‘souvenir sword’ taken by his grandfather during World War II to the Japanese family of the man it had belonged to (*The Japan Times* 2013). Although the sword had a nametag on it, the search to find the family was long and difficult, made complicated also by the strict weapons controls that exist in Japan. In the end, both the American and the family were grateful for the experience. The story was turned into the 2018 documentary *Forgive Don’t Forget*. The Consulate-General of Japan in Boston has a webpage (published in 2016) devoted to the repatriation of World War II artifacts:

The Government of Japan, with the recognition that World War II Artifacts would be most appreciated by the original bearer or surviving kin of them, is promoting return of those artifacts. Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan, in this connection, will attempt to locate the original bearer of a WWII artifact or surviving kin of the original bearer provided the party requesting the investigation agrees to tender the item to Embassy or Consulate General of Japan without demand for compensation, if and when the search is successfully completed. Putting up WWII artifacts with names of war dead for internet auction would

offend feelings of war bereaved and your cooperation will be much appreciated. (“Repatriation of World War II Artifacts” 2016)

Pertaining to swords specifically, the website states: “Due to rigid legal codes, military swords must be sent directly from the individual requesting the investigation to the original bearer of the artifact or their surviving kin” (“Repatriation of World War II Artifacts” 2016). No distinction is made here between machine-made swords and heirloom swords. As a part of this study, perspectives on repatriation of Japanese swords taken during World War II will also be addressed.

### Arms and Armor Collecting in America Post-World War II

Due to a paucity of scholarship on Japanese sword collecting and collectors, research on general arms and armor collecting in America post-World War II (which largely focuses on firearms) provides an analogous lens from which to view the subject. While the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were marked by wealthy collectors, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the economic shifts after World War II created space for “more middle-class enthusiasts” (Witkowski 2020, 442). In fact, the number of gun collectors in America prior to 1940, estimated around 5,000, had become 500,000 strong by the 1970s (Miller in Witkowski 2020, 428-430). Witkowski theorizes this change is due to increased income as well as the fact that more men had handled guns during World War II and the Korean War (even bringing back some as souvenirs), but does not discount the Civil War Centennial in the 1960s and the Bicentennial celebration of the Revolutionary War in the 1970s as contributing factors (Witkowski 2020, 429).

As a longtime collector himself, Witkowski, whose 2020 publication examines arms collecting as it relates to community and cultural meaning, has an intimate

knowledge of the arms and armor collecting world from participating in gun shows, where he has examined both guns and swords (Witkowski 2020, 424). It is important to note that while there may be specific expos devoted entirely to Japanese swords, these blades are also often displayed and sold at gun shows as well. Therefore, there may be crossover in collecting habits which encompass both firearms and edged weapons, although Witkowski does not mention Japanese swords in a post-World War II context. He does state that postwar collectors now had more options for purchasing arms including from antiques stores, pawnshops, auctions, specialist dealers, and private parties (Witkowski 2020, 429). Collector-dealers often also function as informal educators in the world of gun collecting by sharing knowledge of “the symbolic uses of guns – as artifacts, curios, and objets d’art” (Stenross 1994, 29). Swords are most likely available to obtain through these same modes and treated in a similar fashion.

Witkowski defines American arms and armor collectors as “a consumption subculture almost entirely populated by white males of average and above income” who pursue collecting individually or in “face-to-face communities based on more specialized shared interests” within arms and armor (Witkowski 2020, 432). Witkowski asserts that this falls within the realm of “serious leisure.” Serious leisure collecting requires an individual to have special skills, knowledge, and experience in what they are pursuing, and also be motivated by deep self-fulfillment which results from this activity (Stebbins 1992, 3; 2005, 6). This ties in to Hartley’s tiered assessment of Japanese sword collectors in 1976 as either “genuine students”, “serious collectors”, “genuinely interested collectors”, or “the others” (Hartley and Buttweiler 1976). Collectors can be ranked in terms of seriousness, although for most of them the activity is a form of leisure, not a

means for making a living. The difference between “casual leisure consumers” and “serious leisure consumers” may be delineated by those who want to read extensively on displayed collectibles, as opposed to those who just want to look at the objects (Stebbins 2005, 10-11). The *token kai* or collectors clubs for Japanese swords are most likely comprised of those pursuing serious leisure or may be deemed genuine students or collectors, according to Hartley.

In a 2005 publication on antique arms and armor in *Apollo: The International Magazine of the Arts*, Stephen Wood (researcher, consultant and broker) wrote: “Arguing that antique arms and armor have a valid place in the fine and decorative arts is often regarded as sophistry. In the commercial arts world, arms and armour have a place less affected by fashion than other antiques...” because the quality, condition, provenance, excellent research, and background research provided on an object make it more saleable (Wood 2005, 94). In short, those who consume arms and armor are looking for similar qualities in their purchase as those who buy other categories of antiques or art. However, art museums (e.g., The Metropolitan Museum of Art) still house arms and armor collections and display them in their galleries as part of some of the exhibitions mentioned previously in this chapter. Wiley Sword, historian and author of American military history and collector of historical American weapons, takes a slightly different view. For Sword, the “historic usage” of weapons compels him far more than the physical appearance, as many historic pieces are well used and “usually physically unappealing, and deficient in traditional collector criteria such as fine condition, elaborate decor, or model rarity” (Sword 1992, 3). The draw for him, and others, can be found in his comment: “If only that old gun could talk, the stories it might tell! How often have we

heard that familiar adage?” (Sword 1992, 3). Art and history are not necessarily mutually exclusive in arms and armor collecting, but it may vary from collector to collector and also fluctuate with the market.

Regarding what is popular in the market, Sword maintains that it is “largely a reflection of collector attitudes...[attitudes] generally are a by-product of information, or a lack thereof. For this reason we have seen substantial fluctuations in the value of collector weapons based upon the publication and acceptance of specific new data, as in the case of Japanese samurai swords” (Sword 1992, 5). Sword, whose collecting focus is American arms, does not expound upon his comment regarding the value of Japanese swords, although it may be an acknowledgement of the very successful 1992 Christie’s auction of Walter Compton’s incredible collection of Japanese swords. However, he goes on to lament that so many of the weapons on the market, deemed desirable due to their mint condition, lack the historic usage that is the motive for collecting them, as far as he is concerned. Clearly there is a range of perspectives regarding how and why this serious leisure activity of arms and armor collecting is pursued, no matter if it’s practiced as an individual or social activity. What is not mentioned in these sources is how collectors embark upon this endeavor or whether broader cultural trends (movies, popular culture, etc.) influence consumer trends within arms and armor collecting.

#### Theoretical Frameworks: Perceptual Phenomenology and Consumer Culture Theory

A multidisciplinary theoretical framework consisting of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and perceptual phenomenology will be applied to this research in order to better understand the Japanese sword as a collectible item in American culture in the decades following World War II. Belk claims that “Collecting is an act of consumption

writ large since it is a perpetual pursuit of inessential luxury goods” (Belk 1995b, 157). Japanese swords certainly fall into the category of luxury goods, as they are no longer required for self- protection or to signify an individual’s social status, as they did in Tokugawa Japan. The influx of Japanese swords to America post-World War II, along with America’s increased consumption of Japanese culture through philosophy, martial arts, entertainment, etc. likely provided fertile ground to perpetuate the collection, admiration, and commodification of these swords.

The broad field of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), which does not adhere to one methodological orientation, seeks to understand consumer culture on the levels of individual consumption (e.g., purchase of goods or experiences) and the consumer culture this generates (Arnould and Thompson 2018, 1). Arnould and Thompson’s review of twenty years of CCT research states that a new frontier for CCT is “broader analyses of the historical and institutional forces that have shaped the marketplace and the consumer as a social category” (2005, 876). They delineate one specific form of this as “telling cultural history through commodity form” (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 876). In this case, the commodity form will be the Japanese sword and the broader cultural history that of post-World War II. While the broader picture of Japanese swords in America will be analyzed, it is impossible to separate this from the individual experience of the collector, which is where phenomenology enters the picture.

While there are a number of variations of phenomenology, this study will use the twentieth century philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (1908-1961) interpretation. Merleau-Ponty puts forward the concept that objects and people are not separate from each other, as each may act on the other to generate effects and meaning (Merleau-Ponty

in Ting 2012, 173). In “Living Objects: A Theory of Museological Objecthood”, Ting elucidates Merleau-Ponty’s theory further:

Merleau-Ponty argues that objects are alive in the sense that they are an extension of our being. He observes that when we look at something, our body is looked at. This reciprocity of object-human communication suggests that materiality shapes our bodily perception of the world and reveals part of ourselves, such as feelings, thoughts or desires, through this bodily experience. We may not have prior knowledge or personal experiences related to an object, but by feeling its materiality, the double sensations of our bodies are absorbed into a dialogue with the object. (Ting 2012, 173)

One example of this is in sword expert Paul Martin’s statement that “Some swords just speak to you when you look at them,” (Ryall 2014). Since the sword is not simply an object to be looked at, but also an object to be held (even wielded as an extension of one’s arm), it is important to understand how this materiality influences collectors.

It is also necessary to acknowledge that not everyone has the same interpretation of the same object (Witkowski 2020). All those who interact with the artifact in the market process – from a collector to a dealer or a museum curator – assign the object with a cultural meaning (Belk 1995b; Witkowski 2020). Belk asserts in “Possessions and the sense of the Past” that every generation creates their own collective memory around material culture, which can vary from previous memories (Belk in Witkowski 2020). These memories are almost certainly shaped by both personal tastes and influences, as well as the larger shifts in world politics and economics. Just as the late nineteenth and early twentieth century collectors were swept up in the opening of Japan, which resulted

in the Western ‘Japan craze’, World War II left its mark on the consumer culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Current gaps in the literature include a deeper understanding of who Japanese sword collectors in America are, their motivation for collecting, as well as how they perceive the sword and its collection seventy-five years after the end of World War II. The aim of this research, therefore, may be attained by implementing perceptual phenomenological and CCT approaches to the collected data to better understand Japanese sword collection in terms of individual perspectives and how they may be influenced by (and influence) the broader societal changes in America in the post-war era.



### Chapter III.

#### Research Methods

This chapter is divided into the following four sections: Participants; Materials; Procedure; and Theoretical Framework and Analysis. Participant recruitment and data collection took place during the summer and early autumn of 2020.

#### Participants

Study participants were required to be eighteen years of age or older and live in the United States. While there are collectors of these swords worldwide, limiting the study to the United States provided a framework for examining the phenomenon as it relates specifically to post-WWII collecting in America. Participants were required to have owned, or currently own, one or more Japanese blades (*katana*, *wakizashi*, *tanto*). Heterogenous purposive sampling was used in this research in order to attain a breadth of collectors' perspectives in terms of age, gender, and ethnicity. Participants came from a range of backgrounds (martial artists, Japanese sword polishers, current students, retirees, and working professionals) so that various perspectives could be analyzed for commonalities. This study was intentionally left open to those who own antique and new blades in order to allow for a broad range of perspectives, in both age and mindset.

Participants were initially recruited from the Facebook group "Samurai Sword", which is dedicated to sharing information on Japanese swords, *samurai*, and Japanese culture. As one member of over twenty-one thousand in this group, I posted a call for

participants. This post led to an invitation to join the Facebook group “Asian Sword Arts” (with over three thousand members), where I posted a second call for participants. Since individual collectors recommended others within their social sphere who were interested in participating in the study, snowball sampling was used. Snowball sampling was also specifically employed to ensure female representation in this study. All participants were given the option to request a pseudonym, although most declined.

### Materials

Materials consisted of the participant consent form, created and distributed using Qualtrics. This form also included a demographic questionnaire and collected contact information (see Appendix A). An interview guide provided a framework for the semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B). Audacity recording software was used to record all interviews.

### Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by me over the phone or by video conference (Zoom) and recorded with permission of the participant. Interviews began with a review of the study, the procedures (including a reminder that the interview would be recorded), and a reminder that the interview was voluntary and could be stopped at any time. Participants were also asked for a second time if they would like to use a pseudonym and then provided an opportunity to ask any questions before beginning.

Interviews began with introductory questions (e.g., asking what state the participant was calling from) in order to set the tone of a relaxed conversation as opposed to an interrogation. Structured questions were asked within the natural flow of

conversation and interviews lasted from approximately thirty to ninety minutes, depending on participant availability and interest. The conclusion of the interview included asking participants if they knew anyone who would be interested in taking part in the study. Each interview was then transcribed by me, and transcripts were then shared with participants to enable member checking. Interviewing continued until the data were as saturated as the time constraints on this project allowed.

### Theoretical Framework and Analysis

Qualitative research methods, as employed in similar studies regarding arms and armor collecting (Stenross 1994; Witkowski 2020), were primarily used in this study, although some basic statistical analyses were conducted in order to evaluate the aggregate demographic data of participants. Glaser and Strauss's discussion of grounded theory was used to look for significant themes in the data, post-transcription phase (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Individual and cross-case analyses were conducted and Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson 2018; Belk 1995b; 2006) and perceptual phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty in Ting 2012) provided a framework to interpret the themes extracted from the data. Perceptual phenomenology provided context for understanding the relationship between object and collector, while Consumer Culture Theory placed that connection within the scope of historical, market, and social forces that foster culture. The results of these analyses provide a theoretical understanding of the generational evolution and constancies of Japanese sword collecting in the United States post-World War II.

## Chapter IV.

### Results

Data from twenty eligible participants are included in this chapter. Results from four case studies will be presented in order to illustrate the range of study participants' interest in and thoughts on collecting Japanese swords, as well as the particular circumstances that led to their initial pursuit of this activity. Aggregate results will then be offered in the form of demographic statistics, as well as statistics on data coded for the following salient themes: the type of event that inspired interest in these swords, the age of the participant when that event took place, and the decade in which the participant was born. The aggregate results will also include relevant quotes from study participants to highlight particular thoughts and reactions on the following topics: The Sword as a Weapon and Art; World War II Souvenir Swords and Repatriation; and Women and Japanese Swords. In Chapter 5 Discussion these data will be analyzed in light of Consumer Culture Theory and phenomenology.

#### Case Study 1: Robert Benson with Nicholas Benson

Robert Benson, a White male born in 1937 (age eighty-three) trained as a Japanese sword polisher while stationed in Japan with the U.S. Air Force from 1962 to 1967. Growing up in Illinois and Wisconsin, he had no knowledge of Japanese swords. The first time he was stationed in Japan (1959-1961) he lived on Okinawa and had a “mild interest” in swords. He took lessons in the Okinawan form of karate known as

*Shōrin-ryū*, while stationed there, but couldn't find anyone to teach him about swords.

While stationed in the country a second time (beginning in 1962) he took classes with Jesuit priests on Japanese history and culture, furthering his interest in Japan.

Robert was given a sword by his then brother-in-law, which he proceeded to research, eventually bringing him into contact with a sword polisher. After witnessing the polisher at work, he returned every weekend for roughly six weeks to watch the process unfold, finally asking if he could learn how to polish swords. This polisher became Robert's first teacher on a journey which would lead him to study under Koke Ono, who held the title of "living national treasure" and was head polisher for the National Museum in Tokyo at the time. In 1967, Robert entered the annual polishing competition sponsored by the Nippon Bijitsu Token Hozon Kyokai (The Society for the Preservation of Japanese Art Swords or NBTHK), where the naginata he polished earned him the *Dorokusho* (Diligent Endeavor Award), never before won by a foreigner. He became recognized as the first non-Japanese person to have studied polishing and the first non-Japanese person to receive a certificate from the National Museum recognizing him as a polisher of distinction in 1967. Robert is one of the few American experts on Japanese sword polishing and is a founding member and advisor to the American Branch of the NBTHK. He still works restoring blades for Japanese and American collectors and teaches his twenty-year-old son and apprentice, Nicholas, the craft. Nicholas plans to carry on his father's legacy by becoming a sword polisher.

In terms of viewing the sword as an art object or a weapon, Robert stated: "You have to remember they were made for one thing. And that's killing people. So, the ones that are made *now* are just for the artwork. But even if I'm working on a sword that is 700

years old – what I preach when I give talks is: we don't do restoration, we're doing *preservation*. The idea [is] we're *preserving* what this artist put into this sword hundreds of years ago. So, it's considerably more than just putting something back in wonderful condition. We're preserving it...maybe it'll be here for another hundred generations.”

When asked if there is anything spiritual about the blades or the process of polishing, he replied, “Yeah, I used to think that. And I still think that...my second [polishing] teacher was a swordsmith also, and he would get engrossed in doing it [smithing] and wanting to do it for perfection. The flakes and the hot stuff were flying off and burning holes in his clothing and his legs and he'd have blisters on him and every now and then he'd take the water bucket there with the whisk (because they throw water on them when they're hammering a sword)...and put out the fires. And I thought, ‘God, he's *so* engrossed.’ So engrossed in that. And it's the same way polishing... I don't know... maybe it's a spiritual thing. You can get into that rhythm of just – like the Buddhist chants.”

When asked if there was something spiritual about the blades themselves, he initially said no, but mentioned a friend who would never take possession of a blade that had a cutting test indicated on it – meaning that it had been tested on a body. “He just didn't want to handle those because he felt the spirits might be in there. And so sometimes I think about certain swords [I'm handling], “*Man*, you know?” It was like him [my friend]. You handed him something and he'd say he'd get a funny feeling. He'd say, ‘This is not a – has it killed anybody?’ So, I don't know. But [if] it's got a cutting test, you know right away. ‘Oh, take it, take it [back],’ he'd say.”

Robert said that people have that reaction to Japanese suits of armor as well and sometimes feel as though there is a person in them. “I don't know. But, yeah, sometimes they [the swords] have that kind of a feeling. But I don't know. I think that all goes away, the more... beauty you bring out [of] the sword [by polishing]. And you cut the lines just, like, perfect, so they feel sharp. You get the lines so that when you're working, they'll literally cut you on the hand. And I don't know if there's spirits coming out at me, I don't worry about it! [laughing] When I think about it, it becomes emotional because of the fact that I've been doing it fifty some years. And I always think about that. Because the guy doing it [forging the sword] put his whole soul into it. If you see a swordsmith doing the hammering and burning up...then you think, ‘God, you know, this guy put his whole *force* into making this.’ So, they probably have somethin’ in ‘em.”

When discussing modern Japanese swords made in the traditional manner he stated, “Well, I think there's people that prefer that [newly made swords]. I've had guys say, ‘I want a contemporary blade. [A] sword [made traditionally] the same old way, because I don't want to have to think about how many people this sword killed’...There's something for everybody, even in Japanese swords. Likes and dislikes. You have people who only want the *sword*. They don't care... about the mountings... They just want the *beauty* of the *blade*. That's *it*. And then others that don't even collect the blades, they collect all the mountings.” When confronted with an exceptional blade with all of its fittings he states, “By and large, I think everybody loves the *whole* aspect [together], ‘*God*, the blade is hand forged...and look at the *lacquer* on here.’ And you're just in *awe* of how, wow, this is *really* nice. The whole package will just blow you away.”

When the topic of repatriating swords taken during World War II comes up, Robert discusses how difficult a process that is because of how much time has passed. He also notes the difference between someone returning a sword he simply found in America versus one that was taken during war. “I think your experience and if you had to take a sword off of somebody you just killed...I had somebody tell me before, ‘I *killed* for that.’ So, I didn't ask any more questions.”

When asked about Japanese swords portrayed in movies and video games, Robert said he watched *chanbara* (sword fighting movies) while stationed in Japan and he does think that over the years productions have tried to get more technical and represent the swords more accurately, but other shows (like American reality TV, where they have blade forging competitions) he says slaughter the Japanese terminology. Robert’s twenty year old son, Nicholas, said the only connection people his age seem to have with Japanese swords is through manga and video games. Asked whether video games help revive or keep an interest in Japanese swords for younger generations, Robert stated, “I think it does. I think its elevated it. There's a considerable amount of women who are quite interested in this.” He and Nicholas mentioned that a representative from Setouchi City in Okayama Prefecture came to a sword show and explained that she was looking to raise funds to purchase a National Treasure sword, which the city then displayed. Robert related that, “A friend of mine commented, he said, ‘Did you *see* the line [to see this sword]? And how many *women* were in the line?’”<sup>17</sup> Robert commented on the past fifty years or so of collecting and how women have been involved:

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<sup>17</sup> This popularity was fueled by the online game, *Touken Ranbu*, popular with girls and women in Japan and which features Japanese swords (Iwaguchi 2018).



Well, it seemed like all of the men were collectors of swords. So the wives were dragged along to shows...I think a lot of them felt, 'Well, hell, I might as well dive in.' They got interested in the sword fittings, the sword guards, the *tsukas*, the handle ornaments and all this, which some of those have just as much value as a sword – where they'll sell for \$100,000 for one little thing. So, that's what was happening, say in the fifty years that I've been collecting swords. My wife knows probably more than a lot of collectors about that aspect because she deals with that now. She got interested in going to all [the] shows...so just by being around it and looking at some of the art...she's [his wife is] an expert in [swords] herself. So it's good...I mean, it's surprising when I give a talk and we have swords out for a hands-on [event], how many women are stepping up and just looking and then being able to talk about it...Well, I hope that it [continues].

### Case Study 2: Paul Kenyon

Paul Kenyon, a White male born in 1945 (age seventy-five) grew up in Rhode Island and was first introduced to Japanese swords as a child around the age of five or six years old. His father was a World War II veteran who served in the European Theater, while a neighbor served in the Pacific Theater. The neighbor had brought back a Japanese sword from the war, and it hung on a wall in his house. His father would bring him over when he visited the neighbor, and Kenyon vividly recalled the sword:

It was all mounted out in the most exquisite, ornate fittings of dragons and waves and clouds. And it was all silver and there were inlays in the dragon's whiskers and in the flames of gold. And that was such a thing of beauty. I just stood there and would stare at it. And then one day he [the neighbor] said, 'Would you like to

hold that, Paul?’ And I just nodded. And then from there, we went ahead and I learned all about it.

The dragons in particular struck Kenyon as a boy, since the symbolism attached to them was far more positive than the Christian connotation of dragons he grew up with. After Hurricane Carol in 1954, Kenyon’s family moved to a different house and he “lost touch” with his interest in the Japanese sword and dragons. However, his father used to make knives occasionally, which kept his interest in edged weapons and knives alive. In the late 1960s, he read an article in a gun collecting magazine about custom knives which resulted in him joining a knife collectors club that included members who collected everything from knives to razors and swords. In 1979 or 1980, Kenyon went to a meeting in New Hampshire where a *tanto* was up for sale and he immediately recalled the experience as a child at his neighbor’s house.

It [the *tanto* in New Hampshire] was all mounted out in silver dragons with waves with gold. And I took a look at it – now, I don’t know if it was the trauma from going through Hurricane Carol or what, but I had forgotten all about those times [at the neighbor’s house]. And I took one look at that, and *boy*, everything came back to me. Like, just a flood of memories and visual images in my head. And I was just overwhelmed. And I stood there and I started trembling.

Kenyon expressed interest in buying the *tanto* and learned that the seller’s parents or grandparents had been in the diplomatic corps and spent time in Japan in the 1900s, bringing the blade home with them. Kenyon asked the seller for three months to get together the \$1,500 it would cost and then “went haywire selling [his knife collection] off” to raise the funds to purchase the *tanto*. He stated, “That started me on this journey,

back on this journey, again. And it was all going back to standing there as a five- or six-year-old kid, looking up at that beautiful sword on the wall that the gentleman had. So, I've never looked back. I collect, I read, I study. The thing about collecting Japanese blades is, the more you realize you know, the more you realize you need to know."

Kenyon began attending meetings at the Japanese Sword Club of Boston held at the Hurst Gallery in Cambridge. The man who started the club, Lewis Conrad "Rad" Smith III, brought in a sword with a *hitatsura* temper on the blade that reminded Kenyon of an October sky. As a child, Kenyon was raised to appreciate nature and used to lay on his back in October (his favorite month) and watch the sky: "...the air is crisp and the winds are blowing up in the upper atmosphere. You have these intense blue skies and all of these fluffy, fleecy white clouds". Kenyon said the temper on the blade "reminded me immediately of just laying on my back as a kid and watching those clouds go trip, tripping across the sky on those October days. And the blueness of the steel – it actually had a blue quality to it – it's subtle, but with the tempering all over the blade, it just [looked] like that October sky. I mean, it just hooked me even more [on Japanese swords]." In terms of viewing Japanese blades as weapons or works of art, he shared:

I see nature in these things. And I see beauty in these things...I understand that the cutting ability of the Japanese sword is, like, off the charts – it's probably one of the greatest...ever devised in terms of its cutting ability. But I don't see them as that. I see these things as art objects. The beauty and the struggle that somebody [went through] to create such an object – it just transcends beyond anything. It's like when you look at a famous painting...by one of the old masters

and you study the brushstrokes and so forth. I see that same kind of thing in [these swords]. The steel talks to me like that.

Kenyon says that he can only take his swords out and view them “in small doses”. “I don’t know if I go into a suspended animation, but I’m worthless for a few days after, if I do a lot.” When asked if these blades have any spiritual meaning to him, he replied, “I wouldn’t go so far as to say it’s my religion, but – yeah, I see them as that [spiritual objects] because a lot of what they call *horimono* (carvings in the blade), those were done and...what they invoke is protection and the protection of the gods.”

In terms of categorizing this lifelong endeavor to collect and learn about Japanese swords he stated: “I’m a collector slash preservationist. I am a *keeper* of the faith, in the sense that... I don’t feel like I really own them. They’re in my *possession*. I’m here to curate them and care for them as best I can and pass them on to somebody else, at some point in time, that will cherish them and take care of them as beautiful art objects. Just like I consider them...Some people just appreciate them, but they’re in it for commercial [reasons] as well as collecting. It hurts me a little bit, but there’s an intrinsic value I get from having had them in my possession, being able to study them, that I can’t put a monetary figure on. So, if I sell it for less, and I’m meeting a new need that I have... it doesn’t hurt me to do that... while... some people would say, ‘Oh, you own them’... I do and I don’t because I see myself only as a keeper of the faith, to... preserve them and pass them on for future generations.”

Kenyon enjoys studying the history and the artistry in the blades, as well as understanding the schools that each swordsmith belongs to and how the lineage is passed down. His interest lies with older blades, but he acknowledged that there is a

“renaissance” going on in Japan with modern swordsmiths forging blades in the traditional style. For Kenyon, an authentic Japanese blade has to be made using traditional methods. Months after our initial conversation, Kenyon let me know he was on the search for a blade by the female smith, Onna Kunishige (1788-1808). Female smiths were very rare, so the search will likely be long and difficult, but that is part and parcel of being a collector. When discussing Japanese swords in terms of their portrayal in popular culture Kenyon said, “...they’re seen as a weapon and treated as a weapon...I wish they could view them more as an art object as opposed to, ‘Oh, they’re strictly a weapon and they were meant to kill.’” Kenyon’s interest in Japanese swords, swordsmiths, and culture stretches beyond the sword’s cutting ability to include the art and the history.

When asked about souvenir swords taken during World War II he said, “Well, the things started as souvenirs, but I think perspective on them changed dramatically when they realized they had value to the Japanese [people]. But there were a few people here [in America] that were collecting too, way back in the day, after the Meiji Period [such as Walter Compton]. But as the broader public became aware that they had something of value, then people started hunting for them. Sending them back to Japan and making good money on them. I’m kind of neutral about that, I think. I mean, obviously, if I found a sword and it was in my collection and then somebody came to me, or was studying my collection and said, “Oh, this sword was [historically significant], that [it] had been a family heirloom and they had been hunting for it or something like that...I would say: ‘Pay my way back to Japan...the flight. Put me up while I’m there, and I will take the sword back, so that I can personally give the sword back to you.’ That would be the only

expense I would ask for payment of the sword under those circumstances. I would absolutely return it.”

### Case Study 3: Lindai Louton

Lindai Louton, born in 1979 (age forty-one), is an Asian female of Malaysian, Chinese, and German descent. She grew up mostly in Europe and Africa, although she spent some time in Asia as well. Louton has practiced martial arts from around the age of nine, beginning with judo. When asked how she first became interested in Japanese swords she replied, “Well, I’ve always been fascinated by swords [and] weapons, but specifically swords. I’m not even sure where exactly the interest came from (specifically for swords) because they only came really into my life, later in life.” Louton trained in judo through her teens and then began Wing Chung, a Chinese Kung Fu art, which she says is her core martial art. Once she attained a certain level in Wing Chung, weapons training started and “I also got interested in other knives and knife defense and just learning about different types of weapons. [My] interest was re-sparked.” One of her training partners in Kung Fu also trained in the Japanese sword, so she asked him if he would teach her some of it to decide if she wanted to train in that as well. After a month he introduced her to his teacher and she said of the experience, “I loved it *right* away. And, yeah, I’ve been there ever since [for eight years].”

Not all those who own Japanese swords consider themselves collectors. When asked about being a collector Louton said, “I wouldn’t say I’m a *collector*, per se. For me it’s really just training tools. I wouldn’t consider myself a collector. I don’t go out and purchase those for the sake of collecting, if that makes sense? People that I know who collect swords usually put them up for display. Either on the wall or somewhere in the

house. Or they have a dedicated showroom for it. There *are* collectors who also practice. But I guess they would be practitioner *and* collector, in my view. But I would consider myself more of a sword practitioner or student more than a collector.”

Louton owns newer blades as well as two custom blades for her practice. She was also gifted certain pieces. “Maybe some of the accessories might be antique. I'm not sure. I haven't had that checked by anyone who specializes in antiques. I was told they were old, but I don't know the exact age. Like the *tsuba* or some *menuki*, some of the accessories. And then certain things I had to make completely new, like a new handle for example.” Louton’s swords are a combination of old and new and are dedicated to her martial arts practice.

Asked if movies or TV played a role in her interest in Japanese swords she replied, “It reinforces maybe, but it's not that I watched the movie and then, ‘Oh, great! Let me get a sword!’ No. I always thought they’re cool, but it's really about the love of the art. But of course, when I get together either with friends or even by myself, I enjoy watching martial art movies in general. Not just with swords or Japanese [films]. All kinds of *good* martial art movies; good fight scenes.” And while she played video games as a teenager, she does not link them to her interest in swords. When asked if she views the swords as works of art she states:

Absolutely. It’s really fascinating what the smiths do...it’s so fascinating [seeing videos of smiths making blades]. And for me, that's pure art that they create. The smith who makes the blade, then the person who makes the shaft for the blade.

Everything is so precise, there’s a specific procedure, how the material is chosen,

the way the whole process [works] and how it is often even passed on from generation to generation in the smith's family.

For Louton, the ranking and valuing of blades based on the smith, the time period it was made, and its history are important. "That all determines the value of a blade, and eventually of the sword. So, all these things definitely speak to me as being an art."

Louton has seen antique Japanese swords in museums, as well as in the collections of dojo members. When asked her reaction to seeing the antique swords she replied, "I was like, 'Wow! Can I touch it? Can I have a closer look?' I was like a child."

When asked if the swords have any spiritual meaning to her, she stated, "Yeah... I would consider myself a spiritual person. And I'd say there's things we do or we don't do [in martial arts]. I don't know if that's considered spiritual... Like you would never step over a sword. And definitely not over somebody else's. But there's just certain things you don't do. And when we bow in [upon entering the dojo], the respect that [we show]... we bow to basically to the shrine, we bow to the sword. Like it's this whole, I don't know, can we call it ritual? So, it has that aspect too." When queried further regarding if she views the sword as just a tool or if there is another aspect to it, she replied, "You know, when I step on the floor, once I step on the mat with my sword, like for me, I'm just *there*. Nothing else. Everything else fades. I can forget about everything. And in a way, it is my form of meditation and keeping myself centered. So, I think everything that helps you [stay] grounded, focused, and centered is a form of, yeah, I'd say meditation. So, from that aspect it is definitely spiritual for me."

When asked about her thoughts on swords taken in World War II she stated, "I always found it a fascinating topic because it was... you could say it's cultural heritage



that was taken. But they take it as a souvenir. I mean, it was during wartimes, and there was blood and death and violence involved. So I do have mixed feelings about it. I mean, I've never been in combat like this, so I don't know how I would feel...I mean I don't judge it [World War II souvenir swords]. It just happened; it's a part of history. Is it good or bad? I don't know...The whole thing is interesting in the sense that, at some point these swords that kind of popped up here [in the U.S.], some people knew about the value and some didn't. And then I think collectors started just buying them. And those who *knew* the value, of course they were super happy, they found a steal off the other person: 'Oh great, I made money off this.' And then there were some real treasures among them. I think that's also one of the reasons that nowadays it's really, really difficult to get blades out of Japan. Because of protecting that cultural heritage."

#### Case Study 4: Jarae Pierce

Jarae Pierce, a male Filipino Pacific Islander, born in 2002 (age eighteen), grew up on the island of Saipan in the Northern Mariana Islands commonwealth of the United States. Saipan was an important tactical site during World War II and changed hands from Japan to the U.S. during the Battle of Saipan in 1944. Due to this history, the island is littered with rusted artifacts of war. As a sixteen-year-old, Pierce created the Historic Restoration Committee which works on projects to "repaint and refurbish equipment from the war", such as tanks. He has also participated in archaeological digs on the island and assisted in the repatriation of human remains from World War II. Pierce's initial interest in Japanese swords began when he started taking *kendo* in the sixth grade and his appreciation for individual blades grew when he began practicing *iaido* around eighth grade, after being introduced to it by a classmate.

Pierce owns newer blades and states, “I’ve never felt comfortable taking an ancestral blade or a blade that was used by someone before as my own blade. I used to have this Japanese dress saber that I loved, but I never really felt like it was mine because it was issued to someone else. And most likely they died during the war [World War II]...This one’s different [a new blade he owns] because it was rightfully given to me [through purchase]. And I put my own time and effort into it [making the handle].” This newer blade which he made the handle for is a Shikoto – a modern Chinese-made Japanese sword composed of high carbon steel with a temper on it. While he does not own any older, historical blades he would love to one day. Asked if he would be uncomfortable owning an older blade the same way he had been uncomfortable owning the Japanese dress saber he replied, “I feel like now, I’m more prepared to properly take care of the sword. And be its proper temporary holder.”

When asked if he views himself as a collector he stated: “I don’t really view myself as a collector because I wasn’t like ‘These swords look cool, I want to buy a bunch of them.’ It was more of like, this is a tool that I have to use in my sport, but I will make it part of me because it’s a piece of art. The longer a sword will be with me the more meaning it has, so if I used this sword throughout my whole practicing life, it would mean it’s a part of me... I do have one sword that I feel like, because I made the handle from scratch, that sword represents me. And that’s the only reason why I keep it. It’s my one sword that I’ll always hold on to.”

Asked about returning swords taken during World War II he stated, “Ancestral blades [not mass-produced World War II era blades]...I believe that they should be at least offered back. Some families don’t want to accept it because it is a weapon. There’s

no way around it. It was designed and used to kill people. So, some families might say no, but some families might say yes. It all boils down to the families, but I believe that they should always try to offer it.”

Pierce does not have an interest in *samurai* video games, nor are *samurai* movies his preference for entertainment. When asked how he viewed the portrayal of the swords in movies and TV he stated, “It’s a flattering portrayal. It may not be an effective portrayal. If I try to hit my sword against something, like a tree more than twenty centimeters in diameter, my sword will chip. They’re covering up the flaws [in movies], which I don’t think is the correct thing to do.” When asked about how the portrayal in movies has changed since World War II he stated, “I think it’s a different kind of infatuation. I do think it’s on a slight decline, after my personal experiences. The views have changed a little bit with the new generation. The older generation is like ‘Oh wow, *samurai*, the history behind it, [look] what these blades are capable of.’ But [the] modern view, it’s like ‘Wow, this invincible sword.’”

He thinks that anyone interested in these swords should first educate themselves on them by reading, doing research, and watching documentaries. His advice for those interested in the subject being: “Don’t accidentally hurt something because you love it too much. Learn how to love it and then put in that care, time, and effort.”

#### Aggregate Data for Study Participants

The aggregate demographics for the twenty participants are included below. Information gathered from these participants is also broken down into participant birth decade, the type of event that inspired the participants’ interest in swords, as well as which decade this exposure took place in order to see a trend in exposure types. Other

questions that the data were coded for include: understanding the Japanese swords as art or weapons, the effect of popular culture on an individual's interest in the swords, whether they are spiritual objects, and how they are viewed after World War II. Quotes are incorporated throughout in order to give voice to those participants not spotlighted as a case study, as their contributions provide valuable insight into the collecting of Japanese swords in the decades since World War II and its evolution in popular culture.

### Participant Demographics

Data from twenty eligible participants, 80% (16) male and 20% (4) female, are included in the research data below. As illustrated in Fig. 4.1, 85% (17) of participants self-identified as White, 5% (1) as Asian, 5% (1) as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 5% (1) as Other.

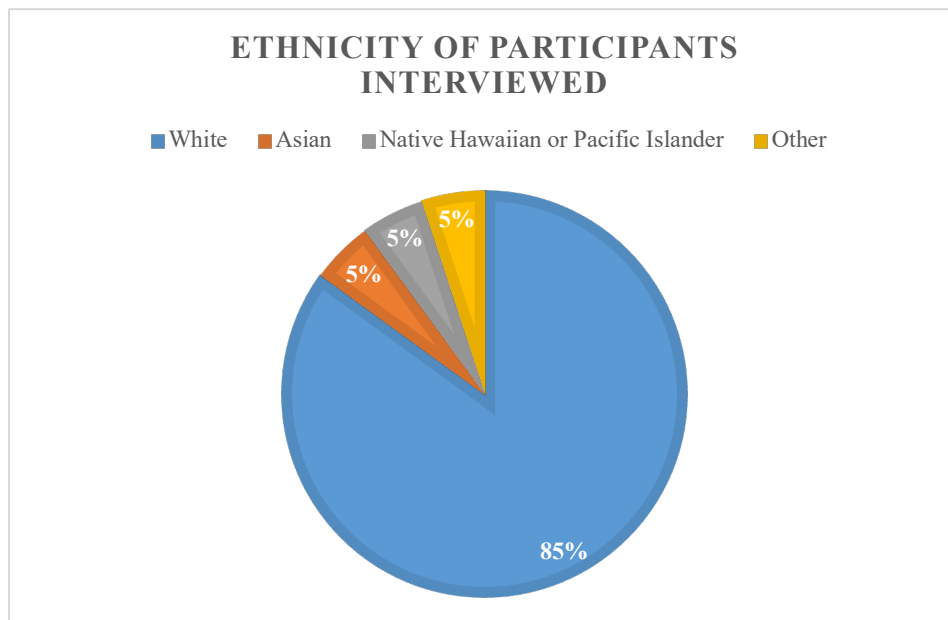


Figure 4.1 Ethnicity of Participants Interviewed

Fig. 4.2 below illustrates the distribution of participants in terms of birth decade. Participants were born over a span of sixty-five years with the oldest participant born in 1937 and the youngest in 2002. The 1990s is the only decade which is not represented in this data. The breakdown of participant by decade of birth is as follows: one participant was born in the 1930s, three participants in the 1940s, two participants in the 1950s, four in the 1960s, five in the 1970s, three in the 1980s, and two in the 2000s. The majority of participants were born between 1961 and 1986, ranging in age from thirty-four to fifty-nine years old. The mean age of all participants is fifty-one.

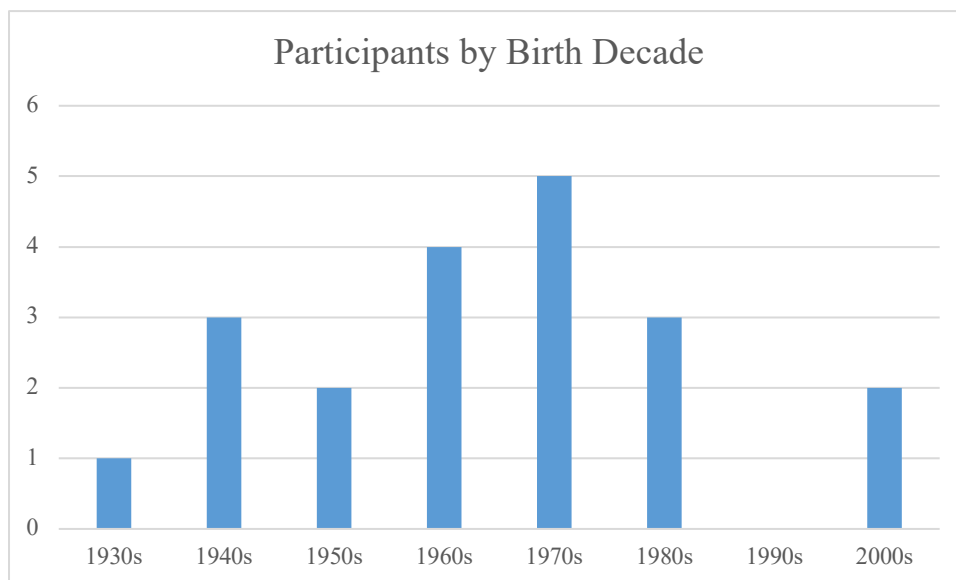


Figure 4.2 Participants by Birth Decade

All participants, except for the two youngest, have pursued education beyond high school, with the majority (60%) holding either a bachelor's or master's degree. The majority of participants also work in fields that have little or nothing to do with Japan or swords, although they may also be martial artists. Exceptions to this are Japanese sword

polishers Robert Benson and Ted Tenold, as well as Nicholas Benson who is an apprentice to his father Robert.

#### Event that Inspired Interest in Japanese Swords and Age at Time of Event

The interview data were coded for the event or interaction, which sparked an interest in Japanese swords. These events include physical exposure (during which the participant saw or held a Japanese sword in person), martial arts, movies/TV, reading about it in a book, or seeing it in Japanese anime/manga. The data were further broken down to display whether these events took place in childhood (up to age seventeen) or adulthood (eighteen years of age and up). The results displayed in Figure 4.3 show that the majority of participants (40%) became interested after physical exposure to a Japanese sword. Martial arts triggered an interest for 30% of participants while movies/TV accounts for 15%, books, 10%, and anime/manga 5%. Sixty percent of these events happened in childhood for participants (seventeen years of age or younger), while forty percent began in adulthood. All those inspired by movies/TV were children at the time and this inspiration also corresponded to participation in martial arts, such as the traditional style of Okinawan karate (*Uechi-Ryū*).

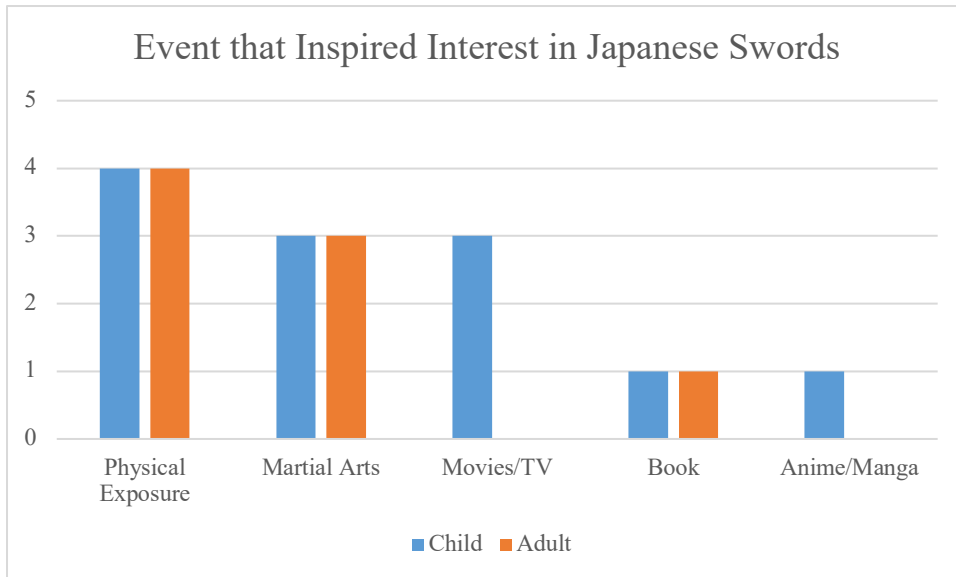


Figure 4.3 Event that Inspired Interest in Japanese Swords

Physical exposure to Japanese swords took place at gun shows, a museum exhibit, an auction, or through a neighbor or friend. Movies cited as inspiration include *Star Wars* (original release 1977), while television series such as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (the first animated series ran from 1987 to 1996), *The Green Hornet* (original release 1966-1967) with Bruce Lee, and *Kung Fu* (original release 1972-1975) with David Carradine also served as an initial inspiration. Books include one on ‘weapons of the world’ found in a school library, while the other was *The Book of Five Rings*<sup>18</sup> written by the *samurai* Miyamoto Musashi around 1643.

While 30% of participants cited martial arts as the inspiration for an interest in Japanese swords, 85% of all study participants (including all of the women) currently practice or have practiced martial arts in the past. Only three study participants have not

<sup>18</sup> Although the subject of the book is dueling and swordsmanship, it has also been adopted as a book of philosophy by businesspeople all over the world.

practiced a martial art and all three of these individuals first became interested in Japanese swords through physical exposure (one as a child and two as adults).

#### Participants' Initial Exposure-Type by Decade of Birth

When examining the type of initial exposure to the Japanese sword by decade of birth (see Figure 4.4), we see that those born in the 1930s and 1940s were physically exposed to the swords. Those born in the 1950s were introduced to Japanese swords through martial arts. Participants born in the 1960s were either physically exposed to Japanese swords or learned about it through martial arts or through movies/TV. This trend continues for those collectors born in the 1970s, with books being introduced as another form of initial exposure. No participants interviewed and born in the 1980s were initially exposed through actually seeing a physical sword, instead taking inspiration from movies/TV, books, or anime/manga. There are no data for the 1990s, but the two collectors born in the 2000s were introduced through physical exposure or martial arts.

The majority of study participants (twelve) were born between 1960 and 1989. During this period, the inspiration for collecting Japanese swords was evenly spread between physical exposure (three participants), martial arts (three participants), and movies/TV (three participants). Two participants were inspired by books and one by anime/manga.



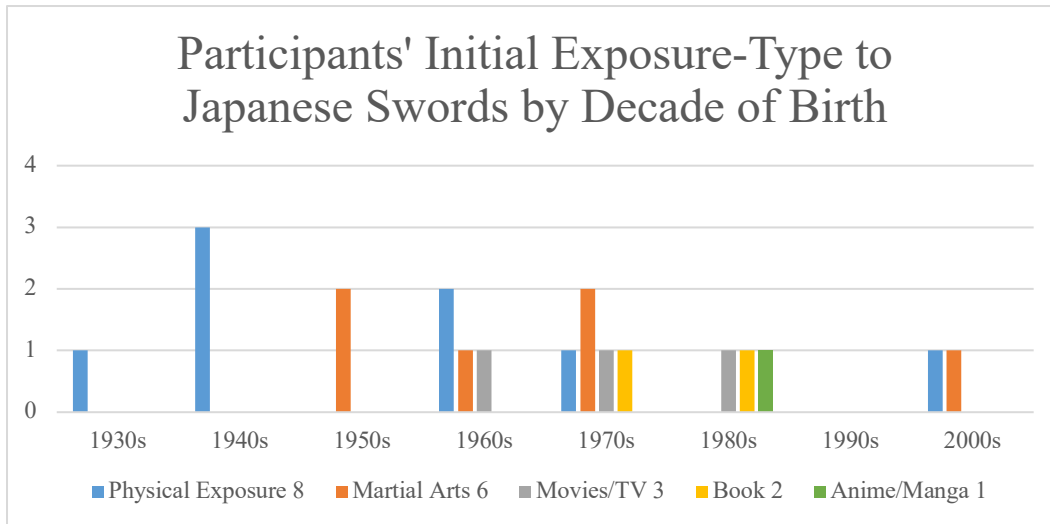


Figure 4.3 Participants' Initial Exposure-Type to Japanese Swords by Decade of Birth

### The Sword as a Weapon and Art

Study participants were asked if they viewed the swords as works of art. The majority of those who own new or old Japanese swords view them as a work of art, while others emphasize their purpose as a tool, but also appreciate their aesthetic qualities and the craftsmanship required to make them. Below are quotes from collectors, regarding their individual perspectives.

When asked why he views these swords as works of art, sword polisher Ted Tenold stated:

Sculpture. They are an incredible expression of sculpture. You're probably familiar with how they're made. They are quintessential, in the very meaning of that word. They are fire, air, water, and earth. And the most basic elements in the hands of a highly skilled maker can produce something that's kind of a sum that's greater than the parts...It's the highest tangible expression of a culture's ability to take very basic materials and create something that is so special and so highly

regarded and so capable, that you wouldn't think it could come from those materials to begin with. It's the embodiment of our ability, as humans, to take things well beyond the basic nature of what those things are. It's like turning a giant piece of marble into [Michelangelo's] *David*.

For Tenold, it is the transformation of basic elements into a beautiful (and also functional) object by an expert that makes Japanese swords works of art.

Kim Scarano, a martial arts practitioner who owns newer blades, focused on the craftsmanship and the choices that go into completing the swords.

It's just the craftsmanship of them. The fact that every single aspect of them and the details...take time. And it's just, I feel like there's so much effort and heart put into them, that it's like the expression of somebody's soul...So I think that definitely makes them a work of art because it's coming from all that detail and everything is coming from a person. Whether it's the person who makes it, and also the person who picks it out. If I'm going to choose a custom sword, then I'm going to choose all of the parts on it too and all the different details, so that also contributes to the artistic nature of it.

Scarano sees the process of sword smithing as a deep expression of the smith but notes that those who commission it can also participate in this process of creation.

Nick Kolick, a collector of antique swords, stated that many other collectors probably “look at the more martial aspect of it [Japanese swords], or military weapon aspect of it. But I look at it less that way and look at it more with an art perspective or history perspective.” Likewise, Katherine Hamilton, a martial arts practitioner shared that one of her favorite places to go is The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s arms and armor

gallery: “They have a really lovely collection of [arms and armor], pretty much across cultures and time periods, but I really do love all of the Japanese swords. I love all of the beautiful *tsuba* and all the other fittings. It's always so beautiful to see and [makes me think], ‘Oh, maybe *someday* I want something like that.’” Her reaction is evidence that museums can inspire future collecting.

John White, a collector of antiques swords who also studied martial arts for years stated, “[Japanese swords are] not only a weapon, they’re artwork. They were appreciated as artwork going back hundreds of years. I mean, they were a weapon first, but there was also an appreciation.” Martial arts practitioner Jigme Daniels perspective is that the swords are “aesthetically pleasing” and he also describes them as “marvels of engineering considering the poor-quality iron that was available on the mainland of Japan.” Daniels does not go as far as calling them art, except for some that were and still are created as offerings for Shinto temples. He acknowledges that “a tremendous amount of craftsmanship goes into each component...but the kind of... the holy grails of blades... the Muramasas, etc. were very much working tools. And so, I'm a little bit leery of characterizing them in that way [as art]. I think that they are beautiful in a way that any well-made tool is beautiful.” He also adds that, “Every once in a while, I’m struck by just how beautifully constructed the thing may be. But it’s hard to feel deep reverence for a tool that was devised to cause damage and harm.”

While Daniels cannot ascribe reverence to the sword as it is an object of violence, Insley Stiles (also a martial arts practitioner) acknowledges the sword is both a weapon and “an incredible work of art” that could also become “a very spiritual thing for the person who owned it and practiced [with it] and wielded it. It’s something to be treated

with reverence and honor and to understand that the underlying nature of the *katana* is still as a killing tool.” Collector Robert Mormile’s perspective sums up the different roles the sword has in culture and the various ways it can be perceived by sharing: “I see them first as weapons, then objects of religious significance, cultural significance, and then finally, as works of art.” While there is variation among individuals on how they view these swords, the consensus is that the Japanese sword may be viewed as a weapon or a tool, but also an object of art or craftsmanship.

### World War II ‘Souvenir Swords’ and Repatriation

Given that the interest in and prevalence of these swords in the United States grew post-World War II, each participant was asked how they viewed the notion of repatriating swords taken from Japan during the war, if the information were available to enable this. Many participants believe they should be returned when possible if they are heirloom swords, while others view the swords taken during World War II as a typical behavior during warfare.

Bryan Garner, who practices martial arts, shared, “I didn't have that personal experience within my family. No one, that I’m aware of, brought home any swords. But with that perspective, especially if it was an heirloom type, signed blade, something that was in the family...It would mean more to me to do that journey and return that and possibly form a *connection* to the Japanese family, than hold onto it.” Insley Stiles also agrees with repatriation, but also sees the point of view of those who fought during the war:

When you conquer a culture, a civilization and you take their weapons symbolically and literally, taking away their means of fighting back...on a

physical level and on a philosophical plane I think, to de-tooth the dragon, as it were. Now, those people who fought in the war and took [swords], yeah, maybe they had a right to. The Japanese were literally trying to kill them and they won and took their weapons and I think that was okay. However, generations later we...[aren't at war with Japan] and the Japanese [people] we're trying to return these to, aren't the people who were trying to kill us. So, then it becomes a question of... just being honorable enough to say: I get why this was taken but I'd like to see it taken back to the family...it's a part of the family history and it's not just a spoil of war at this point. There's an after.

Stiles and Garner both emphasize the point of moving past the concept of the “souvenir sword” and place more importance on the present and the importance of cross-cultural connections.

Jigme Daniels also considers swords in the same cultural heritage vein and says, “I think repatriating [is good]... particularly considering how many swords were destroyed in the sword ban. Watching that footage of just hundreds and hundreds of swords being smelted. Not even smelted, just chucked into raging fire... Not to underplay the importance of the decisions made by the Occupational Forces after [the war]... I know that there were some really difficult decisions that were made. But, in the same way that I can't feel great about the Communist Chinese government destroying 1100 years' worth of Tibetan cultural history... I feel pretty strongly about the wholesale destruction of Japanese historical artifacts. So, yeah, I think repatriation is not a bad thing at all.”

R. Kevin Moore, who collects antique swords, expressed that repatriation could be a complicated question to answer:

It's like discussing politics. It's difficult to give an answer to that. And the answer is, it absolutely depends on the circumstance. But I'm in favor of it. If there's anyone that's going to have a real traditionally made sword and is not going to keep it up...not only is not going to keep it up but doesn't even feel comfortable having it and it's going to be left to them and some kid is going to use it to cut watermelons with, and it's going to get damaged...there's going to be a loss of something that can never be reproduced. There's a limited number [of these swords]....I'm in favor of [repatriation]...you could [also] sell it at an auction house...But I have no problem with it being returned. It's not like America is losing a historical [artifact]. It was theirs [Japan's] originally.

Ultimately, Moore believes they belong back in Japan if an American owner does not have an interest in respecting it and taking care of it appropriately.

Collector Robert Mormile believes they are spoils of war and rightfully taken as such. However, he has also tried, unsuccessfully, to return some swords he has come across that have nametags. He shared:

I would say probably, I don't know, twelve or fifteen of the swords that I've come across over the years had address tags [of owners] on them. And I've actually looked into trying to find people. I was never successful. I think some people might be interested [in getting them back], but I think the overwhelming majority would not be interested in acquiring their swords back...I had dinner with the president of a [Japanese] company once and I asked him, 'Did you have a sword

in your family?’ And he said, ‘Well, my father brought a sword home from the war. Maybe four or five years ago, I put it out with the trash. I didn't even want to bring it into the pawn shop. I'm sure that the garbage man was happy to get it. He probably brought it in.’ But he just couldn't be bothered with it.

Clearly there is variation in how Americans view these swords in relation to World War II, as well as how they are viewed (and perceived to be viewed) by Japanese people. The difference between an ancestral blade handed down through the family and one that was machine-made and issued during the war, may also alter the perspective on whether or not it should be returned to Japan.

### Women and Japanese Swords

Since sword collecting and martial arts are stereotypically viewed as a masculine endeavor, this section sheds light on both men and women's perspectives regarding participation in both. All four women interviewed for this study participate in sword martial arts. One became interested in Japanese sword arts through martial arts itself, another through work in violence choreography and stage fighting, a third through *The Book of Five Rings*, and a fourth through exposure to anime/manga as a child. While the women own contemporary or Meiji period blades, all expressed a keen interest in antique blades.

When asked about how the interest in Japanese swords by women is received, they acknowledged that it is a more male dominated pursuit, especially in the martial arts. Lindai Louton stated, “It's a male dominated art, even nowadays, whether it be at the dojo or at competitions. The majority is men. As a woman, we are always happy to see another woman or two there and then you know it's like, ‘Oh, cool, some like-minded women.’”

All of the women, except for Louton, began martial arts training as adults, although two of the three had always wanted to do martial arts as kids. Katherine Hamilton always wanted to take martial arts as a child but did not have the opportunity to do so. Kim Scarano shared that she had always wanted to do martial arts as a child but was put in dance classes instead. Laughing she said, “And I was mad. I hated dancing...I think it was a money thing because martial arts is expensive and dance is cheap.” But she acknowledged that “dance and sword are very similar. I guess you can relate it to any martial art. It’s all about movement.”

Charlie Cascino watched her brother take martial arts, but never had a real interest in it or in swords until she “saw the practical application of it” in violence choreography (which she found through her pursuit of acting). She stated, “We *love* having dancers. Anybody who knows how to move and is in tune with their body, even if they have *no* fighting experience whatsoever. A dancer will kind of *instinctually* see their line and see the logical progression of the movement.” She added, “And I will tell you this, I *cannot* dance to save my life...But if you asked me to do really complicated footwork with a sword in my hand, for some reason *that* makes sense to me.” Charlie Cascino shared “When I first started [as a violence choreographer]...I don't think they had named a female fight master yet (in the Society of American Fight Masters). But now I think there are five... female fight choreographers and stunt coordinators are *really* in demand [now] to kind of make their female actor combatants much more comfortable.”

When male collectors were asked about women’s interest in Japanese swords, most thought it was great and encouraged it. Many were aware of *Touken Ranbu* (a video game) in Japan, which has raised Japanese women and girls’ interest in Japanese swords



to the point that a sword show was overrun by women. Nick Kolick, a collector of antique swords, shared, "...in Japan now, the *Touken Ranbu* has become very popular and I hear stories from old men saying they can't even get to see these swords in museums because there's a long line of young girls. Like, come on, guys! You can't have it both ways! You either get people interested or you don't. But you should embrace this. And quite frankly, a lot of them [the women] know more than some of the guys, in terms of some of the swords that have the backgrounds in the video game. So that to me, it's great."

Sword polisher, Ted Tenold, shared, "There was an interesting informal online poll that was taken a few years ago through one of the [online] forums (the sword chat boards). And the largest group of new collectors was in the age group of about forty-two to fifty. They were male or predominantly [male]. It didn't get into any more statistics than that or any more details. But that demographic is changing. And I feel there's a number of reasons for that. The anime movie or show or series (I'm not sure what it is I've never watched it) in Japan has *really* increased the interest of Japanese swords with females because it's based on handsome men in this anime, who have some sort of association with swords..." He also said that he sees more women, including women dealers at the big sword show in Japan, called the Dai Token Ichi, "So that's all very good. I support it enthusiastically." Whether it's an interest sparked through martial arts, a book or anime, the general consensus is that women collectors, dealers, and enthusiasts are increasing in number. And they are generally welcome to participate and viewed as valuable contributors in the field of Japanese sword appreciation and arts.

## Chapter V.

### Discussion

This study seeks to understand more fully the relationship between America and the Japanese sword: from how collectors first become interested in the swords to what motivates their pursuit of them. It also encompasses the way in which they view the swords, including their perspective on the ‘souvenir sword’ from World War II. All of these insights together provide a better understanding of what has made the Japanese sword grow as a cultural and collectible icon in American culture. Secondly, this study has surveyed the role and perspective of women who participate in this field, which is so often labeled as a masculine hobby, but constitutes a form of ‘serious leisure’ which may be pursued on a number of levels and enjoyed by anybody with the interest and inclination to do so. This chapter is a discussion of the results put forth in Chapter 4, which shared the thoughts and perspectives gathered from twenty participant interviews. While each participant’s introduction to Japanese swords speaks to their own personal life story, there are some commonalities and patterns that provide insight into how the Japanese sword came to have such a unique place in American culture as a consequence of world events.

The chapter will be organized into the following seven sections: Theoretical Framework Overview; The Intersection of Phenomenology, Consumer Culture, and the Japanese Sword; Motivations for Collecting and Perceptions of the Sword; The Japanese

Sword as a Cultural and Collectible Icon in American Culture Post-World War II;  
Women and Japanese Swords; Study Limitations; Conclusions.

A note about terminology: as was mentioned in Chapter 4 Results, the term ‘collector’ is not one that each of the participants identified with (although the majority did). The martial arts practitioners did not always view themselves as ‘collectors’ because of their practice. However, for the purposes of this chapter participants will be referred to as ‘collectors’ to avoid confusion.

### Theoretical Framework Overview

Analysis of the results, in terms of perceptual phenomenology and Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), provide a framework for understanding how the personal lives of collectors twine with the broader consumer culture and societal forces to initiate and perpetuate the interest in Japanese swords from one decade and one generation to the next following World War II. To review, CCT seeks to understand consumer culture on the levels of individual consumption as well as the consumer culture it generates (Arnould and Thompson 2018, 1). One way to do this is by “telling cultural history through commodity form” (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 876). In this case, it is the consumption of the Japanese sword in America. Merleau-Ponty’s concept of perceptual phenomenology offers the idea that objects and people are not separate from each other, as each may act on the other to generate effects and meaning (Ting 2021, 173). Therefore, both people and the Japanese sword itself perpetuate the consumption cycle and the culture that develops around it.

In “Living Objects: A Theory of Museological Objecthood”, Ting elucidates Merleau-Ponty’s theory further:

Merleau-Ponty argues that objects are alive in the sense that they are an extension of our being. He observes that when we look at something, our body is looked at. This reciprocity of object-human communication suggests that materiality shapes our bodily perception of the world and reveals part of ourselves, such as feelings, thoughts or desires, through this bodily experience. We may not have prior knowledge or personal experiences related to an object, but by feeling its materiality, the double sensations of our bodies are absorbed into a dialogue with the object. (Ting 2012, 173)

Objects are constantly in conversation with humans and humans with objects, narrating and interrupting each other's plot lines – weaving the intricate and varied web of a material universe. Ting interprets Merleau-Ponty further by stating, “the object is not a ‘dead body’ of materials, but a living extension of human beings from different places and times...encountering an object thus goes beyond an intellectual exchange; it is a sensuous experience of feeling how an object's varied perceptual qualities are coordinated in unifying materiality and humanity” (Ting 2012, 180).

In this study it is one particular type of object, the Japanese sword, which is traced through twenty lives spanning eighteen to eighty-three years of age (born in 1937 to 2002) and viewed through the lens of a world war, which altered the trajectory of the Japanese sword and introduced it to a wider audience. The multi-generational nature of the study also underscores the concept that every generation forms their own collective memory around objects (Belk in Witkowski 2020).

## The Intersection of Phenomenology, Consumer Culture, and the Japanese Sword

Perceptual phenomenology, consumer culture, and the Japanese sword all intersect in order to propagate Japanese sword collecting as an activity. Examples include viewing swords at a museum, watching a samurai movie, and participating in a martial art. These activities are pursued through the choice of the individual consumer and influenced by broader societal trends. Analysis of Chapter 4 Results according to this intersection will be divided into the following three subsections: Trends across the Decades; A Note about Museums and Consumer Culture; and Summary.

### Trends across the Decades.

As conveyed in Chapter 4, forty percent of all study participants (equally distributed between childhood and adulthood exposure) across all decades, cited actually seeing a Japanese sword as their ‘aha’ moment of interest in the subject – whether it was viewing one at a neighbor’s house or behind glass at a museum. This demonstrates that, as posited in perceptual phenomenology, objects are not separate from people and our interactions with them contribute to who we are, what hobbies we pursue, and ultimately what we purchase. Thirty percent of all participants (equally distributed between childhood and adulthood exposure) across all decades named martial arts as their entry point for collecting these swords, evidence that popular culture and cultural exports like martial arts are important drivers of consumer culture and, subsequently, collecting activities. Overall, sixty percent of all participants first became interested in Japanese swords as children, highlighting how formative experiences in childhood may often be carried through to adulthood. While these examples speak to the general trend over roughly seventy-five years, the breakdown of study participants’ initial exposure-type to

Japanese swords by decade of birth (Fig. 4.4) provides more insight into consumer culture trends which generate new collectors.

#### Participants Born in the 1930s and 1940s

Those born in the 1930s and 1940s (such as Robert Benson and Paul Kenyon, respectively) were first exposed to the sword in person and both were influenced by the events of World War II, which shifted the consumer paradigm in significant ways and brought many ‘souvenir swords’ to America in the hands of returning veterans. Additionally, the Allied occupation of Japan with predominantly American forces, provided a pipeline for Japanese culture to be disseminated in the United States. If World War II had not taken place, it is impossible to say whether Robert Benson or Paul Kenyon would have set upon this particular life path. For Robert Benson, being stationed in Japan, receiving a sword as a gift, and then watching a sword polisher at work led to a lifetime pursuit of excellence in sword polishing, as well as a deep appreciation for the history of the sword and the craft of polishing. This in turn, has inspired his son to take up the torch and carry on what is now a family tradition. If we consider objects and swords as ‘alive’ in light of perceptual phenomenology, then the material world and the objects in it may have a type of agency over people. Ting interprets Merleau-Ponty as suggesting that “objects are agents, which shape human culture with their materiality” (Ting 2021, 174). The sword and polishing fascinated Robert Benson and shaped a lifetime pursuit, which in turn led to his son’s interest and continuation on that path. The knowledge and culture surrounding Japanese sword appreciation and polishing is thus perpetuated.

For Paul Kenyon, the reaction he had as a six-year-old boy, looking at and holding a Japanese sword brought home by a veteran, left a deep impression on him that flooded back years later when he saw a similar Japanese blade. Kenyon said of the second encounter, “I took one look at that [tanto], and boy, everything came back to me. Like, just a flood of memories and visual images in my head. And I was just overwhelmed. And I stood there and I started trembling.” This would be an example of the “reciprocity of object-human communication” made manifest in Kenyon’s experience in which this sword caused a physical and emotional reaction in him – “bodily perception is an embodiment of our personal history, embracing tactile expressions, passion and feelings” (Merleau-Ponty in Ting 2021, 174). Kenyon’s experience subsequently generated the response of a life-long pursuit of knowledge, appreciation, and collecting. A consumer culture (in the sense of a sword being taken as a souvenir of war) led to his encounter with a sword he may otherwise never have seen. This encounter in turn sparked a phenomenological reaction in Kenyon as a child and then again as an adult encountering a Japanese blade for the second time. And as an adult, this visceral reaction to the materiality of the Japanese sword, combined with his own personal history and memories, inspired a consumer response.<sup>19</sup>

Both Robert Benson and Paul Kenyon’s introduction to Japanese swords are inextricably linked to the larger currents of world events. It is their reactions to the objects themselves, which illustrates a reciprocal phenomenon. This reciprocity between objects and humans is of a cyclical nature, intimately linked with consumer culture.

While the consumer culture for Japanese swords in America began with the ‘opening of

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<sup>19</sup> ‘Consumer’ in this sense is meant to indicate someone who purchases and does not carry any negative connotations of ‘excess’.

Japan' in the late 1800s, World War II re-invigorated America's consumer mindset. As discussed in Chapter 2, this 're-invigoration' of consumerism was viewed as a way to smooth over wartime hostilities and was sanctioned by the U.S. government.

### Participants Born in the 1950s

All three study participants born in the 1950s attributed their initial exposure to Japanese swords to martial arts. Two were kids, when they began training and one was in his mid-thirties (around the late 1980s or early 1990s). John White took judo and some *Uechi-Ryū* (an Okinawan form of karate). Insley Stiles also began martial arts with *Uechi-Ryū*. The popularity of Okinawan martial arts in America at this time was due to the continued presence of U.S. military on American bases in Japan, specifically on the island of Okinawa. Servicemen brought karate back to the U.S., opening dojos and teaching what they had learned during their time on Okinawa, which contributed to the popularity and growing consumption of martial arts in America. As discussed in Chapter 2, in the subsection of American Consumption of Japanese Culture in the post-war years, the U.S. encouraged a re-invigoration of pre-war interest in Japan in order to smooth the transition from enemy countries to allies, however unequal. The increased consumption of Japanese martial arts fell in line with this objective. Additionally, the 1964 Tokyo Olympics broadcast the message of Japan's 'reintegration' well and catapulted judo (which is also how Lindai Louton would begin martial arts) onto the world stage.

Neither White nor Stiles related their lessons in *Uechi-Ryū* to the U.S. having a military base on Okinawa (at least not during our conversations), but both men attributed their desire to learn martial arts to watching Bruce Lee as Cato in *The Green Hornet*. This



underscores how tightly wound together consumer culture, perceptual phenomenology and the Japanese sword are.

#### Participants Born in the 1960s through the 1980s

Individuals born between 1960 and 1989 account for 60% of study participants (twelve individuals altogether). This coincides with the period of increased American importation of Japanese culture through martial arts, TV/movies, video games, and anime/manga during these decades. Notably, video games did not inspire interest in Japanese swords for any study participants. Interestingly, study participants born in these decades were inspired in equal numbers by physical exposure (three participants), martial arts (three participants), and movies/TV (three participants). Movies cited as inspiration during this period include *Star Wars* (original release 1977), while television series such as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (the first animated series ran from 1987 to 1996), *The Green Hornet* (original release 1966-1967) with Bruce Lee. Eight of the twelve participants born from 1960 to 1989 were children at time of first exposure. And it is solely children who reported being inspired by movies and TV.

As a commentary on consumer culture, it points to the power of consuming media images that they produced an indelible mark on the minds of children who later gravitated towards collecting Japanese swords. Martial arts practitioner Jigme Daniels shared that his parents were fans of Kurosawa's films and also practiced aikido but he said that seeing *Star Wars* (inspired by Kurosawa's 1958 *The Hidden Fortress*) was "...kind of the final match. I think it was the combination of having a magic sword that was held with two hands that seemed very much in the wheelhouse of a *katana* or a

similar tool [that cemented his interest].” In Daniels’ case, it was the perfect storm of American consumption of Japanese culture, which drew him to Japanese swords.

Participants born in the 1970s and 1980s also began to find inspiration from sources outside of martial arts. Books inspired two participants – one child and one young adult. For those born in the 1980s, a new vehicle for exposure in the form of anime/manga was being exported (although only one participant cited this as contributing to their interest in Japanese swords). Presumably, there are others who have been influenced by anime and manga that I didn’t speak to or who may yet become collectors. As was stated in Chapter 4, the mean age of study participants is fifty-one, which is older than the participant who was inspired by anime/manga. The mean age may indicate that those study participants have reached a point in life where they are financially stable or otherwise free to spend discretionary income on collecting.

This signals the power that popular culture and therefore consumer culture exerts over what people choose to collect. Popular culture (in the form of martial arts, movies/TV, books, and anime/manga) played an important role in igniting the interest of seven children and two adults born between the years 1960 and 1989. Not only was popular culture an important factor in igniting interest, but it also strongly influenced children who then pursued this interest into adulthood.

#### Participants Born in the 1990s and 2000s

Since there are no data for the 1990s and only two participants born in the 2000s, it is difficult to say what will drive younger collectors’ interest. The two participants born in the 2000s were inspired by martial arts and physical exposure. Granted, Nicholas

Benson had grown up around Japanese swords his whole life due to his father's work as a polisher, experiencing the materiality and beauty of Japanese swords firsthand. Likewise, Jarae Pierce grew up taking *kendo* lessons from a young age – learning how to use and care for a sword properly. It's possible that these examples are outliers compared to their peers. However, a continuation of inspiration coming from anime/manga and video games may be a safe bet, considering the popularity of *Touken Ranbu* in Japan and the recent release of *Ghost of Tsushima*. If this is the case, it would be yet another example of popular and consumer culture driving an initial interest in the material object.

### The Decades in Review

The participant data, viewed in its entirety, show that the majority of participants' interest in the swords after 1945 was fueled by physical exposure (40%) and martial arts (30%). The shift in consumer culture, with Japan buying back many of the swords in America during the 1970s 'Gold Rush', most likely contributed to the fact that the 1970s and 1980s data show a decline in physical exposure to these swords. During these decades initial exposure to Japanese swords was more likely to take place through martial arts, movies/TV, books, and anime/manga. The market for martial arts classes and martial arts movies/TV blossomed and altogether accounts for 45% of all initial participant exposure to Japanese swords. This underscores Krug's point that martial arts practices in America developed "in parallel with mass media construction of martial arts" (Krug 2001, 401). It also highlights the power of consumer culture to take a culturally specific art and make it globally recognized.

The consumer culture in which we exist largely determines what we are exposed to, whether as adults or children. Yet even those collectors who found inspiration from

various forms of media were drawn towards the materiality of the sword – through use in martial arts or appreciation of its craftsmanship, which speaks to Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that objects exert influence over people. There is reciprocity between the consumers and the consumed – perpetuating Japanese swords in physical and media form, ensuring that subsequent generations have an entry point to interest them in the material object itself. And once many people see the craftsmanship and artistry of the object or begin learning a martial art associated with it, perceptual phenomenology picks up the reins and extends the consumer culture around the Japanese sword.

#### A Note about Museums and Consumer Culture

In later decades, the physical introduction to the Japanese sword took place at gun shows, an auction, and a museum exhibit – each a site of consumer culture in action. While a museum exhibit is not a place to purchase an actual sword, it is a place where you purchase admission to experience the physical/visual reactions to seeing the object. Martial arts practitioner, Katherine Hamilton, recounted visits to The Met’s arms and armor gallery, which made her think, “Oh, maybe *someday* I want something like that,” illustrating once more that sharing space with an object is a powerful contributor to the pursuit of collecting as a ‘serious leisure activity’ in a consumer culture.

Regarding the role of museums in generating interest in Japanese culture, it is important to once again acknowledge (as was mentioned in Chapter 3 Literature Review) the large number of museum exhibitions showcasing Japanese arms and armor that have taken place within the last twenty years, potentially inspiring future collectors who were too young to participate in this study. Mettler concludes her book on *America’s Fascination with Japanese Culture, 1945-1965* by commenting that, in many ways,

“...Americans from 1945 to the present have been able to feel like they are peering through a small window into a fascinating foreign land” (Mettler 2018, 215). It should be added that, in this respect, we have not moved significantly beyond the late nineteenth and early twentieth century American fascination with Japan. Which, after all, prompted the first Japanese Department of Art in the country at the Boston MFA in 1890.

Americans still consume the culture that was purchased during the early Japan craze through the museums we frequent, which hold the exports of previous centuries.

Japan today has much stricter controls over its cultural heritage leaving the country, but has also exercised a certain authority over those works outside of Japan by the “systematic inventory [from the 1960s on] of many of the Japanese works of art in collections, public, and private, outside Japan...done by Japanese scholars who have been sent by the various government art establishments, as well as by Japanese art book publishers” (Shimizu 2001, 131). Shimizu states that through this effort “the Japanese implicitly claim ownership over artistic works abroad as part of their cultural patrimony” (Shimizu 2001, 131). According to Shimizu, this highlights the distinction between “the cultural insider (Japanese and Asian) and the outsider (Americans and Europeans)” and the notion that more than one ‘Japan’ exists (Shimizu 2001, 132). While more than one Japan may exist, it does not erase the fact that seeing the physical objects in museums continues to inspire those who visit.

## Summary

As a multi-generational study on Japanese sword collectors, there are some similarities, as well as differences pertaining to how each individual became interested in Japanese swords. Yet even those collectors who found inspiration from various forms of

media were drawn towards the materiality of the sword – through use in martial arts or appreciation of its craftsmanship. This speaks to Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that objects exert influence over people, as well as people over objects. There is reciprocity between the consumers and the consumed – perpetuating Japanese swords in physical and media form to be shared with subsequent generations who become as enchanted with the actual Japanese sword as have many individuals from previous generations.

### Motivations for Collecting and Perceptions of the Sword

The two primary motivations for collecting these swords appear to be as art objects (admired for their aesthetics as well as history) and as a tool for martial arts, evidence of Witkowski’s statement that not everyone has the same interpretation of the same object. Most martial artists also view the swords as both weapons and works of art. Those who do not apply the term ‘art’ to the swords, still have some reaction and appreciation for the materiality of the objects. Pierce, who practices *kendo* and *iaido* does not view himself as a collector, but stated “...this is a tool that I have to use in my sport, but I will make it part of me because it’s a piece of art. The longer a sword will be with me the more meaning it has, so if I used this sword throughout my whole practicing life, it would mean it’s a part of me.... I do have one sword that I feel like, because I made the handle from scratch, that sword represents me. And that’s the only reason why I keep it. It’s my one sword that I’ll always hold on to.” Pierce’s comment exemplifies Merleau-Ponty’s idea that the very materiality of an object may create a dialogue or relationship (Merleau-Ponty in Ting 2021, 173). In Pierce’s words, it feels like it represents him, underscoring Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that objects are not separate from people, and each can effect change on the other. Ting states that “Merleau-Ponty holds that bodily

perception is an embodiment of our personal history, embracing tactile expressions, passion and feelings” (Ting 2021, 174). All of these are tied together in Pierce’s articulation of what one particular sword in his possession means to him. And in some way, his response may shed light on why so many Americans brought ‘souvenir swords’ home after World War II – the war had irrevocably marked their lives and bodies, and these swords may have been a way to ‘hold’ that experience, for good or ill.

Another example of an object effecting change on a collector is Paul Kenyon’s experience seeing a sword with a *hitatsura* temper on the blade, which reminded him of enjoying October skies when he was a kid. He says this experience “hooked [him] even more [on Japanese swords].” On the subject of art, Kenyon spoke of how he sees nature and art in the sword, comparing them to masterpieces by famous artists in which you can study the brushstrokes. He stated, “I see that same kind of thing in [these swords]. The steel talks to me like that.” This is precisely what Merleau-Ponty describes in terms of object-human reciprocity. Ting describes the act of connoisseurship and interaction with the materiality (of a seventeenth century Chinese vase in this instance) by writing, “As the connoisseurs project their education, taste and aesthetic imaginations onto the [pottery] glaze, the materiality shapes their perceptions, sensory responses and appreciation criteria...” (Ting 2021, 174). The connoisseurs Ting refers to describe the color of the glaze as “baby cheeks” and “peachbloom”, for example. Like Peirce, Kenyon’s experience is a prime example of how “bodily perception is an embodiment of our personal history, embracing tactile expressions, passion and feelings” (Merleau-Ponty in Ting 2021, 174). Human memories and objects are often interwoven.

From Lindai Louton's perspective as a martial arts practitioner, she states "...When I step on the floor, once I step on the mat with my sword, like for me, I'm just *there*. Nothing else. Everything else fades. I can forget about everything. And in a way, it is my form of meditation and keeping myself centered. So, I think everything that helps you [stay] grounded, focused, and centered is a form of, yeah, I'd say meditation. So, from that aspect [the sword] is definitely spiritual for me." In martial arts practice, the sword literally becomes an extension of her arm and requires her full presence in the moment. Likewise, polisher Robert Benson has also seen similarities between polishing swords and Buddhist chants – finding himself engrossed in the work. In both of these examples the individuals are actively working with the sword itself and focusing their energies in that one direction, achieving a certain harmony with the object.

When looking at these swords from a polisher's perspective it is possible to view the sword as 'alive' as it is also something being preserved for future generations. As Robert Benson stated about polishing, "It's considerably more than just putting something back in wonderful condition. We're preserving it...maybe it'll be here for another hundred generations." In that way, the swords are an extension of the humans who create it, appreciate it, sustain it, and use it as a tool or make a living from working with it. As many participants emphasized, they are only the temporary holders or caretakers of these swords (new and antique) and there is clear knowledge that the material item in their possession has changed hands many times before (in the case of the antiques) and will again, far outlasting the span of any owner's life. As Kenyon put it, "...there's an intrinsic value I get from having had them in my possession, being able to study them, that I can't put a monetary figure on." Although Kenyon also acknowledges



that while many people enjoy the history and artistry of these swords, they also view them as commodities. These swords do, after all, exist within a consumer-based world.

Japanese swords ‘live their lives’ attached to a consumer culture cycle that sees them change hands often and possibly, if they are high quality, spend their time in a museum<sup>20</sup> or be bought and returned to Japan. The subject of the World War II ‘souvenir sword’ was raised with each participant and most thought that if the owner or the family of the owner could be found (and they wanted the sword returned), it should be given back. This is another example of commodities carrying the story of cultural history, as well as proof that every generation creates their own collective memory around material culture (Belk in Witkowski 2020). Returning a sword to its owner in Japan may have been unthinkable for most World War II veterans in the decades just after World War II. The visceral reaction a veteran may have had to seeing a Japanese sword and recalling the horrors of war, has mostly dissipated. Now younger generations (as well as older generations) largely view repatriation of Japanese swords as second nature, even if it is not a common practice or easy to facilitate. The meaning attached to the sword is no longer one of rightful ‘souvenir’ status.

The youngest participant interviewed for this study, Jarae Pierce (eighteen years old), communicated that he thinks there is a growing difference in the way many members of older generations view the sword and the way many members of younger generations view it: “The older generation is like ‘Oh wow, *samurai*, the history behind it, [look] what these blades are capable of.’ But [the] modern view, it’s like ‘Wow, this invincible sword.’” This generational difference may be due to video games and movies,

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<sup>20</sup> Many participants held unfavorable views of swords in American museums, concerned that they do not get the proper care required.

as Pierce thinks that the Japanese sword is typically portrayed unrealistically. In video games the katana is often the most powerful weapon and so the perception of it as “invincible” may be attached to a younger generation’s understanding of it.

Many study participants are okay with today’s portrayal of the Japanese sword in popular culture. If it sparks an interest in the actual physical Japanese sword and an appreciation for it, most of the study participants are fine with this portrayal, seeing for themselves the effect that *Touken Ranbu* has had on increasing the interest in the subject with Japanese women. In the words of Jigme Daniels, “In some ways, any road in is a good road in, if people want to participate. And there are so many paths to tread to find a way that's going to engage people.” No matter *how* participants became interested in pursuing Japanese swords, it is the joy they take in learning, practicing, and sharing their knowledge which will ensure that the swords continue to exist to inspire future collectors and practitioners.

## The Japanese Sword as a Cultural and Collectible Icon in American Culture Post-World War II

The animosity created during World War II, which Japanese swords became imbued with, to some extent, has largely dissipated with the passage of time. Even with the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1951, an effort was underway to share the most precious and beautiful art of Japan with Americans – linking art and humans in some attempt to reconcile the brutality of war with a gentler, more creative side of society and heritage. Objects are not separate from people and consequently can be used to divide people or bridge differences.

The participant data, viewed in its entirety, show that the majority of participants' interest in the swords was fueled by physical exposure (40%) and martial arts (30%). The shift in consumer culture, with Japan buying back many of the swords in America during the 1970s 'Gold Rush', most likely contributed to the fact that the 1970s and 1980s show a decline in physical exposure to these swords. Therefore, initial exposure to Japanese swords was more likely to take place through martial arts, movies/TV, books, and anime/manga. The consumer culture in which we exist largely determines what we are exposed to, whether as adults or children. Yet even those collectors who found inspiration from various forms of media were drawn towards the materiality of the sword – through use in martial arts or appreciation of its craftsmanship, which speaks to Merleau-Ponty's assertion that objects exert influence over people. As consumer culture around these objects is constantly in flux based upon world events and cultural trends, meanings attached to particular objects and modes of portraying them may shift from generation to generation. In the case of Japanese swords, they are now largely appreciated as objects of great art or craftsmanship as well as weapons or tools.

### Women and Japanese Swords

Chauvinism and misogyny in *samurai* culture were facts of life and while women of the *samurai* class were trained in weapons, the sword was not generally one of them. Although only four women participated in this study, the majority of participants viewed women's interest in sword collecting as something to be encouraged. Consumer culture often genders what people 'should' buy and what people 'should' like (e.g., pink for girls and blue for boys or a princess doll for a girl and an action figure for a boy), as gender is a construct of society. Likewise, the preference that one study participant's parents had

for putting their daughter in dance as opposed to martial arts may correspond to the notion that there are ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ sports activities that drive the consumer market. Although the expense of each activity may also play a role in parental choices. But it is not unreasonable to suggest that perceived gender norms have something to do with more boys being enrolled in martial arts than girls.

Merleau-Ponty’s perceptual phenomenology only discusses ‘the body’ – neither feminine nor masculine. There is only a body and a reaction to the material world. Therefore, it is society and consumer culture which sanctions behavior and serious leisure pursuits as gender ‘appropriate’ or ‘inappropriate’. When Jigme Daniels, a martial arts instructor, was asked about women students he replied:

[It’s] one of those weird misconceptions about [swords] being a masculine or feminine pursuit because, in the main, women tend to rely less on upper body strength to get stuff done. The fact that [women] have defaulted to using lower body strength means that they are usually much more adept, much more quickly, at using swords. Rather than guys who spend, often years, trying to brute force their way through cuts and it takes a lot of deprogramming to work through that.

Daniels was not the only martial artist to share this type of observation, evidence that the ‘masculinization’ of swords and sword arts, is a social construct, which is perpetuated in the media we consume. While *Kill Bill Vol. 1* (released in 2003) is not technically a *samurai* movie, the woman protagonist carries a *katana* and uses it skillfully to exact revenge. Charlie Cascino, the violence choreographer states, “*Kill Bill* is a fun, fun movie. Come on. I mean...you have a kick ass chick with a kick ass sword, kicking

everybody's ass. It's super fun!" And it is also an antidote to traditional male-centric *samurai* films, in which women have considerably less power.

The majority of study participants expressed enthusiasm about welcoming *anybody* genuinely interested in the subject of Japanese swords. However, there is still a large discrepancy in the number of women who signed up for the study, as opposed to the number of men. Those women who participated in the study responded to an 'all call' explicitly stating the need for more women participants. So, while there very well may be less women than men collectors and martial artists, there are more out there, given that the flurry of social media responses did not correspond to study participation by women. Katherine Hamilton, a participant, noted that women may not have identified with the term 'collector' that was used in the advertisement for the study, especially if they are martial arts practitioners. This may have contributed to the low enrollment of women. This research was also conducted in the middle of a pandemic during which time many people were shouldering extra burdens. What is certain is that there are more American women collectors and practitioners of martial arts than this study could adequately portray. And if *Touken Ranbu* in Japan is any indication, it may simply require the appropriate cultural phenomenon or consumer product to ignite the normalization and visibility of a wider interest in swords by women and girls.

### Limitations

The sample size of twenty participants reflects broad trends but may not be indicative of all collectors or martial artists who own swords. Since eighty-five percent of participants were White and eighty percent were male, it is clear the data are skewed to represent one portion of the population. Although, anecdotally, this is also the tendency

of Japanese sword collectors in the U.S. (at least those who are visible collectors and enthusiasts). Missing from this study is a perspective provided by Japanese Americans on the collection of these swords after World War II and in the present day.

The mean age of participants was fifty-one years, which would correspond to a higher chance of being more financially secure (as opposed to twenty-somethings), with enough disposable income to enable the pursuit of a ‘serious-leisure’ activity such as Japanese sword collecting. This study was intentionally left open to those who own antique and new blades in order to allow for a broad range of perspectives, in both age and mindset.

This study is also biased, in that it largely focuses on the American perspective of the Japanese sword, especially as it relates to World War II. And, as with any study, the inherent bias of the researcher and author pose limitations in and of themselves. As a White American woman who does not collect Japanese swords (yet, at any rate), I bring my own inherent bias to the research by studying the diffusion of a culture that is not my own.

## Conclusions

This study has taken a small step towards understanding the evolution of Japanese sword collecting and appreciation in America. While the aim of the study was to focus on collectors’ perspectives post-World War II, the background of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century ‘Japan craze’ puts the consumption of Japanese culture by Americans within its broader historical context. It highlights the fact that humans and material culture are bound together in a tangle of artistry/craftsmanship, consumption, war, economics, and cultural fascination, which stretches far beyond one world war. The

‘souvenir swords’ of World War II are just one example of this continuation of humans asserting control over each other and themselves by dispossession and possession of material culture. This is illustrated through the disarmament of Japan and Americans taking swords home as souvenirs, which embodied personal memories and experiences from the war. These actions then rippled out across the years, as younger generations of Americans came into contact with the sword and the consumer culture ebbed and flowed around them.

While there are many ways for people to become interested in the Japanese sword, it is unlikely an accident that this small study shows physical exposure to be the most common, with popular culture also heavily influencing those born in later decades. Even still, those who found inspiration from movies/TV, books, or anime/manga sought out the physical Japanese sword and found it worthy of collecting. Humans react to the material world. And if it is a positive reaction, human nature is to cultivate similar experiences.

Perceptual phenomenology and consumer culture share a symbiotic relationship that is cyclical in nature and evolves with time and technology. Who could have predicted for certain in 1945 that Japanese martial arts would be practiced all over the world, that a video game like *Ghost of Tsushima* would one day exist, or that *Touken Ranbu* would ignite an interest in Japanese swords for Japanese girls and women? Each generation lives within the materiality of past generations, while also creating new ‘lives’ and meanings for the objects surrounding them. How will the Japanese sword be viewed and understood in America in another seventy-five years? Perhaps a future researcher

will investigate. But I hope that these swords remain appreciated as an embodiment of human achievement and endeavor produced by Japanese culture.



## Appendix 1.

### Participant Demographic Questionnaire

1. Do you live in the United States?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
2. Please specify your ethnicity:
  - a. White
  - b. Hispanic or Latino
  - c. Black or African American
  - d. American Indian or Alaska Native
  - e. Asian
  - f. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
  - g. Other
  - h. Prefer not to say
3. What is your year of birth? Please select from dropdown menu: 1920 ... 2020
4. What is your gender?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Other
  - d. Prefer not to say
5. If you replied other, please specify or write "Prefer not to say".

6. Education: What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? If currently enrolled, highest degree received?

- a. No schooling completed
- b. Nursery school to 8th grade.
- c. Some high school, no diploma
- d. High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent (for example: GED)
- e. Some college credit, no degree
- f. Trade/technical/vocational training
- g. Associate degree
- h. Bachelor's degree
- i. Master's degree
- j. Professional degree
- k. Doctoral degree
- l. Prefer not to say

7. Marital status:

- a. Single, never married
- b. Married or domestic partnership
- c. Separated
- d. Divorced
- e. Widowed
- f. Prefer not to say

8. Employment status:

- a. Employed for wages
- b. Self-employed
- c. Out of work and looking for work
- d. Out of work but not currently looking for work
- e. Homemaker
- f. Student
- g. Military
- h. Retired
- i. Unable to work
- j. Prefer not to say

9. How would you prefer to be interviewed?

- a. Virtual interview over Zoom
- b. Telephone
- c. Other

10. If you selected 'other', how would you prefer to be interviewed?

11. Please provide an email address where you may be reached to set up an interview:

12. Please provide your first name:

13. Please provide your last name:

14. Would you prefer that the researcher uses a pseudonym for you in research? This

will mean that any information from the interview or quotes used in the research will be attributed to a fictional name that cannot be traced back to you.

- a. Yes
- b. No

## Appendix 2.

### Interview Guide

1. When and how did you first become interested in Japanese swords?
2. Do you or have you ever participated in a martial art?
3. Do you have an interest in Japanese history/culture outside of the sword?
4. Do you consider yourself a collector?
  - a. What makes these swords collectible? What are your criteria for buying a sword?
5. Do you work in a field related to Japan or Japanese swords?
  - a. Has your work influenced how you view Japanese swords?
6. Do you view Japanese swords as works of art? Why or why not?
7. Do these swords have any spiritual meaning to you?
8. Have you ever seen a Japanese sword in a museum exhibit or display? What was your reaction to it? Would you ever consider selling the swords you collected or donating them to a museum?
9. Are you or anyone in your family of Japanese descent?
10. Have you ever visited Japan?
  - a. Did you see any swords while in Japan?
11. What is your perspective on returning Japanese swords that were taken as souvenirs by soldiers during World War II? Do you think they should be returned to the families of the owners?

12. Do you collect other weapons (Japanese or non-Japanese)?
- a. Is collecting Japanese swords different from collecting other types of weapons?
13. Popular culture:
- a. Do you watch samurai movies?
  - b. Do you participate or have you participated in video games with Japanese swords?
  - c. How do you think Japanese swords are portrayed in popular culture? Has it changed over time? Is there anything you like, or wish were different about how people view these swords?
14. If you were explaining what a Japanese sword is and represents, to someone who has never seen it (say an alien), what would you tell them?
15. Can you think of anyone you know who may like to participate in this study?

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