

THEY SURE BEAT HUB-CAPS

by
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Back in the balmy days of 1954, when you could mail a letter for three cents, when there were orange groves at the end of Hollywood Boulevard and when there were streetcars running down to Vine Street, my girl-friend said to me one day:

"You ought to collect something."

"Why ?", I asked.

"I don't know. You just look like someone who ought to collect something."

I guess she really meant I was dull.

"What do you think I ought to collect ?", I asked her nervously.

"How would I know ? Let's go out on Saturday and see what we can find."

So we did a day-long tour of a lot of unlikely collectibles. She was quite keen on hub-caps, but I rejected them firmly. Too big and, anyway, I couldn't quite picture my tiny apartment decorated in hub-caps. Stamps were definitely out. I'd tried them as a kid and couldn't have been more bored. The day wore on and Mary was becoming more and more frustrated that I was unable to enthuse over any of the treasures she was showing me. Hood ornaments were quite nice, I thought, but what can you do with them except dust them.

Late in the afternoon, we were in an antique shop on Sunset Boulevard - down past Normandy before Sunset curls to go downtown. There was an old man behind the counter. The shop was mainly devoted to Eastern and American Indian artifacts. Mary was taken with a Shiva - you know, those Indian deities with a whole bunch of very busy hands. I think my reaction then was about the same as it had been for the hub-caps. As we were walking out the door, she noticed a big orange-crate on the floor filled with flat metal things. She bent down and picked one up.

"What do you think these are ?"

I gave her a very superior smile. I may not know my hub-caps, but I did know a horse-brass when I saw one.

"It's what goes on a Clydesdale. You know, the Budweiser horses."

"You're quite wrong there." It was the old man behind the counter.

"Those are tsuba. They're guards from samurai swords"

I knelt down beside the box and started looking through the contents. There must have been four or five hundred of them in the box. Some were plain iron and some had fancy metal ornamentation.

"Hey ! I like these."

I could hear Mary give a sigh of relief.

"How much are they?"

"One dollar for the plain ones. Two dollars for the fancy ones."

At last I'd found something I liked that was in my budget. So I started to scrabble around in the box and finally came up with three that I liked the best. They were all in the "fancy" class, but six bucks seemed a fair price.

We took them home and we got out the Brasso and the steel wool and we went to work my new acquisitions. They were all sort of brown and faded. I was sure that when they sparkled like new pins, they would look very handsome on the wall.

"Guess what ?" Mary said. "This one's copper"

"Which one's that ?"

"The one with the little horse and the warrior on it."

"Try some more Brasso on it. It should clean up."

When they were all bright and shiny, we hung them on the wall.

"That's great !" I said. "Can't you just imagine a Samurai riding around with those. Wouldn't he be pleased we'd cleaned them up for him."

Over the next few months, whenever I had a few dollars I could spare, I visited Mr. Clay - that was his name - and bought two or three more tsuba on each occasion.

"Hey, Mr. Clay ! There's two the same here, but they're not the same size."

"Why don't you take both of them."

"Nah ! What would I want with two of the same. I'll just take the bigger one, thanks."

And there went a lovely daisho set. What did I know ?

Each time I would take my new purchases home and work on them to get them clean. By now I had about thirty tsuba and was firmly convinced I was on my way to cornering the tsuba market. I mean, there couldn't have been that many samurai and I was sure they couldn't have had more than a couple of swords each. If the orange box contained all the tsuba in the world, I thought, then I was about a tenth of the way to cornering the market. One day Mr. Clay told me I could have all the rest that were in the box for \$100. That was an awful lot of money to me in those days and I sadly shook my head.

I should tell you that Mary had moved on to someone else, who was probably starting to collect hubcaps, so I had no one to consult on this huge financial risk that I would be taking. No. I just couldn't afford to spend \$100 though it seemed like a good deal.

About this time a friend, who was a Hollywood Foreign Correspondent, invited me to a preview of a new Japanese film that was having a press preview down at the Wiltshire Ebell Theatre. I'd never heard of it - something called 'Seven Samurai'. On my way down to the afternoon preview, I stopped by Mr. Clay's and bought a couple of tsuba. As we came into the lobby of the theatre, we were handed a press release. I read that I was going to see 'Seven Samurai' starring Toshio Mifun. That's how they spelt his name. Both words. Of course, I was electrified by the film. It was one of the most exciting things I had ever seen. As we walked out into the lobby after the film, there in the corner was standing Mr. Mifun himself. Filled with awe, I walked over to him.

"Mister Mifun, I just want to tell you how fantastic I thought...."

A gruff voice interrupted me. "Mifune"

"How's that ?"

"Mifune"

"No. It says Mifun here."

Very emphatically. "Mifune."

"Oh. Hey, I bet you've never seen one of these." And I took one of my orange-
crate tsuba out of my pocket and handed it to him. He looked at it a moment.

"Ah ! Tsuba." He shook his head. "No good tsuba."

And he handed it back to me and smiled.

"No good ?"

He nodded his head. That was a terrible shock. Perhaps there were more
tsuba that I didn't know about. My goals of cornering the market were fading
fast.

And then the next week, I walked into Mr. Clay's shop with my five dollars
and there in the glass case behind the counter were three tsuba on wooden
stands. I had never seen anything quite so beautiful. One, I remember had
golden horses prancing across a field, another had a funny fat little fellow
with a big hammer and a sack. I don't remember what the third one was. I
was entranced. I asked if I could look at them and as I did, I was filled with a
sense of horror. These tsuba weren't all shiny and bright. Could it be that
they were supposed to look quiet and dignified ? Had I ruined the ones I
already had through ignorance ?

I asked Mr. Clay how much they were.

"Twenty-five dollars each."

"Each ???"

I knew I had to have one. But, which one ? I finally decided on the funny
little fat guy. Daikoku, of course. I worked out a deal with Mr. Clay to pay
him five dollars a week until I had paid the full twenty-five.

"You can take it now, if you like. I trust you."

I took Daikoku home and sadly looked at all my shiny horrors on the wall.
Sixty odd tsuba that definitely shouldn't look like that. Of course, I didn't
touch Daikoku. I'd learnt my lesson. If you want to see him in all his twenty-
five dollar glory, take a look at the front and back cover of our Token Kai
Newsletter. I still have him. I wish I knew who made him. The inscription
reads "A gentleman of leisure made this at your request". The Chicago
Shinsa gave him a nice high mark and attributed him to the Mito School.
Anyone got any ideas who the 'gentleman of leisure' might be ?

Over the forty some odd years, the shiny tsuba have regained some of their
former glory and once I learnt to patinate, I was able to speed the process
along. What a wonderful hobby ! A hell of a lot better than hub-caps, I can
tell you ! Oh, yes. Remind me to tell you How I bought my first sword.....