

Japanese Hanko

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The use of hanko or seals in lieu of signatures began in ancient China and moved to Japan where it continues to this day. The first evidence of writing in Japan is a hanko dating from 57 AD, made of solid gold and belonging to the Emperor. Noblemen began using their own personal hanko after 750, and Samurai began using them in the 1400's; Samurai were permitted exclusive use of red ink. To make any document official it had to contain the chop or seal of the signer.

Period Construction

Seals are normally square in shape and can be from one centimeter to ten centimeters in size. Round and oval seals were used but not as often until modern times. During the Nara period (8th century), seals had a specific size of @ 6cm square as laid out in the Ritsuryo, the legal code of the period.

The first step is to pick the seal material. Gold, silver, copper, bronze and brass were common metals while horn or stone and sometimes soft woods were used. Stone seals include soapstone and alabaster but harder stones were also used and jade seals were reserved for the Emperor. Soft woods were used, but these tend to become damaged easily and stone, metal or horn were the preferred material of construction.

The second step was to decide on the actual image to be carved, many different approaches were used to the carving of the image, and the seal itself is the reverse image of the seal on the paper. From simple letters, to simplified Chinese characters to the full family names were often used arranged in varying ways.



Image of seal types and designs

The third and final step would be the carving of the seal; often the stone would be placed onto a paper and traced out to capture the shape. Then the seal was drawn onto the paper with an oily ink and the seal pressed down onto the paper to pick up the image. Then the seal maker would carve the image.



Close up image of Bronze seal from the 8th Century. (Tokyo National Museum)

Seals are carved in two styles: **Yang** positive (relief) seals in which the characters are in red with white space around them. They are airy and lighter in mood, this is the male or groom form. The idea of Yang is said to include the concept of light, heat, day, south, positive, sun, heaven and spirit among others.



Yin Carving



Yang Carving

Negative (intaglio) seals are referred to as **Yin**. The Yin seal is weightier and seems heavier. The idea of Yin includes shade, dark, water, black, lower, North, female force principle, moon earth and matter, among other things. Both styles were equally popular with both men and women.

Seal Paste

There are two types of seal paste depending on what base material is used in their manufacture.

Silk: The red paste is made from finely pulverized cinnabar, mixed with castor oil and silk strands. The silk strands bind the mixture together to form a very thick substance. It has a very oily appearance and tends to be a bright red in color.

Plant: The red paste is made from finely pulverized cinnabar, mixed with castor oil and moxa pulp. Because the base is a plant one that has been pulverized, the texture is very loose due to the fact that it does not bind. The appearance is sponge like and not oily and tends to be a darker shade of red.

When the seal is used on the printing surface, the procedure differs according to plant or silk based paste. For silk based paste, the user applies pressure with a soft, flat surface beneath the paper, and rocks it forward and back slightly. For plant based paste, the user simply applies light pressure.



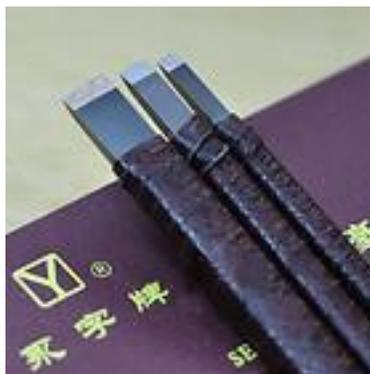
Construction of Seals

Stone seals

1. Stone is imported from China and is specifically used in carving and seals. Stone consists of Qingtian from the mountainous region located in southeastern Zhejiang Province of China. The stone color can vary from light yellow to orange, brick red or purple, and green and blue, due to impurities.



2. Tools are hardened steel. These tools were imported from China as an example of a classic set of stone seal carving tools.



3. The images used were simplified Chinese's characters and my SCA name. Both seals were done in the yin style as this was the most common for the SCA Time Period.

4. Stones were prepared with hand sanding to remove any saw marks when the blocks were cut.
5. I used a pencil to do the reverse Drawing method to transfer the seal design.
6. Using the small carving tools, I carved the designs carefully into the stone surface. If this is not done slowly the stone can chip. Each line is gone over many times to get the depth required to make a good transfer.



7. The stone is again sanded by hand to remove and stray lines and then carved again. This is repeated until the stone makes a good stamp.



Seal impressions

Heart

Dragonfly

Name

Learning from previous attempts at seals

1. For the previous attempt I used different materials to make the seals. This was done to learn the techniques and tool usage before making the final seals.
2. Image of design included name, simple one character or compound characters design.
3. I used the reverse drawing method to transfer the seal design to the materials.
4. Using small carving tools designed for the materials.

- Examples of rubber design:

Heart

Dragonfly

- Examples of wood Design:

Heart

Dragonfly

- Examples of Lino Design:

Heart

Dragonfly

Name

- Examples of soap stone Design:

Dragonfly

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