

# Sahei MIZUNO (1891-1972)

Sahei MIZUNO was one of Japan's foremost *sō* (*koto*) makers, as well as a dedicated collector of fine instruments.

Guided by his desire to "share these treasures with as many people as possible," he donated a cherished *sō* (*koto*) crafted by the renowned second-generation master **Tasuke KIKUOKA** to the Musical Instrument Museum of the Conservatoire de Paris in 1963.

This act inspired further donations, and in 1966, MIZUNO gifted a significant collection of outstanding *sō* (*koto*) instruments to the Osaka College of Music.

This collection—comprising 64 pieces—became the foundation for the institution's instrument archive. In recognition of his passion and contributions to traditional Japanese music, he was awarded the **Order of the Rising Sun, Sixth Class, Silver Rays** in 1968.

## Decorative Sō (*Kazari-goto*)

The decorative *sō* (*kazari-goto*) emerged in the late Edo period as a luxurious evolution of the traditional court *sō* (*gaku-sō*, *koto* for Gagaku). Known as *zoku-sō*, these instruments became popular among feudal lords and aristocrats, and featured elaborate ornamentation that showcased the pinnacle of craftsmanship and aesthetic sensibility.

### Structure and Ornamentation

The *sō* (*koto*), with its long shape, is often compared to a dragon. The following features are found in these ornate instruments:

- **Dragon Head (*Ryūtō*)**: The left end of the instrument features intricate **inlay** (*zōgan*) using ivory or whale bone, surrounded by *makie* (gold and silver lacquer work) with arabesque patterns.
- **Side Panels (*Iso*)**: Gold *makie* designs of **cranes**, a symbol of longevity, adorn the sides.
- **Dragon Tail (*Ryūbi*)**: The right end is crafted with **tortoiseshell**.
- **Bridges (*Kotoji*)**: Used to tune each string, these are decorated with family crests rendered in *makie*. Marks left by the bridges indicate that this instrument was not only decorative but also actively played and cherished.

### Traditional Materials and Techniques

- **Zōgan (Inlay)**: A technique where patterns are carved into wood and filled with materials such as metal, ivory, or precious stones.
- **Makie (Sprinkled Picture)**: A lacquer technique in which powdered gold, silver, or colored powders are sprinkled onto a lacquered surface to create intricate designs.
- **Bekkō (Tortoiseshell)**: Derived from the hawksbill turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), traditionally used for combs and eyeglass frames.

### Preservation Challenges

These decorative *sō* (*koto*) were once crafted as ceremonial items or status symbols for the wealthy elite, including use in weddings. However, today, the continuation of such craftsmanship faces significant obstacles—declining demand, limited access to traditional materials, and the loss of specialized tool-making knowledge.